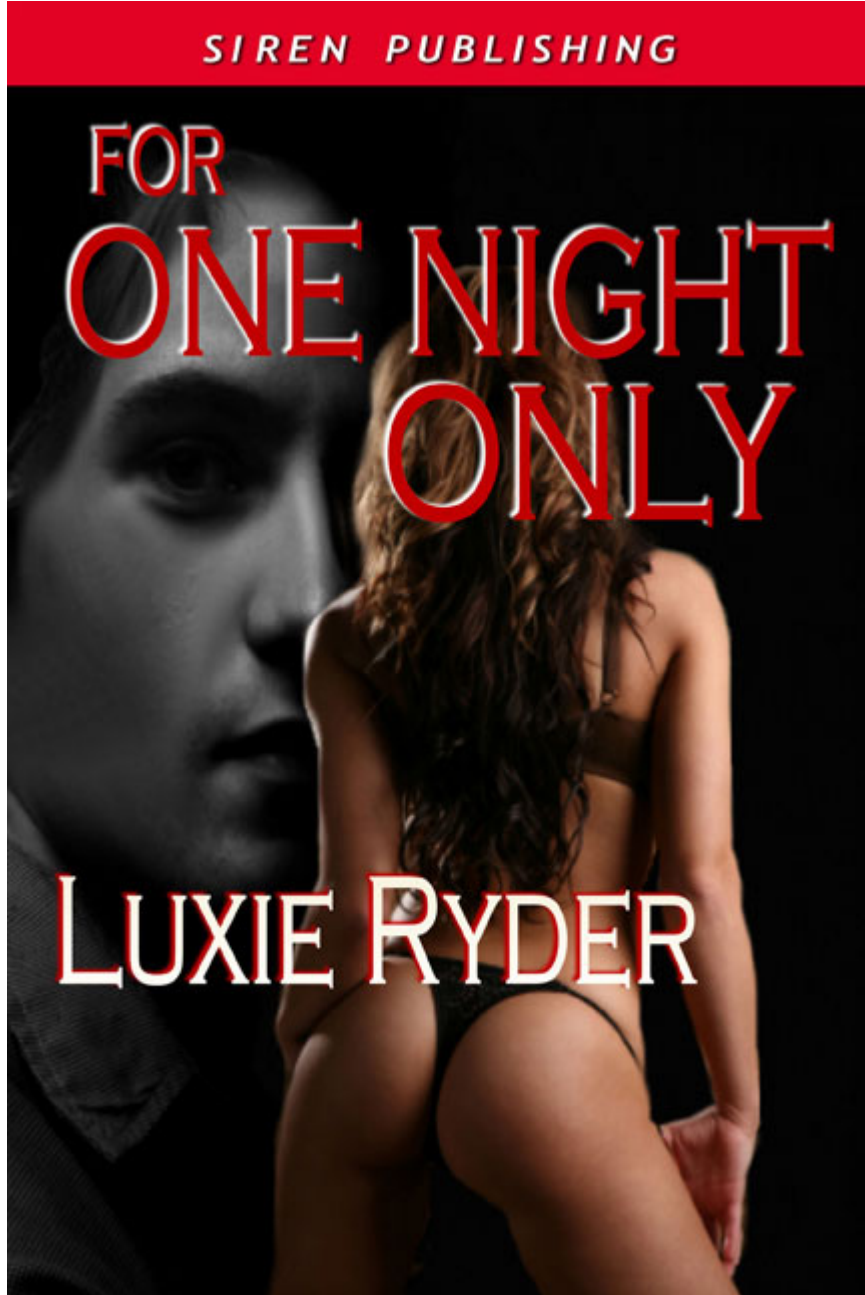


*SIREN PUBLISHING*

FOR  
ONE NIGHT  
ONLY

LUXIE RYDER



## For One Night Only

For one night only...that's all Dr Bethany Shaw tells herself she can handle. Still reeling from a past relationship, she trusts no one. The encounter with a mesmerizing rock star threatens to change her life forever. Can she let go of the pain and learn to love again?

For one night only...that's all Latino rock singer Ruben Navarro can promise, both on stage and in bed. Bored long ago of the readily available women, his sole passion is his charity, until he meets a reserved but sexy doctor who makes him want to forget his past.

For one night only...that's all she ever had, but it would never be enough for the damaged young woman who watches Ruben's every move from the shadows. The promise of being with him again is all she lives for--and nobody is going to get in her way.

**Sensuality Rating: SCORCHING**

**Genre:** Contemporary

**Length:** 71,000 words

# **FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY**

**Luxie Ryder**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.**  
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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

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Siren Publishing, Inc.

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# **DEDICATION**

To my sisters and my friends at the FC who have always supported my writing—you know who you are.

# FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY

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## Chapter 1

Bethany instantly recognized the person who got to his feet as she entered the Penthouse Suite. Waiting until the flamboyant man with spiky bleached blond hair who had answered the door introduced her, she extended a hand.

She had been called out to a few of the big hotels on The Strip in the past couple of years, and had treated many showgirls and performers, but he was her first real celebrity.

‘Are you the patient?’ She had to check. *He looked too damn good to be ill.*

‘Yes, it’s me. Thank you for coming Doctor Shaw,’ he said, smiling warmly as he shook her hand.

‘So you do actually believe I am a doctor?’ Her words surprised both men, but she couldn’t resist the dig at the short, weirdly dressed guy who had practically frisked her at the door before allowing her to enter.

Ruben smiled in apology. ‘Please excuse our strange behavior, but surely you realize that we need to be very careful?’

She didn’t doubt that for one minute. The singer facing her was globally famous, huge even by Vegas standards, although he was no longer as wildly popular as he had been when his first single was released some years ago. Known only by his last name of ‘Navarro’, his musical style was unique, a kind of ‘Rock/Flamenco’ fusion that relied far too heavily on screaming guitars and raucous vocals for her tastes.

He was a couple of inches taller than her 5'9". The combination of black collar length wavy hair, dark brown eyes and golden skin was stunning. His features could have been a little too strong, but were softened by long eyelashes and a warm, full mouth. A trace of an accent remained from his youth and gave his deep, slightly husky voice an exotic air.

A brief, tight smile crossed her face. 'I understand, of course. People are usually relieved to see me. It's not often that I get interrogated on the doorstep.'

'Well, we're happy to see you...right Byron?' He winked at his friend and turned to give her a wide smile. She fought the urge to return his grin, busying herself by putting her bag down, while she inquired as to the nature of the problem. Retrieving her stethoscope as he spoke, she turned to him.

'Okay, if you could just remove your shirt, Mr. Navarro.'

'Why do I need to take my shirt off?' Ruben exclaimed. His dark eyebrows knit together in surprise, chasing away the boyish charm he had been leveling at her moments before.

'So I can listen to your breathing,' she replied in an exasperated tone. 'There is no need to look so scared. I have seen many bare chests before.'

Ruben flushed. 'I'm sorry. We have to be careful...' His voice trailed off as he shuffled uncomfortably.

'Yes, you told me that already,' she murmured. 'Do I look like a groupie, Mr. Navarro?' she asked, beginning to smile.

He reddened further. 'No, I guess not.'

Byron coughed and excused himself from the room, making a poor job of disguising his amusement.

Turning his back to her, Ruben removed the black shirt. Bethany raised her head just as he slid the fabric down over his shoulders, exposing a broad expanse of toned muscle. She swallowed hard as she watched his back ripple from the motion, light bouncing along his olive skin. Dropping his shirt onto the bed, he turned to her. Boyish embarrassment gone, it was every inch the man that steadily returned her gaze.

'Where do you want me, Doctor?'

*If his back was gorgeous, his front was better!* Taking in his broad chest, her eyes dropped to his abdomen, following the trail of hair until it disappeared into the waistband of his jeans.

'Doctor Shaw?'

Snapping back to attention, she realized he had spoken to her. She saw his knowing look and felt like she had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. A quirky smile played on his lips as he asked again where she wanted him. Berating herself, she told him to sit on the bed. After assuring him she was not a groupie, the mere thought of touching him made her nervous.

Mischievous brown eyes twinkled at her as she crossed the room to stand over him. Resolving not to look him in the eye again, she asked him to take a deep breath as she placed the stethoscope on his chest. The contact of the cold metal caused him to flinch momentarily, making her jump in response.

‘Sorry, I forgot to warm it up.’ She laughed nervously, raising the disc to her mouth to breathe on it. His eyes followed her actions and she saw them spark briefly before she moved out of his line of vision. Placing the warmed disc back onto his skin, she found it was hard to hear much with her own blood pounding in her ears.

Bethany moved again, asking him to turn to the side so she could listen through his back. She was mortified to see her hands shaking as she touched him again. Her eyes drifted to where his hands were braced on his thighs and she noted his long, thick fingers. Mouth going dry, she remembered what they said about guys with big hands and dropped the stethoscope all together. Ruben craned his head around to look at her.

Dropping to her knees to retrieve her equipment, she glanced up to find him looking down her blouse. Scrambling quickly to her feet, she straightened her jacket, shielding her body from his eyes, lest he spot the hardened nipples she could feel begging for attention.

‘All done?’ he asked, the lightness of his tone in direct opposition to the intensity of his gaze. He’d noticed all right.

‘Yes, thank God,’ she replied, realizing belatedly that she had spoken out loud. His look of surprise was replaced seconds later by a broad laugh. Flushing furiously, she laughed herself. She really had to get a grip on her nerves.

‘Okay, Mr. Navarro, I just need to check your glands and then I think I am done,’ she said, determined to get the situation back under control. Her legs didn’t want to respond, but she forced them forward as she walked over to where he stood and placed her fingers at his throat.



‘Please, call me Ruben,’ he replied smoothly, looking down at her through slit eyes as she focused on the column of his neck. Her gaze flashed up to his briefly before she stood back, grateful to put some space between them.

‘Well then...Ruben, your chest sounds fine and your glands are not too swollen so I think you are over the worst of it. Are you performing tonight?’ He nodded. ‘In that case, I think I will give you a shot to help with the symptoms. That should get you through.’

The thought of touching him again unnerved her so she chatted mindlessly as she prepared. ‘My niece did nothing but talk about your concerts for the last month,’ she told him with a nervous laugh.

‘Is she coming tonight?’

‘No. Unfortunately she couldn’t get a ticket. It’s lucky for me actually as I promised I would take her and I did not relish the thought of a night in an arena full of screaming teenagers.’

‘There are all ages at my shows,’ he told her, voice slightly defensive. ‘If you like, I can certainly arrange a couple of tickets.’

Bethany hesitated for a second. Her first response was to say no, but then she would have to spend the rest of her life making sure she never mentioned to Tyla that she had been in a room with Ruben Navarro and had refused free tickets. ‘Well, my niece was very disappointed,’ she pondered aloud.

‘Then that settles it! Come to the stage door tonight and I’ll make sure there are two tickets waiting for you.’ He turned away from her confident she would not refuse.

Watching him shrug his shirt on, she wondered at the sanity of spending any more time looking at this man. *It would be interesting to see that body in action though.* Flushing at her train of thought, she thanked him, avoiding his eyes and his outstretched hand and moved quickly towards the door.

Byron appeared from nowhere to open it for her, as if he had been waiting just out of sight. She barely had time to form the thought that he may have been eavesdropping on them, when he confirmed it by giving her a warm smile and saying he would see her at the concert. She smiled back, forgetting her earlier annoyance at the flamboyant little man.

Waiting until she knew she was out of earshot of the suite, she got out the cell phone from her bag. Tyla was never going to believe what had just happened.

## Chapter 2

‘Now that was interesting,’ Ruben said as Byron came back from seeing the hot looking doctor to the door. The staid suit she wore did her no justice, but couldn’t hide her long, lean body. He smiled again as he recalled how flustered the tall brunette had gotten. He could tell that she’d been surprised at her own reaction to him although she was classy enough to disguise it well. Only the spark in her pretty green eyes had given her away.

The shrill ring of his cell phone broke through his reverie. Seeing it was Karen, the angel who ran his charity, he greeted her warmly but briefly, knowing that if she rang it had to be something important. He was probably needed in the office. After initially committing to a major part of the workload himself, he’d been forced to take a back seat eventually but had maintained overall control of the charity’s management. The problem was that meant there were certain jobs only he could do and at times like this, he regretted the decision.

It had all started years ago with an offer to become a UN Goodwill Ambassador. He had to admit his initial motivation had been a selfish one. It never hurt your image to show the public your ‘caring’ side. He’d guessed also that it could be cathartic and help him to sort out some of the stuff he was still carrying around from his childhood. But, once he’d begun to educate himself on the issues facing children in the Third World, the horror he’d found chased any thoughts of self-gratification out of his head. He would never forget what he’d seen and heard in those first few days—children being trafficked, sold into slavery, prostituted, abused, and orphaned by AIDS. It had changed him and his view of the world forever. He’d known he had to do something.

So, he’d started his own charity. Initially they had focused on raising funds and awareness about the myriad problems these kids faced. Recently though, they concentrated solely on the problems of the lack of medicines,

health care providers and simple AIDS education in the world's poorest regions. It was a thankless task and, so far, hadn't affected the statistics much, but he wouldn't give up on it. For years now, a portion of the profits from his record sales had gone directly towards funding.

Ruben ended the call as Byron brought him a sandwich. He was in his late forties, and had been his personal manager as well as his best friend for the last fifteen years. Byron looked tired these days, Ruben thought, and had been neglecting his personal life recently. 'When did you last speak to John?'

'Earlier today. He was in *the* worst mood so it wasn't a long call.' Ruben recognized the blasé tone Byron always used when he was pretending he wasn't bothered about something. The tour had been hard on both of them. The difference for Ruben was that he didn't have a personal relationship that was suffering as a result. Byron missed John badly, but he refused to have him join them, claiming that he wouldn't be able to mother two people at the same time.

The US leg of the tour was almost over. Ruben didn't even want to think about Europe, never mind the Middle East. They were definitely going to need some time off before then. The charity wanted a little of his undivided attention and Byron really should go home for a few days.

Clicking on his laptop, he sighed as he opened his email account to find endless pages of messages waiting for him. *Damn, not again.* His inbox had been flooded since the last time he had logged on a couple of days earlier. He'd pay whatever it took to find out who had given his private email address out to a fan. Forced to change it a few times in the past, he'd found the process of notifying everyone who needed to contact him via email a total pain. Besides, someone always seemed to get the new one from somewhere. Eventually, he'd decided to keep the one he had, simply deleting any mail from people he didn't know, without reading it.

Ruben laughed, remembering some of the sleazier messages he'd stupidly read in the past. He considered himself a worldly man, but had never even heard of half of the things the emails talked about doing to him. Some of them were very innocent and sweet, but others had been pretty nasty, threatening to harm him and any woman whose name had been linked to his—usually falsely—in the press.

Unable to delete every email cluttering his inbox in case some were important, he resolved to at least scan them all before he left for the venue, pausing only to beg Byron for another cup of coffee.

\* \* \* \*

The Fan had waited with the others for hours in the stifling heat but there had been no sign of him at all. They had checked all the exits for a glimpse of somebody they knew. His manager Byron would usually be running in and out, giving away Ruben's location without intending to.

The girl next to her suggested they join the rapidly forming line of people waiting to enter the arena. As usual, most of the hardcore fans had tickets for the front rows, but it never hurt to get your seat early—it left more time for scouting out the venue, looking for ways to get backstage.

Following the crowd reluctantly, she remembered with a flash of anger that she had forgotten to send the emails she had spent all night composing. She wrote to him every day and wondered if he ever read them. It would be a terrible waste of her time and effort if he hadn't at least seen some.

Mind you, it wasn't easy staying in touch with him. After an initial fraught time for her when he kept changing his email address, she had managed to write to him often, sometimes up to ten times a day. More if she was feeling particularly creative. Changing her own address every few days had become a necessity once she had realized her regular account was being blocked.

Her poetry told him everything she could not. Maybe one day soon, she would get to read him a few poems. *Maybe during a long, lazy morning in bed or a romantic dinner?*

Pulling herself up short, she remembered she was in company and couldn't afford to let her feelings about Ruben surface. Thoughts of the two of them together always elicited an almost painful physical reaction in her—a combination of unbearable sadness and instant arousal, tinged with anger. Many times, when the feelings were too intense, they had sent her blindly out into the night, desperate for release. Men were easy to find and always happy to oblige an attractive woman who just wanted to fuck. *The arrogant fools thought they had struck lucky, unaware that she had less respect or use for them than she did her vibrator.*

The woman beside her was irritating. The constant chatter intruded on her thoughts; spoiling the anticipation she could feel building within. The day would soon come when they would all realize how very little they had in common with her. It served her purposes to allow them to think she was as pathetic and hopeless as they. *Let them believe that all she lived for was a smile or a kiss.* Some of them dared to dream of more, but she knew they would never get near him, not in that way. Many of his fans were middle-aged housewives holding on to their youth through fantasies...fantasies they pursued relentlessly. The irony of it all made her laugh. They didn't know the real Ruben, wouldn't want him in fact. *The Holy Grail they sought didn't exist.*

They didn't know him, as she did, as a real flesh and blood man, not the plastic fantasy the public saw. They wanted a lover who would say all the right things and never hurt them or shatter their illusions. They craved a romantic hero to save them from the soul-destroying monotony of their day-to-day lives. She pitied them. They had no idea how futile their dreams were.

Normally, she wouldn't have needed their help. Following him was easy; he was a creature of regular habit, often staying in hotels he had visited previously. She had only lost him a couple of times since 'going on tour with him' six months ago. That was what she called it, going on tour. Some of the other fans, the ones that didn't have the spiritual connection to him that she did, called her a stalker. It didn't bother her. They were jealous of the fact she could afford to do what they wished they could.

The line moved forward again, taking her into the arena, bringing him closer. Very soon, she would be with him again. The circumstances were not ideal and certainly not what she had been working toward for so long, but they would have to do for now.

Smiling at the tightening in her groin, she squeezed her thighs together discreetly, holding the feeling deep within. Excitement trickled through her. What if tonight was the night? The night when she reconnected with her soul mate?

## Chapter 3

Bethany felt self conscious as she walked through the stage door alone later that evening. She'd had no idea how to dress. Bon Jovi's huge stadium gigs in the early nineties were the last concerts she had attended but big hair and a leather mini skirt had been her choice of outfit back then! Feeling strangely excited, she waited for the show to start.

Her niece hadn't come after all. Her mother Donna had already bought tickets for another show. They were on the way to the airport at that very moment, flying out in time for the gig in LA the following day.

Bethany laughed when she recalled the new respect in her niece's voice once she learned where her 'old maid' aunt had been that afternoon. Tyla had been very excited and full of endless questions. Bethany did not go into ALL the details—the kid was only fifteen after all. She laughed again, realizing she had acted like a horny teenager herself that afternoon. It had been a long time since a handsome face and hot body had elicited that kind of response from her.

Finding out she would be alone that evening, Bethany had almost changed her mind about going. After a couple of hours of indecision she'd realized it would seem rude not to accept the invitation—and there was a huge part of her that was curious to find out how he looked up on stage, larger than life. She wanted to see if that animal magnetism came through in his performance too.

He had been as good as his word. She collected both tickets, deciding there was no need to explain that she did not need the other one, and found that her seats were in the front row. Most of the other people attending had chosen to wear jeans and t-shirts and she was happy she had settled for the same.

Two hours later, she was exhausted. Nothing had prepared her for the exhilaration of watching him perform. Her hair hung in damp ringlets

around her face, wet from dancing almost non-stop. It had been impossible to resist the urge to move to the rhythm. As for Ruben—he had been on fire.

Bethany was glad she had never seen his show before she had been called to his suite that afternoon. A knot formed in her stomach as remembered the feel of his skin under her hands and the fire in his eyes. Interlaced with that now was the image of his body moving sinuously to the music—sweat soaked shirt outlining every inch of him. If he moved in bed like he did onstage, he could kill somebody.

As she got up from her seat, a young woman approached informing her that Mr. Navarro had invited her party backstage. Bethany began explain about her niece but the woman had started walking, obviously expecting her to follow. Led through a labyrinth of hallways until they reached a door with a very unassuming piece of paper stuck onto it bearing his name, she tried again to tell the woman what had happened, but she had already knocked on the door.

Byron appeared almost instantly, this time smiling at her in recognition. Stepping aside to allow her access, he asked why she was alone. Surprised not to see Ruben in the stark, bright dressing room, she began to explain what had happened. Byron's eyes registered on something over her left shoulder and she turned to follow his gaze, finding Ruben across the room listening. His hair was still wet from his earlier exertion, dripping onto the vest top and track pants he appeared to have just put on. Using the towel thrown around his neck to mop his face, he came closer. Her body set about betraying her—quite willing to ignore the warning from her brain to calm down.

Sure her eyes were bugging like some star struck kid, she shook his offered hand. If he noticed, he didn't show it, simply stating that he was sorry to hear her niece had been unable to come as they took a seat. Bethany realized he was only half listening to her explanation as his eyes wandered freely over her face and torso. Not enjoying being sized up so obviously, she had to admit she probably bore no resemblance to the woman he had met that afternoon. A quick glance into the mirror over his shoulder confirmed her worst fears. Dark hair framed her flushed face in moist ringlets and her t-shirt clung damply to her body.

'Did you enjoy the show, Dr. Shaw?' Ruben asked, his eyes following her not so subtle attempt to peel her top away from her skin.



Her face lit up as she answered. 'Please, call me Bethany, and yes it was wonderful. I have never danced so much in my life.' She laughed. 'In fact,' she added, 'I may well try to join my niece in LA tomorrow night if the tickets are not sold out.'

'A ticket is not a problem,' he assured her, 'but how will you get there?'

She told him that her sister had flown, but if she left early the next morning she should be able to make the drive to LA in good time. Ruben excused himself abruptly, returning seconds later after a brief conversation with Byron.

'Bethany, if you wish to travel to my show tomorrow, I would be pleased to have you as a guest on my jet. There is no need for you to drive all that way alone,' he said simply.

Her mouth fell open. Knowing she looked stupid, she tried to regain her composure and began to shake her head.

Ruben cut her off before she could voice a protest. 'But it would be foolish for you to say no. We are both attending the same event in the same city tomorrow night. Why would you possibly want to travel alone?'

'Well...I don't know,' she admitted. 'I wouldn't want to impose.' Her stomach plunged at the thought of spending any more time with him.

'If you knew me better, Bethany, you would realize that I never do anything I don't want to.' The look in his eye made her wonder exactly what it was that he did want to do, but she quashed that thought quickly.

Standing, he reached down and pulled her to her feet. The warmth of his hand drew the last of the resistance from her and she nodded in agreement, finding her voice finally to thank him. He held her eyes and her hand for a moment longer before taking a step away from her.

'Now, I must go. Byron will give you the details. I think we fly out in a couple of hours,' he said, looking to him for agreement. He gave her a warm smile before walking her to the door. 'I look forward to seeing you again, Bethany.'

\* \* \* \*

Ruben ignored the look of amazement Byron was leveling at him. Hell, he didn't know why he wanted to spend more time with her, he just did. And he wasn't about to take a couple of hours of ribbing from Byron about it.

Luckily, his friend knew when to leave him alone. Byron hardly had the time to interrogate him anyway as he flew in and out of the room in his usual frenzied fashion.

Ruben had spotted her in the crowd earlier. Correction—the first thing he had noticed was the space next to her. An empty front row seat at one of his gigs was unheard of and he'd been pissed at first. But watching her let go and enjoy the show soon made him forget his annoyance.

It had taken him a moment to recognize her. It turned out that the severe bun she had worn earlier hid a mane of shoulder length curls. His attention had been drawn back to her a couple of times, but he got as lost in the performance as the crowd did. *You had to love performing to be able to do it. Singing the same songs over and over again, night after night, would drive you crazy otherwise. The only thing that made the loss of privacy and personal life worth the sacrifice was the high you got from being onstage and feeling the love of thousands of people coming at you.* The money was a huge bonus too, but the kick of being rich beyond his wildest dreams had worn off pretty quickly.

*She'd looked damn good in those jeans too...maybe he'd get to help her out of them sometime soon?* Ruben knew that she wouldn't be easy. He'd seen enough besotted fans and hard faced groupies to know. Hell, he could open the door now and ease the sexual tension she had caused, but he'd long since gotten bored with that. Sure, he still succumbed occasionally—there were some gorgeous women out there and he was a man after all. Just after a show was a prime time for him. If there was somebody available who'd sparked his interest, they often got the benefit of the adrenaline he'd built up onstage.

He hadn't always been proud of the way he treated women. For many years, the memory of his parents' turbulent relationship influenced his behavior. He'd been callous and cruel at times. Ironically, it was becoming famous that had changed his attitude. Confronted by hordes of women on a daily basis, he had seen many sides to their personalities. There were the sexually confident types who sent him silent signals with their eyes and innocent teenagers who would stare at him in mute infatuation. Then there were the older women. They were the ones that had really affected him. Somewhere, underneath the layers of cynicism they had built up over the

years, he could still see the romantic hopes of their youth, shining bright in their eyes.

At first, it had all seemed like a huge responsibility, but he had soon come to realize that it wasn't really about him. He was nothing more than a focus for their hopes and desires. And as long as they didn't expect anything from him—and nobody got hurt—well, he didn't really mind if they fantasized over him.

It seemed everything in his life had always been about sex. Sex sold the records, and sex sold his image. The main interest in him usually turned out to be sexual. He'd gotten used to keeping people at arm's length, allowing them to believe what they wanted. And now, it had become a habit. One he needed to break.

At thirty-two years old, he wasn't getting any younger. He wondered if his recent obsessing about why he was still alone after all this time had anything to do with his interest in Bethany. His body reacted immediately to the thought of her, leaving him in no doubt that, although she intrigued him, his interest for the moment was primarily physical. And it felt good. It had been a long time since he'd actually wanted to be with someone rather than just take what was freely offered. He relished the idea of pursuing her.

Jumping into the shower, he cursed the fact that he wasn't alone. A few minutes to relieve the tension building in his groin were what he needed. Peeking out into the dressing room, he wondered if there was time. The question was answered for him as the door opened again. Turning quickly to face the wall, Ruben hid his hard-on from the all-seeing eyes of his manager. Byron gave him a look that spoke volumes, making it clear as usual that he knew what was going on.

'I'll be back in five minutes,' he drawled, rolling his eyes dramatically. Turning on his heel Byron left the room, closing the door behind him.

\* \* \* \*

The Fan was numb. Arousal pulsed through her, fogging her brain, making her feel slightly sick. Others around her began to scream, but she couldn't make a sound. Ruben paused at the stage door, smiling and flirting while signing autographs for those who seemed to think having his name on a piece of paper meant something.

Forcing herself to move back, away from the man she loved, she slipped further into the crowd, watching him. His eyes caught her movement and he smiled without recognition. Every part of her being wanted to throw herself at his feet and beg him to remember her, to remember what they had and give it back to her and make her whole again. She couldn't do that, could never do that. Her reward would be sweeter if she could just wait for the right time.

Moments later he was gone, guided into the waiting limo by his ever-present bodyguard, Albert. She knew his staff well—as did all the fans—but for a different reason than most. Studying their habits and knowing the way they worked had become vital to her. The clues on Ruben's plans or whereabouts she had gotten from watching his staff had been invaluable. Albert was a big Cockney bruiser and the easiest one to watch for, his nearly seven-foot height, baldhead and battle scarred face made him impossible to miss anywhere. Many of the other women flirted with Albert, seeing him as a way to get nearer to the ultimate prize. Too much of a brute for her tastes, she wondered how far some of them were prepared to go. He was a thug from London's east end, who had supposedly gone legit by becoming a 'security expert', but she wouldn't want to be alone in a room with him again. He had ruined the best night of her life with his brutal and heavy handed treatment of her and she feared and hated him for it.

Hands suddenly pulled at her, hands she resisted before realizing they were Martha's and allowed them to drag her into the waiting taxi. She knew, without asking, where they were going. Fans often arrived at the airport before Ruben, amazing him when he spotted ones he knew he had seen only minutes earlier. The address Martha gave the driver surprised her. He wasn't flying out of McCarran.

North Las Vegas airport was very quiet and they had no trouble working their way through to the departure lounges to wait and watch for Ruben. It didn't surprise her to find that they were not the only ones who had figured out his plans. Twenty or so women of all ages and sizes stood in clusters, necks craning around every few seconds, searching every new face. Excusing herself to the bathroom, she had to ignore Martha's protests that she would miss all the excitement. She couldn't hide under the glaring lights and didn't want to risk being noticed—if that happened now, all her work would be for nothing.

Wandering around the restroom, she paused to fix her hair and touched up her face, killing time while she waited. Martha wouldn't give up a prime location to look for her, so she had no need to hide as she listened for the telltale signs he had arrived.

She hadn't waited long when she heard the screams and shouts through the door about five minutes later. Peering around a corner, she saw his small entourage pass by without stopping. He smiled and waved, but kept moving. Watching carefully, she waited until he had gone through the doors before running to Martha, feigning disappointment at missing him. The woman looked at her like she was crazy, but didn't question further, redirecting their attention to the window that would be the best to watch him board.

Minutes later, the crowd began to disperse, excitement over as he disappeared into the small, private jet. But she didn't move, attention riveted on a tall, slim brunette making her way sheepishly towards the plane. She didn't recognize the woman. If it was a fan, it was a new and audacious one.

Her pulse quickened as she saw Albert's giant frame lumber down the steps towards the woman who wisely took a couple of steps backward. Smiling, she waited for the inevitable, expecting the ill-mannered thug to treat this fan as he did all others, typically bundling them away. Confused, she watched him call her forward before pointing up the steps. She felt her stomach lurch as she realized the woman was more than a fan and would be joining Ruben.

*Who was she?* Certainly not his girlfriend. Ruben didn't go for that type; she knew that better than anyone. There had been no sign of her elsewhere on the tour and no mention of any new girlfriend on the fan grapevine. Staring at the door, she willed the woman to reappear. Martha approached but she ignored her, no longer worried if her companion found her behavior strange. *Come out, come out*, she begged silently.

Her eyes began to water, the effort of trying to see through the darkness and into the jet straining them. The door closed suddenly, shutting her out of his life once more. She punched the glass in frustration, over and over, screaming in absolute rage. Blood from her damaged knuckles smeared the glass. Martha's gasp of fear shocked her back to reality as the pain began to register. She stopped suddenly, sucking in ragged breaths, attempting to calm the pounding in her head before daring a look at her companion.

The woman looked scared and stepped back quickly, cowering away from her just as a security guard arrived, asking what was going on. A cold calm had descended by the time she turned to reassure them both, plastering a smile on her face. Neither looked convinced by her explanation that it was just disappointment at missing him that had caused the outburst.

The guard reached for her hand, intent on helping her it seemed. Screaming that he should fuck off and mind his own business, she turned away, refusing his offer of medical attention. Wanting nothing more than to be out of the airport, she walked toward the exit hearing Martha fall into step behind her.

She kept quiet, unable to trust herself not to give too much away. She had to be more careful. Her insides were in turmoil and she was desperate to be alone. Walking away from Martha, she ignored the woman's calls as she jumped into a taxi and left her standing on the sidewalk.

## Chapter 4

Bethany boarded the plane shyly. After changing her mind a million times, she was finally there. The thought that she shouldn't bitch about her life if she wasn't prepared to grab an opportunity like this had been the decider. Ok, so she knew why she was there, but what was in it for him? It wasn't in her nature to throw caution to the wind and she would be much happier once she had a handle on what was going down.

Ruben was already seated and looked up as she entered. Smiling, he gestured that she should take the opposite seat. Wondering if she looked as terrified as she felt, she sat down quickly. She had dressed casually in clean jeans and a sweater, the result of a good hour spent debating what she should wear. Not wanting to give the wrong impression—or maybe the right one—she had settled for low-key, but now she felt distinctly under dressed in the elegant décor of the plane's interior. Beige and gray leather covered every surface that wasn't already veneered in limed oak or covered in plush carpet.

'Ready for a wild ride?' he asked. Her eyes flashed quickly to his. Unsure if the double-entendre was intentional; she chose to ignore it and smiled at him benignly. She felt him watching her as she fumbled with the seat belt. The urge to fill the static silence with inane babble was overwhelming and she succumbed quickly.

'I hope I didn't keep you waiting. I'm not used to doing things last minute. I tend to over plan. Having to organize myself this quickly wasn't easy.' She laughed, after finally pausing for breath.

'I envy you that. I never get to plan anything. I'm always just told to be in this city or that country by a certain day. Thank God Byron points me in the right direction.' His comment surprised Bethany. She had always assumed that the lifestyle and the wealth it brought with it would give you the ultimate freedom. She told him so.

He shook his head dismissively. 'Yeah, you would think so, right? The record company owns me. You sign a contract with them; you make a deal with the Devil.' His laugh held some bitterness. 'I have it easy compared to 99.9% of the planet, so I'm not complaining. I do what I love and get paid a fortune for it. What about you? Do you like what you do?'

Uneasy having the conversation focus on her boring little life, she told him of her small practice. He seemed genuinely interested and asked her why she chose medicine. She explained she had her mother to thank for that. She'd brought Bethany and her sister up single-handedly after their father had disappeared. After dying way too young, she had left enough money for Bethany to start a small practice with her share of the inheritance. Sometimes, when she wanted to quit her life and take off, it was the thought of her mom's sacrifices that made her stay.

Five minutes later, Bethany was mortified to find she was still talking. Resolving not to bore him to sleep, she bit her tongue, allowing the silence to hang between them for a few seconds.

His next question surprised her. 'So, Bethany, are you married?' The casual tone of his voice didn't match the intensity of his stare. She shook her head.

'You?'

'This isn't the life for a wife and kids,' he said. The finality in his tone made it clear he was alone and intended to stay that way. Intuition told her there was more to the story than his short, curt answer revealed.

The ever-present Byron finally finished doing whatever it was that had kept him running around the aircraft in frenzy and settled down across the aisle from them, nodding a quick hello in her direction. Turning instantly, he engrossed Ruben in conversation long enough for Bethany to finally relax into her seat as they took off.

She took the opportunity to slide her eyes slyly over Ruben. The simple black V-neck sweater he wore clung to his torso, coming to rest on top of track pants of the same color. They in turn outlined every inch of his thighs. Checking quickly that he wasn't looking her way, she took a peek at his groin and almost swore aloud as the newspaper folded on his lap blocked her vision. Her gaze continued downward, coming finally to rest on his feet. He wore no shoes and she wondered at how comfortable one must be in their own skin to be so relaxed in front of strangers. She saw his toes flex



and stretch as he sank them repeatedly into the plush carpeting, as if enjoying the sensation.

Inventory finished, she raised her gaze, flushing to the roots of her hair as she realized he had been watching her. Staring at him helplessly, she saw amusement then arrogance flash in his eyes. Any hopes she'd had of hiding the way he affected her were gone, she realized on a groan. He knew all right. And he appeared to be enjoying it. A pulse in her throat thumped as she felt as much as saw the change in his expression to one of invitation.

*What the hell was she doing there, eyeing up rock stars on private jets?* For the briefest moment, she wished for the familiarity of her usual routine, but not for long. Anything was better than another one of those evenings; hours spent staring off into space, trying to figure out where her dreams had gone. She would usually be in bed by now, falling asleep in front of some TV movie. Totally out of her comfort zone, she fumbled in her bag for the book she had brought, grateful for the distraction. Raising her head again, she was relieved to find Byron handing Ruben various contracts and letters. Normality, whatever that was, returned for the time being and she began to relax.

A little later into the flight, Bethany was glad she had come. Ruben and Byron were both incredibly nice guys. Interesting and funny, they kept her entertained with stories and anecdotes. Ruben told her how he'd met his manager when she commented on the obvious bond between them. After leaving the family home in Mexico as soon as he was old enough, Ruben's 'big break' had come when he was discovered singing in a bar in New York, supplementing his college funds. From that moment on, his life had been a whirlwind. After a while, Byron had been assigned by the record label and it had been a turning point. Ruben had been about to walk away, uncertain whether it was what he wanted to do with his life but sure he couldn't handle the madness around him.

Byron had taught him how to avoid wasting time and effort on the trivial things and how to prioritize his workload. He'd been fiercely protective too, keeping away people who tried to demand too much of his charge and taking care of every aspect of his day-to-day life. When Ruben had changed labels a few years later, Byron had resigned too, working exclusively for him from that day on.

As the plane came into land, Ruben asked which hotel she was staying in. Bethany's hand flew to her mouth as she realized she had not phoned her sister to tell her she was coming—and she had no idea where they were staying. Looking at her watch, she realized it was way too late to call them now.

Never able to pull off a convincing bluff, she laughed and admitted her mistake. Almost before she had finished the sentence, Byron was on his cell phone, arranging a room for her at the hotel he and Ruben were in. Thanking him for being so chivalrous, she grimaced internally when she heard the name of the place they were staying. Although easily able to afford the cost of a night there, she would never usually have spent that much money. Oh well, what they'd saved her in travel expenses would pay for the room, she figured. Feeling like a total idiot, she couldn't be sure she'd actually just seen the smug look flash briefly across Ruben's face.

They landed shortly after and made their way out to a limo waiting quietly on the tarmac. Placing a hand on the small of her back, Ruben guided her in. Sandwiched between the two men, she felt a little self-conscious. Her libido was raging despite all her attempts to calm it down. Now, she had a man pressed against her on either side from shoulder to knee. She was pretty sure one of them was gay, but in her flustered state, it made no difference.

She saw Ruben's gaze travel quickly the length of her legs as she stretched them out in front of her. The casual touch on her arm startled her as he drew her attention to the dawn breaking over the city. The orange glow of a breathtaking sunrise seemed almost surreal in her current state of mind. Smiling as the warm light seeped into her, she turned to tell him how lovely it was, but froze as she found him staring at her.

'Beautiful,' was all she could say.

Smiling into her eyes he agreed. 'Yes, very beautiful.'

It was impossible to miss the implication in his words as his eyes roamed over her face, coming to rest on her lips. His eyes darkened before she turned her body away, unsure of how to deal with a man who made it so clear what he wanted. Feeling out of control was uncomfortable and her natural reaction was to resist him. He reached out to catch hold of her fingers.

'Are you ok, Bethany?'

'A little tired,' she lied, pulling her hand back slowly, on the pretence of rubbing her eyes. She was far from tired. Every nerve in her body was alive and kicking.

'We're almost there,' Byron offered in a kind tone. The sexual tension between them eased a little as Byron continued to speak; informing Ruben how much time they would have to rest before they had to get ready for the show. A brief sound check would be all that was necessary before then.

The limo pulled into the curb suddenly. Byron groaned aloud and Bethany followed his gaze to the small group of fans that waited at the entrance to the hotel. Assessing the situation quickly, he suggested Bethany stay in the car until it parked round back. She did not need to be involved in the madness and Ruben could do without fielding questions regarding a mystery brunette for the next few weeks, he laughed.

Giving her hand a little squeeze, Ruben leapt from the car as Byron got out curbside, smile plastered onto his face. The screams ripping through the early morning air scared the hell out of Bethany. *How did he cope with it?* The chauffeur chuckled to himself as he slowly pulled away, shaking his head. 'Those chicas are crazy,' he said over his shoulder, wide smile splitting his round, friendly face. Bethany laughed as she looked back. Ruben had made it safely in through the door, leaving the girls to giggle and hug each other in excitement.

\* \* \* \*

*My God...she's half naked!*

Ruben's mind went blank until Bethany moved to grasp the towel tighter around her, seeming to recover her composure as she stepped back to let him into the room.

'I thought you were room service,' she offered by way of explanation. 'I...I ordered breakfast.'

'I'm sorry to intrude,' he said as he tried to avert his eyes. 'Byron realized we had to let you know about the ticket and got your room number. I offered to come down and confirm the arrangements with you and to check that you had settled in.' *Damn, that sounded lame even to his ears, but hopefully she wouldn't think he had come to her room just to stare at her.* He had no way of knowing that she would be dressed like this.

‘OK, well thanks,’ she muttered, looking uncomfortable. ‘Excuse me while I get a robe.’ Ruben would have been happier if she’d stayed exactly as she was, but he kept silent. He didn’t want to make her more nervous than she already was.

He wandered over to the window, taking a deep breath, trying to chase away the image of how she had looked in that skimpy towel. Dragging his hand through his hair, he let out an exasperated breath. He really needed to keep a grip on himself around her; sure she wouldn’t welcome him getting hot and heavy so soon. She wasn’t the type of woman he was used to spending time with and the usual rules didn’t apply.

There was a knock at the door as she came back into the room and she crossed to it, pulling the neck of the robe together. Guessing correctly that it was room service this time, she kept the waiter in the hall, taking the trolley from him.

Ruben leapt to his feet to help her as the door closed. Turning abruptly, Bethany bumped straight into him and he had to grab her upper arms to steady her. He hadn’t intended to touch her, but now he couldn’t let go. She didn’t help the situation by freezing on the spot and staring back at him in surprise.

Waiting for her to pull away, he hesitated only briefly before turning the steady grip on her arms into a gentle caress. The slightest pressure brought her closer to him and he searched her face for some idea of how she would react if he took things further.

Almost as if she feared what he would see in her eyes if she continued to look at him, she dropped her gaze, but didn’t resist. His hands snaked up her arms to her shoulders, one of them continuing up to lift her face. He dropped his head slowly, still giving her time to pull back. Bethany didn’t move. He heard her shaky intake of breath at the first brush of his lips against hers.

Deepening the kiss, he groaned as one of his hands moved up to cup her head while the other moved carefully down to the small of her back to pull her even closer to him. Her gasp as he sucked her lip between his teeth told him all he needed to know.

Dropping his mouth to her neck, she didn’t stop him as he pulled her robe over a shoulder, baring her skin. She smelled of something musky and sweet and he could taste a little of it as his tongue flicked over her.

Bethany's head dropped back as he nipped at her collarbone, while his thumbs snaked their way up her torso, massaging gently through her robe, coming to rest on her ribcage. Groaning, she leaned forward onto his shoulder as he fought the urge to touch the breasts he could feel grazing the backs of his hands. The sudden shrill ring of the bedside phone made them jump. Bethany pulled away hastily, staring at him in confusion as she pulled the robe around her body.

'Byron,' Ruben groaned in explanation.

It was fortunate for his friend that he was in another part of the hotel. Bethany had been responding as if she had wanted him as badly as he wanted her, but now the wary look was back in her eye. Damn Byron's timing!

Cupping her chin, he pressed a brief kiss to her lips. 'Tell him I'm on my way,' he laughed as he moved towards the door. 'Your ticket will be at Reception and, as I'm sure you want to be together, a couple for your sister and her daughter, too. Bring them backstage tonight after the show, ok?'

She nodded and smiled as he made to leave, but didn't speak again, trying to appear nonchalant as she closed the door behind him. He would have been happier if she had been her usual, sassy self. He hoped what had just happened wouldn't freak her out.

By the time he arrived at the Penthouse suite, Byron was waiting in the open doorway. 'Ruben, you need to get some sleep. We don't have much time today.'

'Ok, ok, I'm here now. By the way, can we spend another night here and fly on to New York tomorrow?'

'Why?'

'No particular reason. I just want to stay here tonight, that's all.' Ruben dropped his gaze and feigned interest in the newspapers lying on the table. He could never lie to Byron. Not convincingly anyway.

'It should be no problem. As usual, I'll arrange everything,' he drawled. 'Now will you please go to bed?'

Seeing the tiredness etched onto his friend's features, Ruben felt guilty. 'You need some rest, too.' Smiling, Byron picked up his cell phone and switched it off, making it clear he was unavailable to all for the time being. Leaving the room, he told Ruben he would wake him in about 6 hours.

Stripping off his clothing as he walked, Ruben made his way into the bathroom, hoping a quick shower before bed would relax him. The warm water did nothing to calm his sensitized skin. Feeling himself begin to harden again as he thought of her near nakedness just a few floors down, he laughed and turned the cold tap on full. He would wait until he got what he wanted this time.

\* \* \* \*

Shutting the door on the bellhop without tipping him, The Fan dropped her bags on yet another bed in yet another hotel. She didn't know how much longer she could go on like this.

Unimpressed, she looked around the hastily booked room. She'd been lucky to get it at such short notice. Her money wouldn't last long if she kept paying for expensive hotels, but after last night's developments, she didn't have a choice. She had to stay close to him, had to find out who the brunette was and what she meant to him.

Unable to sleep a wink since she had seen him, she had returned to her room only to pack her bags and head straight for the airport, hoping to book a flight that arrived about the same time as his. Damning her luck, she had been forced to spend fraught hours on standby, pacing the departure lounge as she waited to be called. In the end, she had arrived about four hours behind him.

Her cell phone rang, reminding her that the friend she had arranged to share with was in town, and probably trying to book into their hotel room in another part of LA. She answered, telling the woman impatiently that she should make her own way to the show and they would meet up later. Hanging up on her without saying goodbye, she resolved to think up a plausible excuse for her erratic behavior by the time they spoke again. Hopefully, that would get the woman off her back for now.

Ignoring the exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm her, she plugged in the laptop she took everywhere. It was her lifeline—her connection to Ruben's world—and the one place she could rely on getting the information she needed. Navigating quickly to the many fan sites she was a member of, she found nothing, no mention of any woman. Apparently, she had been the only one who had noticed.

Her brain hurt from hours of ruminating on who the brunette was and what she and Ruben were up to. *Was she here with him? Had they spent the night having sex?* Bile rose in her throat and she pushed the thought away, deciding there was no point in getting upset until she had proof. *Maybe the woman had been a reporter or someone from the record company? No need to panic yet.*

The regular fans had been online in droves, posting every picture, no matter what the quality simply because they were of Ruben. Endless tales of ‘fan encounters’ filled the forums, rambling on breathlessly about seeing him leave a car, walk through a door or wave at them—all non-events as far as she was concerned, but the very stuff they seemed to live for.

She had nothing in common with these women, but often found herself grateful for their obsessive attention to detail. In the years when she had been trapped with her father, she had lived vicariously through them, eagerly absorbing every morsel of information she could glean from their messages and photos. Thanks to them, she knew where he lived, shopped, relaxed and worked. She knew his car, his staff, his family and his friends.

She’d actually come face to face with him at a CD signing when her journey had first began six months earlier. The devastation of realizing that he had no idea who she was had been hard to get over. Due to the fact they were not alone, her smile had barely slipped as he’d signed her CD without a glimpse of recognition before she was hustled away to make space for the next fan.

She also knew about the two very casual girlfriends he had been seen with since then. One of them had been a celebrity, the other had not. The latter had been easy to find once she knew her name and paying the bitch a visit had been one of the first items on her agenda once she had been free. *Nobody had been home the night she turned up on the doorstep, but that hadn’t mattered.* Unable to punish the girlfriend for being with Ruben, she had satisfied herself with trashing the apartment and stealing the few items of jewelry that had caught her eye. A shiny new Mercedes outside on the drive hadn’t fared much better—she’d slashed the tires before throwing a brick through the windscreen. She still remembered the sound of the car alarm shrieking in protest as she ran off into the night.

In a way she was glad she hadn’t confronted the woman. If she had done her harm and gotten caught, any hopes of being reunited with Ruben would

be gone forever. *He wasn't hers yet, and she didn't have the right, or the reason—she hoped—to be jealous.*

Getting on top of the bed, she tried to fight the tiredness, but knew she would have to sleep soon, if only so she would have more energy for later. Knowing he was somewhere above her in the hotel didn't excite her, it wasn't as if she would be able to get near him. *Shit, she doubted Albert would let anyone onto the entire floor, assuming his boss had taken his usual penthouse suite.*

*Ruben hated having anyone around before a performance—including friends and family.* A thought panicked her. What about after? He often entertained or hit the clubs after a show, still pumped from the adrenaline of being on stage. Things could get complicated if the mystery woman was still hanging around like a bad smell while he was looking to release some of that excess energy. She was sure he would be resting for the time being, knowing from bittersweet personal experience that he wouldn't let anything or anyone get in the way of a show.

She shut her eyes, deciding to rest while she could. The night ahead promised to be a long one and, if the brunette knew what was good for her, Ruben would spend it alone.



## Chapter 5

Bethany breathed a ragged sigh of relief as the door closed behind him. Her earlier conviction that Ruben couldn't possibly be interested had left her unprepared for what had happened. During the whole encounter, she had been unable to move, never mind stop him. It all seemed so unreal and her brain simply refused to accept what it had just seen. If she hadn't been there herself, she wouldn't believe it either!

*Sure, it was flattering that he'd come on to her but what was the point of it all?* She never did this kind of thing and she seriously doubted that he was interested in anything other than quick, mindless sex. Not that she found the idea unappealing. He was an attractive man. *That body could take her mind off her troubles for a few hours*, she guessed.

Squirming at the throbbing between her thighs as she thought of his lips on hers moments before, she allowed herself the indulgence of imagining what could have happened if she hadn't been 'saved by the bell'. Throwing herself back onto the bed, she blew out a loud breath, trying to relax.

*Why did she always have to be so serious? Maybe just this once, she could have fun, without fear or expectation?* Saying it was one thing, doing it was another. Her relationship with Simon had suppressed the natural inhibition she used to have. She smiled wryly, trying to chase away the tiredness that always invaded her spirit whenever she thought of her ex-fiancé.

The girl she used to be wouldn't have hesitated for even a moment. Ruben wouldn't know what had hit him. She laughed into the stillness of the room as she imagined him, lying stunned and naked on the floor, after she'd had her way with him. She sighed as she remembered she wasn't that girl anymore.

She picked at her breakfast half-heartedly, the sleepless night beginning to catch up with her. With just enough energy left to arrange an alarm call, she fell asleep on top of the covers.

Many hours later, Bethany led Donna and Tyla through the curtain and up to the door of his dressing room. After one more urgent whisper at her niece to calm down, she knocked, feeling no braver than the young girl, but determined to lead by example. Tyla had hyperventilated for almost an hour once she found out what her aunt had managed to arrange for her.

Her mother Donna, Bethany's younger sister, had been almost as excited, but more interested in hearing the juicy details. She appeared to have forgotten she was sulking at the moment, convinced that Bethany simply wasn't telling the truth about her time with Ruben.

Inside the room minutes later, Bethany was almost sorry she had come. Tyla was sobbing uncontrollably, clinging to the front of Ruben's shirt. Bethany and Donna were making soothing noises whilst trying to pry his clothing out of her fingers, talking over each other as they kept apologizing. Ruben impressed Bethany with the way he tried to calm Tyla without being panicked by her actions. Finally, his soothing tones got through to the young girl, who went from loud wailing to quiet sniffing. Not long after that, they managed to coax her into a chair.

Bethany dared a look at her sister. The surprise on her face wasn't a revelation. Although happily married for many years, Donna still had the wildness in her that Bethany had lost. Her eyes were asking how the hell Bethany had kept her hands to herself while she was alone with this guy. Donna blatantly took in the view from her position behind him, smiling and winking up at him as he turned around and caught her doing it. Bethany was relieved to see him laugh and wink back broadly. She just prayed that for once in her life, her sister wouldn't blurt out what she was thinking.

Tyla looked up at him in silent awe, red-rimmed eyes wide as he turned his attention back to her and asked if she had enjoyed the show. Nodding mutely, she dropped her head, embarrassment starting to kick in. Sensing her discomfort, Bethany decided to bring her ordeal to an end.

'Thank you so much for seeing us Ruben. It's getting late though and I think we're all a little tired,' she said with a kind look at her niece. The group moved slowly toward the door as Ruben signed pictures for all of

them. About to follow her family out into the hallway, Bethany was halted by the sound of her name.

‘When are you going home?’ Ruben asked

‘We’re flying back very early tomorrow morning.’

‘Will you join me for a late supper tonight, in my suite?’

Bethany hesitated. Now that was a complication she didn’t need to think about at the moment. He obviously intended to pick up where they’d left off earlier. After the morning’s foreplay, they both knew if she accepted, she was consenting to more than just dinner. As usual, her brain went into overdrive in an attempt to stop her body from getting her into trouble. About to shake her head, if only just to play for time to think, she was interrupted.

‘Yes, she would love to,’ came her sister’s distant voice through the open doorway, followed instantly by the sound of her niece giggling uncontrollably. Ruben and Bethany grinned at each other.

‘Well? Will you join me, Bethany?’

The look in his eye told her he already knew what her answer would be. Nodding quickly, she tried to ignore the butterflies in her stomach as she held his gaze. Kissing her cheek briefly, he let her go; his look promising that he would see her later.

Rejoining her sister in the hall, she was greeted by incredulous eyes. ‘I know you weren’t thinking of turning him down,’ her sister said, a laugh in her voice. Not wanting to spend the whole journey back to the hotel explaining in front of Tyla why she had almost refused, Bethany simply shook her head and smiled.

\* \* \* \*

‘I’m not going.’

Ruben was furious, but trying hard not to take his anger out on Byron, who had just delivered the news that the record label needed some extra publicity shots. They wanted him in New York by early morning.

Byron persisted. ‘Why must we stay here tonight and why are you being so stubborn?’

Ruben kicked his shoes off. ‘I just want to, that’s all.’ Dragging his hands through his hair, he began to pace. ‘They can’t just call and change

plans at the last minute. They own enough of my life without eating into the pathetic amount of free time I have left.'

'I warned you not to cut your hair, didn't I? But you couldn't wait. You had to have it done straight away.' Byron placed his hands on his hips. 'So now, your publicity shots are out of date.'

He was right, of course, but Ruben wasn't in the mood to be reasonable. Fixing Byron with a glare that always terrified the road crew, Ruben was pissed that it didn't scare him at all. Just this once, he wished his friend would give him some personal space and allow him to make his own decisions. He told him so.

'Fine,' Byron snapped, looking offended. 'You can wipe your own ass for a change.'

Ruben felt bad as he watched Byron launch into the tidying and cleaning he always did when he was angry. Clothes were put away at record speed, newspapers folded, things moved to one side and then put back for no good reason as he muttered mutinously under his breath. Ruben tried to ignore him, but verbal missiles like 'better things to do' and 'must think I don't have a life of my own' came flying at him from all directions through the charged atmosphere.

Smiling despite himself, Ruben couldn't stay mad for long. Guilt at causing the uncharacteristic outburst from Byron sent him scurrying to the kitchen. Returning minutes later with a cup of tea, he guided him to a chair, placing the drink in his hand. 'I am sorry,' he said, giving Byron's shoulder a brief squeeze.

The smile he received in response showed him all was forgiven. Taking a sip of the tea, Byron spoke. 'But what am I going to tell the label?'

Shaking his head, Ruben was at a loss for an answer. 'I don't know, tell them you couldn't find me.' He warmed to the idea. 'Tell them we had a fight and I stormed out.'

Byron wasn't convinced but agreed, warning Ruben to remember he was a terrible liar and they would never believe him. 'That doesn't matter. Don't you see, they'll be so relieved when I arrive for the gig tomorrow night, they will have forgotten all about the photo shoot. Hell, they are always canceling those things on a moments notice anyway.'

Byron nodded in agreement, before surprising him with a change of topic as subtle as a sledgehammer. 'It's that doctor, isn't it?'

‘What?’

‘Bethany. She is the reason you want to stay tonight?’ Byron folded his arms, convinced he was right and looking smug about it. Ruben didn’t answer him. ‘Is she worth all this trouble? You hardly know the woman.’

Ruben erupted from his seat. ‘That isn’t the point.’ He paused unsure what the point actually was. ‘I just want to do this. I want one evening the way I want to spend it, with a person I want to spend it with. I don’t want to be told where to go or what to wear or when to sleep or when to get up.’ He ran out of steam then, sure Byron didn’t have a clue what the hell he was talking about.

‘I understand Ruben, really I do, and sure, if you want a night to yourself, then we will make it happen.’ Byron said, compassion warming his eyes. ‘But you know that’s not gonna solve anything?’ Ruben shook his head, unsure of his meaning.

‘We should never have signed that contract,’ Byron sighed.

‘Huh. That wasn’t a contract.’ Ruben spat out. ‘Indentured servitude is a better description.’ The five-album deal he’d signed a few years earlier had seemed like a dream come true at first. Problem was, three albums later, he was marking time, desperate for it to end. He’d decided long ago that as soon as he was free, he would launch his own label. *No record company would ever own him again.*

Ruben looked at his watch, guessing Bethany would be arriving soon. About to tell Byron to make himself scarce, he remembered suddenly that, despite his earlier protestations about doing things alone, he needed his help again. ‘Any chance you could scare up a gourmet meal for two before disappearing discreetly?’ he asked with a cheeky grin. Byron choked on his tea at Ruben’s audacity. Wiping his shirt front, he shook his head in mock censure, but got straight on the phone to room service.

## Chapter 6

She arrived at his suite just after midnight. It seemed an insane time to eat and she wondered if his offer was genuine or simply a ploy to get her alone. Ruben opened the door, welcoming her into a beautiful room with a fully laid table waiting in front of the balcony.

‘Thank you for coming,’ he said, surprising her with the formality of his greeting. Following his gaze, she spotted a waiter discreetly organizing dishes on a serving trolley in the corner of the room.

Allowing him to seat her at the table, she accepted a glass of wine. ‘This all seems so surreal. Do you often entertain at this time of night?’

He held her gaze for a moment before answering. ‘No, not often.’

Bethany had dressed simply, having brought nothing with her from Vegas. A black linen shift that she intended to fly home in had been her only choice. His appreciative glance at her legs when she’d first entered the suite bolstered her confidence. She thought he looked gorgeous in the t-shirt, jeans and casual jacket he had chosen.

The meal was wonderful. Bethany couldn’t tell if the glow she felt was from the wine or his presence. *Maybe it was a little of both?* He had managed to make her forget the nervousness that had almost stopped her from accepting his invitation. *What was it about him that scared her so much?*

Conversation flowed easily despite her nerves and they laughed when Bethany reminded him of her niece’s behavior earlier. Ruben assured her there was no need to apologize. Apparently, Tyla had been well behaved compared to some he had encountered.

During a lapse in the conversation, Bethany’s eyes lingered on his hands and the strong fingers gripping the fork. The memory of those fingers working their way up her body earlier in the day made her face flood with color. Dropping her head to hide her blush, she willed her tightening groin

to calm down. He appeared to notice the change in her demeanor and asked if she was okay as she took a big gulp of her wine.

‘Yes, I’m fine,’ she said, as brightly as she could given the circumstances. He looked like he didn’t believe her for one minute, but thankfully didn’t pursue it. To her relief, he took the hint and changed topic, asking instead about her family.

Mischief twinkled in his eyes. ‘What exactly is the story with that sister of yours?’

Glad of the diversion, she told him a few tales about ‘that sister’ that made him laugh out loud. He seemed content to let her talk and watched her intently, smiling and nodding often. Nerves forgotten, she was eternally grateful to her sister for giving her so much to talk about. Careful to make sure he got the right impression about Donna, Bethany told him of some of the crazier things she had done in her life, laughing to herself as the memories flooded back.

Eventually, she realized he had stopped listening as she became aware of his eyes on her face, tracing every feature. He appeared very attentive and focused on what she was saying, but managed to move subtly closer until it seemed only natural when he picked her hand up from the table and began to stroke it with his fingertips. Her voice died in her throat as she watched him silently. An ache rose slowly upward from her groin causing her to flush and part her lips, suddenly short of breath. His grin told her that he knew what he was doing.

Bethany tried to continue the conversation, but had trouble thinking. Stealing the occasional furtive glance at him, she found his attention on either her mouth, her breasts or her hair. Becoming flushed and fidgety under the heat of his stare and the sexual energy that flowed from him, she marveled how he could he make her wet just by looking at her.

Thanks to the wine, she had the weird sensation of being excited and terrified at the same time. It surprised her to realize she actually liked him a hell of a lot. *Yes, he made her feel like a frightened teenager, but that was mostly all her own doing. He was actually a genuinely nice person and she enjoyed spending time with him so why couldn’t she just relax?* She pulled her hand away, smoothing down her hair in a self-conscious gesture—wishing he would stop staring at her.

‘Bethany. What are you afraid of?’ he asked suddenly.

Smiling shyly, she hesitated before deciding on telling the truth. 'I don't like to lose control, I guess.'

'Do you think you would lose control with me?' he teased, leaning in closer. His tone was light, but she could feel the tension in him as he waited for her answer.

'I'm trying not to,' she admitted, cursing the wine for loosening her tongue. A question appeared in his eyes and if the waiter not chosen that exact moment to come back into the room, she knew he would have tested her willpower. His expression told her she'd had a lucky escape...for now.

Instructing the waiter to leave the dessert trolley and clear the table, Ruben led her out onto the balcony to have their coffee. Bethany stared out over the city, awed by the view you could buy if you were rich enough. The last thing she needed now was another reminder of the differences between them. Pushing the thought from her mind, she sighed away the tension as the breeze caressed her skin and whipped at her hair. Bracing her hands on the wooden rail, she closed her eyes and took in a deep, cleansing breath—vaguely registering the sound of a door closing as the waiter left the suite. She only realized Ruben was behind her when he slipped an arm around her shoulders. Startled at first, she willed herself to relax and allowed him to pull her close.

'It's beautiful out here,' she whispered.

'You are beautiful.'

Unused to such open compliments, Bethany ignored it, groping blindly for a neutral subject to distract him with. 'I'll be sorry to leave tomorrow. This trip has been wonderful,' she said wistfully.

'Can't you stay away any longer?'

*What was he asking her?* She warned herself against reading any more into the question before answering. 'I have to go back. I'm needed at work.'

'I see...'

Ruben went quiet for an uncomfortable amount of time. Bethany watched him out of the corner of her eye and it made her smile to see he was a little nervous too. She realized he didn't know what to do next. Reaching up to smooth down the hair that was blowing into her face, she turned to ask him when he was leaving.

Catching her hand, he brought it to his mouth, turning it over and kissing her palm. She watched mesmerized as his warm lips brushed over



the pulse on her wrist before he raised his head abruptly, dragging her to him. Threading his hands into her hair, he didn't hesitate, capturing her mouth instantly with his.

Feeling him harden against her abdomen, she held herself rigid, still afraid to give in and take what she wanted. Ruben's hands were insistent, grabbing her hips to pull her pelvis against his. Sinking into the sensation, Bethany's brain told her to stop, but her body wasn't listening. She found her hands on his shoulders and willed them to stay there, surprised when they ignored her and worked their way down his back to pull the t-shirt from his jeans. Ruben's groan as her hands touched the skin above his waistband was answered by a tightening in her groin.

The hands molding her ass began to pull her harder onto the thigh he had slipped between her legs. Grinding against the taut muscle, her breath caught as heat raced through her. Biting down on his bottom lip, his gasp surprised her and she pulled away suddenly, afraid she had been too rough.

Ruben looked confused. 'What's wrong? You didn't hurt me if that's what you are worried about.'

'I can't do this out here.' She laughed, embarrassment making her lie, mortified at how easily she was losing control. He must think she was some frustrated old woman.

'We can go inside if you like,' he said softly, flicking a tongue into her ear, 'as long as you promise to bite me again.' Bethany punched him in the arm for seeing through her so easily, but returned his smile and didn't resist as he led her from the balcony into the darkness of the bedroom.

He was less gentle as he pulled her to him again inside the room. His hands searched blindly for the zipper on her tight linen dress. Having no success, he stopped and turned her around to look for it. 'How the hell does this open?'

Worried he was about to tear it from her body, she brushed his hands out of the way before he did any damage. Cursing her decision to wear the damn thing, she remembered that there was no zipper and the only way out of it was over her head. Shaking a little, she reached down to the hem and pulled the dress off, giving herself no time to prepare for his eyes on her.

By the time she turned back to face him, his jacket and t-shirt were off. Her underwear stopped him dead in his tracks and she almost laughed at his expression. The black camisole she wore was totally functional with nothing

but a lace insert at the cleavage to make it 'feminine'. His reaction surprised her but she was glad he liked it. She held the discarded dress against her, unable to simply stand there with his eyes on her body.

'No,' he said throatily. 'Don't hide from me.'

Obeying him, she felt self-conscious as she waited, watching him strip slowly. *He sure knew the value of anticipation*, she realized as he took forever to undo his jeans before letting them slide down his legs. Her attention centered on his groin as he flicked his thumbs into the waistband of his underwear, easing them carefully over his erection. Bethany swallowed dryly, unable to help but stare. His wasn't the first hard-on she'd ever seen. It wasn't even the biggest. But damn he looked good and she wanted him inside her. She felt the wetness dampen her crotch as her muscles convulsed in anticipation.

'I've been trying to imagine what you had on under that dress all night,' he said, moving to stand in front of her. Snaking out a hand, he clasped the back of her neck and forced her to close the gap between them. The soft skin of his erection touched her first, sliding up her abdomen and resting there as he pressed his body into hers. A bunched fist in her hair dragged her head back and he looked down at her briefly before trailing his tongue across the slash of her lips. She palmed the skin on his back, letting her fingers trail slowly down to his firm butt. His warmth filled her hands as she pulled him harder against her groin. Taking her lead he slipped the straps of her underwear from her shoulders. Filling his hands with her breasts, his thumbs brushed across her nipples repeatedly and he paused to watch her reaction briefly before dropping his head. His lips started a slow, tortuous journey down from her neck, over her collarbone and onto her breast. She could feel the warmth of his breath as he sucked a nipple into his mouth. Cursing him silently as he removed his lips to focus again on her camisole, she waited as he stroked it down her body, kissing every inch of skin he exposed until coming to rest at the apex of her thighs.

Staying on his knees, he kissed her abdomen, using his weight to push her back to lie on the bed. Bethany began to sit, but he stopped her by hooking her legs over his shoulders, forcing her to lay back. Strong fingers parted her thighs as his head lowered. He didn't touch her instantly, but she began to writhe as his soft hair trailed along her skin. Just his breath against her nub caused a little tremor and she pulled back instinctively. He held her

still as he flicked his tongue over her the first time—as if he knew she would buck against him as the sensation shot through her. Gentle at first, his strokes became bolder until finally he sucked her fully into his mouth, moving his head randomly as he groaned against her.

She was shocked by her reaction. Throwing her head back, she bit down on her lip, trying to stifle the sounds coming from her. Barely able to breathe, she gasped and jerked as his tongue stroked her over and over again. His attention moved suddenly to her inner thigh, nibbling and sucking the skin between his teeth.

She sagged against the bed as the overwhelming heat building in her subsided briefly, allowing her time to register the pain she was inflicting on herself by digging her nails into her palms. His mouth returned to her clit, sending sensations slamming through her again. Clutching desperately at the bedcovers beneath her palms, Bethany started to shake—amazement that she was about to climax replaced by a desperate need to. Her torture increased as he circled her pussy with the tip of his finger, causing her to writhe against him, moaning. Her thighs trembled against his cheek as he kept her on the brink. What was he waiting for? She began to groan and rub against him, praying that he knew what she needed. The teasing finger plunged into her immediately—his mouth and tongue still moving against her as he began to take her with his hand.

‘Oh my God...Ruben!’ she exclaimed, lifting her hips from the bed and grinding against him as the first spasm hit. He rode it out with her, not letting her go until she collapsed, chest heaving as she struggled for air. Finally opening her eyes to find him leaning over her, slightly breathless himself, she clasped his face in her hands.

‘Wow.’

‘You liked that?’ he smiled, fishing for compliments. Reaching up, she brought him down to her for a scorching kiss.

‘What do you think?’

\* \* \* \*

Ruben couldn’t help but laugh in triumph as he rolled over onto his back, taking her with him. She straddled him immediately, running her hands over his hard body. Dropping her head, she feathered kisses over his

neck and torso, rubbing her soft wet groin against his hard one. He placed his arms behind his head allowing her the freedom she wanted. Slipping down to kneel in the gap between his thighs, she began to caress his cock. Ruben tensed the instant she touched him, inhaling sharply. Her hand closed around him, sliding easily up and down, bringing Ruben up on his elbows to watch what she was doing to him.

Suddenly she leaned closer—so close that he could feel her breath caressing his engorged head. He tensed in anticipation, but she didn't put her lips on him, leaning over to kiss and bite at the crease of his hip instead before raising her head to look at him. Taking hold of the shaft, he ran the tip of his penis slowly across her lips—asking for what he wanted. Bethany flicked a tongue out to caress it gently before opening her mouth tortuously slowly, allowing him in a little at a time.

His body jerked with every movement of her lips as she took him in further. Looking down at her through slightly glazed eyes, he groaned as she finally opened her mouth wide and slid down his length, taking as much of him in as she could.

'Bethany!' he groaned, his legs scrambling on the sheets as he felt a tremor shoot through his groin. Moving slowly back and forth on him, she dropped her hands to cup his buttocks. He could feel his muscles tensing as she sucked on him, taut with the urge to thrust into her mouth. Pulling her head up abruptly, he slid away from her with a groan.

'No...I don't wanna come yet Baby. I want to be inside you,'

Reaching under a pillow, he scrambled around a moment before finally producing a condom that he put on as quickly as his shaky hands would allow. Pulling her forward to sit over him, he guided her legs to the sides. Her pussy slid along the length of his cock and she groaned in surprise before repeating the motion. Grunting in satisfaction, Ruben's hands flew to her thighs, parting them to allow him in. Her moist heat closed around him and he urged her body upright, forcing her fully onto him.

The breath caught in her throat and she rocked against him as he went deeper and deeper. Lifting her slightly, he held her still and began to slowly push in and out, filling her again and again, gently at first. Within moments he was pounding up into her, watching her every reaction to his thrusts. Bracing her hands against his chest, she began to push back, riding him just as hard. Eyes locked with hers, his vision blurred as he surged upward to

meet her—knowing he would come sooner than he wanted to but unable to stop himself.

‘Oh fuck! Fuck,’ he rasped, the last thread that held him snapping. Grabbing her head, he thrust his tongue between her lips as his orgasm hit. Jerking and writhing, he could do no more than gasp into her mouth as she ground against him. His hands twisted in her hair and he barely registered the thought that he hoped he wasn’t hurting her.

She collapsed on top of his body as the final spasms shuddered through him. The blood pounded in his ears and he could do no more than lay still until his strength returned. Needing to catch his breath, he had to lift her off, turning them both to lie next to each other. He smiled, hoping she wouldn’t feel rejected.

Thankfully, she smiled back at him. Stunned again at how beautiful she looked—especially now with her hair hanging wildly around her flushed face—he leaned over for a kiss. Propping himself up on an elbow, her nipples reacted as he traced idle circles around first one then the other. *She couldn’t be ready again so soon? He certainly wasn’t.*

‘I’m really glad you stayed,’ he said, voice low. ‘That was amazing.’

‘It was, wasn’t it?’ she smiled at him dumbly, not attempting to hide her satisfaction.

*It was great to see her so relaxed and happy.* If he’d known she would look this way after sex, he wouldn’t have been able to wait two days to have her.

She became a little shy under his gaze and pulled the sheet over body, smiling as she pushed him away. ‘As much as I love the attention, I’m gonna need a rest before we go again,’ she teased.

‘I couldn’t raise an argument at the moment,’ he laughed. ‘Don’t be offended if I fall asleep okay?’ She shook her head, smiling as she slid over to wrap her arms around him.

He turned toward her to rest his lips against the crook of her neck, and kissed it, inhaling her scent. He fought the tiredness that threatened to overwhelm him for as long as he could, wanting more of her. Satisfying himself with the thought of what he would do after he had recovered his stamina; he allowed his eyes to close. Minutes later he was asleep

\* \* \* \*

The Fan scrambled to her feet, swearing repeatedly under her breath. *Why the fuck had she slept so long?* Squinting at her watch in the semi-darkness, she cursed again when she realized it was almost 6am.

Poking her head out of the linen room, she saw the door to Ruben's room thrown wide— the maid's cleaning trolley holding it open. She realized with a groan of disappointment that she had missed him.

She had followed him the previous night, forsaking the concert in order to loiter in the foyer, waiting for him to return. He had appeared just after midnight, entourage in tow, passing right by the lounge bar where she had been sitting.

Deciding to wait a little longer before going up to her own room, her plans had changed when she'd seen the woman from Vegas walking through reception. *The bitch was staying in the same hotel!* Hesitating only to gulp down the rest of her drink, she had followed her to the elevators—nodding in casual civility as their gazes crossed.

Staring at the brunette from such close range, she'd felt able to reassure herself once more that he could never be involved with a woman like that. *Sure, she was attractive enough and her hair was nice, but she could afford to lose a few pounds and appeared to be on the wrong side of thirty.* The woman had caught her staring and flicked a polite—if slightly bemused—smile her way as she'd left the elevator.

She'd continued up to his floor, checking the corridor before daring to enter. Scanning the area quickly, she had found an unlocked linen room, and slipped inside as she'd heard the elevator arrive. Leaving the door open a crack, she had been able to see a waiter, pushing a trolley laden with food, wine and flowers, approach one of the suites. Moments later, Ruben had appeared, swinging the door wide to let him in.

Trying to fight the thought that was forming, she couldn't deny that there had been too much food for one person. She hadn't had to wait long before her worst fears were realized as the brunette approached his door, nervously smoothing her ugly dress down over her fat ass. The smile he'd given the woman when he opened the door had torn at her heart. *He liked her...God only knew why...but he did. Since when had Ruben's tastes run to frumpy, middle aged women?*

Beginning to shake from rage and the incredible pain searing through her, she'd wanted to strike out, break something or hurt someone, but she couldn't move.

The waiter had left about an hour later, which meant they were alone together. Emerging from her hiding place, she had crossed the hallway silently, pausing to listen for sounds of anyone approaching. Pressing an ear against the door, she'd strained to hear through the solid wood. Frustrated, she had squinted through the wrong side of the spy hole, unable to see anything but the opposite wall. Looking around once more, she had tested the handle—turning it slowly and carefully to muffle any sound. She'd known it would be locked, and didn't really want to think about what she would have done if it hadn't been.

Returning to her hiding place, she had waited, scared at what she could discover, but needing to know if the woman would spend the night...

The next thing she had known was waking up stiff and sore from sleeping crouched against the doorframe.

Peeping back out into the hall, she found the maid walking slowly toward the other suite. Moving quickly, she crossed the hall again, slipping into Ruben's room, dead locking the door behind her. Tiptoeing stealthily through the rooms, she checked that they were empty before allowing herself to breathe again.

Checking all of the surfaces, she was disappointed to find he'd left nothing behind. A quick search of the drawers and wardrobes turned up nothing either—she guessed he had no need to unpack properly in every hotel he visited when he usually only stayed for one night.

His bed was a still unmade—rumpled sheet thrown to one side. She picked up one of the pillows, recoiling in disgust from the smell of another woman's perfume. Unable to afford herself the luxury of a full-blown tantrum over the evidence, she quickly stripped the case from the pillow on his side of the bed, breathing in his scent before stuffing it into her pocket and racing from the room.

## Chapter 7

‘Don’t tell me you are still sulking over that woman?’ Byron said, surprising Ruben as he came into the room. ‘Will you *please* just call her and put us all out of your misery?’

Ignoring the angry look he got in answer to his question, Byron rolled his eyes before reminding Ruben about the scheduled interview and the reporter on the way up to the suite. ‘I put out some clothes for you. You can’t see your visitor in that,’ he said, flicking a disapproving eye over Ruben’s attire.

Looking down at the track pants and T-shirt he was wearing, he didn’t see what the problem was, but he gave in again. Byron’s voice took on a strident note when he lost his cool and Ruben just couldn’t handle any more aggravation. He was tempted to tell Byron that *he* shouldn’t be seen in the Hawaiian shirts and khakis he always wore, but he bit his tongue. Byron had a style all his own and didn’t take kindly to having it criticized.

The reporter didn’t stay long and, as the interview ended, Ruben found himself looking at his watch and automatically converting the time to where Bethany was. He grimaced, angry that two weeks after their night together, she was still in his every thought. She’d fucked him and dumped him, and that pissed him off. Still, he couldn’t get her out of his head. *What had possessed her to creep out of his bed in the middle of the night like that?*

She wasn’t even his ‘type’—he usually went for pretty, overtly feminine women. She was neither of those things, but she was attractive in a sexy, womanly way, and the male in him responded to her on that level. And she’d been a revelation in bed. *Who knew she’d be that uninhibited?* His jeans felt tight all of a sudden and he had to turn his back on Byron as he begged off going out to dinner with an excuse of extreme tiredness.

He wished he could figure out why Bethany bugged him so much. She’d scored a first; he’d give her that. No other woman had ever left so eagerly.



In fact, very few had ever been invited to stay the night. In the early days, guilt used to make him offer empty promises to call or keep in touch. As he'd gotten older and more cynical, he realized women used him as much as he did them, and he felt no need to explain himself.

For years now, he'd kept his life uncluttered. He'd seen what relationships did to people.... his parents for a start. It never ceased to amaze him that they'd ever gotten along well enough to have a child.

For as long as he could remember, they had despised each other, but they stayed together. Devout Catholics just didn't get divorced, no matter how miserable they made themselves and others—him included. Being an only child didn't help either. He'd made his own entertainment during the endless hours spent up in the room he escaped to when he couldn't face hearing another fight. Turning on the radio to drown them out had been the beginning of his interest in music, so he guessed he was grateful for that.

A hollow lump formed in his chest as he recalled just how awful life with them had been. His father never actually hit his wife, but he used the threat of violence to control and intimidate her. Hell, his mother was no saint and hardly ever sober, but nobody deserved that. The abuse had continued until Ruben was twenty and living away from home.

Ignoring his better judgment, he'd returned from New York, where he had been attending college, for Christmas. Like some bad movie he'd seen a million times, his mother began drunkenly abusing his father and he knew what would happen next. Except Ruben had changed the ending that time.

His father had taken a little longer than usual to react—maybe in deference to his son's visit—but eventually he had lunged for his wife, pinning her against a wall. The shock on his face as his son punched him to the floor was something Ruben would never forget. Nor would he forget the way his mother leapt at *him*, screaming that he should leave his father alone. He'd stormed out of the house that night and had never gone back.

The only time he saw his parents now was if he had a gig anywhere near Mexico. He would fly them in and spend the afternoon in the city but he never went 'home' again. Hell, he hadn't even seen the house he'd bought them. He was their son and they would never want for anything, but he couldn't imagine a time when they could ever be a real family again.

His mood worsened—the day had been traumatic enough without filling his head with bad memories. He shouldn't stay in his suite any longer. Bitter

experience had taught him that no good would come of staying alone when he was in this frame of mind. Problem was, he didn't really want to go anywhere.

After picking up the cell phone, he scrolled again through the list of names until he found her number. He'd had it, along with her home address, for just over a week now thanks to the Internet. That was a first, the Internet working for, rather than against him. He'd lost count of how many crazies had gotten his address that way.

He toyed with the idea of phoning her, but realized the most he could hope for was hearing her voice and making himself even hornier. Throwing his phone back down on the bed in disgust he picked up the hotel phone instead and dialed Byron's extension.

Wherever he went, there was always a stack of invites waiting for him and Byron came in a few moments later carrying a handful. Usually, Ruben could think of nothing he would rather avoid than those types of parties, but he needed a distraction.

They decided on the after party of an awards show. He knew the place would be crammed with women—none he would want to introduce to his mother, but that wasn't what he was looking for. Women loved being with him. If Bethany didn't want him, there were plenty more who did. It was time he remembered that and forgot about her.

\* \* \* \*

Bethany pushed her plate away in disgust. She had picked at her food, unsure why she had even bothered to cook for herself. Bored beyond belief, but aware it was too early for bed, she turned on the TV.

Flicking through the channels, she stopped on an entertainments program. 'Beautiful people' flittered by on the screen, barely registering with her. The location changed to an outdoor shot of an exclusive nightclub. An overly made up presenter was almost beside herself with excitement as she fawned over the stars on their way into the party. Picking up the remote to change the channel, Bethany froze as Ruben's face filled the screen.

Every part of her body recognized him and instantly sprang to life as she watched him flirt with the presenter. Charm oozed from his every pore and she felt insanely jealous as his warm brown eyes caressed the woman. He

had been looking at her that way less than two weeks earlier. *God, she missed that.*

He spoke briefly of his reasons for attending, explaining that he was in town and needed to unwind. The shot ended with Ruben disappearing into the club. Turning to camera, the woman excitedly explained that Ruben had arrived alone but that ‘this reporter’ was sure he wouldn’t be for long. Snorting in disgust—at herself as much as the simpering female—Bethany reached for the remote and turned off the TV.

Resting her head back on the sofa, she fought the sadness that invaded her so often these days. Her time with Ruben had been fun but it was over. So, she would never see him again, but at least he’d given her confidence a huge boost. Yeah, but he had also given her something else to add to her list of regrets, she argued. She shouldn’t have left the way she did, but she’d panicked. Disappearing had seemed the easiest way out of a potentially embarrassing situation. *She’d probably done them both a favor.*

Bethany had been certain that Ruben was the last thing she needed in her life, but that night of mindless, mind-blowing sex had sure done her a power of good. And, for a while, she’d been satisfied. Since that night though, her world seemed grayer and drabber than before. Ruben sure wasn’t the answer to her problems—she guessed he didn’t even remember her name by now—but that brief, bright moment in her otherwise dreary life made her current situation almost intolerable by comparison.

The phone rang, startling her out of her reverie. She was relieved to hear her sister’s voice. Bless her—she always seemed to turn up just when she was needed.

Donna was in her usual upbeat mood. ‘What’s going on Sis?’

‘Not a lot.’

‘Uh-oh. I recognize that tone. What’s wrong?’

Bethany sighed, reluctant to unload on her again. It was all she ever seemed to do recently. ‘I’m ok. A little bored I guess.’

‘Don’t you dare complain about boredom,’ Donna said. ‘I can’t believe you were in bed with that horny bastard back in LA and you ran out on him.’ She laughed then to soften her words. ‘You’re crazy, you know that don’t you?’

Bethany couldn’t help but smile down the phone. ‘I am not going over this again. I explained on the plane home...I just freaked out. That’s all.’

‘Well, from what you told me, I am amazed you could walk, never mind run out on him in the middle of the night.’ Donna’s raucous laugh made her blush as she recalled how wild she had become with him. She wished now she had never told her about her night with Ruben —her sis was never going to let her live it down.

‘It just seemed easier to leave before—’

‘Before you dared to relax and allowed yourself to get close to somebody again?’

‘Hey! I’m not that bad,’ Bethany protested.

‘Sweetheart, you are fabulous. I just wish you could forget about the past and enjoy what life is trying to give you.’ Donna’s voice had become serious. ‘It’s been a long time since you let anybody get that close. I know you, Beth. You found some reason to push him away, rather than risk being hurt.’

*Where had that come from?* Her sister knew her so well she had probably guessed what she’d been thinking about. ‘Donna, I am fine. I understand what you are saying, but that really wasn’t an issue. I doubt if Ruben has even thought of me since then.’

Bethany ploughed on, filling the rare silence from her sister. ‘The experience was fabulous and a night I will never forget. But that’s all it was...a night.’

She heard Donna sigh and expected an argument, so found her words surprising. ‘Ok, so now that you have been reinvented as this wild child who loves them and leaves them, who is your next victim?’

‘Very funny.’ Her kid sister could be a real smart ass sometimes.

‘Seriously Beth, use this as a turning point. Don’t allow yourself to settle back into your old routine.’

*She was right.* Bethany knew it.

Searching for an excuse to change the subject, she asked about her beloved niece. She laughed as Donna told her that her husband Fletcher had banned the name ‘Ruben Navarro’ from ever being mentioned in his house again. She also mentioned that Tyla had become the ‘it’ girl at school—due to her aunt’s connections with the rich and famous.

‘I think ‘connection’ is stretching our involvement a little too far,’ Bethany objected, although secretly flattered that her niece thought she was so influential.

‘Well, based on the pathetically small amount of juicy gossip you deigned to share with me about that night, I’d say you were pretty ‘connected’ for most of the evening!’ Donna’s laugh drowned out Bethany’s mortified shriek of embarrassment.

‘You must think I am as wild as you, Donna,’ she laughed, shaking her head at the thought of what her sister must be like in bed. *That Fletcher was a brave man.* Well, either brave or stupid.

‘Hey, we aren’t *that* different, as much as you would like to convince yourself that we are.’

‘I guess you’re right.’ Bethany didn’t think for one minute that she was anything like her, but decided against sharing her thoughts. *How could she disagree without making it sound as if she disapproved of her sister’s much more relaxed outlook on life and love...well, everything really?* They shared the same sense of humor and a quick temper but, deep down, they were different in a way that Donna could never understand.

The call ended quickly due to Tyla’s insistent whining in the background that she had to use the phone.

Bethany thought back over her sister’s words. *Forget the past and enjoy what life is trying to give you.* That’s what Donna had said, and it kept repeating in her head, over and over.

Mindlessly finishing the last few household chores before she went to bed, she couldn’t shake the feeling that things needed to change. She didn’t want to go back to the emptiness of her life before.

The weekend was coming up and she was surprised to discover she had no desire to spend it alone. She would get her hair and nails done, perhaps go out to dinner.

Roger, the medical sales rep who asked her out every time he dropped off supplies, was due in the following morning. If he asked her out again, this time she would accept. He wasn’t really her type and she seriously doubted she would be able to tolerate him for more than an evening, but the thought of having a reason to dress up appealed to her.

She crawled into bed feeling a little better than she had in a long while. She was too wired to sleep though, thoughts of Ruben floating in and out of her head. Seeing him had brought a lot of feelings flooding back...feelings she didn’t want when she was alone.

\* \* \* \*

There had been no further sightings of the mystery brunette by the time The Fan checked into her hotel in Corpus Christi some two weeks later. Dogging his every move from the time she'd caught up with him again in San Diego—the next step on his tour after LA—she knew he had traveled alone, save for the usual companions. She didn't want to spend more money booking into yet another expensive hotel at the last minute. His schedule allowed for an extra couple of nights in the city, giving Ruben—or rather, both of them—a much-needed break.

As far as she knew, none of the other fans she was 'friendly' with were in town. None of them had turned up at any of his scheduled appointments. A couple of interviews at a local radio station and an evening with the press must have seemed like a pretty easy day for him compared to his usual routine.

She hadn't had the energy to follow him all day, and returned to her hotel, resigned to an early night.

Sleep didn't come easily; she felt unsettled but didn't know why. He was alone, she was sure of it. Still, the night he had spent with the brunette had shaken her to the core. The thought Ruben might find someone else hadn't really occurred to her before—not seriously. She knew his sexual appetite well enough to be sure he couldn't go long without release but there had been very few women in the six months she had been traveling with him—and none of those had spent the night.

Her own experience had been a perfect example. He'd invited her back to his room after seducing her effortlessly. *Her virginal naivety had been no match for his easy charm.* She'd known before she agreed to go with him that he believed her to be more experienced than she actually was, but she wasn't afraid—in fact, she had barely been able to control her excitement at the prospect.

Keen and eager to please, she hoped her enthusiasm would hide a lack of experience. She'd acted in the same way that the women did in the dirty videos she had found in her daddy's bedroom once. Ruben had seemed to like it so she'd gotten wilder, mimicking the sounds she had heard in the movies and groaning as if in ecstasy when she had taken his penis into her mouth.

Oral sex had been a surprise. She'd had no idea that she would be so good at it or enjoy it so much. Soon, she was no longer faking her reactions. The power she got from seeing how turned on he was, made her wet and totally ready for him.

Her initial nervousness had soon been replaced by an insatiable need and she'd begun to take over—telling him what she wanted. He'd been happy to oblige, grinning in surprise as she had ordered him down between her legs. Her first orgasm had been mind-blowing, coming almost as soon as she'd felt the first touch of his tongue. Her second had been just as powerful although less intense, but deeper, somehow. He'd been inside her by then; riding her with such force that she had known he was as moved as she was. His orgasm had been brutal, robbing them both of breath.

Nobody since had made the same impression or gotten the same reaction from her. Older and wiser, she'd come to realize that what had happened that night had been much more than just sex. That kind of connection came from something deeper and could only be found with a soul mate. She remembered laying in the safety of his arms afterwards, feeling like she had finally found the place she belonged.

Suddenly something had changed, and to this day, she didn't know what. Jumping briskly from the bed, he'd thrown on a robe, his eyes not meeting hers as he explained he needed to speak to someone. He'd barely been gone more than a couple of minutes before the door opened again and the man mountain she now knew to be Albert, walked in.

It turned out Ruben liked his privacy and Albert ensured he got it. Barely suppressed fury rose in her as she remembered the way he had dragged her naked from Ruben's bed, throwing her clothes in her face and telling her to get out. He had not listened to her protestations that Ruben had simply left to speak to someone and would be expecting to find her waiting for him. Albert had laughed—if you could call the menacing, grunting sound he had made 'laughing'—and told her that she had thirty seconds to get her clothes on, or he would throw her out as she was.

The heartbreak had almost killed her in the days and weeks immediately after that night. She'd tried in vain to get in touch with Ruben for a while, sure that he must have been as hurt and upset as she that their time together had ended so suddenly. She often wondered whether he knew the truth about that night. *Had Albert ever confessed to throwing her out like a common*

*whore? Or had he simply allowed Ruben to believe that she had snuck out on him while his back was turned?*

Finally, the futility of her efforts and the demands of an invalid father had forced her to abandon her destiny until recently. Sobs racked her body as she relived the anguish of those first days after she had met Ruben. She wouldn't be whole again until they were re-united. Being with Ruben again was all that mattered now. The death of her father, and subsequent sale of the house she had inherited, had finally given her the money and the freedom to get what she wanted.

Desperately in need of comfort and a connection to him, she reached into her bag, pulling out the stolen pillowcase. Inhaling deeply, she could still make out the faintest trace of his scent on it. Sliding further down onto the bed, she opened her dress, rubbing the smell of him over her breasts and abdomen, before slowly pushing the fabric down between her legs.

He didn't remember her yet, but she knew once she had broken through the veneer that he used to protect himself from the outside world, once he was buried deep inside her again, he would remember.



## Chapter 8

Ruben rang the doorbell nervously. He had traveled all day to get to Bethany's house by early Saturday evening. *Why hadn't it occurred to him beforehand to check whether she would be home...and what kind of reception he could expect?*

The awards show party had been a total washout. There had been hot women everywhere he turned, but none of them had held his interest. They all looked brash and cheap and were no substitute for the memory of the woman that had driven him out in search of a warm body in the first place.

After being pinned into a corner by a very predatory female with too much make-up and not enough clothing, he'd had enough. Leaving the party, he had resolved to ring Bethany as soon as he got back to the hotel, but he'd changed his mind by the time he reached his suite. Knowing instinctively that she would try to talk him out of seeing her again, he made the decision for both of them.

He had to have her again, if only so he could forget about her. It had been a very long time since anyone had occupied his thoughts in such a way. Now, standing outside her door, he wondered at his rashness. *Would she be happy to see him?*

The door opened to an empty hallway. Peering around the frame he saw her walking briskly back to the living room, shouting over her shoulder that he should come in and that she would be ready in a minute. The realization that she was expecting someone else hit him.

Stepping into the hall and closing the door, he watched her silently. From what he could see, she wore a long black sheath dress that fit like a second skin, molding to the arch of her spine and the long, lean line of her legs. It had a split up to the mid-thigh area that exposed a lot more as she reached over the sofa to get her bag. Turning, she stopped dead in her tracks when she saw who occupied her hallway.

Ruben decided there was no way she was going anywhere with another guy in that dress. At the front it clung to every curve, from her full breasts right down to her shapely knees. The keyhole neckline showed only a tiny amount of cleavage, but it was enough. He wouldn't have made it through dinner without having her if she'd been wearing that dress during their date.

Realizing that she was expecting some kind of explanation for his presence and that he couldn't just stand there staring at her, he was about to speak when the doorbell sounded.

'Expecting someone, Bethany?'

Starting toward the door, she stopped as he turned and opened it wide. There, behind a bunch of flowers that was almost bigger than the man holding them, Ruben assumed, was her date.

Peering over the top of them, the guy looked quite alarmed to find a large man filling the doorway. Ruben sized him up, taking in the ill-fitting suit he wore in a dreary shade of gray that washed out his already pale skin. The guy wasn't bad looking—he just didn't know how to make the best of himself. Ruben decided quickly he was no competition. Raising an imperious eyebrow, he waited for him to speak.

'Is...is Bethany home?' the man stuttered.

'Are those for her?' Ruben ignored his question. The guy nodded, looking nervous. Reaching down, Ruben took them from him. 'I'll make sure she gets them,' he said, and shut the door firmly in his face.

Bethany gasped as she rushed passed him to open it again. He could see the guy still standing where he'd left him, uncertain of what to do next. She spoke to her visitor in hushed tones that Ruben strained to hear. 'I'm sorry, Roger. I have an unexpected guest from out of town. Can we reschedule?'

Roger started to complain. 'You could have phoned and saved me the drive out, Bethany,' he whined. Ruben stepped into the doorway behind her to stare silently at the man, effectively ending the conversation.

'I'll call you next week,' Roger said over his shoulder as he moved rapidly down the path.

Leading her back through the open doorway, Ruben suppressed a triumphant grin. Bethany smiled back at him, although he could tell she felt sorry for Roger.

'That was mean, Ruben,' she admonished.

'Don't tell me you were serious about that guy?'

‘Not in the least, but it was nice to have a chance to dress up for a change. He really is very sweet. I think it would have been fun.’

‘You do look stunning in that dress by the way. I think it would be wasted on him, though. He couldn’t handle you, Bethany.’

‘Oh! And you can, I suppose?’

‘You know I can,’ he stated carefully, leaving the words to hang between them. He could handle her any time she would let him.

Realizing that he still held the flowers, he offered them to her with a lopsided grin. Putting her bag on the hall table, she moved to take them. Dropping the flowers to the floor, he tried to pull her into his arms. A hand braced against his chest stopped him.

‘What are you doing here, Ruben?’

‘I missed you, Dr Shaw,’ he said into her hair.

Kissing her then, he almost lost his resolve to sort a few things out first. If only for his own sanity, he needed to be sure how she would react to his coming on to her again. He couldn’t take another fortnight of raging hard-ons and pointless masturbation that didn’t ease his need for her.

‘Bethany, we need to talk,’ he said, holding her at arms length.

‘We can talk later,’ she said as she wrapped herself sinuously around him. This was going better than he hoped, but he couldn’t celebrate. Not yet.

‘Please, Bethany. Don’t tempt me. I really want to talk to you.’ Her arms slid from his neck and he almost wished he hadn’t stopped her. ‘Why did you leave like that?’

The flush on her cheeks told him she knew what he was talking about. Taking a step back, she leaned against the wall, arms folded protectively across her chest. ‘I didn’t know what to do Ruben.’

‘Were you so keen to get away from me?’

She looked upset at his comment. ‘No. I did have to get back to Vegas—I wasn’t lying about that. But I lay next to you for hours, unable to sleep and I sort of convinced myself it was best if I simply wasn’t there when you woke up.’

He couldn’t blame her for that. Plenty of women had been on the receiving end of a frosty attitude and monosyllabic conversation the morning after. How was she to know he would be any different? If he was brutally honest with himself, he had no idea how he would have treated her.

'If it helps at all, I've regretted it ever since.' She didn't look at him and he sensed there was more to her behavior than simple nerves. When he wasn't so distracted, he would have to get to the bottom of what she was running away from. He decided to let it go. They were together for now and she looked amazing. *Where in hell did he get the idea that she wasn't feminine?*

Walking over to her, he placed a hand either side of her head, bracing his weight against the wall. He allowed himself the luxury of a long, long look down her body before leaning in and whispering against her mouth. 'That dress is driving me crazy.'

'Ah, yes. My dress. It's new,' she sighed, looking down at it. 'I bought it for this evening.'

'We should go out.' Ruben jumped at the idea, grateful for the distraction. If they stayed where they were a moment longer, he would forget his intention of getting to know her a little better and showing her there was more to him than she had given him credit for.

She looked stunned at his change of pace. 'Can we do that? I mean, won't you be harassed or stalked or something?'

He laughed at her choice of words, but she had a point. 'I am sure you know some quiet little restaurant where we won't be disturbed?' She nodded and mentioned the name of a place he had obviously never heard of, but he told her that was fine and asked if she could book a table.

'I'll get my bag from the car. I have a change of clothes,' he said, moving toward the door.

Ten minutes later, he had showered and shaved and put on a black linen suit with a v-neck t-shirt. Her appreciative smile told him he'd chosen his outfit wisely, but the look that followed it stopped him. Her heart was in her eyes. He saw excitement there, but he saw fear too. Comprehension dawned. Damned if she wasn't afraid of him.

Giving her a dirty wink, he was relieved to see a smile appear. Trying to understand why she had acted the way she did had driven him crazy for weeks, but now he knew what it was and how to deal with it. She would not get away from him so easily again.

Leading her briskly out of the house before that dress weakened his resolve, they drove into the city, the promise of an unforgettable night ahead of them.

\* \* \* \*

Bethany watched him tear into his steak. He ate with the same amount of restraint with which he made love. *Meaning none.*

She could tell he loved to eat and marveled at his body, wishing he would share the secret of how he managed to maintain his weight considering the amount of food he'd just consumed. He was pretty wild on stage, she recalled, which probably explained it. She bet he burned most of it off that way. *And what he didn't burn off there, he sure did in bed.*

The decidedly dirty turn her thoughts had just taken must have been apparent on her face, she realized, as he had stopped eating to stare back at her. He held her gaze while taking a sip of his wine, before raking his eyes over her breasts. Shaking his head as if to clear his mind, he smiled ruefully before continuing with his meal, giving her a look that pretty much told her not to tempt him.

Bethany loved the way he made her feel. She had never been with a man who made it so clear what he wanted or appeared to enjoy life so much. You couldn't fail but to feel womanly and sexy with a guy like Ruben around. Sure, the way he looked did an awful lot of the groundwork for him, but it was his absolute lust for life that made him truly irresistible.

It felt so strange to be sitting across from this beautiful creature and know that he wanted her and couldn't wait until they were alone. She looked around the restaurant, wondering what people thought of them together. Did they wonder, as she did, what he saw in her?

None of the women were looking at her that was for sure. They all totally ignored her but she could understand why. Not only was the man dining with her drop dead gorgeous, he was also very famous. She was beginning to forget that, to the rest of the world at least, he was a star, albeit a very elusive and private one. She couldn't remember ever hearing or seeing any news articles about him, besides the initial furor around him when he first hit the music scene. *Why had she never heard of him being involved with anyone?* The question burst from her lips before she had time to stop it.

The change of pace seemed to take him by surprise, causing his eyebrows to rise warily. 'There hasn't really been anyone for you to hear

anything about,' he replied flatly. He didn't seem too keen to expand on his reply.

'I don't believe for one moment that I am your first,' she teased, finding his careful answer very strange. Thankfully, he laughed.

'I thought you were asking about relationships, not sex.' His voice lowered as a devilish look played across his face. 'Did I seem inexperienced to you...?'

Bethany blushed and couldn't hold his gaze. When he looked at her that way, she felt it right to her core. His suggestive chuckle made her squirm. He knew what he was doing to her —the look on his face confirmed it.

He broke the tension by offering her more wine. Bethany marveled at the way he just turned his sexual energy on and off. He seemed so unflustered and in control of his emotions, while she on the other hand could barely think straight. The thought sobered her. She didn't need to be reminded that she was totally out of her league.

'Are you ok?' He'd sensed her change of mood. 'You are very quiet.'

Bethany scrabbled for the right words. 'Yes, I am fine.' She hesitated. 'This is an unusual situation for me. I don't usually do this kind of thing.'

'Have dinner with a man?' He smiled to take the sarcasm out of his words, but his look of concern was genuine.

'I mean this...us.' She shook her head. 'I am not explaining myself very well. Sorry.' Laughing self-consciously, she wished she'd never brought it up.

'Relax, Beth. It's just you and me.' He picked her hand up from the table. 'I am a little nervous too, you know.'

'You?' She didn't mean to sound so incredulous, but she couldn't help it.

'Yes,' he laughed. 'Well, you're the first doctor I have ever dated.'

He was teasing her, but it worked. She laughed with him, glad at least one of them wasn't taking things too seriously. He seemed determined not to let her push him away and scurry back into her comfort zone.

The thought of what would surely happen later both frightened and excited her. At least she'd had no idea what to expect the last time she had considered spending the night with him. Now, she knew what he could do to her and how she would react. Her heart pounded at the thought.

Her hand was still in his and a gentle squeeze brought her attention back to him. As usual, he seemed to have picked up on her thoughts. His expression made it clear he was thinking about the same thing.

‘Are you ready to go, Beth?’ He was asking much more with his eyes.

‘Don’t you want dessert?’ Her question had been innocent, but sounded outrageously suggestive even to her own ears, causing a subtle change in his expression to one of urgency.

‘I think it’s time we weren’t here,’ he said, getting quickly to his feet. Throwing enough money down on the table to cover whatever the bill might have been and leave the waiter the best tip of his life, he grabbed her hand and propelled her from the restaurant.

She wasn’t too sure she liked the caveman routine, she thought as she barely managed to keep up with him, but at this precise moment, she had a good idea where they were going. And she was just as keen to get there.

## Chapter 9

Ruben froze. Peeping into the bedroom from the darkened hallway, what he found stole the breath from his lungs. He realized she didn't know he'd returned from the bathroom. His slight guilt at watching her was forgotten as she came fully into view.

He swallowed with some difficulty as she lifted her arms to run the brush through her hair, leaning this way and that. The tiny pink bra barely held her breasts in and as for the panties...what panties? The thong was so dainty it was near invisible. Boy, he envied that scrap of lace as it disappeared down between the cleft of her ass. Giving herself one last look in the mirror as she smoothed her hair down over her breasts, she began to walk away.

'Stay there...'

He wasn't sure he'd actually spoken until he saw her jump, then glance quickly over her shoulder in the direction of the darkened doorway before turning obediently back to the mirror. He walked toward her, seeing his own reflection appear over her shoulder.

'Is this for me?' he whispered, fingering the strap of her lingerie, his eyes holding hers in the glass.

She began to turn toward him, but he held her still as he moved to stand closer. He watched in the mirror as his hands slid around to shape her waist, before moving up to cup her breasts. Her eyes followed their path as they moved downwards again, dropping to the scrap of material between her thighs. Skimming across it, he smiled as she groaned in frustration. Running a palm down over her arm, he covered her hand with his own, edging it toward her panties. Her look of uncertainty was quickly replaced by one of satisfaction as their joined hands slipped between her legs. The wetness between her thighs coated his fingers and he told her how hot that was as he urged her to rub gently downwards.



Her weight fell back against him as she began to groan. Briefly, he moved her hand away as he pulled the gusset of her briefs to one side, allowing them both to see what her fingers were doing. Her hesitation frustrated him and he gripped her hand again. This time, he set the pace, forcing her to rub hard. Biting into the exposed skin of her neck, he lifted his eyes again to her reflection. The hardness of his erection became painful. Her ass quivered against it every time a tremor went through her and he had would have to have her soon. Sliding a hand under her buttocks from behind, he slid a finger into her wetness, moving rapidly in and out, telling her he wanted her to watch herself come. She responded instantly by doing just that. He could barely hold her weight as she bore down on his fingers, but he stayed with her.

Ruben released her long enough to drag the dresser stool across to where she stood. Bending her over to rest her elbows on it, he stripped quickly. Bethany tilted her ass, ready for him. He filled his hands with her flesh as he entered her pussy savagely, forcing the breath from her lungs. Barely able to keep his eyes open, he watched as she bit her lip, bracing herself against his onslaught. His gaze traveled down along her body to where they were joined and he saw the ripple of his abdomen as it slapped repeatedly against her skin.

Bethany dropped her head briefly, but he needed her to watch. Grabbing a handful of hair, he pulled her face up toward the mirror, forcing her to look at him. She smiled at him then, chasing away any doubt he was being too rough. Shifting position to lay his body over hers, he licked a slow path over the skin of her shoulders, stopping at the crook of her neck. She cried out as he nipped her skin.

Legs trembling at the exertion, he leaned back, just enough to be able to watch himself sliding in and out of her. Just then, her fingers encased his balls. Eyes back on his reflection, he saw his own expression change into one of fierce determination as he plunged into her. No longer able to watch, he threw his head back and gave himself over to his climax, spilling into her.

Ragged breaths tore at his throat as he pulled out of her and helped her upright. He tried to embrace her, but the urge to sit before his legs gave way was overwhelming. Stopping only to grab her hand, he staggered to the bed and slept where he fell.

\* \* \* \*

Bethany couldn't figure out where she was. It took a few seconds for her sleep-fogged brain to recognize her own bedroom and remember the reason she wasn't actually *in* the bed. Turning her head, she saw Ruben across the room trying to slip silently into his clothes.

'What time is it?'

He turned quickly at the sound of her voice. 'Six a.m. I was just about to wake you my love. I have to go.'

Her heart sank at his words. 'So soon? Do you have time for coffee?'

Nodding, he told her he would make it, saying it was best if she didn't strut around in front of him half naked. She smiled at his teasing, but wasn't happy that he hadn't told her beforehand that he could only stay one night.

'I'll call you later today,' he said as he returned with the cups. He looked sincere enough, she guessed. Taking a long sip of her coffee—damn, he even made great coffee—she watched him silently. He returned her stare openly, seemingly scanning her face for some sign of her mood. She braced herself as she saw the twinkle in his eyes moments before he spoke.

'Your hair suits you, all wild and punky like that,' he smiled.

Confusion caused her to stare dumbly at him for a few seconds before she saw his eyes flick upward as he smothered a grin with his coffee. Horrified, Bethany wrapped the sheet around her and flew from the bed to look in the mirror. The sight that greeted her was truly hideous—day old mascara smudged around her eyes and fright wig hair. She groaned audibly while trying to simultaneously smooth down her curls and clean her eye make off with a wet finger. Déjà vu hit as Ruben appeared behind her reflection again, but this time he was laughing as he dragged her into a bear hug.

'You look gorgeous,' he murmured in her ear.

His touch became a little more serious as he began to kiss her. Wrapping her arms around him, she was just beginning to warm to the idea of taking him back to bed when he spoke, effectively killing the thought.

'This is it my love. I must go,' he said, regret edged his tone as he unwound her arms from around his neck.

'This very minute?'

‘Yes, this very minute,’ he smiled. ‘If I don’t leave now, I won’t be able to.’

Scooping her into his arms, he pressed a hard kiss on her lips then turned without looking back and walked out of the room. The front door to the house clicked shut a few seconds later, seeming loud in the oppressive silence already descending on her.

Scurrying across the room, she watched him drive away before returning to the still warm bed. Only then did she realize she had no idea when she would see him again.

\* \* \* \*

She wasn’t sure she was cut out for this kind of life, she thought hours later, as she flopped down onto the sofa. All day spent cleaning the house had kept her mind off the emptiness around her. It had been a long time since she’d felt as desperately alone as she had since he’d left.

That was the part she hated. The part where you began to need the person and felt like something was missing if they weren’t there. The last time she’d had similar feelings was when she had met Simon. *Not that there was any real comparison between the men.*

When she first met him, she’d believed she had a chance at true happiness. Boy, had she been wrong. The charming intern with the boyish grin hadn’t stayed that way for long after they were engaged and living together. His chivalrous nature quickly dissolved into controlling behavior. The subtle shift in attitude had gone unnoticed until it was too late. The first time he had manipulated her into doing something she didn’t want to, it hadn’t seemed important. He was a strong personality, she had reasoned to herself, and she didn’t expect to get her own way all the time. It hadn’t helped that she’d had no male role model to compare Simon’s behavior to. Her own father had run out on the family just after Donna was born.

It soon became evident that she was never going to get her way. Eventually, he hadn’t even needed to tell her if he didn’t like something, so attuned was she to his every expression. A tick in his jaw coupled with a sullen look would be all it took for her to know he wasn’t happy...and if he wasn’t happy, then she wouldn’t be for long. He was never violent, but he

did intimidate her if she ever tried to stand her ground. Very soon, nothing she wanted seemed worth the hours of sulking or her frayed nerves.

She looked down at her bare hands wondering who was wearing her engagement ring now. Simon had pawned it a few months before they split up after a huge loss at the tables. He'd slid it from her finger with a promise to replace it with something better. Of course, that had never happened, but she never asked him about it again. *Why hadn't it bothered her more?*

She realized now, that was the moment she had begun to leave him.

That was before she even knew about the woman at the hospital. The text message she'd found on his phone had resulted in a huge argument. He'd denied it of course, saying it must be a wrong number or not intended for him. By the end of it, she'd been apologizing for not trusting him. Not that she did trust him—she just couldn't be bothered to fight anymore. She'd seen him with the woman a few times at work and there was always a tension between them, something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

His behavior had gotten worse after that. Like many men who cheat, his guilt turned to anger...anger that was always directed at her. He seemed to trust her less and questioned her endlessly about whom she had spoken to or why she was wearing such a short skirt to work. His sexual appetite grew too. It was as if he needed reassurance that she still belonged to him.

Occasionally, her tactic of feigning sleep before he lumbered into bed kept him off her. It no longer mattered to him that she was unresponsive. He'd long stopped caring if she enjoyed their sex life or not. It usually always ended the same way—he would climb off her in disgust telling her she was frigid after brutally rutting his way to an orgasm.

The biggest insult of all was that he was the one who left in the end—running away with the female colleague who turned out to be his lover—to live in another state.

Bethany still didn't know to this day how she managed to lose herself so totally. Therapy helped in the early days, but soon even that began to feel like a crutch. She came out of that period of her life vowing never to need anyone or anything that badly again. Her confidence and self-esteem had grown immeasurably since he'd been gone. She'd found herself again.

She'd found Ruben too. If the encounter with him had taught her anything, it was that you never knew who or what was waiting if you dared to look. Not all men were like Simon.

Still, it wasn't the man in her life that was the issue this time. Was she brave enough to relinquish the total control she had over her life and see where this thing with Ruben would lead?

## Chapter 10

Ruben put the phone down after his almost nightly call to Bethany and swore into the empty room. A month had passed since they had first met and he had managed to see her a couple more times since then, but her mood concerned him recently. Her voice had lost some of its sparkle. She was not dealing well with the separation—he could sense it. He hadn't been able to make a personal connection with her for days. Their conversations sounded more like those of polite friends rather than new lovers. *Maybe she was losing interest.*

A couple of times in the past he had lost out on the chance of a relationship due to his lifestyle. No woman seemed to understand that it was simply not up to him whether he spent time with her or not. He'd ended up alone and feeling guilty. It had not taken long for him to realize that a long-term commitment was something he would never have, not while he pursued his musical career anyway. He was determined that would not happen this time. Bethany meant too much to him already. If it didn't work out, then so be it, but his career wasn't going to ruin things again. *Not this time.*

It had only been a week since he'd seen her last, but it seemed like forever ago. Upon his return to work, his energy level had been immense. The nights he spent with her had been liberating. He had never wanted anybody that badly or for so long. And she hadn't disappointed him. He doubted he would ever come that hard for anybody else in his entire life.

Thinking of her was a mistake. Throwing himself back onto the bed, he stared at the ceiling. The draught from the open window felt good on his naked body. Closing his eyes, he willed himself to relax. These moments alone were precious and he usually enjoyed them. That night, as for so many nights recently, his head was full of images and sounds of her.

The warm breeze stirred his blood. Memories of her touching and stroking him with her mouth and hands flashed behind his closed eyelids. He saw her lying under him, taking everything he could give. Remembering how the cool, efficient doctor lost control with him sent a charge down his body, making him rock hard. Following its path with his hand, he grasped himself firmly, resting his head on his free arm. His body jerked as images of her flooded his mind.

Moving his shaft firmly in his hand, he pounded his flesh. Turning his head to bite into his bicep, he grasped the skin between his teeth. Tasting his own scent on his tongue but remembering hers, heat raged through him. A low groan escaped his throat, his stomach muscles bulging as the first waves of his orgasm washed over him. Head thrown back, free hand twisting the sheet from the bed, he bit into his lower lip, imagining it was Bethany making him come. Taut thighs trembled as he pumped himself furiously, thinking of her as the final shudders racked through him.

Collapsing back onto the bed he gasped for air, chest heaving. The tension slowly seeped from his limbs as his breathing returned to normal. The breeze that had caressed him now chilled his sweat-dampened skin. He lay still for a moment enjoying the lethargy his release had brought him. Dragging a hand through his hair he sat up with a sigh, realizing he needed another shower.

He frowned. *How many times had he jerked off just this week alone?* He could not go on like this—he had to see her.

Bringing his US schedule for the following week up on the computer, he sighed when he realized his workload would take him nowhere near Vegas. The week after was no better. *Byron wasn't going to like receiving the call Ruben was about to make, but it was his personal life, damn it. And, just this once, it would take priority.*

\* \* \* \*

On the other side of the country, Bethany took a long sip of her wine. Groaning as it hit the spot, she grabbed the bottle from the fridge and took it into the living room. What a day she'd had. She flopped down with a grunt, not caring if she spilled the drink on her beloved recliner. Rubbing away a

splash with the edge of her sweatshirt, she sighed at the stain slowly spreading across the brown aniline leather.

Ruben's call had come a little earlier than usual that day due to the time difference on the East coast. She had tried her best to put on a bright voice, but he had sounded concerned. It didn't take a genius to figure out she wasn't happy. She should have been—deliriously so. She was involved in a relationship with a gorgeous man and it wasn't costing her any loss of self-respect or pride. On the contrary, he was good for her and she loved how she felt about herself when she was with him. The person she had always known was inside her had just begun to surface, drawn out by the safety of an accepting spirit. Ruben seemed to welcome every new facet of her that revealed itself and never had she been so open—sexually and intellectually—to any man before. The problem was, although she liked the 'new' Bethany, that woman only seemed to exist in his arms or reflected in his eyes.

She found him staring at her from time to time, looking deeply, as if trying to see into her soul. At first, she hadn't found it easy to hold his gaze, instinctively protecting her inner most thoughts and feelings from his penetrating stare. Eventually, she learned to distract him, giving him a hot look instead of the emotional connection he was searching for. They both knew what she was doing, but he didn't push and she didn't give.

His life was so different from hers. Money made things easy for him. If you wanted to be somewhere, you just went, without a second thought. A few times he had asked her to drop everything and join him. Any initial excitement his request had elicited had been quickly squashed by resentment. *How dare he think her life was so unimportant?* She was a doctor for God's sake. People needed her. His arrogance could be a real turn off sometimes. She poured another drink and turned on the TV. The romantic movie she tried to distract herself with began to bug her. Life just wasn't like that.

Running a finger around the wine stain, she began to realize this was a different side to the same issue she'd had over Simon. Ruben was ten times the man he had been—there was no comparison. She was the problem and the way she lost herself in any relationship, it seemed. Rather than making her 'whole', her affair with Ruben was making her feel like part of her was missing whenever he was gone, which was almost all the time. It was



becoming harder and harder to just live in the moment. His absences were beginning to hurt, and without any mention of feelings or emotion from him, why the hell was she putting herself through it?

There was just no way to spend more time with him, not without risking her practice and her independence. She simply couldn't do that. Hell, even the thought of it scared her.

A corny line from the movie drew her full attention. She watched, through slightly drunk eyes, as Tom told Renee, 'You complete me.'

Guffawing loudly at the saccharine sentiment, she laughed into her wine glass, before slamming it down onto the table and sobbing into her sleeve.

\* \* \* \*

*Where the hell was he?*

The Fan checked her laptop for the millionth time—knowing without checking that she was in the right city on the correct date. The website confirmed what she already knew. There were to be two days of promotion followed by a concert on Monday.

Ruben's manager and road crew had all turned up as expected, but he was conspicuous by his absence. Even Albert had come—a fact that didn't make her feel particularly happy. The only time he went anywhere without his bodyguard was when he was visiting family or friends...or girlfriends.

*The brunette. It had to be her. She knew nothing about her, except that she hated her. Deeply.*

For once, she was grateful that the other fans were in town, too. At least she wouldn't go insane waiting for him to show up.

Martha came out of the bathroom, asking if she was ready. They were meeting up with the rest of the girls at the band's hotel. A night spent watching their pathetic attention seeking wasn't exactly what she had in mind, but it was preferable to wondering what Ruben was up to.

A couple of hours later, she threw back another drink, unable to take much more of the inane chatter without a serious amount of alcohol. She had spent the time, since they'd followed the band to a the nightclub, watching women—some of them old enough to be her mother—lose their morals and their minds as they took turns at seducing the guys and it was beginning to take its toll. One of the slightly younger fans finally struck

lucky —if you could call it that—and ended up giving the sound guy a blowjob in the bathroom. The party broke up pretty soon after.

Back at the hotel, she seethed with disgust as she watched Martha move around the room getting ready for bed. Sharing a hotel room with her occasionally had seemed like a good idea when they had first started chatting online many months earlier, but now she could barely stand to look at the woman. Her husband must be a total idiot. Married for twenty years, she dumped everything at a moments notice to chase Ruben around the country and her fool of a husband paid for it. *What she hoped would happen if she ever met Ruben, God only knew.*

Not that Martha was a bad looking woman. She was past her prime, but still feisty and attractive, if a little sleazy. Ten years ago, she would have been serious competition—but now her voluptuous figure, over made up face and brassy red hair just made her look like an aging burlesque dancer.

She was finally able to let the fake smile she'd had to maintain for the last few hours slip from her face when she heard Martha's faint snoring coming from the other side of the room.

Crossing quietly, she stood above her sleeping form, fighting the urge to punch the woman in her bloated, revolting face. How dare she talk about fucking him? When Martha had drunkenly giggled earlier about the 'free pass' she had from her husband to sleep with Ruben if she ever got lucky, she had wanted to beat her to a pulp then. She fought to control the rage coursing through her, knowing there was no way she could ever explain attacking the woman in her sleep.

*What would she say if she knew the truth? That the body Martha wanted so badly had been hers once? Or about the night she'd had with him...and about the things he had done with and to her?*

She had met Ruben on a rare night off from caring for her dad. The man who had been her whole world had taken up all of her time since an accident that left him severely disabled when she was only fifteen years old. She had grabbed at the chance of leaving him with a nurse to spend a night in the city with a friend, meeting Ruben for the first time in the VIP area of a club they had flirted their way into. She'd been twenty-one, the same age as her friend, and her blonde hair and skimpy clothing had been all she'd needed to get through the door.

Invited to sit at his table with the rest of his band, she'd been overwhelmed by him. The decision to give him her virginity had been made without his knowledge and long before he'd invited her back to his room. She often wondered if he even knew how much she had given him that night.

*Martha would never, could never, get as close as she had...as she would again.*

The thought of him being with any woman made her nauseous. If she ever had proof that anyone had gotten near him—especially that brunette from Vegas—she would make her pay.

*Either way, she'd make her pay for taking what didn't belong to her.*

## Chapter 11

Ruben looked across the dinner table at Bethany. *What on earth was wrong?* He certainly hadn't anticipated this mood when he had turned up—unannounced—but with a whole weekend free that he couldn't wait to share with her.

Beth's whole demeanor had changed since they had made love that afternoon. He had stirred in his sleep and, reaching for her, had found the bed empty. Raising a sleepy head, he'd found her sitting at the dressing table, looking hard at her own reflection.

'Hey,' he'd said, groggily. 'I keep waking up in an empty bed.' She'd jumped at the sound of his voice, lost in her own thoughts. Smiling at him in a weird way he had never seen before, she'd quickly averted her eyes as she suggested going out for dinner at their quiet little restaurant in town.

'You will not be hassled there. They're used to you now,' she'd said. 'I'll wait for you in the living room, okay?' She'd left quickly without glancing back.

He was glad she had lightened up a little over dinner, but she still was not her usual self. Picking her hand up from the table to drag her attention back to him, he didn't like the distance he saw in her eyes. 'Where do you keep going, Bethany?' he asked quietly. 'You're not here with me.' She pulled her hand back hastily, appearing to gather her thoughts.

'Ruben...' She hesitated before continuing. He sat back in his chair, watching her squirm. He had a feeling he knew what was coming. 'I have loved being with you,'

'But?' he cut in harshly, the tone of his voice making her look at him.

'But.... I am a very simple woman. I have a job I love and feel comfortable doing. I have very little going on in my life that doesn't fit into my daily routine.'

'And?'

‘And.... I don’t want you to get the wrong impression about me. This last few days with you has been wonderful but—’

Confusion creased his brow. ‘Last few days? We have been seeing each other for a month,’ he corrected, knowing it wasn’t the point.

‘If you add up the time we actually spent together, it’s only a few days.’ Her head dropped briefly and he waited for the killer punch. ‘And I think it’s time to get back to my normal life.’ She kept her eyes down.

She didn’t move as she continued to speak. ‘I know myself, Ruben. I can’t handle not being in control of my own destiny. I gave up too much of myself for a man once before and suffered as a result.’

Ruben knew she was being unfair. ‘I haven’t asked you for anything you didn’t want to give.’

She shook her head. ‘That’s just the problem, I went into the last relationship willingly, too. We haven’t been together for more than a few weeks and already I find myself at your beck and call. We only see each other when you can fit me in.’ He began to protest but she cut him off. ‘What happens when I get lonely Ruben, or horny for that matter? Is it up to me when we see each other, or am I expected to wait weeks at a time and then be available the minute you want me?’

She looked around self-consciously, aware she had raised her voice. Dropping it to barely more than a whisper, she continued. ‘The sex has been fantastic, more than I could have dreamed about. At my age though, it’s just not enough. You’re a handsome man and I am incredibly flattered by the attention, but I am selling myself short.... can’t you see that?’

He searched her face in disbelief. Obviously Bethany had not considered him as anything more than a fling—a brief flirtation with a guy she could not take seriously. Sometimes he hated his life and the way it seemed to give people the right to make assumptions about him.

‘So, are you saying it’s over?’

Tears sprang into her eyes. ‘I don’t know Ruben...I really don’t. I love being with you, but I can’t spend my life waiting for someone.’

‘I see.’ A thousand questions on his lips, he kept his silence, not trusting himself to stay civil. He signaled for the waiter to bring the bill.

Ruben led her through the restaurant and into his car without a word. Neither of them spoke for the short journey back to her house. Bethany kept her head turned to look out of the window. He guessed she didn’t want a

confrontation, which was just as well considering how angry he was. He prayed for the journey to end before he said something he'd regret. She barely allowed him to stop at the kerb outside her house before leaping from the car.

'I think it's probably best if you don't come in,' she said.

He lost the battle to control his temper. *Who the hell did she think she was?* Ruben climbed quickly out of his seat. 'Is that it?' She turned as if to say something and then changed her mind, hurrying her steps up to the door. He swore as he made to follow her and nearly dented the car door slamming it shut.

'Tell me what the fuck is going on,' he demanded as he strode up the path. Her hands shook as she fumbled for her keys. He tried to help her, but she slapped him away.

'Ruben, just leave.'

'I will leave Bethany,' he replied, trying to calm his voice, 'but not until I get a proper explanation for the way you are treating me.' Green eyes bored into his. He watched as her guilt slowly morphed into anger.

'What is it, Ruben?' she shouted into his face. 'Does it hurt your pride that I don't want to see you anymore?'

Shaking his head in disbelief, he took a step back from her. She had the door open and quickly stepped through it. Grabbing her elbow, he turned her to face him. 'No, Bethany,' he ground out, 'It does not hurt my pride. It does surprise me though to find out what a cold bitch you are.'

Bethany's hand shot out and slapped him across the face, hard. Grabbing her, he pinned her wrists to her sides, bringing her up close against him. She struggled to get free. 'Get your hands off me.'

'You didn't want me to get my hands off you last night,' he drawled. 'Nor this morning, nor this afternoon for that matter.' Fire sparked in her eyes as he reminded her of the one thing they had that worked...absolutely. Her eyes dropped to his mouth as she parted her lips. 'Are you sure you want me to leave, Bethany?' he asked, encouraged by her reaction.

He'd spoken too soon. Resolve crossed her face and she pushed him away from her, disgust etched into her features. 'You aren't that irresistible,' she smirked and moved to close the door on him. He stopped it with a hand, forcing her further into the house as he stepped in, slamming it behind him.

‘Get out,’ she shouted, turning to grab a vase from the hall table. Realizing she was about to throw it at him, he grabbed it out of her hands, pinning her to the wall. She fought him like a wildcat, trying to pull his hair and scratch his face. He had no choice but to grab her arms again, if only to save himself. He had never seen this side of her before and it frightened him.

‘What the hell is wrong with you?’

‘You are an arrogant bastard. That is what is wrong with me,’ she spat out. ‘You think you can do what you want because you made me come a couple of times. Well, I have news for you. You weren’t the first and you won’t be the last.’

If she was trying to piss him off, it was working. Striding away from her, he punched the wall, causing the plaster to crack. Resting his head against it, he drew in ragged breaths, trying not to let his temper make a total asshole out of him like it did his father. The thought sickened him.

*Why was she doing this?* He’d been more open and available to her emotionally than to anyone he had ever met. *Maybe he had misjudged her feelings for him?*

Dropping his hand to his side, he flexed it gingerly, testing it for damage. *Wouldn’t it be insane if he had managed to bust it up?* He guessed it was all he deserved for allowing himself to get close to someone.

‘Oh God, Ruben,’ Bethany cried out. ‘I’m so sorry...I didn’t mean to make you angry. Let me see your hand.’ Refusing at first to let her touch him, he relented when the pain kicked in. ‘I don’t think you’ve broken anything—’

‘Why don’t you want to be with me?’ he cut in, searching her face for answers. He was glad to see the anger gone from her eyes, but he couldn’t handle her pity.

She shook her head. ‘I’m not saying that I don’t want to see you anymore, I just don’t know how much longer I can go on like this.’ She began to cry then, making it hard for him to understand her words. ‘I have been in constant limbo since we met. I’m either thinking about the last time we were together or looking forward to the next.’

‘Do you think it’s any different for me?’

'I guess not,' she shrugged. 'The truth is, you're part of my life, but I have no involvement in yours. I don't even know which country you are in half of the time.'

'Maybe the real difference is that I am in love.' He stopped suddenly, shocking himself as much as her. *Where the hell did that come from?* He had no time to think about it. He had to know how she felt. 'Don't you love me, Beth?'

She stared at him in silence as fresh tears rolled down her cheeks. Finally, she nodded, her eyes huge. Ruben let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding until that moment. Wiping the tears from her face, he hugged her.

He wished he knew what she expected him to do. His life had always been this way.

'Come with me. Just for a few days,' he blurted out. Her snort was hardly the response he'd hoped for, but he wasn't surprised.

'Ruben, I have a surgery to run. I can't possibly leave on a moments notice.'

Refusing to be deterred, he ploughed on. 'What would happen if you were ill, or got into an accident? Would your practice close down?'

'Well, I guess if that happened I would have to arrange a locum,' she admitted with a smile. He knew then she would come. He leaned back against the wall and tried not to show her how smug he felt. She saw right through him. 'You can take that look off your face. I haven't said yes yet.'

'Yeah, but you will,' he said on a grin, covering his head just in time to deflect the playful slap she gave him.

'Wow, you really are an arrogant bastard,' she laughed, not stopping him as his hand began to wander up her thigh.

'But you love it though, don't you?' She opened her mouth to reply, but bit her lip instead as his fingers delved inside her panties. She would say yes to anything he asked by the time he was through.



## Chapter 12

A few days later, Bethany sneaked back into the bedroom of their suite, finding Ruben in his usual post-coital condition—sound asleep. Unable to begrudge him his rest, she slipped quietly in beside him. Even asleep he seemed to be aware of her nearness and turned over to pull her against him without waking.

As a Latin artist, Ruben was wildly successful in Miami and had booked a suite at one of its most exclusive hotels for the whole week due to having three gigs scheduled in the city. Staying at the beautiful resort had been almost a re-birth for Bethany. She felt wonderful, but why wouldn't she? Sleeping beside her was one of the most gorgeous people she had ever laid eyes on, never mind had sex with, who said he was in love with her, and was insatiable for her. Bethany was sure she had never made love so often or so frantically, even as a teenager.

Days spent catching a little sun and using the world famous spa facilities had left her skin glowing with health and soft as silk. And the food! She had never tasted anything like it. Burning off the calories with Ruben at every opportunity was the only reason she hadn't gained at least ten pounds.

Despite the comfort of his arms and the tiredness of her body, Bethany could not rest. She lay for ages with her face turned into the curve of his neck feeling his pulse beating against her lips. She had to admit to herself that he had been right. The time he had insisted they spend together had changed everything for her. He wasn't conventional—far from it—but he was just a man. She'd been able to take him down from the pedestal she'd put him on and relate to him as a person. She was happier for it, too.

Finally giving up on sleep, she tiptoed through the suite into the living area. Piles of papers occupied a desk and she leafed through them idly. One large dossier caught her eye and she sat down to glance at it briefly.

She had no idea how long she had been sleeping when Ruben woke her.

‘What time is it?’ Hearing his reply, she groaned. Ruben sank onto the sofa with her, snuggling his head down into her lap. ‘I started reading about your charity,’ she explained. ‘I hope you don’t mind.’ He smiled at her with bloodshot eyes and shook his head.

His eyes began to drift shut, but she couldn’t let him rest. ‘I think it’s a wonderful project. Tell me a little about it.’

Voice still thick with sleep, he began to speak slowly, telling her how it all started and breaking down the main aims of his Foundation. He described passionately the problems faced by children and how he hoped to help combat them.

He woke up pretty quickly, becoming more and more animated as he spoke. Bethany could see his total commitment to the cause and marveled again at how she could have thought him so one-dimensional. It occurred to her—and not for the first time that week—that she really needed to question some of her own prejudices.

They talked for hours, barely stopping for food and coffee. Bethany was horrified by many of the stories he had told her and was a little ashamed that as a medical professional, she hadn’t become more involved in that kind of work herself.

‘I’m going to Africa at the end of this week to attend a conference on Pediatric AIDS,’ he said. ‘Most of it goes over my head, especially the medical terminology, but I can bring awareness and attention to the issue just by being there.’ His slight blush touched her. ‘I’m just a pretty face in these situations.’

She hugged him. ‘Hey, I’m a doctor, but my knowledge of treatments and research is very limited. Don’t be so hard on yourself.’

He handed her a ream of information regarding the conference. ‘Maybe you can make sense of this for me. I used to try hard to understand the terminology and actively take part.’ He laughed. ‘Now, I accept that the most important thing I can offer is money and publicity.’

Bethany quickly scanned the pages before snuggling against Ruben, explaining the parts she understood. She gobbled up the information a little selfishly, quite forgetting that the point was to help Ruben rather than expand her own knowledge.

Commonsense prevailed and they returned to bed just as the sun came up, aware Ruben had a busy evening ahead of him. They slept briefly,

waking about noon. Before he left for the day's madness, she made him collate every document and source of information he had at his disposal for her to look at while he was gone.

Time passed quickly for her—so quickly in fact that she leapt from the desk she had been working at in surprise when he walked back into the suite many hours later. Still in her robe, she began to fuss with her hair, apologizing for her appearance but he stopped her, saying he'd spent the day thinking and wanted to talk. She didn't like the sound of that but didn't push, allowing him to get coffee for them while she threw on some clothing.

Later, he told her what was on his mind. Rather than just lobbying governments in the countries he visited to invest more funds in health care provision and AIDS education, his charity could employ and train the much-needed staff themselves. The first step would be recruiting and educating doctors locally and giving them the tools they needed to run their own clinics. He looked at her expectantly. She didn't understand...*what was he saying?*

He sighed in mock exasperation before explaining. 'You could work for us.'

She clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle the giggle that escaped. Ruben looked a little bewildered, but didn't comment, continuing to lay out in detail what he was getting at.

'You could fill this role in my organization. You could speak to doctors and health care professionals in impoverished areas. Find out where the shortages are and what they need to provide these services themselves and then agree a plan of education and action with them.' He paused for breath, enthusiasm making him rush his words. 'The charity will fund any training and equipment they need of course. What do you think?'

Bethany was stunned. 'I need a little time to think about this.'

'Of course, take all the time you need. Five minutes ok?' he joked.

He laughed as she slapped his thigh, but she was grateful when he handed her a dossier containing the new information from the Department of Health along with the job offer, and left her to mull it over. This meant a lot to him, she could tell and, knowing how pushy he could be when he wanted something, it was probably killing him not to pressure her into it. He couldn't be the reason for her decision though. She wanted to think about it privately.

Working for his charity was a wonderful opportunity. Her newly acquired knowledge had made a big impression and the thought of becoming involved was thrilling. There was much more to consider though. The salary offered was astronomical—much more than she wanted or needed—but it would allow her to maintain her independence. She could easily employ another doctor for her practice and keep her house.

The position involved a lot of travel, not all of it at Ruben's side. Much of the work was educational and could be arranged to match his schedule. There would be times she would need to visit the locations and countries with the greatest need for HIV and AIDS resources, but as Ruben had pointed out quite often he would be able to accompany her. He intended to remain actively involved.

There was just no way she could make a decision as quickly as he wanted. Their time together was coming to an end. This would be their last night together for at least a little while—even if she accepted the job. They agreed that the best time to make a start would be at the end of the coming month. Ruben was back in New York for a break then and it would give Bethany time to wrap everything up at her end and join him—should she decide to.

Putting the topic to one side, they focused on enjoying their last evening together. Ruben was insatiable and they made love to the point of exhaustion, as if he were trying to totally possess her body and mind, allowing no room for anything but him. Bethany's heart weighed heavily in her chest. She couldn't think of the rapidly approaching separation without a lump forming in her throat. They slept for brief periods throughout the night, waking and turning to each other often.

Morning came too soon. They ate breakfast in quiet intimacy. All too quickly the long week that had stretched ahead of them had flown by and all they were left with were a few brief minutes before Ruben had to leave. Bethany walked him to the door of the suite, her eyes already brimming with tears by the time he turned to her.

They had chosen not to leave together. Her flight was four hours later than his and they didn't want to have to say their goodbyes in public at the airport.

'Don't cry, Beth,' he pleaded, his own voice weak. She smiled thinly, struggling bravely to stem the tears. Holding her face in his hands, he kissed

her before pulling her into his chest. 'I'll call you tonight. Think about what I said, okay?' She nodded dumbly, unable to speak.

He walked quickly through the door without turning back. Bethany rushed over to the balcony and looked down into the street. Fans thronged around the entrance to the hotel and she caught only a brief glimpse of him as he disappeared quickly into the waiting limo.

Fresh tears fell. He had not looked up to wave goodbye to her. It was foolish to expect a romantic gesture in the middle of that frenzy. She waited for the car to pull away. Without warning the limo's sunroof slid back and Ruben's face appeared. He was beaming up at her, waving frantically until it was no longer possible for him to see. She laughed through her tears—he was such a dork.

At that moment Bethany knew what she would do. He had only just driven away and she felt like half of her had left with him. Life did not offer a chance to be this happy very often and she would never forgive herself if she did not reach out and grab it with both hands. Whatever the outcome, she had to be with him—it was that simple.

Gathering up her belongings, she left the hotel about an hour after him, heading to the airport for her flight back to Vegas.

Closing the door behind her as she entered the cold, empty house a few hours later, Bethany looked around and realized it was no longer her home. Home was wherever he was and she couldn't wait any longer to be with him.

\* \* \* \*

Less than a week later, she was outside his dressing room door in Paris. Byron had been wonderful, keeping her informed regarding Ruben's whereabouts. He didn't mind helping Bethany to surprise him—Ruben had been in a foul mood since they parted, he'd told her.

Byron answered her knock and kissed her cheek before ushering her in, gesturing that Ruben was in the shower. 'Ruben, there is someone here to see you,' he called, hamming it up with a big wink in her direction.

When Ruben did not instantly appear, Byron poked his head around the door to see what he was up to. Bethany could hear muffled voices—she

guessed Byron was having trouble convincing him to come out. Her suspicions were confirmed when she heard Ruben lose his temper.

'I'm in no mood for fans, Byron,' she heard him shout through the open doorway, a little indiscreetly she thought. His manager reappeared, shrugging his shoulders in defeat.

Bethany winked at Byron, shushing him as she moved closer to the open door. 'First, Byron thinks I am a groupie and now you think I am a fan,' she said loudly, hoping her voice would carry though to him. Suddenly, Ruben appeared naked and dripping wet in the doorway, smiling briefly before dragging her squealing into the shower.

\* \* \* \*

*The Fan* stared at the images taunting her from the laptop. Candid shots of Ruben and the woman she now knew to be Bethany, taken without their knowledge by fans in Miami, filled the screen. She had been there too and seen them together with her own eyes.

Pictures didn't usually interest her, but she scanned them in minute detail—trying to read his eyes—searching for any clues that would reveal his true feelings toward the woman.

The websites hosting the pictures were also full of opinions from hordes of jealous females. Body language had been studied and discussed—every look and touch scrutinized and criticized. The information they had managed to glean suggested that she was one of his Foundation's new employees—one of the long-time fans had asked a member of Ruben's band who she was friendly with. There was rampant speculation regarding the reason he could be spending so much time with the woman, but nobody knew for sure.

Only she knew that they had flown out of Vegas together over a month ago and shared dinner—possibly more—in his suite later that same night. Only she knew what a huge threat this woman was to her future plans.

Indescribable pain had almost paralyzed her when she first realized they were in Miami together. She'd thought the woman was history, after all, there had been no sign of her for weeks. Unable to confirm whether they had shared a room, as security was so tight, she only knew Bethany had been staying in the same hotel.

Ruben had left Florida for Paris and he hadn't taken Bethany with him, thank God. She didn't know what it meant, but she prayed that he had gotten bored of her. Unable to follow him out of the country until her passport came through, she hoped he would still be alone by the time she caught up with him in Madrid. *Damn passport. Why hadn't she thought of it earlier?*

She was glad she hadn't followed him when he left the hotel earlier, choosing instead to watch and wait for the brunette. She'd seen her up at the window of one of the rooms as he had driven away. Bethany had certainly looked like she was in love but he had still chosen not to take her to Paris with him. She hoped that meant he didn't feel the same way.

A couple of hours later, when the woman left the hotel, she had followed. *It was much easier stalking somebody who wasn't famous, that was for sure.* Many times, she'd been close enough to reach out and grab a handful of her hair or push her to the ground, but there were always too many people milling about. Bethany had strolled along Ocean Drive, staring through the windows of the exclusive boutiques and checking out the street traders, before stopping at an ocean front terrace for coffee. The small suitcase she'd had with her made it clear she didn't intend to return to the hotel.

She had not wanted to get too close, whether Bethany would remember it or not, they had met before in LA and she couldn't risk being recognized, so she had waited outside until the brunette re-appeared, jumping straight into a cab. She had almost lost her before finally managing to hail one herself. The friendly Haitian driver lost his ready smile when she'd snapped at him to take her to the airport, making it clear she was in no mood for friendly banter. She just hoped she'd guessed right and that Bethany was indeed leaving Miami.

Minutes later, she'd been able to relax. Her cab had caught the other easily, heading out towards the airport on I-95. Luckily, she had arrived a few minutes ahead of her target and tipped the driver handsomely, surprising him into risking another smile her way. She'd returned it that time.

Following Bethany into the terminal, she kept her distance, watching carefully to see which departure lounge she was heading for. Checking the gate number against the information board, she'd been hugely relieved when

it confirmed her fervent hope that the woman was heading back to Vegas, alone.

Lurking at the back of the line, she had waited until Bethany had passed through the gate and out of sight before heading back to the hotel. Emotions warred within her. She was grateful to see the back of her but oh, how she would have loved a moment alone with that woman.

She turned off the laptop, tired of seeing them together. Reassuring herself with the knowledge that Ruben and Bethany were now on two different continents, she hoped she would at least be able to relax and get a good night's sleep. The last week had been awful for her. Taunted endlessly by thoughts of them together, her imagination had run riot. She smiled ruefully, doubting that Ruben was even capable of the deviant behavior she had tortured herself by imagining.

Bethany, however, looked like a filthy whore, and she wouldn't put anything past her. Knowing they were apart made her happy and she breathed a little easier than she had in days. Getting the woman's full name and address became a priority and something she could focus on to stop herself going crazy while she couldn't be with Ruben.

Then, it was only a matter of time until she would pay Bethany a visit and make her sorry she'd ever put her sleazy hands on him.



## Chapter 13

Ruben leapt from the bed with a laugh as he heard her open their hotel room door. He'd gone almost crazy waiting for her all day, imagining the ways he could welcome her home from work and show her how much he had missed her.

He was pleased at how well things had worked out. Initially, he'd been worried about how he would feel spending so much time with another person, but things were good. Beth was doing a fantastic job in her new role. She loved it, so much so in fact, he often had to ask her to shut up about it.

Hours later, his desire and good humor had disappeared as he sat watching her intently, wondering what in the hell was wrong. Time alone together was so rare and it irritated him that she had spent so much of it away from him, just to return in a touchy mood.

She'd practically swatted him away as he kissed her in greeting and excused herself to the bedroom, pleading a headache. But he'd walked in to find her crying. His concern had turned into annoyance as she refused to tell him what was wrong. The tears dried up, but her mood had not lifted by the time they ate dinner in awkward silence. Her attempts to disguise her sadness with a brittle smile every time he looked at her were not fooling him. When she thought he wasn't looking, the smile faded and a look of pure desolation took its place.

Bethany disappeared again after their meal, forcing him to look for her. He found her staring silently at her reflection in the bedroom mirror, pain etched across her features. His temper finally snapped. 'What's going on?'

The harshness of his tone caused her to jump. She made to shake her head, but he stopped her, telling her to save whatever lie she was thinking up and tell him the truth. Ruben saw the temper flare in her eyes then and he welcomed it. Anything was better than her earlier sadness.

'Simon,' she sighed wearily.

‘Simon?’ Ruben’s incredulous tone caused her to wince. ‘Why the hell are you thinking about him?’

‘He rang me earlier,’ she said, adding quickly, ‘Now don’t get angry. He called to tell me his mother died.’

‘Were you very close?’ he asked quietly, feeling guilty for shouting at her.

‘Not really.’ She shrugged her shoulders, ‘I always blamed her for the way he turned out, truth be known.’

‘Then why are you so sad?’

Carefully re-arranging the items on the dressing table, she avoided his gaze. ‘It just got me thinking...about the past...and him.’

‘What about him?’ Ruben could hear the coldness in his own voice. His stomach clenched uncomfortably as she kept her eyes downcast. ‘Because you still want to be with him?’

Bethany shook her head fiercely. She seemed to be collecting her thoughts as she kept him waiting for an answer. Barely holding his temper in check, he tried to calm his reaction to the idea of her spending all day thinking about her ex-fiancé.

Finally, she spoke. ‘I don’t know where things went wrong. We were in love at first and I thought that would never change. I can’t believe I was so wrong about him and that scares me.’

He took a deep breath, but his relief at her words was short lived. ‘What if I am wrong about us Ruben?’ She blundered on, ignoring his astonished reaction. ‘I realized earlier that I am making the same mistakes with you as I did with him. I have no life of my own...’

‘You cannot be seriously comparing me to him,’ he shouted, beginning to pace, agitation causing him to run his hand through his hair. He understood her concerns, but he had always been kind and supportive. *How could she think he would ever treat her as badly?*

‘It’s not you Ruben. It’s me.’ She answered as he told her his thoughts. ‘I trust you implicitly. But I trusted him too and look where that got me.’ She shook her head as he started to respond, silencing him. ‘I can’t afford to rely on my own judgment anymore.’

Crossing the room, he tried to pull her up into his arms. Finding her stiff and unyielding, he sighed and let go. Struggling for the right words, he tried to make things better. ‘I love you, Beth and I would never hurt you. I want

you with me constantly.’ Pausing to look at her, he felt his words were not getting through.

Taking her face in his hands, he continued. ‘We’re good together, Baby. How can what we have be wrong?’ She didn’t seem convinced. *What the hell did she want from him?* Turning from her, he had to walk away before he said something he’d regret.

He paused as realization dawned. ‘You know, Beth, he is still controlling you,’ he stated calmly. Her quizzical look prompted him to continue. He shook his head in disgust. ‘He doesn’t even need to be around to ruin your life anymore. You do it for him.’

Fresh tears fell, but he couldn’t feel responsible. She hadn’t even bothered to disagree with him and her lack of belief in their relationship pissed him off. *Didn’t she think they were worth fighting for?* If she wanted to wallow in self-pity, she was going to have to do it alone.

‘Ruben,’ she called as he picked up his jacket and headed for the door, ‘where are you going?’

‘I need to clear my head. I suggest you do the same,’ the look he leveled at her brokering no argument. ‘Don’t mention his name to me again,’ he threatened, slamming the door behind him.

The walk did him good. Never one to stay angry for long, he sat in a nearby park, trying not to think too hard about her ex. Focusing instead on Bethany, he wondered why she had been so upset. *Maybe a part of her still wanted Simon?* He doubted it, but hell, there must have been some reason she stayed with the jerk all those years.

Ruben didn’t want to lose her. He couldn’t believe he’d wasted so much of his life without knowing what it was like to have a woman care for him. It wasn’t like she waited on him hand and foot but she made him feel loved. And not because of anything he’d done—she just seemed to love him.

The one dark spot was her stubbornness. She refused absolutely to allow him to take care of her and would never admit she needed him for anything. Also, she spent a lot of time away from him during the day and he wondered if it was by accident or design? Her independence was important to her, he knew that, but surely she realized by now she could trust him? He wasn’t anything like Simon.

Ruben thought back to the fight they’d had the first time she had spoken about her ex-fiancé. He’d tried to be supportive as she went on and on about

how much she had loved him and what she had sacrificed for him, but eventually his jealousy had flared. Being prone to that emotion wasn't something he was proud of and he'd always had to fight to control it when he was younger. She'd laughed at first before realizing that it was the worst thing she could have done when his temper escalated. She hadn't backed down, though.

Hell, he hadn't cared enough about anyone to get jealous in years. He had never really experienced the emotion as a mature man and it unnerved him to realize it was still there, beneath the surface.

The way she kept her escape route open pissed him off too. She still had her house and medical practice in Vegas. Of course, he understood why and he guessed it gave them both freedom. But it implied that she didn't have much faith at all in him or their relationship. He was beginning to need her, much more than she needed him it seemed, and he didn't like it. Not one bit.

Unable to find any real answers, he gave up making himself crazy thinking about it. He wanted to get back to her and drive the painful memories away forever. Her body was his. It was time she let him into her mind.

Entering the suite much more quietly than he had left, he poked his head into the bedroom to find her watching a movie. She looked up at him as he approached and the warmth in her eyes and her smile told him the storm had passed for now. Relief coursed through him and he wasted no time in climbing into bed beside her and ensuring she was incapable of thinking about anyone else for the rest of the night.

\* \* \* \*

The bubbles around her felt luxurious. What a pleasure it was to have a proper bath after all those showers on the tour bus. The two-week stint in Europe had been grueling for both of them.

Ruben hadn't even had time to rest since their arrival early that morning. He'd left first thing, a busy day ahead of him. Bethany offered to keep him company, but he'd shook his head, saying she should take it easy and enjoy the suite. Thinking of him brought a smile to her face. The last few weeks since she had joined him had been wonderful—so much more

than she ever dared dream. The contrast to her previous life was staggering. *Who would have thought that she could ever be so totally happy?*

She'd slotted into his road 'family' with an ease that surprised her. When not involved with the project, she joined in with the workload, helping anyone who asked. Ruben hadn't liked her doing it, but he'd understood finally that she needed something to do while he was busy—which was most of the time.

Watching him perform from the edge of the stage night after night was a huge turn on. He came off stage electrified—charged by the reaction of the crowd. More often than not, she could feel the sexual tension radiating off him in waves, only held in check by the fact they were not alone. Realizing early on that her presence was a distraction, she'd gotten into the habit of avoiding him after the show until she knew he had no company. Usually, he would be on the tour bus pacing behind the door, pulling it open and dragging her in when he heard her gentle knock. His staff learned quickly that it was a very bad idea to disturb them after that.

He sure had a temper on him. Luckily he seldom lost it and, even if he did, it was over quickly and never directed at her. Well, not so far. It struck her as strange that she wasn't frightened of him the way she had been of Simon. Maybe it was because she knew that underneath all that noise and fire, there was a kind heart.

Annoyed at herself now for ruining her happy mood with thoughts of her ex, she began to dry her hair and prepare for Ruben's arrival.

\* \* \* \*

'Ignore it,' Bethany panted some hours later, frustrated by the ringing phone. She had pounced on his body as soon as he'd got back, and had no intention of sharing him with anyone for the next hour or so.

Ruben seemed to comply, his continued thrusting showing he had no intention of disobeying her. Her hands on his ass urged him deeper, giving him no choice. Hooking a leg over his calf possessively, she groaned in satisfaction, as his attention returned to her approaching climax.

'Shit! I must answer it Beth. It could be important,' Ruben apologized as the insistent ringing began to irritate and distract him. Rising up on his

elbow, he grabbed for the receiver. 'This better be good,' he growled into the phone.

Bethany groaned. *Was it too much to ask for some privacy?* This was their first night in a proper bed for days and his staff knew how much he relished his free time. Byron's voice barely reached her ears down the phone line. She heard him say he had rung to notify Ruben of last minute changes to the schedule and then began to run through them in a dull monotone.

Realizing it was nothing important, Ruben turned his attention back to her and grinned as he saw her biting her lip to avoid making any noise. Her hands drifted along his torso and she sat to lick at a nipple with a playful gleam in her eye. Reclining sinuously, she rolled her hips as she beckoned him back to her with a crooked finger. His barely suppressed gasp caused her to smile.

'Will that be all?' Ruben asked through gritted teeth. Byron voice droned on again.

Cupping the mouthpiece in his hand, Ruben kept the phone to his ear and gave her a hard thrust. Bethany's eyes flew open and she stuffed a fist into her mouth to muffle her yelp. Again she rose. The arm supporting his weight shook uncontrollably as she slipped her tongue into his ear.

'Ruben—are you still there,' came the voice, loud enough for Bethany to hear.

'Uh huh,' He couldn't speak. Bethany had shifted her weight up onto her elbows, grinding her pelvis against him. He threw his head back and she watched as the smooth column of his neck convulsed with his ragged panting. Trying to make her behave, he placed his weight on her, pinning her back down to the bed. Turning it to her advantage, he was again within easy reach and she wasted no time, reaching around him to push insistently at his butt, urging him into her again and again. Her teeth grasped his shoulder, as she tried to suppress the unmistakable sounds of a woman about to come.

'Later,' was all he managed to grunt into the receiver before slamming the phone in the general direction of the cradle. It slipped unheeded to the floor. Both hands now on her hips, he pulled her hard against him, thrusting rapidly. Ripping her mouth from his skin, she threw her head back and groaned loudly as her insides undulated around him. He rocked into her blindly a few more times before coming himself, very hard and very loud.

Lying at her side, spent and panting afterward, Ruben suddenly went quiet. Sitting up, he cocked his head, as if trying to hear something. Nudging her hard, he pointed wordlessly to the handset of the phone lying on the floor.

‘Hello? HELLO?’ it said in a tinny voice. ‘Are you there? Can you hear me?’

Bethany’s eyes widened and her hand flew to her mouth in mock horror as she began to laugh. Hitting her with a pillow, Ruben scooted to edge of the bed, retrieving the phone.

‘Byron? You still there?’ He stifled a snort. ‘Sorry about that. It was the TV. I must have sat on the remote,’ he lied. Bethany convulsed into a fit of the giggles as he tried to finish the call. Laughing out loud, he had to turn his back on her.

\* \* \* \*

The journey to his condo in Manhattan from her friend’s apartment in Bayside took The Fan about an hour by train. Many month’s had passed since she had last made the trip and she enjoyed seeing the old haunts of her childhood.

Arriving at the familiar building, she almost felt as if she had never left. Soon after she had first visited Ruben’s condo months ago, she had gotten into the habit of sitting in the coffee shop opposite, where she could see the comings and goings of the residents.

The waiter recognized her as she entered, smiling in welcome as he commented on how long it had been since he saw her last. She didn’t know why she’d come. Ruben was out of town for a couple more days so there was no chance of seeing him.

The idea of seducing the guard came to her as she watched him craning his neck to check out all the girls walking by from his position at the door. He seemed to like the ladies and expected them to like him too, apparently believing that his age and appalling physical condition was no barrier. The gold band on his ring finger didn’t seem to cramp his style.

Men were so easy to figure out, and he had been no exception. Approaching the short, fat man with badly dyed black hair on the premise of

asking for directions, she'd been able to calculate—almost to the minute—just how long he would take to invite her inside.

From then on, it was a simple matter of playing to his ego. Tony couldn't wait to tell her about the clientele living in the building and how important his job was. Trying at first not to give too much information away, he folded like a deck of cards when she had teased that he was lying about the famous people he alleged were residents. Constantly amused by how easy it was to distract and fluster an aroused man, she hitched up her skirt a little more as she feigned surprise and delight at the mention of Ruben's name.

Tony wasn't as stupid as he looked, and it didn't take long for him to get the message she was sending—that the pretty girl panting over Ruben might pant for him if he impressed her enough. Within minutes, he had locked the street door, and was leading her up to Ruben's apartment. Pausing, he made her swear never to tell anybody. She nodded quickly; pushing passed him before he changed his mind.

Moving through the huge rooms as fast as her feet would carry her, unsure how much time she had, she took in as much detail as she could. The tasteful, Eastern inspired décor was a surprise. Muted browns and creams dominated the impressive interior, accented by touches of bronze and flashes of red. Asian art adorned the walls, complimenting the many pieces of Buddhist sculpture used to full effect in all the rooms. By the time she reached the bedroom on the upper floor, she was aroused to the point of dizziness—the heady thrill of entering his inner sanctum made her body throb.

Tony shouted in protest when she threw herself across Ruben's giant hand carved, wooden bed. She was surprised at the plain, functional linen—Egyptian cottons and thick chenille rather than the satin sheets and exotic fabrics her imagination had conjured up.

Moving to pull her up, Tony stopped dead in his tracks as she rolled over onto her back and opened her legs for him. Pulling the crotch of her panties to one side, she showed him her glistening flesh, happy to let him believe that he was the one she was getting hot for. Recovering his composure quickly, he lumbered onto the bed beside her, scrambling to get his penis out of his pants.



Having sex with him in Ruben's bed was surprisingly enjoyable, the knowledge of where she was making up for Tony's lack of technique and stamina. Closing her eyes to the horror of the old, sweaty man grunting on top of her, she managed to block him out and focus purely on her surroundings and her feelings for Ruben. The encounter was blissfully short, thanks to her partner's physical limitations.

The sudden bleeping of his radio sent Tony into a blind panic and he became abusive and dismissive toward her. In his haste to get them both out of Ruben's apartment, he didn't notice the discarded condom as he rushed to straighten up the bed. Anticipating what the consequences would be for him when it was found, she kept silent, deciding that his disrespectful attitude towards her—and Ruben, for that matter—shouldn't go unpunished. Walking away from Tony without a backward glance, she returned to her booth in the coffee shop. Signaling the waiter, she sighed. If something didn't happen with Ruben soon, she was going to have to push a little harder. Fate alone wasn't bringing them together. *She was gonna have to find a way to get to him.*

## Chapter 14

*So this was the jerk she was pining for?* Ruben threw the dossier onto his desk in disgust, sending the picture inside floating to the floor. Retrieving it, he stared at the image, stunned at how different he and Simon were.

He and Beth had been back in New York for a week. The short break in the schedule had been a perfect opportunity for her to move into his permanent residence. Stupidly, he'd thought the idea of living in a condo that was part of a prestigious, upscale development in Manhattan would make her happy.

After a few days of watching her walk around the place like she was still in a hotel, he'd lost his temper. Questioning why she was refusing to put down roots and make herself at home, he'd been furious at her reply. He was getting pretty sick of how every new step for them reminded her of mistakes she had made with Simon. Ruben hated a guy he had never met, thanks to Bethany's insistence on punishing him for someone else's mistakes.

Having someone dig up the info had been wrong, but he couldn't help himself. Ruben needed to know why Simon still had such a hold over Bethany's emotions. He was almost a silent partner, ever-present in the middle of their relationship, and Ruben felt like he was constantly being compared to him.

He didn't understand what she could have seen in the dirty blonde haired man staring out of the picture with the flabby, pasty face and watery blue eyes. The corporate haircut he had did nothing to strengthen unimpressive features. Ruben could tell by the slope of the man's shoulders that he had very little muscle definition and a relatively slim physique.

Strangely, he didn't feel reassured by the knowledge. Beth's attraction to the guy certainly couldn't have been physical, which meant it was emotional, and much more difficult for her to overcome.

Ruben scanned the other documents, wondering if Bethany knew that Simon had moved back to Vegas about six months after he'd run out on her. Married and divorced since then, too. No kids to speak of.

The desperation and futility of his actions hit him suddenly. Shaking his head, he slammed the folder into a desk drawer. He felt no better than before, even with the newly acquired information that was certainly far more impartial than any Beth had given him. In fact, he felt worse. Now he felt deceitful as well as confused.

The unwitting victim of the shameful intrusion into her past life walked into the room, moaning that her feet were killing her. He watched as she kicked off the high-heeled pumps she wore, wriggling her toes to encourage the blood to circulate again.

'Here, let me do that,' he said, helping her onto the sofa before lifting her feet onto his lap.

'Thanks, sweetheart,' she smiled, pricking his conscience with her trusting gaze.

His brain raced as his fingers worked, smoothing the ache out of the arch of her foot before turning his attention to her toes. He knew he should tell her. *How would she react?* She'd be mad, as she had every right to be.

'Ouch!'

Her shout scared the crap out of him, jolting him from his thoughts. 'What?'

'You nearly broke my toe,' she grimaced, taking her feet back and rubbing the pain away.

'I'm sorry, Beth...' He dropped his head, brushing away an imaginary speck of dust on his jeans.

'What's wrong Ruben?' The concern in her voice made him feel more of an ass than he did already. 'Have you had a bad day?'

He brushed the hands she had placed on his shoulders away before moving across the room to retrieve the folder. Handing it to her silently, he stepped back a couple of spaces, giving her a moment to realize what she was reading and watching her face for any sign of reaction.

Neither of them moved for a couple of minutes. About to cave in and explain himself, Ruben was glad she finally broke the silence.

‘Where did you get this?’ She didn’t look at him. He guessed she was pissed.

‘Byron...he knows a guy who does this kind of thing.’

She closed the dossier and placed it on the bed, her face still giving him no clue what to expect. ‘I’d have thought Byron would have had the sense to talk you out of it.’

‘It’s not his fault, I wouldn’t take no for an answer.’ He tried for humor. ‘You know me.’

She didn’t return his nervous laugh. ‘Are we eating dinner in the suite tonight?’

Ruben was confused. *That was it? No fireworks?* ‘Aren’t you angry?’

Bethany shrugged, shaking her head. ‘A little I guess. Mostly though, I’m just sorry I made you feel this was necessary.’

‘It wasn’t your fault, Beth,’ he began to explain.

‘Agreed. It was your macho pride that made you search him out.’ She hugged him to soften her words. ‘But it was my obsession with the past that made you feel insecure enough to do it.’

She accepted his kiss before continuing. ‘After being with you, I could never go back to a man like Simon.’ Ruben smirked into her neck, exhilarated by the words. The sharp slap on his ass took him by surprise and he leaned back to stare at her in mock horror.

‘What was that for?’ he laughed, rubbing the spot where she’d stung him. He couldn’t say he found the sensation unpleasant.

‘You know exactly what it was for,’ she laughed. ‘I know how cocky you are.’

‘Tell me more about how Simon could never satisfy you after me,’ he begged on a smile, unconcerned that he had totally corrupted her words. Beth was trying to look stern, but he could see right through her. She was enjoying his banter. ‘Just how much better in bed am I?’ Her shocked laugh delighted him and he knew he was truly forgiven.

‘Behave, Ruben,’ she smiled.

‘Why, will you slap me again if I’m bad?’ He waggled his eyebrows for emphasis, causing her to giggle.

‘Only if you want me to, darling.’ Her voice had dropped an octave and took a direct path through his ear to his penis, making him suddenly and painfully hard. Bethany noticed his reaction, and hooked a finger into the loop of his jeans to pull him closer. Ruben groaned as she grabbed his ass roughly, pulling his groin hard against hers.

‘Now...just *how* bad have you been?’

## Chapter 15

Bethany was excited. This was the first time since they had begun dating that she was going to one of his social events. It had taken her all week to find the perfect dress. Newfound sexual confidence made her consider clothes she would only have dreamed of a few months ago.

She remembered why she never wore sexy clothes as she got out of the limo. Finding it hard to keep her breasts from tumbling out of the revealing slashed neckline, she was careful not to flash her panties to the waiting press as she stepped onto the kerb. Ruben's eyes roamed over her as he took her arm, flicking frantically from her neckline to her thigh and back again. He looked like a kid in a candy store who was spoiled for choice and, wanting everything, could focus on nothing.

His reaction earlier had been almost laughable. He had frozen mid-stride and swallowed dryly, and then a familiar gleam had appeared in his eyes. She had only just managed to talk him out of having her on the hallway floor at home. Still, he had done enough to make her very hot and wet until the driver disturbed them by ringing the bell.

Ruben looked stunning in his tux and she felt lucky to be with him as he put a protective arm around her shoulder and they rushed through the crowds into the hotel. After being shown to the table hosting many of his friends and industry colleagues, the wine and conversation soon started to flow. He seemed to be enjoying himself and introduced her proudly to everyone who stopped by their table. She was aware that the men seemed more interested in her chest than talking to her, but Ruben noticed too and reacted every time by giving her a little kiss or a gentle touch, just to remind them who she was with.

Business got in the way as usual and she only had him to herself for about an hour before he got dragged off to meet someone. Bethany wasn't happy, but what choice did she have? Just once she wished he would keep

their time together sacred. *Why was she always expected to be so flexible regarding her demands on him?*

Turning her attention to Jeff, one of Ruben's longtime friends and the only other person left sitting at the table, she resigned herself to making small talk with a complete stranger. She hoped he was at least fun.

Bethany had no need to worry—the guy was an absolute joker and had her giggling within minutes. His flirtatious nature seemed to be part of his charm so she thought nothing of it when he dragged her laughing onto the dance floor.

It took her about ten seconds to realize how wrong she was. The snake got her into the middle of the floor and got real sleazy, real fast. Ignoring the up-tempo beat, he attempted to slow dance or rather, dirty dance. At close range, she could smell the booze on his breath and realized he was pretty drunk. Bethany began to pull away but he resisted, causing her to lose balance. She fell against him briefly, struggling to right herself as he took his chance and locked slimy lips over hers.

Wriggling out of his grasp, she managed to put some space between them. Voice shaking with anger, she rounded on him. 'Keep your filthy hands off me!'

Turning to exit the dance floor, she smacked straight into Ruben who seemed to be coming to get her, thank God. Her relief didn't last long as she felt the anger emanating from him and realized it was directed her way. Bethany began to explain what his 'friend' had just done, but he cut her off.

'I can see with my own eyes what was going on,' he snapped.

Brushing passed her; he grabbed the guy by the collar of his shirt. Unable to hear what Ruben was saying over the music, Bethany watched as Jeff went pale, shaking his head vehemently, apparently denying everything, until Ruben let him go. For one brief moment, he looked like he wanted to do the same to her until the arrival of security forced him to drop the disgusted glare he was leveling at her and deal with them.

She headed quickly back to the table, grateful for a moment to compose herself. Almost immediately he appeared beside her, leaning down to growl into her ear that they were leaving.

Bethany stared at him incredulously. *Did he really think she would take orders from him?* She raised an eyebrow and very deliberately picked up her glass of wine.

‘It’s your choice,’ he said, his voice deceptively smooth, ‘you can walk out, or I will carry you out.’

‘You wouldn’t dare!’

‘Try me...’

Deciding that this was not the place to assert herself, she gave in. They moved quickly through the crowd, his hand squeezing hers a little too tightly. The brewing storm abated a little due to the people outside so he had no choice but to wait for the limo in furious silence. It still arrived way too soon for Bethany’s liking as she was dragged in behind him, all of his earlier chivalry gone. Snatching her hand away as soon as she was inside, she composed herself.

Bethany took a deep breath and waited for the explosion, but it didn’t come. Shooting a quick look at him, she saw his thunderous expression coupled with a nerve ticking in his jaw, as he repeatedly ran a hand through his hair—a sure sign he wasn’t happy. Her temper began to rise. *What the hell was he mad at her for?* She bit her tongue, guessing the driver was the reason he was silent.

They arrived home quickly. Ruben jumped from the car without waiting for her and stormed into the entrance of his apartment building, leaving the door open behind him. She toyed with the idea of staying in the limo and finding a hotel for the night. *How dare he treat her like this?* A desire to make him apologize for his behavior won out and she followed him.

He was at the bar pouring a large brandy as she found him. He never drank that way. ‘What the hell is going on?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ he replied coldly. ‘Seeing my woman draped all over one of my friends always makes me drink.’ His eyes flicked over her in anger. She screamed at him in frustration.

‘You leave me alone all the time. Is it any wonder other men think I’m available? Does it hurt you to think that you may not be the only person interested in me?’

‘The way you are dressed tonight, any man would want you,’ he replied, ‘but I had hoped that the only man you wanted was me.’

Bethany couldn’t believe what she was hearing. ‘And I had hoped that you would be defending me from men like that, not accusing me of wanting them.’



He looked embarrassed for the briefest moment and seemed ashamed to realize that he hadn't considered her feelings at all. She took a step towards him before he raised a hand to stop her and turned his back. Was he still sulking?

'Do you even want me Beth?' he asked quietly.

'What kind of crazy question is that?'

Anger flared in him again. 'Crazy? You mean like staying with someone who keeps one foot in their past life and seems to look for reasons to keep me away? First it was work, and then it was old hurts you couldn't get over. Now, it's this guy.'

What was he talking about? Bethany knew this wasn't about some guy at a party anymore. He didn't trust her, didn't think she was truly committed to their relationship. Sighing in exasperation, she didn't know where to begin answering the accusations he had just thrown at her so she asked him if he had actually seen what had happened.

'I saw you kissing him...'

'You saw me fighting him off.'

He laughed mockingly, 'Honey, you didn't look as if you were fighting too hard.' Her fingers itched with the urge to slap the cocky smirk off his face. Her temper snapped and she gave up trying to placate him.

'When did you become so insecure?' She asked. 'Does a guy showing interest in me threaten you that much?' The smile disappeared instantly. Her change of tactics had caught him off guard. She blundered on recklessly. 'Maybe I should go back to the party and give you something to be jealous of,' she said, turning to leave the room with no intention of going any further than the bedroom to take off the damn dress that had been nothing but trouble.

She almost got to the door before he reached her, spinning her to face him, placing a hand on the wall on either side of her head. His body leaned into hers and she was shocked to find him rock hard. He lowered his face to hers, not touching but close enough to smell the alcohol he'd just had, as his warm breath fanned her skin. 'Did he make you as wet as I do?' he muttered.

Bethany pushed him away, furious but appalled to find that she was turned on. He grabbed her to him again, leaning them both into the wall as

he slid his thigh between her legs. 'Why are you fighting me? Do you wish it was him touching you?'

She couldn't allow herself to give in to him, not when he was acting this way. 'I don't have to explain myself to you,' she shouted.

Her words angered him. For one brief moment she thought he would back off, but instead he grabbed her hair and locked his lips over hers. The thigh between her legs pushed harder into her groin, as his hand ripped the dress from her breast, grabbing it roughly. He pulled his head back after a moment, watching as she strained to continue the kiss. She could see in his eyes he knew he had her then.

Replacing his thigh with a hand, he plunged two fingers into her without warning. Her knees buckled as her body pulsed in reaction and it was only his weight against her and the hand in her hair that stopped her falling. 'He can't have you,' he whispered into her ear. 'This is mine.'

A noise that was half scream-half groan came from her. He gave way when she pushed at him again. Her body was betraying her, but pride wouldn't let her be dominated so easily.

'No.... its mine,' she told him, straightening her clothes, 'and I can give it to whoever I want.'

His eyes flared with anger. 'Oh really?' he replied, surprising her with the calmness in his voice.

Ruben walked toward her slowly, unbuttoning his shirt, and taking it off as he reached her. Refusing to be intimidated by him, she held her ground. Unable to read his look, she gasped as he reached forward and ripped her dress apart. It flapped limply at her sides, exposing the panties and stockings she wore under it, as he pushed her back against the sofa, her ass just meeting the top edge.

The thong received the same treatment as the dress, falling in tatters to the floor. He dropped to his knees parting her to his gaze. Running a finger over her, he groaned as he felt her moisture. Arrogance blazed in his eyes. They both knew he was responsible for how hot and wet she was and he wasn't finished yet. Watching her intently, he leaned forward without touching her again and flicked the tip of his tongue over her clit. Bethany felt her legs quiver as her head dropped back on a groan, gasping in shock as a finger entered her roughly. Leaning forward to suck her fully into his

mouth, his finger probed deeper as his eyes burned into her, taking in every whimper and moan he created.

Falling slightly sideways, unable to support her own weight or take her eyes off him, she threw a leg over his shoulder and scraped the stiletto heel of her shoe down his back. Ruben growled in pain and punished her by plunging another finger into her pussy. Not believing how wildly she wanted him, Bethany ground against his mouth, trying to finish it, trying to relieve the burning inside her. She could hear her own whimpers and his name on her lips, but it sounded alien to her. Her ears buzzed as the blood pounded around her body.

Suddenly, he pulled back.

His hand moved slowly inside her, keeping her prisoner, not quite enough to make her come.

‘Please,’ she begged him, ‘Please...’

‘Is this mine?’ he asked quietly, pushing into her repeatedly. Bethany nodded feverishly and begged him again. ‘Tell me,’ he shouted.

‘It’s yours,’ she whispered hoarsely barely able to get the words out.

‘Who made you this wet?’

‘You...you did...’ She bore down on his hand, not caring anymore if he saw how easily he controlled her.

‘What do you want me to do?’ He was still angry, but she could almost smell the heat coming from him. He was barely controlling himself.

‘Fuck me...I want you to fuck me,’ she cried, voice breaking a little as frustration raged through her.

‘Maybe we should wait until we both calm down a little,’ he said, surprising her as he slid his fingers from her body. His expression gave him away. He wanted her to beg for more.

Bethany gasped... before laughing out loud. His confused frown told her that wasn’t the reaction he was expecting, but she knew him too well to believe he was anymore able to stop at that point than she was. The huge erection bulging through his dress pants made it obvious that he desperately wanted her. His erratic, jealous behavior alarmed her slightly, but she was surprised to realize that she was getting a perverse pleasure in seeing him this out of control.

Their sex life was fantastic, but she always felt naïve and unsure compared to him. He played her body so easily that it was almost as if she

had no control over the outcome. Just this once, it was liberating to see the wildness and uncertainty in his eyes.

She leaned back on the sofa, letting her hand trail down between her legs. His face was still level with her groin and his eyes were on her as she stroked herself slowly, taking advantage of the wetness his mouth had left. 'I don't think I can wait Ruben,' she pondered aloud, trying to provoke him. 'Maybe I should just do it myself?'

He growled, but he didn't move, his eyes locked onto the movements of her hand.

'Don't you like my body?' she teased, the breath catching in her throat as she saw him open his fly and grip his cock firmly. He began to pull on it hard, teeth biting down into his lip. The anger still simmering in her chest was making her go farther than she had ever dared before but she didn't want to stop. On the verge of orgasm and so hot she could barely breathe, she loved watching his reactions to her words. 'Don't you want to fuck me?' she asked on a groan intended to entice him.

A curse brought him to his feet and he picked her up, falling with her onto the sofa. Bethany's nails scraped down his back as she pulled him harder onto her, causing him to hiss in pain before he grabbed her arms, pinning them over her head. Rising onto his knees, he slid an arm under her ass and brought her body up against his, her legs straddled open across his thighs. His free hand guided his erection to her opening but he hesitated, looking into her face, waiting for some sign that it was ok to take what he wanted.

Bethany couldn't believe him. *So now he wanted to be a gentleman?* He looked exactly how she wanted him, like a wild animal with his muscles bunched and flexed from holding her down as the sweat poured from his body. His hair had fallen across his face and she could barely see his eyes through the curtain of dark waves as he panted heavily, waiting for her response. 'Don't you dare stop now,' she warned.

She moaned in satisfaction as he slammed into her hard, taking the breath from her body with the first, brutal thrust. His head slumped forward as he groaned deep in his throat, shudders racking him. She arched toward him, increasing the contact and using her body to bring her orgasm closer. Turning her head, she bit hard on his bicep, causing him to flinch and pull back his arm, freeing her hands. They went instantly to his hair, dragging

him down to kiss her. He bit her lip firmly, inflicting just enough pain to make her wince. Sitting back on his heels again, he dragged her body with him, still impaled on his cock. Wetting his thumb, he reached down to circle her nub, fingers splaying out over her abdomen. His possession of her was total and he knew it.

His own orgasm began, making his words feverish. 'Is this mine?' he asked again, his eyes no longer angry, just desperate to hear what he needed.

'It's yours,' she uttered on a whisper, as her orgasm came. The warmth spread up through her from his fingers, radiating in waves deep into her stomach. Bethany could feel her walls clenching around him, trying to pull him in further. She began to cry, sheer sensation overwhelming her, leaving only one way to release it. Barely recognizing the sound, she heard him utter her name over and over, his voice finally subsiding into one long, low groan as he shuddered into her.

Bethany had no idea how long they lay frozen in position, too tired to move. His head stayed in the crook of her shoulder, his breathing hard against her skin. She felt his body sag briefly before he let out a ragged sigh.

'Ruben?' She said his name waiting for him to lift his head. The eyes that looked down at her finally were saddened and full of remorse. She could see he felt guilty and ashamed. Once more, she felt bad for provoking him earlier. In some ways, she was much stronger than him.

Unwinding his limbs from hers, he sat abruptly, propping his head in his hands. 'I'm such an idiot,' he mumbled into his palms.

'Hey, it took two of us to have this fight you know.'

'I am so sorry, I just get mad with jealousy,' he explained. 'When I saw you kissing that guy, I lost my mind a little.'

Bethany told him again what had happened, finally managing to make him understand what he had seen. He got angrier as he listened, disgusted at the behavior of a so-called friend. By the time she finished the telling, she had to stop him from going back to punch him out.

'That doesn't excuse my behavior,' he continued. 'I should never have been that rough with you.'

'Do you hear me complaining?' She smiled, desperate to take the look of pure desolation from his face. The thin smile she got in return didn't reach his eyes. 'I'm sorry too—I could see you were losing it and I provoked you.'

He didn't look convinced, so she decided to change tack. 'Besides, it will be a cold day in hell before I can't handle you with one hand tied behind my back.'

He laughed finally before gasping as she slipped her hand down to gently caress him. He surprised them both by springing to life instantly.

'Is this mine?' She asked, laughing at him, making him blush.

'Hell, yeah.'

## Chapter 16

Ruben threw the microphone to the floor, before swinging around to glare up at the sound engineer. ‘What the hell is going on? How hard is it to stop a little feedback?’

*God, he had to get a grip on his temper.* The guy had visibly paled, unsure why he was in the firing line. *It wasn’t his fault—hell, it wasn’t anybody’s fault,* Ruben thought. Nobody else was responsible for the fact that he was no better at controlling his temper than his father. It hurt to have to admit that to himself.

It had been about a week since their terrible fight. He hadn’t been able to forgive himself, despite Beth’s assertions that she was fine and felt equally responsible. Ok, so she’d admitted provoking him, but she wasn’t capable of making him do something that wasn’t in his nature. The fact that it had ended in sex only made things worse in his opinion. That was something else he had in common with his father—his parents had always gone to bed after their battles, without a thought or a care for the terrified child hiding under his bedcovers in the next room.

Ruben wasn’t in the mood for work. Gesturing to Byron that he was going backstage, he moved quickly, desperate for some fresh air. Finding the stage door, he forgot himself and threw it open, striding out into the alley. The screams that rent the air stopped him dead. *Idiot.* He’d forgotten there would be fans outside—there were always fans outside. *Shit, why couldn’t they leave him alone?* Slamming the door quickly, he stalked to his dressing room.

Wishing Beth was around, he sank onto a sofa and tried to relax. She’d stayed in London an extra day before joining him in Madrid. The charity project was going well and demanded a lot of her time. He didn’t like her being away from him at all, but if there was a good reason for them to be apart, this was it.

Ruben wanted so much to believe her when she said everything was still ok between them. She said she had forgiven him, but how could he be sure? Maybe she was right; maybe he was the only one who had a problem with what had happened.

Bethany had teased him over it at first, saying how wild he had been until finally, he snapped, asking her if she was proud of making him lose control. She'd been hurt and shocked, saying she had no idea he'd taken it all so seriously. After a few hours spent trying to convince him that it hadn't changed her opinion of him, she'd given up. Neither of them had mentioned it since.

Byron came into the room, surprising Ruben by tapping on the door as he entered. *Since when had Byron ever knocked?*

'What's up?' Ruben asked, his eyes flicking from the concerned look on his friend's face to the piece of paper he held in his hand. 'Bad news?'

Byron looked nervous, taking a seat before handing him the email. 'You'd better just read it.' Frowning, Ruben snatched it from his hand, scanning it quickly. 'Don't worry about it, we will get it sorted out,' Byron said nervously. 'The lawyers will handle it.'

Reading it for a third time, Ruben still couldn't believe what he was seeing. He had a child? Scanning Byron's face for some guidance on what to think or say, he was stunned, his brain simply not functioning. 'I'm a father?'

Byron jumped from his seat to stand at Ruben's side and place a comforting hand on his shoulder. 'Hold on, that's what this woman claims, but that doesn't make it true,' he said softly. 'Don't worry about it for now. We'll know more once the tests are in.'

'Tests?'

'Paternity tests, Ruben.'

'Do I even know this woman? When was this supposed to have happened?' Ruben couldn't remember the last time he'd had sex with anyone except Bethany. Oh God...Bethany. *What was she gonna think?*

'She is a dancer from Miami—claims she met you in Brazil last August. Remember we were there for the World Music Festival in Bahia?'

His stomach churned as he remembered the girl he'd been with that night. She had been hot enough to break through his boredom and spark his interest. Watching her samba for an hour or so, he had been ready and



waiting for her when she turned her attention his way. Their night together hadn't been particularly memorable. He grimaced. 'I remember.'

He bristled at the judgmental look Byron leveled at him. 'Hey, don't look at me like that. I was careful. I always wore protection...you know that.' Ruben ran a hand through his hair. 'Hell, I still wear it with Bethany.'

'What are you going to tell her?'

'Beth?' He shook his head. 'Nothing.'

'You can't possibly keep this from her!' Byron exclaimed.

Ruben's face set in defiance. Avoiding his friend's censure, he dropped his head into his hands, groaning at the absurdity of it all.

'Look, I know this kid isn't mine. I wore a condom,' he reasoned aloud, as if trying to convince himself. 'And as soon as the tests are in, this will all be forgotten.' Searching Byron's face for reassurance but finding none, he continued. 'Things are really difficult between Beth and me at the moment. I am not gonna risk losing her over this.'

'Ruben, that's crazy. You can't possibly keep this from her. You will have to attend for testing and, if you are the father, how do you tell her then?'

Ruben waved a hand, as if swatting away the argument. 'That won't happen.'

Byron shouted then, frustration causing his voice to rise. 'Ruben. Condoms break.'

He stared back at him wordlessly, unable to argue with the logic. Balling the paper in his hand, he threw it at the wall, before slamming the door behind him as he went into the bathroom.

Leaning his head against the cool tiles, he tried to damp down the panic rising in his stomach. He waited for Byron to leave before walking aimlessly back out into the dressing room, stopping in the middle of the room to ask himself what the hell he was going to do.

\* \* \* \*

*The small nightclub, just off the Plaza Major in Madrid, wasn't really The Fan's type of place. The clientele were a wealthy mix of businessmen and tourists—all of whom seemed to be looking for women to spend some time with.*

She had only agreed to go along in order to placate Martha, who was beginning to get suspicious about her unwillingness to get too close to Ruben. Women like her just couldn't understand those who did not run at him—screaming hysterically—whenever he appeared.

The incident earlier had been a perfect example. Ruben had appeared, unexpectedly, at the venue's stage door. She had been there and bored beyond belief, but using the opportunity to at least make friends with some of the local fans.

They'd been taking her and Martha down an alley to show them where the back exit of that evening's concert was when it had opened suddenly. Ruben had stepped right out into the alleyway before noticing the girls, stopping dead in his tracks when he was greeted by a cacophony of ear piercing screams. He'd turned on his heel and walked straight back through the door, irritation marring his handsome face.

His sudden appearance, combined with the reaction of the fans—fans that seemed insane compared to the ones she was used to—had jangled her nerves. Pretty sure he hadn't seen her amongst the crowd, she had no time to think on it when Martha turned to her, face flushed with excitement. Asked if she had seen him, she nodded and smiled, trying to mirror her enthusiasm.

Martha had turned away after giving her the weirdest look—something obviously on her mind, but choosing to keep quiet. Later, she'd pursued it, asking her why she never seemed pleased to see Ruben. Eventually, the answer that she was just naturally shy and didn't like to be too forward, satisfied the woman, or at least, satisfied her for the moment. The questioning had unsettled her, making it clear she wasn't blending in as well as she should. So, she'd readily agreed to the night out when Martha had suggested it, resolving privately to act more like 'them' in future, to avoid further suspicion. Apparently, it was a nightclub the Spanish girls said the band members always used, even Ruben had been seen there once or twice over the years.

The club's interior was shabbier than she had expected although it had a wonderful ambience and an impressive dance floor. After spending a couple of boring hours fending off lecherous advances and dancing listlessly with the increasingly intoxicated group of women, she began to question the accuracy of the information she and Martha were receiving from the local fans.

Separating herself from the group, she'd been about to leave them to it, when she spotted a few band members congregating around a table in one of the darker corners of the club. The other women had noticed too and reacted in the usual way, huddling together to talk in excited whispers.

She kept her place at the bar, watching them with an amused smile on her face. The musicians seemed fully aware of what was happening, but they didn't appear to react. One or two of them scanned the group—looking to see if anyone was worth their effort, she guessed. About to turn away from the display of arrogance she always found sickening, she noticed one of them was staring straight at her.

He wasn't one of the regular band members. She didn't know his name or much about him except that he was Cuban by birth. Dropping his gaze, she turned back to the bar, smiling secretly to herself. *Why not?* The guy was cute—handsome in the dark, strong-featured way typical of his countrymen. *He was no Ruben though.*

*One night with a hot guy could be a welcome distraction from her problems,* she mused. She would never give up on her quest to re-unite with Ruben, but at the moment he seemed farther away than ever—*thanks to that whore Bethany*—who seemed to go everywhere with him.

Maybe, once they were all back on home territory, she could put some more effort into making her life very uncomfortable if she hung around. Her foray into Bethany and Ruben's empty hotel room earlier that afternoon had been a taste of just how much she could get away with if she were audacious enough. She'd been disturbed before she could do much damage except scrawl the word 'bitch' in lipstick across the bedroom mirror. She'd heard a key in the lock and toyed with the idea of waiting to see if this was her opportunity to get Bethany alone. The risk that it could be Ruben and blow all her future plans forced her to hide in the bathroom as the person entered, slipping out unseen through the door before it had swung shut. She'd felt elated for a while until she realized it only increased her desire to make Bethany truly sorry for interfering in her life.

Martha reappeared at her side, flushed from dancing and full of excitement about the guys who had left their table to join the group of girls on the floor. Tugging on her arm, she tried to drag her towards the group of men, begging her to join in. Shaking her head fiercely, she was about to tell

Martha exactly what she thought of her behavior, when she was saved by the intervention of the young guitar player.

Introducing himself as Jose, he offered her a drink. Pulling up a chair to sit beside her, he tried to make small talk, asking her where she was from and why she was visiting Madrid.

She allowed him to flirt outrageously with her, initially enjoying the attention of a young, handsome guy, before his childish enthusiasm began to annoy her. Downing her drink, she got up and began to excuse herself, saying she needed an early night. Latching onto the one thing he thought would interest her—in a desperate attempt to stop her leaving—he asked how long she had been a fan.

The guy was keen to impress and she realized that blowing him off too easily would be a wasted opportunity to get some valuable inside information on Ruben and Bethany. Retaking her seat, she smiled at him encouragingly, slipping on the veil of seduction that she knew from experience made men open up to her.

An hour later, her mood had worsened considerably. Jose had talked openly and explicitly about Ruben's relationship, all the while plying her with more alcohol and moving ever closer. *Sometimes, ignorance was bliss*, she thought to herself as he had rambled on and on about how in love they were, and how nobody had ever seen the boss so happy. Laughing, he told her that Ruben and Bethany's sex life was an open joke amongst the band—the frequency of their lovemaking becoming obvious to all during the long hours they often spent locked together in Ruben's tour bus. The guys had even coined a catchphrase about it apparently—'If the bus is a-rocking, don't come a-knocking'. Jose slapped his leg in juvenile hilarity, barely able to speak for laughing.

Staring at the giggling imbecile in absolute fury, she waited until he raised confused eyes to hers before slapping the dirty smirk from his face and throwing her drink at him.

\* \* \* \*

Bethany's bullshit detector was on full alert, but she couldn't put a finger on what was bothering her. Ruben's explanation that he had to fly back to the States for a couple of days didn't ring true. Pacing around the

frankly ugly, minimalist designer hotel room in Madrid, she was annoyed she'd put off an important meeting in London to get back to him earlier.

'It's just work...nothing important. I will meet you in Budapest,' he assured her, averting his eyes.

She persisted. 'Well, I would love to come home too. I could visit my sister and her family. I haven't seen them in ages.'

'Beth, you can't come. Just drop it will you?' Ruben's sudden explosion of temper made her jump. She sat in stunned silence for brief seconds before dropping her gaze to hide the threatening tears. Ruben was instantly apologetic. 'Baby, I am sorry. I didn't mean to shout.'

She shunned him initially as he tried to take her into his arms, but gave in, unable to resist his warmth or the gentle pull of his voice. 'I have been under a lot of stress lately and I shouldn't take it out on you.' Lifting his thumb to brush the tears from her cheek, he kissed her. 'I will be back before you know it,' he smiled. 'Will you miss me?'

'No,' she replied petulantly.

'Well, I will miss you.' He smiled, slipping easily into the role he knew she liked him to play from time to time. 'And I will miss this...' he said, gliding up under her sweater to clasp a breast. 'And this...' he said, as he popped the button on her jeans, grazing her abdomen with the back of his hand.

Beth pulled away. *Maybe she didn't know what was going on, but he wasn't going to distract her so easily.* Ignoring his look of surprise, she straightened her clothing. 'You can't miss me that much or you would take me with you.'

'Since when did you become so needy?' The coldness in his tone surprised her. 'Did I act like this when you had to stay over in London?'

'That was different and you know it.'

'No, it wasn't. You had to work and I didn't question you on it. I trusted you...' He left the accusation hanging.

Bethany walked away, unable to argue with him. *Maybe she was being unreasonable.* He had done nothing, but show her love and respect since day one. Hell, he'd even confessed to snooping into Simon's life in an attempt to be totally honest with her.

Sure, it was his stubborn streak stopping him from explaining his trip, but she didn't want to push it, not at that moment. He'd only just gotten over

the fight they'd had at the party, convinced that she didn't want to be with him anymore. The last thing they needed was another issue to divide them.

'You're right, Ruben. Darling, I am sorry.' She slid onto his lap, running her fingers through his hair the way he liked her to. 'I do trust you...implicitly.'

He stilled her hand, bringing it down to his lips. Opening his mouth as if to speak, he stared at her for the longest time before closing his eyes on a groan. 'Thank you,' he said finally, an unreadable expression on his face. 'That means a lot to me.'

She swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. *What the hell was wrong with her these days?* All she seemed to do was cry.

A hand on her hip brought her attention back to him and she looked down to find his finger sliding slowly over the fly of her jeans, following the seam down to where it disappeared between her legs. Grateful for the opportunity to stop thinking and simply feel for a few brief moments, she gave in to him, pushing the doubts to the back of her mind.

Later, as they lay in a tangle of clothing and limbs, Bethany couldn't shake a sense of déjà vu. She'd been here before—in love but deeply unsettled. Then, as now, she was never sure whether she was being perceptive or paranoid. Lying quietly as Ruben left her to get a glass of water, she took a moment to break things down logically—an old trick she'd retained from her days in therapy.

Regardless of the fact that Ruben was a far better man than Simon, the basic truth was, he had no time to cheat on her. She was with him almost constantly. Work kept them apart for brief periods, but they were few and far between and never planned in advance. His life was exhausting. Even during the days with no public appearances planned, he would often spend hours on the telephone conducting one interview after another. When all that was done, he always turned to her.

She knew he loved her. Ruben had spoken of his childhood and Bethany understood how hard it had been for him to let anyone get close. Every emotion he had showed in his eyes and he could hide nothing from her—not that he seemed to try. Bethany loved him in a way she didn't think she was capable of again and she wasn't going to jeopardize what they had by listening to voices from her past. There were only a few hours left before he had to leave and she wasn't going to waste them.

Giggling as she wriggled out of the rest of her clothing, she stretched out on the leather sofa, luxuriating in the feel of it against her skin as she waited for him to return.

\* \* \* \*

A week later, Ruben walked into the bedroom of their Budapest hotel suite, keen to spend some time with her after an exhausting morning arguing with tour promoters. He found Bethany sitting at the window with a newspaper clutched in her hands. Standing as she heard him approach, she flung it into his face. Retrieving the paper from the floor where it landed, he looked at her in confusion.

‘Center pages,’ she spat out, as if it hurt to speak.

A pulse began to beat in his throat. The glaring headline caught his eye moments before he recognized the Brazilian dancer posing provocatively across the pages. The color drained from Ruben’s face. ‘Baby, I can explain.’

Bethany ignored him as she stared wordlessly at the newspaper he now held. Ruben couldn’t believe he’d gone through all those nights of guilt about keeping such a huge secret from her just to be found out when it was all over. Of course, the child wasn’t his. Not that he’d thought it was for one second.

It looked like the mother had taken out a little insurance by selling her story. His lawyers had tried to get her to sign a confidentiality agreement, but she’d refused. Any hope that her own shame at trying to pin another man’s baby on him would be sufficient to ensure nobody ever found out was stupid. He guessed the world didn’t work like that anymore.

She could tell a good story, he’d give her that. By the time he finished reading, he almost believed the dancer’s tale of the worldly pop star that had seduced and dumped a naïve twenty year old who, until recently, believed he was the father of her child. Ruben pitied her baby and hoped that eliminating him as a potential father would at least narrow down the search for the real one.

‘You know,’ Bethany said quietly, almost as if talking to herself, ‘it’s not even that you may have gotten another woman pregnant.’ She shook her

head. 'It's the fact you didn't tell me. You didn't trust me enough...that's what hurts.'

'But I knew I couldn't be the father, Beth. Don't you see?' He tried to lift her face so she would at least look at him, but she shrugged him off. 'What was the point of worrying you over something I knew couldn't be true?'

'Oh, give me a break, Ruben. You were never going to tell me. You took the tests over a week ago, what has stopped you telling me since then?'

He scrambled for an answer. 'I got scared, Beth. I thought once this had all blown over, it would be easier to tell you...but then the enormity of what I had done began to hit me, and I couldn't think of a way to make it right.'

Bethany's cynical smile chilled him. 'I am still not a part of your life, am I?' Her sudden change of tack caught him off guard. He opened his mouth to contradict her, but she cut him off. 'It's still your decision what happens between us. You decided that I didn't need to know the man I am in love with might have fathered a child, so you simply didn't tell me.'

'I knew it wasn't mine,' he insisted.

'How did you know?'

'Because I always use a condom—you know that, Beth.'

Bethany slammed down the glass she was holding in her hand. 'Like the night of the party you mean?'

'That was different, we were both out of control that night,' he said, realizing for the first time she was right. He'd never even thought about it. His only concern had been repairing the damage he'd done to their relationship. 'Are you ok? I mean, is there a chance you could be pregnant?' he asked. Cold eyes stared back at him.

'Why on earth would I tell you, Ruben? I mean, it's not like we are close enough to confide in each other about stuff like that...is it?' He guessed he deserved the comment, but it still stung. He asked her why she couldn't understand he'd done it to protect her.

Bethany's temper snapped. 'How dare you pretend you did this for me? You and I both know you kept quiet to save your own ass. I was the last thing on your mind.'

'Beth, I was terrified.' He turned her to look at him. 'You know how bad I felt over that fight we had. I was scared I had lost you.' His voice cracked then as he saw he wasn't getting through to her.



‘That’s just the problem. I told you over and over that I was fine and that nothing had changed, but you thought you knew better. You don’t respect my opinion or allow me to decide how I feel about things that affect us both.’ She pushed him away, taking a step back as she crossed her arms.

‘I know I was wrong, but I didn’t want this to come between us.’ Ruben sank onto the bed, sudden tiredness draining his energy. She sat down beside him leaving a gap between them. He ached to close it, but knew he would be rejected.

‘You keep things from me all the time,’ she said, raising a hand to stop his protest of innocence. ‘Why didn’t you tell me that somebody had been in your apartment in New York before we moved in?’

Ruben flushed. ‘Our apartment,’ he corrected, playing for time as he tried to figure out how she knew. ‘There was no need. It was a one off. Probably one of the staff or security.’

‘So you decided there was just no need to tell me that I could be in danger or to watch out for some obsessed fan?’

‘Byron,’ he said angrily, as he realized he must have been the one who told her. Trust him to create a drama out of nothing. He’d been pretty lucky as far as psycho fans went until someone had broken into his condo and had sex in his bed. Ruben shuddered at the memory, remembering his disgust when he had found the used condom lying on his sheets. There had been no signs of forced entry and the police hadn’t managed to find anything suspicious on the tape from the surveillance camera in the lobby of his building. Personally, he thought it could be someone from the security firm employed by the building’s management company, but had no proof. Still, he’d insisted they be replaced.

Bethany got her feet. ‘Don’t blame him; he let it slip when I found him cleaning our bedroom mirror in Madrid. He refused to tell me what had been scrawled across it but I know it was something personal. That’s when he mentioned about the incident in New York.’ She laughed bitterly. ‘He seemed to think I knew.’

He didn’t know what to say. Crazy fans were part of his everyday life. Being cautious was usually enough to keep them at a safe distance. She had never been in any danger, so why worry her?

Long minutes passed before she spoke again. ‘This was the worst thing you could have done, don’t you see that?’ Her expression was earnest as she

turned to face him. 'You know it took me a long time to get over my last relationship, Ruben.'

He leapt to his feet. 'Here we go again,' he shouted. 'I wondered how long it would be before you brought that jerk into the conversation.' Despite the precarious position he was in, Ruben couldn't keep quiet if she was about to compare him to her ex again.

The calmness of her tone surprised him. 'The point I am making is that Simon also tried to control how I felt about our relationship by keeping things from me. The result of which was that I spent three years without ever really knowing the person I thought I was in love with.'

'That's crazy, Beth. In no way is this situation anything like that. I am not cheating on you or abusing you.' She shook her head, rejecting his words. 'Okay, I made a huge mistake by not telling you about the paternity test, but if you really think about it, you will see it doesn't have to affect us—'

'Of course it will affect us, Ruben. How can I ever get to really know or trust you if I don't have all the facts? For all I know, the man I am in love with doesn't even exist.' Bethany's voice broke on a sob.

Ruben reached out, desperate to hold her, to make things right. 'Baby, calm down.'

'Stop telling me how to feel,' she shouted, scrambling to her feet and heading for the door.

'Don't leave now,' he pleaded. 'We need to talk about this.'

The face she turned to him was streaked with tears. 'I can't talk now, Ruben...I need time to think.' She stepped back before he could embrace her, pulling on a coat. 'I'll be back soon, okay?' She slipped out of the door quickly, allowing him no time to protest.

Later, he wished he made her stay with him. He hadn't known then she would not be coming back.

The afternoon had passed slowly and he'd waited as long as he could before leaving for the arena. Nobody he'd spoken to had seen or heard from her all evening and after trying her cell phone numerous times, he'd begun to worry. Resolving that he would call the police if she wasn't at the hotel when he returned, he'd cut his performance as short as he dared before racing back.

As if guided to it, his eyes had landed on the folded sheet of paper on his pillow as soon as he entered the bedroom. Not needing to read it to know what it said, he opened it with shaky hands.

She was gone.

## Chapter 17

Bethany got out of the cab slowly, her legs shaking. She'd been dreading this meeting. The idea of visiting the prestigious hotel on Sunset Boulevard would have excited her in the old days, but she felt too jaded at that moment to appreciate anything. The lobby, with its diaphanous curtains and glowing glass walls, did take her breath away momentarily.

The receptionist gave her directions to the Banquet and Conference room and she walked briskly to the elevator, feeling out of place in such opulent surroundings. She'd stayed in finer hotels than this one during her time with Ruben, so she didn't know why she felt so self-conscious. She knew the ecru linen shirtdress she wore looked smart enough. Letting out a breath as the doors closed in front of her, she put her sense of unease down to stress. She knew the next few hours were going to be hard on her.

Karen, the charity's director, greeted her warmly. 'Bethany. It's great to see you. How have you been?' Showing her to a seat in the anteroom, Karen poured coffee, explaining they had a few minutes until the meeting started.

Bethany took a fortifying sip from her cup before answering. 'I've been fine...busy.'

'Can I change your mind about resigning?' Karen's directness startled her. Bethany had rehearsed a speech, explaining why she felt she could no longer continue in her role, but the words escaped her at that moment. The older woman let it go.

'I'm just teasing,' she smiled. 'I know you must have your reasons.' Karen's gray hair and motherly appearance hid a razor sharp mind and her perceptive eyes seemed to be seeing right through Bethany's façade. *How much did she know?*

Bethany had hardly spoken to any of the staff for the six weeks that had passed since she left Ruben in Budapest. She'd returned to Vegas to spend time with her sister, as far as they were concerned. For a while she'd

considered staying with the charity. Avoiding Ruben wouldn't have been a problem. In all honesty, he'd barely had time for her when they were together. Their paths had no reason to cross unless he decided to put in the occasional appearance, to raise the charity's profile and awareness, at the many meetings and conventions she would need to attend.

But she'd discovered something during the last few weeks that made any notion of staying unthinkable, hence her decision to leave. The meeting with the board she was about to attend had been called to tie up loose ends and give her the chance to meet the person who would be taking over her job.

'Shall we go in?' Karen said, gesturing that Bethany should bring her coffee and follow her. She was surprised to find people milling around the room as she entered. Nodding quickly to the faces she recognized, she took the offered seat and got her papers ready. The noise level in the room was quite astonishing and she knew she would miss the vitality of this group of people. They had a mission they were passionate and vocal about. Ruben had chosen his staff well.

People began to settle in their seats at the long teak table, leaving the one at the top ominously empty. Her heart dropped into her boots. *Everyone was here...who was it for?* She was left no time to panic as Karen introduced her to the young man opposite who was to be her successor. His name was Mark and he looked to be green out of med school and absolutely terrified. Sympathy overwhelmed her, forcing her own predicament out of her mind as she engaged him in conversation. He visibly sagged with relief as she laid out the documents containing her detailed work agenda in front of him. Gobbling up the information, he confessed he'd had no idea where to start and thanked her profusely. Bethany laughed at his earnest expression. She was sorry they would never work together. He seemed like a nice guy.

A sudden silence in the room caused her to look up. Turning to see what everyone else was looking at, the smile died on her face as she saw Ruben standing at the head of the table, staring at her with barely concealed irritation.

Bethany prayed she didn't look as scared as she felt. She wasn't ready to see him yet, if ever. Turning away quickly, her heart pounding, she busied herself with tidying the papers she had been discussing with Mark. Any

hopes she had of making it through the meeting without having to look at him again were dashed when he spoke.

‘Thank you all for coming. I know many of you would rather be elsewhere so we will keep this brief.’ Bethany’s head snapped around to look at him then, convinced the comment was aimed at her. Although others in the room seemed to take it as a joke and smiled politely, she knew him too well to miss the sarcasm in his words. He sat down then, deferring to Karen to conduct the meeting.

Bethany found trying to concentrate on what was being said impossible. She sat back in her seat as far as she could, but still his eyes found her. Claspng her hands in her lap to steady her nerves, she flicked a glance his way. Their eyes caught and held. Bethany’s stomach lurched again, and she couldn’t look away. She would never forget until the day she died the torment she saw in his eyes. It was Ruben who finally broke the contact. She saw a warmth creep into his gaze moments before he chased it away. His mouth set into a hard line as he dropped his head.

She wanted to cry, right there, in front of them all. Blinking away her tears, she wondered if he knew how much she still loved him and how hard it was to stay away. Many times she had doubted her decision and was ashamed of how she’d left things with him. If there had been any other way, she would have taken it, although she knew he would have talked her around. In all honesty, she still wasn’t sure she would be able to resist him now. He’d lost a little weight, but was still heart-stoppingly gorgeous. The black suit he wore had been one of her favorites. Glancing up to find him staring at her again, she quickly averted her eyes, not wanting to see the pain she had caused.

The war of words in her head began again, as it had almost constantly since they parted. *What the hell was wrong with her?* She had nothing to feel guilty for. If Ruben was suffering, it was his own doing. He surely didn’t expect her to stay with him after what he’d done? He was to blame for the misery they were both going through. He’d known from the beginning how important honesty was to her.

‘Bethany?’ Karen’s voice brought her sharply back into focus as she realized the woman was waiting for a reply. Scanning the table, she realized all eyes, including Ruben’s, were on her.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you.’

Karen laughed. 'Hey, I know this is pretty boring stuff.' A flush spread over Bethany's face as she realized that was the only way they could have interpreted her apparent lack of interest. 'I asked if you would like to say a few words.'

*Oh shit!* She hadn't prepared anything. Admitting that as she got to her feet, she struggled to find the right words. 'Okay. Well, let me first say that I have loved my time working with you all...and.... and I am sorry to be leaving—'

'Then why are you?' Ruben cut in abruptly, almost daring her to admit the truth.

Fuming at being put on the spot, Bethany stared right back at him. 'Let's just say my life took an unexpected turn and leave it at that.' Dismissing him, she turned back to the table. 'I wish you all the best of luck in achieving our aims. You're a wonderful group of people.' She stopped when her voice cracked, sinking back down into her seat.

Karen wrapped up the meeting after officially welcoming Mark, joking with him that his predecessor would be a hard act to follow. Bethany smiled at him then, hoping he wouldn't panic too much at Karen's teasing. The sound of a glass being slammed down onto the teak tabletop brought their eyes sharply around to stare at Ruben.

An awkward silence followed until Karen began ushering people out of the boardroom, passed the head of the table. Bethany took as much time as she dared gathering her notes, cursing under her breath as she saw Ruben had every intention of staying exactly where he was until she was forced to pass him.

He got to his feet as she approached, but turned his back to her, blocking her exit from the room as he began shaking hands with the other board members on their way out of the door. Sighing at his obvious tactic, Bethany put her briefcase down. It was clear he wanted to talk and she guessed she owed him that much.

Following the last person to the door to close it behind them, he clicked it quietly shut, pausing for a moment with his hand on the doorknob, as if thinking. He turned without looking at her and crossed to the huge windows offering a panoramic view of the city below.

Unable to stand the silence any longer, Bethany spoke. 'So, how have you been?'

‘How do you think I have been?’ His harsh response was no surprise. His eyes flicked over her, assessing her coldly. ‘You look like you’ve been taking our split much better than me. You look well.’ She had no idea how to respond to that. There was no way he could know what she’d been going through. Returning to his seat, he dragged his hands through his hair before leaning forward to stare up at her.

‘What happened, Beth?’ His eyes were earnest and the pain she saw tore at her heart. ‘What did I do that was so bad you had to run away from me?’ She couldn’t stop the tears spilling over then. Having survived the last few weeks on anger, damning him for ruining what they had, she wasn’t prepared for the raw emotion hanging between them.

‘I don’t understand,’ he continued. ‘The tests came back negative. Hell, even if they hadn’t it wouldn’t make any difference to us, Beth.’ Pushing himself to his feet, he came to stand before her. ‘I wouldn’t have been involved in the child’s life. There is no way I am ready to be a father.’

‘So you would have turned your back on a child?’ Her voice shook with barely controlled anger. *Did she even know this man?*

‘You don’t think very much of me do you?’ He shook his head, a half smile that didn’t reach his sad eyes making it clear he knew the answer. ‘If I chose to have a child, that would be different, but I won’t have one forced on me. Like I said, I’m not ready now...if ever.’

A sob tore from her throat, shocking them both. Scrambling for her belongings, she ran for the door. ‘I can’t do this anymore...’

‘Beth, what’s wrong?’ he asked, rushing to take her in his arms. She allowed herself to stand in the circle of his warmth for a few seconds, breathing him in. God, she’d missed this feeling. A hand in her hair brought her back to her senses. He was misreading her reaction.

‘Ruben, just let me go,’ she pleaded, looking up at him. His arms dropped limply to his sides and he took a step back, before turning away. Unable to look at him again, she slipped quickly out of the door, running down the hall with tears streaming down her face. She didn’t breathe again until she was in the safety of the elevator.

*‘I am not ready to be a father...’*

His words ran through her head repeatedly. Strangely enough, they helped Bethany immensely in her decision, convincing her she’d been right not to tell him she was expecting his baby.



## Chapter 18

He watched her through deeply intoxicated eyes. The dance she performed was only for him—or at least that's how she made it seem. He was warming to the bold invitation in her eyes and movements. There were many other girls around her on the dance floor, but his gaze was locked on her, and she knew it.

*My God.* How long had it been since he'd actually thought about the effect he had on women? He'd forgotten that all he had to do was turn up somewhere and he could usually have whoever he wanted. It didn't mean much, but it was true.

He'd tried explaining the phenomenon to Beth, but she had simply laughed and called him an egomaniac. *Hell, he wasn't stupid.* He knew they didn't want him...not really. Women wanted what he represented. *Excitement. Sex.* An escape from what they considered a boring life.

They had no idea what boredom was. Boredom was seeing the inside of a different hotel room every night for three months. Boredom was passport control, airline lounges and limo rides. It was being so tired after a grueling day that you only had the time and energy to eat and sleep.

In the early days, he taken up many of the offers thrown his way, his head turned by the sudden availability of hot women. As he got older, the novelty had worn off. Before Bethany, he had still indulged himself every once in a while. If a body was tired and needed to lose itself for a couple of hours, what better way was there than with a beautiful woman who wanted to please?

The blonde began to move closer, dancing directly in front of his table. Smiling at her briefly, he signaled the waiter for another beer. He lost count of how many he'd actually had. The need to dull the raw pain caused by seeing Beth earlier had been overwhelming. She'd walked away from him

again. He'd known it was foolish to risk seeing her at the meeting, but he really had no choice. He had to be there. Had to try one more time.

He drank very rarely and got drunk even less—this wasn't going to be one of those times.

'Blondie' continued to writhe in front of him. If her movements became anymore suggestive, they would be foreplay. Ruben's cock became a little more interested in what was going on as the white suede skirt she wore rode further up her thighs. Her top confused him. It looked like a handkerchief worn as a halter neck. The same color as her skirt, it became almost transparent under the lights. She had a great pair of implants—he'd give her that. At least he thought they were implants. Breasts that size didn't usually defy gravity, he giggled to himself. His humor confused her and she lost a little of her confidence until he crooked a finger, beckoning her over.

Looking triumphant, she glanced around quickly to ensure he had been gesturing to her before sliding into the booth with him. He'd seen the look in her eyes many times before on numerous faces—both male and female. Of course, it was only ever the women who got lucky...and he was about to make this girl's night.

An hour later, he regretted leading her on. Angie—at least he thought that was her name—was sucking on him hard, trying to elicit a response. She'd invited him back to her hotel soon after joining him at the club. Even in his drunken state, he'd felt compelled to warn her that he couldn't stay and was leaving town the following morning. Her reply had been to just relax and 'go with the flow'.

Up close, she was a little younger than she'd looked at first glance, but not so young that he needed to worry about it. Regardless of her age, her experience became apparent as her mouth worked over him feverishly. Expert lips slid firmly down his shaft as she cradled his balls in her hand. Suddenly she stopped, sitting back on her heels with a sigh.

'Don't you like me?' Her pout was quite endearing and was the most natural thing he seen her do in the short time he had known her.

'I am sorry. I guess I am a little drunk.' Hoping she bought his lame excuse, he smiled in reassurance. He didn't know her or particularly care how she felt, but he wasn't cruel. Berating himself, he resolved to try harder. 'I love what you are doing, don't stop,' he lied smoothly.

Angie seemed satisfied, smiling seductively before dipping her head again. Ruben tried to focus on the cherry red lips sliding up and down his cock. He loved getting head. He just wished it were Bethany doing it to him.

His penis sprang to life at the thought of her. Closing his eyes, he grasped onto the image of her in his mind. His beautiful Beth had her mouth on him, groaning in that little way she did as she became aroused by his response to her. Angie increased her efforts, encouraged by his reaction.

Ruben kept his eyes closed. He didn't want to lose his fantasy. She moved to lay beside him, continuing to stimulate him with her hand. He guessed she wanted him to reciprocate, but he couldn't. She wouldn't smell or taste like Beth and the illusion would be shattered.

Groping blindly at the nightstand, he flicked off the light without looking at her again, before sliding on a condom and positioning himself over her.

'Oh, wow! Fuck me, baby,' she said in a plastic, porn star voice as he parted her legs, entering her quickly.

Ruben grimaced as he hushed her. 'I had too much to drink. I need to concentrate,' he lied. He didn't think too hard on the ethics of what he was doing—he was simply trying to find a way to give her what she wanted and then get the hell out of there.

*Beth...think of Beth, he repeated over and over in his mind as his erection began to subside. Think of her body and how it feels when you sink into her pussy. Remember her taste —the one you can never get enough of. Those hands on your ass are hers, pulling you deeper. She likes me to fuck her hard...like this...just like this. And when I am pounding into her, she cries out my name, telling me how good it feels. I can feel she is getting wetter now. She loves my cock inside her, loves to feel every inch of me. I can feel her muscles tingling...feel the spasms begin to ripple through her and over me. She will come soon. My sweet Beth will come for me...with me.*

'Beth!' he shouted hoarsely as the sudden orgasm caught him unawares. He grasped for the sensation, burying himself as deeply as he could into 'her' body. Holding his breath, he savored the feeling, trying to prolong it. The spasms began to subside, robbing him of the connection, bringing him back to the harsh reality that he wasn't with the woman he loved.

The one he *was* with didn't seem too happy if the way she pushed him off was anything to go by. 'My name is Angie,' she said, acid dripping from every word. 'Don't you remember?'

He answered, without looking at her. 'Sorry. I did warn you that I was pretty drunk.'

Angie wasn't buying it apparently—jumping from the bed to storm into the bathroom and slam the door. Her reaction seemed a little extreme considering he'd only known her a couple of hours, but what the hell did he know about women and the way their minds worked?

Deciding that it was probably best if he left, Ruben donned his clothing quickly and slipped out of the room.

The night air felt good on his skin, cleansing somehow. He decided to walk, determined to clear his head and shake off the effects of the booze. Staggering a few blocks, he realized he didn't have the first clue where he was.

*How insane it all was.* Sex with a total stranger hadn't helped. He'd been stupid to think it would. Now, he just felt sleazy and pathetic, unable even to perform in bed without thinking of Beth. *But she didn't want him anymore...nobody wanted him. Shit, even Angie probably hated him and he couldn't blame her.*

He flipped open his phone, dialing Byron. The call was answered almost instantly by the ear piercing, frantic voice of his manager. 'Where the hell are you?'

'Lost,' Ruben giggled, sinking onto the kerb.

\* \* \* \*

The Fan couldn't breathe...couldn't think. Ruben had called her Beth. He didn't remember her nor did he want her. He wanted Beth. It wasn't fair. She'd waited so long, hoped so much, and it wasn't supposed to be like this.

When she'd seen him walk out of his hotel alone a few hours earlier, with no security in tow, Angie had been sure this was the opportunity she'd been waiting for. Unable to think of a way to ditch the ever-present Martha, she'd had to let her tag along—all the while racking her brains for a way to get rid of her.

The job had been done for her when they had tried to follow Ruben into the exclusive nightclub on Sunset. The doorman had put up a hand, stopping them when they tried to enter. Pointing at Martha, he had simply shaken his head, but told Angie she could go in.

She hadn't hesitated for even a second—skipping through the door without a backward glance at Martha. *Fuck her*, she'd thought. The sad old woman should be at home with her husband anyway. This time out, they weren't even sharing a hotel room. *How fucking perfect was that?* Things couldn't have gone any better. They were the way she had always known they would be when the time was right.

Angie hadn't approached him straight away. Forcing herself to wait a reasonable amount of time before trying to engage him had been hard, terrified as she was that he would hook up with someone else before she got her chance. She'd figured out pretty quickly that he wasn't looking for company as he sat alone in a corner hunched over a succession of beers that he downed almost as soon as they arrived.

She had known the moment was right to make her move when he'd finally loosened up enough to sit back in his seat, focusing on the women dancing a few feet away. Throwing the last of the vodka she'd been nursing down her throat, she had taken a deep breath and gone to get him.

She finally had her longed for moment with him only to find out he didn't have a clue who she was and that he was still in love with someone else. So in love, in fact, that he could barely perform in bed. The sudden urge to cry hit her without warning, and she bundled a towel against her face to muffle the sobs—afraid he would hear them through the bathroom door.

The tears stopped abruptly when it dawned on Angie that she was wasting the only chance she had to make him love her. *Okay, so he'd been thinking about Bethany, but she could make him forget that bitch.* She was better looking, slimmer and younger—and she had one great advantage over the other woman—he was still in her bed. And this time, she had to make sure he stayed.

*Fixing her hair after splashing some cold water on her face, she quickly reapplied her make-up. Having nothing to wear as she had run naked from the bed, she wrapped a towel around her—only to throw it off brazenly before opening the door.*

Plastering what she hoped would be a dazzling smile on her face, she strode out into the room. It took a moment for her to see through the semi-darkness that the bed was empty. She wanted to scream, slapping a hand over her mouth to suppress the sound just in case he was out on the balcony. Finding the glass doors still locked, she knew he wasn't there, but looked anyway, unwilling to accept that he had gone. Running naked out into the corridor to look for him, she checked in both directions before retreating back into her room slowly on increasingly shaky legs.

Angie sank to the floor in the middle of the room, feeling physically sick. Curling over to rest her head on her knees, she fought for control over the rage and pain building in her gut. Rocking back and forth, she tried to suppress the scream she could feel rising in her throat. Stuffing a fist into her mouth, she bit down hard, tasting her own blood as she lost the battle to muffle the noise emanating from her.

She surged to her feet, screaming in absolute mental anguish as she began to pace the room. He was gone, and she didn't know what to do. Her dream had been handed to her after years of wanting and waiting just to be so cruelly torn away.

Angie's vision began to cloud as a lack of oxygen made her light headed. Her longed for second chance with him was already over. *How could that be? What had she done wrong? Nothing...she'd done nothing.* She couldn't fight an invisible foe. He was in love with someone else and nothing she could do would change that. Even when he'd been fucking her, he'd been thinking of someone else.

*But he wasn't with Bethany anymore—everybody knew that.* She had resigned from her job with the Foundation, returning to Las Vegas alone. *Surely he wouldn't be sleeping with other women if he still wanted her? If he still loved her?*

Angie couldn't reject the thought invading her mind. It was her he didn't want or love. Twice now, he had taken her body and thrown her away afterwards without a thought or care. She couldn't blame him—Ruben was only a man after all. She simply wasn't worthy of his love. He didn't even want her sexually. It had taken forever to get him hard enough to screw her and the only reason he had managed to come at all was because he had been thinking of Bethany.

Her pacing stopped as she caught her own reflection in the mirror and she wanted to laugh at the pathetic whore she saw looking back at her. *Why had she ever believed she could be happy or that Ruben would want her?*

‘Look at you...why would anybody want you?’ she screamed. ‘Stupid bitch...even your own mother hated you...and the only person who has ever loved you is gone...Daddy’s gone,’ she said to the face she could barely stomach to look at in the glass.

Lurching forward suddenly, she smashed her face into the mirror with a scream, breaking it. Dazed for a moment by the intense pain, she fell to her knees to vomit violently. Raising her head as the sound of shouting and loud knocking reached her ears through her own screams, she didn’t understand why she couldn’t see. Wiping at the warm stickiness covering her eyelids, she stared down at her hands in shock, realizing it was blood.

Glass lay all around, glinting brightly, taunting her. A large shard caught her eye, and she picked it up, looking at it curiously before dragging the sharp edge across first one wrist, then the other.

The persistent knocking at the door became increasingly muffled. A feeling of calm wrapped itself around her, the realization that a lifetime of loneliness and constant rejection would soon be over, bringing her peace. Lying down, she curled up, as if to sleep, relaxing into the heaviness invading her limbs and her brain.

A familiar smell caught her nostrils, and she sniffed her hands, inhaling the scent of his body where she had touched him. He had been the first man she had ever wanted or given herself to. Angie thought it seemed right somehow that he would also be her last.

## Chapter 19

Bethany felt as if she was in the Twilight Zone. It was the only explanation for the surreal turn her life had taken. In just the last week, she had resigned from a job she adored and re-started her old one, after walking away from the love of her life without telling him she was carrying his child—a child that he didn't want.

Now Simon was standing in the center of her office, smiling at her like they were old friends.

'Hi, Bethany,' he said, with an ease that she found annoying.

'Simon...what are you doing here?' She gathered her wits about her, reaching out to shake his hand, guessing that's what you did with someone you knew well, but didn't like anymore. 'I was sorry to hear about your mother,' she said, remembering suddenly.

'Thank you. It was a tough time for all of us.'

He ignored her hand, grasping her firmly by the shoulders to kiss her. Bethany turned away in time to ensure he only made contact with her cheek. His embarrassed laugh made it clear he had noticed her recoil.

'You look great. How have you been?'

'Fine. Busy.' Bethany was far too distracted to string a coherent sentence together. *What in hell did he want?* 'Working hard.' She gestured around the office, hoping he would realize he was intruding.

He smiled smoothly. 'Yes, I know you are busy. That's why I took your last appointment of the day.' He gestured over his shoulder toward the reception area. 'I booked in last week.'

Bethany didn't like the way things were going. It was so typical of him to try and control the outcome of a situation. It may have been a long time since she had seen him, but obviously some things had not changed. 'Simon. I don't have time for this. I am sorry to be so blunt, but what do you want? Are you ill?'



He shook his head. 'I just want to talk Bethany. That's all.'

'I can't really believe we have anything to talk about after all this time.' She tried to keep the hostility out of her voice. It would have been so easy, and unfair, to blame him for some of the problems between her and Ruben. He'd left her an emotional wreck, unable to see a good thing when she had it. Simon was the reason the behavior had started, but it was her fault it continued. She'd realized that too late.

He began to look uncharacteristically nervous. 'I miss you, Bethany,' he blurted.

She laughed. She couldn't help it. 'What?'

'I guess I deserve that.' She could see she'd pissed him off with her reaction, although he held his tongue.

'Damn right you deserve it,' she shouted. 'Are you insane?'

'If it's insane to realize what I lost and want it back then, yes. Yes, I am.' He gave her his best 'sincere' look—the one she used to fall for way back when.

'And it took you almost three years to figure that out, huh?' The look of surprise on his face was comical. It had been a long time since he'd had to deal with a Bethany that wasn't beaten down and defeated by his controlling nature.

He began to lose his charm, his tone becoming cold. 'When did you become so bitter?'

'I'm not bitter, Simon. Just older and wiser.' She stopped, unwilling to hurt him, however much he deserved it. 'I just realize now we should never have been together.' She began to gather her things, hoping to bring an end to the conversation. 'Really, you did us both a favor.'

'I'm older and wiser too. That's how I know what a dreadful mistake I made.' He grasped her hand, staring pleadingly into her eyes. 'Can you forgive me?'

Untangling her fingers, she moved behind the desk, putting some space between them. 'I forgave you a long time ago.' Seeing him smile, her voice became serious. 'But that doesn't mean I would go back to what we had...not for one second.'

'Hey, it wasn't that bad.'

Bethany slammed down the book she had been holding. 'Maybe not for you. For me, it was hell.' The color drained from his face. 'I gave up my whole life for you—'

Simon cut her off. 'I didn't ask you to.'

'That's right. You didn't. But I gave you all I had. Too much in fact,' she said, as much to herself as him. 'And what thanks did I get? You treated me like shit for three years and then ran out on me.'

He at least had the good grace to blush. 'Like I said, I was immature. But I am back now and I want to make it up to you.' He took her silence as encouragement and plundered on. 'There hasn't been a single day since we parted that I didn't miss and want you.' He paused for dramatic effect. 'I love you, Bethany.'

Ignoring his declaration, she thought back to the information Ruben had gathered on him. He'd been married and divorced since they split. Bethany had been annoyed with Ruben at the time, but now she was grateful for the knowledge he'd forced on her. She wouldn't have known any better and may have fallen for Simon's bullshit sob story if it wasn't for Ruben.

'Didn't that bother your wife?'

Long seconds passed while he struggled to respond. She knew him well enough to label every emotion crossing his face, watching the lie he was thinking up form in his mind before he rejected it, defeat showing in his eyes.

'How did you know about that?' Grateful at least that he didn't deny it, Bethany shook her head.

'It doesn't matter how I know. I just do.' There was no way she would tell him about Ruben.

She heard Barbara, her receptionist, leave for the night. Wishing just once that her employee wouldn't be so efficient, she realized they were alone. Strangely, the thought didn't really worry her. He wasn't a threat to her anymore. Never really had been.

'I am sorry things didn't work out for you, but I really don't know how you expect me to feel, Simon.' She rubbed her temples, suddenly tired. 'We've both moved on...'

'You're involved with someone?'

She shook her head. 'Not anymore.' Tears sprang into her eyes. She didn't feel at all well. The pounding in her head had increased and she felt nauseous. A flush crept up her cheeks as she realized she was about to faint.

'Bethany,' Simon exclaimed as he rushed to stop her sinking to the floor. Helping her into a chair, he loosened the neck of her blouse before fanning her face with the desk blotter.

She began to feel slightly better as the cool air wafted over her. Struggling to sit up, she brushed him away, burying her face in her hands.

'I'm not up to this at the moment, Simon. I think I better go home.'

'Are you ill?' The concern in his voice seemed genuine.

'No. I'm pregnant,' she replied bluntly. She didn't care what he thought enough to bother lying about it.

Simon staggered backward to stand across the room, staring at her in confusion. 'I thought you said you weren't involved?'

'I'm not,' she said quietly, tears threatening again.

'Don't tell me he dumped you when he found out you were pregnant?' Bethany couldn't believe her ears. Simon was getting angry, protective even. 'Who is he?'

'It wasn't his fault. It was me.' He was the last person she would ever talk to about something so important. It was in his nature to be cynical and judgmental. He would only contaminate her memories.

If there was ever a time for this conversation, now was definitely not it. 'I must go home. I am exhausted,' she said, hoping he wouldn't argue.

'Let me take you.'

She shook her head. 'I don't think that's a good idea.' Getting to her feet, she grabbed for the table as a wave of nausea hit her again. Simon rushed to her side.

'Bethany, you are in no condition to drive,' he insisted. 'Don't be so stubborn. Let me help you.'

'Maybe you're right,' she conceded, allowing to him gather her things.

The short drive to her house passed without much conversation. Bethany rested her head against the seat, willing her stomach to settle. She didn't much like Simon being in control, but commonsense told her she needed his help.

He took her right up to the door, insisting that he get her into the house. Hoping it wasn't a ploy to spend more time with her, she handed him the key. Nothing he could say would make a difference anyway.

'You're still in love with him, aren't you?' Simon asked her a few minutes later, after he had settled her on the sofa with a glass of water. He looked at her sadly, finally seeing that there was no hope for him. She nodded silently, not trusting her voice.

He sat down beside her. 'I am truly sorry, Bethany...about the way I treated you, I mean.' He hid his eyes, clasping and unclasping his hands. He laughed self-consciously. 'It took me six months of therapy to be able to say that.'

'You've been in therapy?'

'Yes. I had to. After my marriage failed, I had nowhere left to hide. I realized the problem in my relationships was me.' Bethany didn't speak, sensing he had more to say.

'You know, I have always respected you.' He turned to look at her finally, letting her see he was being genuine. 'I never felt good enough for you. And rather than raise my game and make myself the kind of man you would want to be with, I tried to drag you down.'

'But I loved you Simon,' she interrupted. 'Why wasn't that enough to reassure you?'

He shook his head. 'Not back then. I could see I was treating you badly, but I couldn't stop. I hated myself and took it out on you.' He fell silent, allowing his words to sink in.

'I saw a therapist too,' she confessed. 'It helped me a lot.'

'Helped you realize you were better off without me?' He smiled sheepishly, taking no offence at Bethany's nod of confirmation.

He continued to look at her as he fell silent, his eyes saying everything he could not. She prayed he wouldn't try again to win her heart. She was strong enough now to kick him out of her life for good and never look back. Hopefully, it wouldn't be necessary.

Simon dropped her gaze as he sighed and got to his feet. Bethany moved to walk him to the door, but he gestured for her to stay seated. 'I know the way out.'

Pausing as he reached the door, he turned to speak. 'I registered with your practice, so you have my number. Let me know if you ever need anything, ok?'

Going to him, she kissed his cheek before giving him a hug. 'Be happy, Simon,' she smiled tearfully.

He cupped her face, making sure she took in every word. 'Follow your own advice, Bethany. Do whatever it takes to make yourself happy.' He gave her a lopsided grin. 'Don't be like me.'

She had no idea how long she had stayed, rooted to the spot, after she heard the door click behind him, until her headache returned with a vengeance, forcing her back to the sofa.

*What a day it had been.* She never thought she would say it, but she was glad Simon had stopped by. The person she'd feared most until now had turned her world on its head. Finding out that he still loved her and had been in awe of her was a huge revelation. It sure hadn't felt that way back then. His timing sucked though. She wished they'd had this talk and ended things in such a civil manner before she'd met Ruben. Maybe things would have been different.

Bethany sobered as she remembered how badly Ruben had deceived her. But she could have forgiven him for that eventually...hell, she had forgiven him already, if the truth were known.

There wasn't a damn thing she could do about his attitude to fatherhood though. Every few days, she got an overwhelming urge to tell him, to see what his reaction would be. But what would be the point? He'd made his feelings clear.

She would just have to love the baby enough for both of them.

## Chapter 20

Ruben stepped out onto the balcony of his parent's Monterrey home. The mountain vista displayed before him soothed his soul and he was glad he'd decided to visit. Relieved his parents had invested his money in such a beautiful location, he toyed with the idea of buying something close by. He'd stayed away from his parents for too long. Maybe it was time to rebuild a few bridges?

He heard his mother Rosa call him for dinner. He smiled at the familiarity of the sound—more than a decade had passed since he'd heard it last, but it felt like only yesterday. Since his arrival two days earlier, he'd been pleasantly surprised. Age had mellowed his parents. His mother no longer drank at all. As for his father Hector, he had to ask him for the name of his therapist, Ruben thought with a laugh. The change in the man was nothing short of miraculous.

Entering the room to join them for dinner, he saw his father seated at the head of the table. Ruben marveled at the fact that he had never before noticed what a handsome man he was. The serenity in his face gave no hint of the angry, bitter person he used to be. Of course, he had noted the gradual change in them during the many visits they had paid him since he left home, but he'd always assumed they were on their best behavior at those times.

The people before him were almost strangers. It was time he put that right. To an outsider, they looked like a couple in their late fifties who had never had an angry word in their thirty plus years of marriage. They were the kind of people he would like to know better.

Neither of them had questioned him when he'd arrived unannounced in the middle of the night. He'd been touched to find his mother had a room ready, in case he ever visited. The joy in her eyes as she had tucked her grown son into bed had hurt Ruben deeply. He'd never considered that his parents loved and needed him, too.

Sitting down to the table, he accepted the steaming plate of food from his mother. His father cleared his throat, in the way he always did when he was getting ready to speak. 'Ruben, I must ask you something.' Hector waved away the look his wife gave him, her silent plea not to meddle going ignored. 'What has happened son? Why have you chosen to visit us now?'

'It was time. That's all.'

Hector wasn't satisfied. 'Is it anything to do with the scandal over that girl who claimed you were the father of her child?'

'Hector!' his mother put down the serving spoon she was holding with a bang.

'It's okay, Mama,' Ruben reassured her. Turning to his father, he shook his head. 'That was six months ago and ancient history.'

'Is it yours?' his mother asked quietly. Shame washed over Ruben. They didn't know. Why would they? It hadn't occurred to him that they would be here, still wondering. He hadn't bothered to tell them what was going on and they obviously hadn't felt able to contact him about it.

He shook his head. 'No. I am sorry I didn't tell you before but I guess...I guess I wasn't thinking straight. Once it was all over, I tried hard to forget about it.'

'Were you serious about this girl?' Rosa asked.

'There was never anything between us,' he said, choosing his words carefully. His mother didn't need to know too much about the kind of women he'd encountered and what he done with them.

She smiled hopefully. 'And is there anyone special now?'

Ruben pushed his plate away. 'There was someone...but that's over.' He couldn't talk to his parents about Bethany. He still couldn't talk to anybody, after all this time.

'You still love her, don't you,' his mother asked, reaching out to smooth a hand over his.

'It doesn't matter how I feel anymore, Mama.' He smiled to soften his words, hoping she would take a hint and drop the subject.

'Any woman who doesn't want my handsome son must be crazy,' she bristled. 'She wasn't right for you, Ruben.'

'It wasn't her fault. It was me...I ruined things and she left,' he said, his voice flat and emotionless. Ruben was grateful for the awkward silence that

fell. Thanking God when his parents changed topic, he finished his meal quickly, desperate for some time to himself.

His father found him later in the yard, watching the setting sun. 'You know, Ruben,' he began as he pulled up a chair. 'We never did thank you properly for this house. Your mother and I have been very happy here.'

Ruben smiled, unsure what to say. Taking the beer his father offered they drank in uncomfortable silence, staring out over the mountain.

'This woman you mentioned earlier...'

'I don't wanna talk about it.'

Hector sighed, took a long pull on his beer, and continued. 'I was only going to say that something you love is worth fighting for.'

'Like you and Mama?' Ruben couldn't hide his sarcasm. His father, of all people, was trying to give him relationship advice.

Hector chuckled. 'You have a point. But, the one thing me and Rosa had was love. That's why we stayed together.'

'You sure didn't act like you loved each other.'

'We were young, Ruben and didn't know what we were doing.' He placed a hand on his son's forearm. 'And we didn't know what we were doing to you either.'

Ruben swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. 'I'm okay,' he said gruffly, uncomfortable with the turn of conversation. He'd spent so many years angry at his father. He didn't know how to react to the kindness in the older man's eyes.

'I would like to believe that son, but it worries us to see you alone all the time. You don't let anyone get close...including us.'

Hector sat back in his seat, realizing he wasn't about to get a reply. Ruben wanted to give his father what he was asking for, some kind of absolution he guessed, but the words wouldn't come.

'You know,' his father continued, 'it took me a long time to overcome my demons, and I almost lost the love of my life over it. Don't let the same thing happen to you...don't pay for my sins.'

Ruben couldn't begin to explain how he'd come to this point. Maybe he would talk to his father about it some day, when it hurt less. Now was not the time. Thankfully, his mother spared him the need for a lie.

Rosa's voice rang out over the garden, calling her husband. Hector laughed as he got to his feet. 'Talking of sins, I think I forgot to load the



dishwasher.’ Heading into the house, he called over his shoulder, ‘don’t stay out here too long.’

Ruben watched him walk away, still reeling from the conversation. Everything he thought he knew about his father, and therefore himself, had just been turned on its head. He’d been fighting for years to prove that he was nothing like the man who had raised him. Now, for the first time in his life, he hoped he was, at least in one respect. His father had changed for the better and kept the woman he loved.

Ruben realized too that he had been hiding behind his hatred of his father for years. Any aspect of his personality he didn’t like had been blamed on his upbringing. It was time to let that go. He was a grown man and responsible for his own actions. Sure, his childhood could and should have been better, but that was history. Everybody had moved on, except for him. *Hell, even Bethany had.*

The shock of seeing her with Simon again had almost finished him off. He’d gone to her house a few days after the board meeting, emboldened by the hesitation he’d seen in her eyes when they spoke. *Maybe he had given up too easily?*

She wasn’t home when he arrived so he’d waited in his car, watching for her. Late afternoon had dragged into early evening by the time she appeared. Ruben was about to reveal his presence when he saw her driver door open and Simon jump out. He rushed around to help her before walking with her to the house, his arm thrown around her shoulders in a possessive manner that made Ruben feel ill.

The desire to break Simon’s neck almost won out over his need to get the hell away from there before he did something stupid. He’d gunned the engine, roaring away from her house, unwilling to subject himself to more torment.

Ruben could feel the temper rising in him all these months later as he remembered that day. *How could Beth have been so false?* He couldn’t remember how many times he’d asked her about Simon and whether she still loved him. She’d even made him feel like a paranoid jerk for being so jealous over her ex-fiancé.

He hadn’t stayed angry with her for long, though. It was his fault they weren’t together and she owed him nothing. She was a free agent and had moved on. Sure, he wished it hadn’t been Simon, but it was none of his

business anymore. Ruben knew he would have felt awful no matter who she had turned to.

He'd spent many nights going over in his head what he should have done differently. *Hindsight was a bitch...not only did it taunt you with the knowledge that you'd screwed up, it also showed you what could have had.* His fear that Beth wouldn't want him if she really knew him had become a self-fulfilling prophecy. She had been right...she'd never really known him. All she had seen was the man he thought he should be—one that tried to control everything around him and in the end controlled nothing, not even his own happiness.

A blaze of gold and red across the sky moments before the sun finally disappeared earned his appreciation as he took a deep, cleansing breath to chase away the memories.

He wasn't over Bethany yet, who knew if he ever would be, but he felt calmer than he had in a long time. The visit home had done him good.

Finishing his beer, he walked back to the house. He would stay for another day or so, determined that when he left home this time, he wouldn't be running from his past.

## Chapter 21

Bethany grappled her considerable bulk up out of the chair. *Ugh!* She hated being pregnant. Her due date had passed and she wondered how long she would have to walk around feeling like she had a bowling ball between her legs. Donna appeared beside her instantly.

‘Beth, there is no point me being here if you won’t let me look after you,’ she admonished, walking slowly beside her sister as she waddled to the kitchen.

‘I have to keep moving, Donna. Sitting in one place is driving me crazy.’ Lowering herself gingerly onto a kitchen chair, Beth rubbed her belly. ‘Please, come out baby girl. I am desperate to see you.’

‘I wonder if she is going to look like you,’ Donna mused, patting the bump tenderly.

Beth bit back the tears that threatened. She prayed daily that the baby looked like Ruben. She missed his warm brown eyes and she longed to see them again in the face of his daughter. Donna smoothed the hair from her brow, watchful as usual and aware of her sadness. ‘All I seem to do is cry these days,’ Beth smiled through her tears.

‘Ah, the joys of motherhood.’

Beth grimaced. ‘Don’t remind me, Sis. I am not looking forward to the sleepless nights either.’ Fresh tears washed over her. ‘Oh God. What if I’m a terrible mother?’

‘You won’t be.’ Donna reassured her. ‘You’ve got me to help you. And don’t forget, we had the best Mom in the world.’

‘She had to be. She was both mother and father to us.’

Donna nodded, distracted. She was unusually solemn. Beth could see she was fighting the urge to say something. She didn’t have to wait long to find out what was on her sister’s mind.

‘Beth...’ Donna began. ‘Have you thought anymore about letting Ruben know he is about to become a father?’

So, that’s what the sad face was about. ‘I don’t want to discuss this again. You know my reasons for not telling him.’

‘I know the reasons you’ve convinced yourself of, Beth,’ she replied. ‘But is it fair to affect three lives over a matter of principle?’

‘You don’t understand, Donna. Trust is a huge issue for me and Ruben betrayed my trust. He took a paternity test and had no intention of telling me about it. That’s huge by anybody’s standards.’ *Why was she doing this to her now?* Donna of all people knew how heartbroken she still was over her break up with Ruben and to be reminded of it was the last thing she needed just before giving birth.

‘Coming from anybody else, I would believe it. But I know you, Beth. Be honest, your relationship was doomed from day one. The script was already written. You went into it expecting to be let down and deceived. All Ruben did was play his part.’ Beth was stunned. Donna had never spoken to her that way. And she wasn’t done either.

‘The guy made a mistake...a huge one, I’ll give you that...but that’s all it was. He probably panicked and chose the wrong course of action. But ask yourself, Beth, was he wrong to be afraid of how you would take the news?’ She paused then, allowing her words to sink in.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You overreacted, Beth. You tried and convicted him in an afternoon. The guy never had a chance to put things right and you didn’t hang around long enough to see if what you had was strong enough to overcome it.’

Bethany knew she was right. She’d said it to herself a million times since the split. It still didn’t change the fact she was about to have his baby...a baby he neither knew of nor wanted.

‘Don’t you see, none of that even matters anymore, Donna? I can’t ever see him again. I am about to have his child. A child he told me in LA he may never be ready for.’

Donna let out a harsh breath, shaking her head in defeat. ‘He still has a right to know, sweetheart. What you are doing to him and this baby now, by denying them their relationship, is far, far worse than anything he did.’

Bethany sat in stunned silence, shock at her sister’s words rendering her speechless. Straining for the indignation she should be feeling after being

spoken to in such a way, she came up with nothing. The niggling pain she'd been ignoring for the past half hour kicked up a notch, causing her to cry.

'Darling, I'm sorry!' Donna was immediately on her feet, putting her arms around her. 'I've got a big mouth. Take no notice of me.'

'It's not that,' Beth wailed. 'My back is killing me. I think the baby is coming.'

Donna started crying too. 'Oh no, I've forced you into labor,' she exclaimed so dramatically that they both began to laugh through their tears.

Many hours later as she began to get sleepy after the emotional and physical strain of giving birth, Bethany peeked over into the crib aligned with her bed. Stretching out a hand, she watched in wonder as the small fist opened up as she touched it, just long enough to grip tightly onto her finger.

Just like her father, little Tiana Dorothea Navarro—all seven pounds of her—had stolen Bethany's heart.

\* \* \* \*

Ruben was glad to finally get off stage. It had been almost a year since he'd last played Vegas and he hadn't wanted to return anytime soon. Memories had begun assaulting him the moment he'd stepped off the plane onto the tarmac six hours earlier. The sooner he got through the stage door and out of this town, the happier he would be.

Surprised at how raw his wounds still were, he hadn't been able to help but scan the crowd, hoping to see her face. Of course, he'd know she wouldn't be there. His performance had suffered badly as a consequence, adding to his worsening mood. Byron was giving him a wide berth too. Ruben felt bad that his friend always felt it was best to keep out of his way at times like this, but he guessed Byron was right.

Showering and dressing as fast as he could, Ruben was out of the stage door in minutes. Getting through the swarms of fans wouldn't be that easy. His latest release had raised his profile again, attracting new admirers along with the ones that had followed him for years. Ruben always tried to make time for them. He'd be nothing without them. The noise level was deafening as they all vied for his attention. Security was working full time keeping the crowd under control as he followed the golden rule and 'kept moving'. One persistent voice drew his attention.

Turning to scan the throng, his eyes landed on a teenage girl, jumping up and down on the spot. He froze as he recognized the face...but why? The girl, seeing him look her way, shouted louder. Recognition slammed into him, it was Bethany's niece. *She's sure grown in the last year*, he thought as he scrambled for her name. Guessing she wanted an autograph, he gestured to security to get her nearer to him.

'Ruben,' she said breathlessly as she was brought to him. 'I am Tyla. You know my Aunt Bethany.' The pain hearing her name always caused never ceased to surprise him. 'You've got to see her. It's like, so important.'

'Why, is she ill?' Fear gripped at him. Unable to hear her, he had to get the kid out of this madness. Opening the door to the limo, he told her to get in.

'Oh, wow. This is amazing,' Tyla said, awestruck at the luxurious interior of the sleek black Mercedes. She fell silent as her wide eyes took in the television screens, plush carpeting and leather upholstery, seemingly unaware of Ruben.

*So help him, if this kid was yanking his chain, he was gonna lose it.* 'What is wrong with Bethany?' Ruben fought to keep his voice calm.

'Oh, she's fine. She doesn't know I am here,' the girl whispered, as if confiding, 'but you really need to see her.'

'Why?'

Her eyes flew open in horror. 'I *so* can't tell you. I promised I wouldn't.' Ruben couldn't help, but laugh. She was driving him crazy, but she was a cute kid.

'Then what are you doing here?'

'I didn't promise that I wouldn't try to get you to visit her.' She babbled on, warming to her topic. 'Grown-ups are so stupid sometimes.'

Ruben shook his head, unsure of how much she knew of his history with her aunt. 'I don't think Bethany wants to see me, Tyla. It was nice of you to try, but there is really no point.'

Leaping forward, she grabbed his hand. 'Oh please, you have to see her. It's like, so huge.'

Gently extricating the fingers she was crushing, Ruben decided to put an end to it. 'I am sorry...I can't. It was sweet of you to try, but you shouldn't really meddle in your Aunt's life.'

Tyla burst into tears, startling Ruben into silence. Her words came out in a jumble. 'It's so hard for her...she's...she's...not coping...Tiana won't sleep...Aunt Beth has to work and she's so tired—'

'Tiana? Who is Tiana?' Ruben saw the girl reel in shock. Her hand flew to her mouth as if trying to pull back her words back in. Ruben was losing patience. 'I said, who is Tiana?'

Tyla squirmed in her seat, avoiding his eyes. 'Tiana is her baby,' she muttered so quietly, he wasn't sure if he'd heard right.

'What?'

'I said she's her baby,' Tyla groaned. 'Please, please don't tell her I told you. She would so kill me.'

Ruben couldn't put the girl out of her misery. His brain was paralyzed. 'How old is she?'

'Tiana? Six weeks and, ohmigod, she is so cute.' Tyla's expression became serious. 'Please, Ruben, don't tell her I said anything. My mom will lose it, big time.'

Ruben's heart soared and fell in a matter of seconds. The timing meant the baby had to be his...but what about Simon?

'I won't say anything—I promise,' he reassured her. It was a promise he knew he couldn't keep. If Bethany thought she could simply ignore him so that she and Simon could play happy family with his baby— then she was in for a shock.

'Maybe you could pretend you needed to speak to her about something important,' Tyla plotted—unaware just how portentous her words were.

'Don't you think Beth and Simon would mind if I just showed up?'

The look of confusion on her face would have been charming in other circumstances. 'Simon? The guy she used to be with?' He nodded. 'Why would he mind?'

'Does he know about me?'

Tyla shook her head. 'Aunt Beth may have told him when he visited months ago, but she hasn't seen him since, so I'm not sure.'

Ruben's brain raced, unable to process the information with the twitchy teenager staring at him in bewilderment. He needed time to think. 'Hey, we better get you home. Do you need a lift?'

'I'm with my friends and I can't really turn up at my house with you. I'll get busted if my mom sees me in your limo.' He smiled then, forgetting how devious teenagers could be.

'Good thinking,' he laughed. 'You did the right thing, Tyla. Your aunt is lucky to have a niece like you to watch out for her.'

Blushing furiously, she changed the subject. 'Could I have some autographs for my friends?' Five minutes later, he'd signed and personalized fifteen postcards for her never-ending list of 'friends.'

'Thanks,' she shouted, kissing him quickly on the cheek as she jumped out of the car. Byron practically crossed her at the threshold, climbing into the space she had left.

'What on earth was that about?'

'Nothing' Ruben said, 'you wouldn't believe me if I told you.'

\* \* \* \*

Angie wasn't happy.

She'd had a bad feeling about Ruben being in Vegas again as soon as the gig had been announced. *Who was the kid that had been in his car, and why had his limo suddenly turned off—away from the airport?*

Glad now that she had followed her instincts and rented a vehicle, she let the Mercedes get about three or four cars ahead of hers, so she wouldn't be spotted, before following it into the exit lane.

Taking a hand off the wheel to scratch distractedly at the scar on her wrist, a slight pain from the still healing wound reminded her she had to be careful. She'd done a fair bit of damage to the nerves and tendons and the healing process hadn't been easy.

Not that she'd wanted to heal at the time. The last thing she remembered about that night was fighting off the security guard who had broken her door down to get in just after she had decided to end her misery. Vague impressions she couldn't really call memories floated in and out of her mind—like the sound of a siren and then a bright, noisy room with lots of people in it.

The next thing she had known for sure was waking up on the psych ward with her worried aunt looking down at her. That had been a little over six months ago.



Angie's aunt Sharon had given her no choice but to accept an offer to stay with her at the house in Long Island until she had recovered—threatening to have her committed if she refused.

The medications she'd been on at the time had drained her of the desire to either live or die—she simply hadn't cared anymore. Life at her aunt's had been easy enough to tolerate at first, but once the doctors started to reduce her dose she'd begun to feel restless. Her thoughts had turned to Ruben—tentatively at first—in case she found the memories too painful.

When she'd first started using the Internet again all those months ago, she had been scared of what she would discover. The relief had been immeasurable when she'd found no new pictures of him and Bethany. The online gossip contained no mention of the other woman's name—save for a few old comments discussing the fact they must have split up as nobody had seen her for months.

Eventually, she'd come to feel glad that her attempt at ending her life had failed. The more she had thought about her earlier desperation over Ruben, the more she realized she had given up too easily. If she looked at things logically, it had all been a blessing—she knew now that he wanted her and his being with Bethany hadn't changed that.

He'd been drawn to her again, with no memory or knowledge of their previous encounter. Ruben had thought he was in love with someone else, but still had not been able to resist his attraction to her or fight the connection between them. *Why hadn't she realized at the time what that meant?* Lightning didn't strike twice without good reason.

The limo turned into a residential area with very little traffic. Angie had no doubt he was on a personal errand. It seemed insane to hope that he would be conducting business affairs so late at night. They aren't together anymore, she reasoned, trying to calm the pounding in her head.

*Bethany.* Just the thought of her made Angie shake with rage. She'd allowed the other woman to come between them, almost ending her life over the misery Bethany had inflicted on both her and Ruben. The desire to make the bitch pay for what she had done to them had been a motivating factor in the early days of her recovery. Angie had always intended to track her down, determined to inflict just as much pain and suffering on her as she had caused. But being with Ruben again had been the most important thing,

and she'd focused solely on that for the last few months, putting Bethany to the back of her mind for the time being.

She had needed to rethink her approach, choosing against using her old connections. She had no idea how much Martha had seen that night or what the gossip about her was amongst the other fans. These days, she eschewed concerts, TV shows and personal appearances in favor of buying her way into the charity events he regularly attended.

Angie had begun making contacts amongst the organizations his charity worked with regularly and the invitations to more fundraisers and events had begun to land on her doormat, as the people she had met added her to their lists of supporters. She hadn't allowed him to see her yet—wanting more time to allow the angry, jagged scars on her wrists to heal and to ensure that he'd forgotten her face.

She'd had no choice but to follow him this time. The idea of his being anywhere near Bethany in Vegas while she stayed in New York had driven her insane. The tour had long since finished save for the occasional appearance and he spent much more time at home. Angie still made the trip over from her aunt's house in Long Island to his condo a couple of times a week, unable to totally give up what had become a way of life for her. Without Ruben and her hopes for their future together, she had nothing.

The limo finally stopped outside a small residence. Ruben got out alone, leaning back in to speak to someone before watching them drive away. Angie kept going as she passed him, turning the bend before pulling over.

## Chapter 22

Bethany tiptoed from the room, clicking off the light. Tiana had finally settled. Despite her tiredness, Bethany had to admit she was a good baby on the whole. The night feeds were hard, especially since she had returned to work in the last couple of weeks.

Soon after, she was up to her neck in bubbles, luxuriating in finding five minutes to pamper herself. Washing quickly, she ensured she would at least be clean if Tiana started to fuss and she had to jump out, forsaking the long soak she intended to have. Smoothing her hands over her flat tummy, she'd been thrilled at losing her baby weight so easily. A few ugly stretch marks remained, but she couldn't complain. Donna's tip about moisturizing every day had really helped.

She'd switched to bottle-feeding pretty early on so her breasts were beginning to shrink back to normal size. She'd enjoyed being busty at first, but as soon as her nipples began to get sore from feeding, she'd been happy to forsake the extra couple of bra sizes for comfort. Tiana had a healthy appetite and didn't seem to mind where the food came from, as long as it came on demand.

The doorbell rang, making her jump. Leaping from the bath to wrap a robe around her, she ran to the door. *Whoever was outside better not wake her baby or there would be hell to pay.* Panic fluttered in her chest as she realized how late it was. *Who the hell could it be?* Peering through the spy hole, she stepped back in alarm when she saw Ruben on the other side.

She couldn't think...couldn't breathe. *What the hell was he doing here after all this time?* She knew he had no idea what had happened. *How could he?* No matter how strongly Donna felt about the situation, she would never betray Bethany.

Backing away from the door, she toyed with the idea of leaving him outside. Maybe he would just leave.

The door rang again. This time he kept his finger on the button, filling the house with a shrill ring. It would be a miracle if Tiana slept through it. Bethany moved quickly forward, swinging the door open wide as she pressed a finger to her lips, hushing him.

‘Ruben. How...how nice to see you.’ Bethany’s brain wouldn’t function as her emotions warred with each other. Her heart leapt at the sight of him, but the knot of fear in her stomach tightened as she prayed the secret sleeping in the other room wouldn’t stir.

‘It’s good to see you too. You look great, Beth.’ He smiled, genuine warmth in his eyes. He can’t know, Bethany reasoned, he is too calm. ‘Are you going to invite me in?’ he asked, stepping inside anyway.

‘Sorry,’ she mumbled, ushering him quickly into the kitchen, the room farthest from Tiana’s. ‘Would you like a drink?’

‘A glass of wine would be nice,’ he smiled, shrugging off the leather biker jacket he wore with his jeans. His hair was much longer now, resting in thick waves that reached his shoulders. She watched amazed as he made himself right at home, looking for all the world as if he were staying the night.

‘Aren’t you joining me?’ he asked, as she got a single glass from the cupboard. She shook her head, wondering what the hell was going on. He seemed far happier and healthier than the last time she’d seen him. He looked back at her, an unreadable expression on his face. If she had to guess, she’d say he was a little angry, save for the fact he appeared so calm. He was looking at her intently, as if trying to see through her.

Unable to stand the tension, she broke down, initiating a conversation. ‘So, what brings you to town?’ She gestured for him to take a seat at the breakfast bar, placing herself at the opposite end.

‘I had a gig tonight and thought I would drop by and see how you are.’ His tone gave nothing away. Bethany could almost believe it was purely a friendly visit if she didn’t know him better.

She fiddled with her hair self-consciously. She’d scooped it up into a loose twist while she had her bath and hoped it didn’t look as bad as it felt. ‘You should have called first, given me a chance to tidy up.’

Ruben smiled. ‘You look fine. Besides, you don’t have to make any effort on my account.’ He was toying with her, but she didn’t know why. Bethany began mentally ticking off people who could know about Tiana and

whose daughter she really was. She was sure nobody, but her immediate family had all the information necessary to make the connection.

Her concentration was broken by the thin wail of a baby stirring. Blood pounded in her ears as she looked up, hoping he hadn't heard it too. Tiana ensured there would be no doubt about it by opening her lungs fully and shrieking into the silence between them. Bethany leapt to her feet, wanting to go to her child, but unable to move, pinned to the spot by the look in his eyes. *He knew!* God alone knew how, but he did.

She tried to speak. 'Ruben...we...we need to talk.' He got to his feet slowly, coming to stand in front of her. Placing a finger gently on her lips, he stopped her.

'Take care of the baby, Beth...we can talk later,' he said softly. There was no mistaking the look in his eyes this time. He still loved her, despite all that had happened. She didn't know what that meant yet, but it felt good. Tiana's cries got louder, telling anyone who would listen that she hadn't eaten in ages, jolting her mother out of the daze she was in.

\* \* \* \*

Ruben sat at the counter, his heart beating loudly. The urge to follow her out of the room was a strong one, but he wanted to wait until she brought his daughter to him of her own free will. There was no doubt in his mind that Bethany had given birth to his child—it was the only explanation for the panic he saw in her eyes when she found him standing outside her door.

He still loved her. He hadn't known just how much until now. The journey over to her house had been fraught with emotion as he swung wildly between absolute fury at her deception and sheer bliss at the knowledge of their child. He'd sat in stunned silence for a few minutes after Tyla had left, causing Byron to panic. Questions had come thick and fast from his friend, but he'd been unable to answer them, turning to him after a few minutes and saying in a flat monotone that he had to see Beth...he had to see her tonight. Byron had begun to object, but the look on Ruben's face had stopped him dead.

Minutes ticked by as he sat in the kitchen. His drink remained untouched as his fingers drummed thickly on the counter and he tried to be patient. Frustration drove him to his feet and he paced around the small

room, trying not to think about the fact that his whole world was in another part of the house. He had to find them.

Walking quietly to her bedroom, Ruben guessed correctly that Bethany would have the baby sleeping with her. The first thing he saw as he peeked around the doorframe was an empty white crib occupying the left corner. Leaning further into the room, his vision scanned to the right until he found them. Bethany was feeding the little bundle nestled in her arms. The first thing he noticed was a shock of dark hair, spiking out in all directions from the baby's head. Her tiny hand was curled around one of the fingers her mother held the bottle with, as if afraid she would take it away. Awestruck, he watched as his daughter wiggled slightly, murmuring in contentment at her full belly.

Ruben didn't know he'd moved to stand over them until Beth looked up, forcing his gaze from the baby to her. The love and pride evident on her face brought tears to his eyes and he let them fall freely. He sank to his knees, drawn closer to the strange little person he'd never met. Reaching out with his fingertip, he traced a feather light path across the back of his baby's fat knuckles, smiling through his tears as her hand flexed open at his touch.

Bethany caressed his cheek, bringing his attention back to her. She was crying too, looking at him with such gratitude that he broke down. Dropping his head forward onto her chest, he fought to control the tears overwhelming him. The hand in his hair was comforting as he let go of months of frustration and loneliness. The baby began to fuss, causing him to pull back. The tiny bundle opened her eyes, gazing at him sleepily before her lids drifted shut almost instantly.

'She's got your eyes,' he whispered to Beth in amazement. He'd only seen them briefly, but the piercing green shade was exactly the same.

Beth smiled. 'I know. I'd hoped she would have yours...' She fell silent as he shook his head at the notion. 'I named her Tiana,' she said, unaware that he already knew.

He tested it out loud for the first time. *Tiana*. It suited her. The beautiful dark haired girl looked like a Tiana. About to ask her last name, he thought better of it, unsure he could control his reaction if Beth had chosen to use her own. The thought was sobering, reminding him that there was much to talk about.

Moving away to sit on the bed, he was happy to watch as Bethany finished the feeding, getting up carefully to place the sleeping bundle back in her crib. Gesturing he should follow her as she moved passed him, Bethany left the room, clicking off the light.

Directing him into the living room, she retrieved the bottle of wine and an extra glass for herself from the kitchen. He watched her move around the room, avoiding his eyes. He understood her nerves totally. No more prepared than her to start a conversation that would undoubtedly prove to be a very emotional one, he took a long sip of his wine.

Watching her silently as she settled into the leather recliner opposite, he became aware, with a flush of heat to his groin, that she was naked under the robe. The brief flash of inner thigh he'd seen as she leaned forward to retrieve her glass made that obvious. He guessed now wasn't the time or place for these feelings, but he couldn't feel ashamed of the way he was reacting to her nearness. The woman he had loved for the past year, and fantasized endlessly about for many months, was in front of him, looking adorable despite her attire. In the other room, his baby daughter slept soundly. If there was a more potent combination in this world he didn't know what it was. He felt masculine, strong and protective...and charged to the hilt with sexual energy.

The doorbell rang then. Bethany looked at him expectantly, as if he would know who it was. Shrugging, he followed her as she moved to answer it.

'What on earth...' Bethany said, as she looked through the spy hole before opening the door. Donna and Tyla stood on the other side. Tyla's face was tearstained and her mother looked ready to explode until she saw him standing behind Bethany and the color drained from her face.

'You'd better let me in, Sis,' Donna said, pushing her daughter through the entrance before her. Bethany led them all into the kitchen, closing the door behind her in case the baby woke.

Ruben caught Tyla's eye. 'Are you okay?' he asked quietly, concerned that he'd gotten her into trouble.

'She's fine,' Donna interrupted, 'but I think she owes her aunt an apology.'

Bethany's eyes flew from one face to the other in bemusement. 'I think somebody better tell me what's going on.'

‘Well,’ Donna began, sending a scathing look in her daughter’s direction, ‘somebody decided to go see Ruben tonight.’ He looked down at his feet, not wanting to add to the bonfire the poor kid had burning under her. ‘I wouldn’t have known anything about it either, except I was going through her pockets when she got home and found a wad of autographs. So I asked her what had happened.’ Donna placed an arm around her daughter, supportive despite her anger. ‘Anyway, long story short, she has never been able to lie to me. It didn’t take long to find out she’d let slip about Tiana.’

‘I forced it out of her,’ he was compelled to say. ‘She mentioned about Beth having sleepless nights and I wouldn’t drop it until she told me what she meant.’ It wasn’t entirely true, but it was good enough.

Donna waved a dismissive hand at him. ‘It’s nice of you to try and protect her, Ruben, but she should never have been there. She was banned from going to your concert tonight.’

Tyla burst into tears, rushing into Bethany’s arms. ‘I’m sorry, Aunt Beth. I was worried about you and I just wanted to fix it. You were so tired and bummed out all the time. I thought I should tell Ruben he needed to see you. I didn’t mean to tell him about the baby. It was so, like, an accident.’

‘Darling, its okay.’ Bethany soothed. ‘Maybe you are wiser than your years.’ She raised her eyes to look at him then, sending him a message that she was glad he knew...and that he was here.

Donna cleared her throat. ‘Well, I wouldn’t have rushed over if I’d known you had company,’ she said, cocking her head comically in Ruben’s direction. Bethany laughed, the love of her quirky sister evident on her face. ‘Seeing as we are here though, I think the least we can do to make up for it is to take the baby for the night.’

‘Oh yes, we’ll look after her,’ Tyla enthused, looking up into her aunt’s face. Ruben could tell she was about to refuse.

‘Beth? We do need to talk,’ he said, turning instinctively towards her sister for backup.

Donna was less tactful. ‘Bethany Shaw, can you for once in your life stop being so stubborn?’ Closing the gap between them, she clasped her sister’s hand. ‘You owe him this, Beth.’

Bethany nodded. ‘You are right. We do need to talk.’ Her eyes bore into his.



Donna moved to leave the room. ‘Okay, come and help me get the baby ready, Tyla.’

‘No—don’t disturb her,’ he said. ‘Beth, wouldn’t it be easier to ask them to stay here with Tiana? We can book into a hotel.’

Beth turned hopeful eyes to her sister. ‘Is that okay?’

Donna looked at Ruben. ‘Not only gorgeous but smart too!’ Her saucy wink made them all laugh. He knew he’d found a new friend and an ally in his fight for Beth. Donna turned her attention to her sister. ‘So, are you wearing that?’

‘Oh God, no,’ Beth laughed, looking down at her robe. She managed to tell him she would be right back just before her sister dragged her from the room.

## Chapter 23

The ride over in the limo was easier than she'd hoped. Ruben made it plain that he bore no anger over her deception. She began to explain her reasons for not telling him, reminding him of their last meeting before he stopped her.

'I remember every word we said to each other, Beth. I played it over and over in my mind a million times.' He shook his head, as if amazed at his own stupidity. 'I know I told you I wasn't ready for children.'

Bethany latched onto his words, grateful for a chance to explain. 'I was in shock myself. I hadn't expected to see you at all, and certainly not so soon after finding out I was carrying our child.' She turned away from him then, shame making her hide. 'In all honesty, you did me a favor by giving me a reason not to tell you. I was looking for a way out of having to confess.'

'I understand.'

'I am glad you know now, but oh my God Ruben, I am so sorry.' Her voice cracked then as the guilt she had felt for months finally surfaced. 'I stole something precious from you. You had a right to be involved in Tiana's life from the minute she was conceived and to share in the experience of her birth. I can never give that back to you,' she cried.

'I am a firm believer that things happen for a reason, Beth. If I hadn't acted the way I did over the paternity test, you would never have left. You are not to blame for making the best of a situation that was forced on you.' She kissed him gratefully, wondering what madness had possessed her to ever let him go.

'What about Simon?' Ruben asked quietly, watching her intently for any reaction to the mention of his name. 'You saw him, didn't you?'

Bethany was stunned. 'How did you know?'

'I came to see you a week after you resigned.' He sighed, obviously finding it hard to talk about. 'You weren't home so I waited. When I saw your car pull up and Simon get out of the driving seat, I assumed he was back in your life.'

'You were there? Oh my God, Ruben. Why didn't you let me know?'

'I almost lost my mind when I saw his arms around you. When you went into the house together, I took off.' He spoke so quietly that she could barely hear him over the noise outside the car. 'What happened, Beth?'

She placed a hand on either side of his face, making him look at her and take in every word. 'Nothing happened, Ruben. Absolutely nothing.' She could see in his eyes that he believed her.

'He came to the office, trying to talk me into going back to him and I was in the middle of telling him that hell would freeze over first when I got so sick to my stomach.' She smiled. 'I guess the baby didn't like him much either.' His grin reassured her, but she continued, wanting to tell him everything. 'He insisted on bringing me home. And I'm glad he did.'

'Glad?'

'Yes,' she smiled quickly to reassure him. 'We talked. Said the things that needed to be said.' He nodded to show he understood. 'Simon is in therapy now. I guess he hoped I would give him another chance now that he was getting help.'

'What did you tell him?'

'I didn't have to tell him anything, Ruben. He could see I was in love with someone else.' Bethany kissed him again. 'He told me to do whatever it took to make myself happy. I haven't heard from him since.'

'I am such an idiot,' he said, without anger. 'If only I had stayed that day...made you see me.'

His reaction had unnerved her. She'd expected anger, not this calm maturity he'd developed since the last time they'd been together. He'd changed the subject then, wanting to know everything about the birth.

A short time later, Bethany sat gingerly on the edge of the huge bed dominating the bedroom of a Penthouse suite. Ruben had excused himself to the bathroom, allowing her an opportunity to catch her breath. Life with him had always been a whirlwind so she wasn't surprised to find her head was spinning.

Walking over to the windows, she waited for him to return in the semi-darkness. The bright lights of The Strip below illuminated the ceiling of the suite, casting an almost ethereal glow. She heard him enter the room and waited for him to appear beside her. Turning when he didn't, she found him leaning in the doorway, staring at her.

He approached slowly, looking as terrified as she felt. His heart was in his eyes and Bethany knew he was scared to make a wrong move and be pushed away. A desire to give him back everything she'd taken from him drove her actions as she threw her bag onto the bed and began to unbutton her dress. Ruben froze, his eyes on her hands, following their path.

Dressed only in her underwear, she closed the gap between them, placing her hands on his face as she kissed him. His welcoming groan echoed her own emotions and she pressed hard against his taut body, marveling that she ever been able to let him go. Her actions were urgent as the desire to have him inside her became overwhelming. Ripping the T-shirt over his head, she grappled with his belt, freeing him quickly from his jeans.

Ruben kicked off his boots as he stepped out of the last of his clothing. Bethany moved to touch him again, but he picked her up, half carrying and half falling onto the bed with her. His hands were everywhere at once as they kissed. She in turn clutched at him desperately, needing to feel all of him.

Kneeling suddenly, he helped her out of her panties as she rapidly shed her bra. Her firm breasts drew his attention immediately and his mouth fell on them hungrily, sucking at one as he caressed the other. Bethany squirmed against him, loving what he was doing, but needing him inside her. Pushing him away gently, she opened her legs wide, allowing him to slip into the gap between them.

'Beth, I am trying to be gentle with you,' he said through gritted teeth as she rubbed her pelvis against him, trying to force him inside.

'You can be gentle later,' she said as she surprised him by dropping a hand down between them to grasp him firmly and slide the tip of his penis into her. She felt the deep rumble in his chest on her lips where they lay pressed against his throat. Turning her head, she bit gently into the firm skin of his shoulder, her hands clutching at his ass, showing him what she needed.

Ruben recovered his composure quickly, taking over. Her arms fell back onto the bed as she reveled in his possession of her body. Every time he thrust into her, Bethany groaned her encouragement, vocalizing her need. She tried to stop him as he shifted position until she felt the flat of his hand against her nub. Raising her head, she looked down at the place their bodies joined and watched as his fingers drove her nearer and nearer to orgasm. She turned her head, biting into the arm supporting his weight, the muscles rigid with the tension.

‘Oh God, Beth...I love you...I love you so much,’ he groaned as she began to come. Her face contorted as she fought to keep her eyes on his, losing the battle ultimately as his own orgasm began, causing him to pound into her relentlessly.

He collapsed on top of her briefly, before trying to lift his weight off her. Bethany pulled him down, hooking her ankles over his back to stop him moving away. She had missed the feel of him and was in no rush for it to end. He relaxed against her then, sliding his arms under her back to crush her to him.

‘Ruben,’ she whispered against his ear. ‘I forgot to tell you something.’ She felt him tense before raising his head to stare into her eyes.

‘What?’

‘I forgot to tell you I love you.’

\* \* \* \*

He awoke later as she tiptoed back from the bathroom. She slipped quietly into bed, obviously thinking he was still asleep. Bethany almost jumped out of her skin as his warm arm slipped around her waist.

‘Ruben! You scared me,’ she exclaimed.

‘I am sorry, Beth,’ he said. ‘I can’t keep my hands off you.’

She groaned quietly as he caressed her breast with his large hand. Sliding slowly across the bed, he rubbed his erection against the cleft of her buttocks, demonstrating his need for her. She pushed back against him with an answering moan. Turning her over firmly, he kissed her.

‘You are amazing,’ he whispered against her mouth. He felt her answering smile against his lips.

His erection lay heavily in the valley between her legs and she writhed against it. Ruben had no intention of allowing her to take the lead this time. He lifted his body from her. Bethany groaned as he broke the contact. He held her eyes as he smoothed his hand down over her abdomen to cup her exposed flesh. She grasped at the covers as he pushed a long finger into her. Ruben didn't think he would ever get over the way she responded to him. Hoarsely, he groaned that her wetness excited him as he reached up to kiss her. She sucked his lip into her mouth, grazing her teeth over it.

'I've never been this way with anyone else,' she whispered brokenly, his incessant thrusting causing her voice to tremble.

He took the time to kiss every inch of her, acquainting himself with the newly ample curve of her hips and breasts. Sadness clutched at him as he trailed his lips over her stomach, wishing desperately he had been part of her pregnancy. He would have loved to watch her belly grow as his daughter came into being.

He consoled himself with the knowledge that there would be more children. Not yet...not until she was ready and their relationship was on solid ground again.

She seemed to sense his mood, smoothing a hand over his dark head. He smiled at her, concentrating instead on the bliss of being with her again. Moving up over her quickly, he slid into her easily, causing the breath to catch in her throat.

Watching every reaction move across her face, he thrust into her with slow, measured strokes. He needed to feel every sensation, hear every sound. The desire to fuse his body totally with hers drove him on as he lifted her legs around his waist to sink deeper into her. The first warning tightening of her pussy told him she was about to come almost before she knew, and he raised his eyes to watch as she bit down onto her lip before throwing her head back on a gasp. Her hands grabbed at him blindly, urging him further inside.

'Beth,' he rasped, every sensation coursing through him suddenly combining. He couldn't move, buried deep inside her as the orgasm robbed him of control. Long moments passed before he became aware he was crushing her.

'Don't pull away,' she whispered as he made to move. 'Stay with me,' she said sleepily, eyelids already getting heavy. Rolling slightly to the side,

he smoothed the hair from her hot, sticky face as he watched her drift off to sleep. Pulling her closer, he draped himself around her body, sudden exhaustion taking him over.

He didn't know what he'd ever done in life to get this lucky. His arms were full of the woman he was crazy about and he couldn't imagine ever being happy again without her.

\* \* \* \*

Bethany woke with a start...Tiana! Sitting up in bed in blind panic for a moment, her heartbeat returned to normal as she flopped back onto the pillows, closing her eyes as she remembered where she was and why the baby hadn't woken her.

Realizing the reason she had been awake nearly all night wasn't in bed anymore, she creaked open a reluctant eyelid and scanned the room. Spotting him on the balcony, she saw through the closed glass door that he was on the phone. He should have that thing surgically attached she thought, a little put out not to be woken by him, urgent with the need to have her again. She was getting greedy. He'd more than made up for the time they had spent apart.

She watched as he paced back and forth, hands gesturing wildly as he disagreed strongly with whoever was on the other end of the phone. Putting his nose against the glass, he peered into the room, smiling as he saw she was awake. Bethany decided it was time he paid her a little more attention. Turning onto her side to lean on her elbow, she held the sheet across her breasts as she hooked a leg over it, exposing the curve of her hip. Still on the phone, he came to her immediately, standing at the foot of the bed and allowing his eyes to make a slow inventory of her body.

'I don't care,' he shouted into the phone suddenly, winking at her to show he wasn't as angry as he sounded. 'I will be back this afternoon. You can reschedule the studio time for then.' He snapped the phone shut quickly before laughing at his own audacity. Bethany asked who he had been speaking to.

'The record label,' he grimaced. 'They are so gonna sue my ass.' Laughing at her shocked expression, he threw himself on the bed next to

her, almost bouncing her out of it. So much for her attempt at early morning seduction.

Squinting at her watch, she elbowed him in the ribs when she saw the time. 'It's six am! Even Tiana doesn't wake me up this early.'

'Baby, I am sorry. It's just I can't wait to get back and see her.'

'Same here—I miss her so much,' Beth laughed.

'Tiana.' He said the name again, rolling it around on his tongue. It sounded so much better when spoken with his accent, Beth told him. 'Tiana, Tiana, Tiana,' he said, punctuating each one with kisses on her neck and shoulder. His hand began to wander over her skin until she reminded him that if he didn't stop now they wouldn't leave for ages and that she had a perfectly good bed at home.

'You're right,' he said, leaping to his feet and grappling into his jeans with amazing efficiency considering his state of arousal.

Bethany fell back against the pillows, the lump in her throat almost painful. His obvious delight at being a father elated her. Even during their time apart, she had known he still loved her. Ruben didn't give his heart easily, but he'd given it to her and she knew it was for life.

Dropping to his knees at the side of the bed, he scanned her eyes, searching for the reason she was crying. Bethany smiled, pulling him down for a kiss, showing him in the only way she could that she was in love and deliriously happy.

'Come on Ruben,' she said, getting to her feet. 'Let's go get our baby.'

\* \* \* \*

Angie tailed the limo. Only the knowledge that Ruben was in the car stopped her from trying to ram it off the road. Eyes blinded by the early morning sun and her tears, and with thoughts screaming through her head, she had to focus hard to keep a grip on the rage building in her.

She had never again expected to feel the agony she had the night before when she'd seen them leave Bethany's house together, hand in hand. For one moment of blind panic, she'd thought Ruben was taking her home with him. When the limo had stopped outside a hotel, she had been confused, but grateful. Maybe it was just one night for old time's sake?



Trying in vain to book a room herself, she'd been forced to return to her car, unwilling to find another hotel, as she wanted to remain close. The young girl she had seen in Ruben's car had stayed at Bethany's house with a woman Angie had assumed was her mother, so the opportunity to break in and wreck the place had been lost. She'd had no choice but to wind down the seat and try to get comfortable.

From her position in the car, hidden in a dark corner of the hotel parking lot, she had lain for hours, eyes staring upward to where she thought they would be, while her mind taunted her with images of them together. Angie's only hope had been that her vivid imagination was far more deviant than they could ever be.

Thankfully, they had left the hotel very early. Following them now, her tears dried as she watched the dawn break over Vegas—vowing silently that it would be the last morning she would ever spend as Ruben's 'other' woman.

## Chapter 24

Ruben felt as if everything he had done in his entire life had been in preparation for this very moment. Beth had just placed Tiana in his arms, and then stood back to watch him as he stared down at the sleeping infant with a mixture of fear, curiosity and awe. Looking to her for reassurance, he smiled through his tears.

‘Am I holding her right?’

Bethany caressed his head. ‘You are doing fine.’

He hadn’t dared dream of this moment. All those months he had spent feeling totally alone and guilty over his deception, he had never thought things would work out so perfectly. The thought that he would have to leave soon threatened to darken the mood and he pushed it from his mind—knowing that the separation would only be temporary. Bethany offered to take Tiana from him, but Ruben wasn’t ready to let her go. From the moment they had walked into the house he had been desperate to hold his daughter and had lurked in the background, afraid to approach the child who already meant so much to him.

Donna and her daughter had taken good care of the baby. Bethany had hurried them out, sensing that he was keen to some spend time alone with his new ‘family’. He felt a little guilty, as they had woken the pair on their return to the house, but her sister seemed to understand.

Ruben had drawn Tyla to one side as they prepared to leave, thanking her solemnly for displaying wisdom beyond her years. Quite predictably, she’d gone beet red and shuffled awkwardly in front of him until her mother had come to the rescue.

Tiana started to fuss and wriggle in his arms before letting out a thin wail of protest at being held so gingerly. Reluctantly handing her over to Bethany, he saw the bond between mother and child and felt a pang of jealousy. Tiana didn’t know who he was and had not liked being held by a

stranger, he guessed. It was nobody's fault but his own that his daughter didn't know him yet and he swore silently that he would spend every waking moment making it up to her.

'Are you okay?' Beth's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. 'Do you want to help me bathe her?'

His enthusiastic nod made her laugh, and he followed her to the bathroom. Watching her take care of their daughter made him proud. *What did he ever do right in his life to deserve such an amazing woman?* Surprising Bethany, he reached forward to lift her face to his.

'I love both of you so much, Beth,' he said, as he swallowed down the tears he could feel building. Laughing at himself, he rubbed them away with a fist. He had to get a grip on his emotions—even the baby didn't cry this often.

'I love you too, Ruben, and I will never be able to thank you enough for the way you have forgiven me.' Planting a firm kiss on her lips to silence yet another apology, he leaned over the bath, marveling at the perfection of his child.

His cell phone rang abruptly then, causing the baby to jump before wailing in alarm and he swore aloud as he fumbled for it.

'That language is gonna have to stop now there is a baby around,' Beth warned, giving him a mock stern look.

*That isn't the only thing that is going to have to stop,* he thought as he saw Byron's number on the display. His short term schedule couldn't be changed, but Ruben wasn't looking forward to the confrontation he would have with the record company once he told them that he wasn't prepared to spend so much time away from home anymore. He knew Byron would understand. *It wouldn't hurt him to slow down a little either.* Ruben felt sure that a change in lifestyle would be better for both of them.

Finishing the call quickly, he stuck his head back through the door, about to apologize and explain that he would soon have to go. Bethany cut him off.

'Don't tell me, you have to leave,' she said, without anger. 'It's okay Ruben. I didn't expect you to be able to stay long this time.' Cradling the now dressed Tiana, she kissed his cheek before leading him into the bedroom and settling the baby in her crib.

‘This has been an emotional few hours for both of us,’ she smiled. ‘I don’t know about you, but I am exhausted.’ Following the direction of his gaze, she looked down and saw that the t-shirt she had on was wet from holding the baby and that his eyes were fixed on her breasts. Bethany laughed, obviously not aware of how her newly dark nipples drove him crazy—especially as they were now, taunting him through the wet fabric.

‘Not too exhausted, I hope,’ Ruben said as he walked toward her, encouraged by her laughter.

Bethany gasped as he ripped the t-shirt over her shoulders and pulled off her bra. ‘Ruben, do we have enough time for this?’ she asked, but helped him out of his clothes anyway.

‘The car will be here in about five minutes,’ he grunted against her neck, ‘but I am so hot for you right now, I won’t need that long.’ Bethany laughed again, pushing him back onto the bed before straddling him. Ruben stopped her with an outstretched hand.

‘Is it okay? To do it here, I mean. In front of the baby?’

Bethany smiled. ‘She’s asleep silly. And far too young to be corrupted if she wasn’t.’ He raised his head, intending to look over into the crib to check, but forgot about it when Beth slid down, sheathing his penis with her body.

Minutes later, he laughed ruefully. He’d been right, although he hadn’t expected to finish quite so quickly. He was tempted to use their last few moments together giving her the orgasm she had told him they didn’t have time for. His plans were interrupted by the doorbell.

Getting to his feet, he looked down into the crib before brushing a soft kiss on his daughter’s cheek. He couldn’t wait until the time came when he would never have to leave them again. Slipping into his jeans and shirt, he waited until Bethany donned a robe before sneaking one last look at Tiana and walking quickly out into the house, feet still bare.

Opening the door to wave an acknowledgment to the driver, he dropped the shoes and jacket he held onto the floor, crushing her to his chest.

‘I will phone you tonight,’ he said. ‘We have a lot to discuss.’

Hurting at the tears in Bethany’s eyes, he kissed her. ‘Beth, we will do whatever it takes—live wherever you want. The only important thing is that we are together, okay?’ She tried to smile as she nodded. ‘Just give me a few days to sort things out.’

'I love you,' she whispered against his lips as he leaned in for a final kiss before stepping quickly through the door.

Checking that she had gone back in the house before sliding into the limo, he turned to find Byron staring at him expectantly. 'Well?'

Ruben shook his head, still unable to believe the words he was about to utter. 'Byron. I'm a father.' The tension hung between them—neither man speaking as they stared at each other silently. Byron looked shell-shocked and, for once in his life, seemed at a loss for words.

Finally Ruben could stand it no more, letting out a raucous laugh as he wrestled Byron into a headlock before pressing a resounding kiss on the bald spot on top of his head.

\* \* \* \*

A sudden and unexpected chime of her doorbell made Bethany jump. Getting up to answer it, she scanned the room quickly. *Had Ruben left something behind? Maybe he had decided to stay?* The thought quickened her steps and she flung the door open wide, forgetting her usual cautious nature and the chain she always slid into place before answering it.

The young woman standing on the threshold was not who she was expecting to see. Bethany didn't know her but she did look familiar. *Maybe it was a neighbor?*

'Can I help you?' she asked.

'No—but I can help you,' the woman said, a little too mysteriously for Bethany's liking. Taking a casual step back, she braced a foot against the inside of the door.

'I don't understand. How can you help me? Who are you?'

'Oh, you don't know me. My name is Angie—and I have come to talk to you about Ruben.'

Bethany was losing patience. 'What about Ruben?'

'Well, for a start I know he was just here,' the woman snapped, looking around quickly before stepping closer to the entrance. 'I think you would prefer it if we didn't discuss this on the street.'

The rather pretty young woman was beginning to make her uneasy. 'Well, Angie—is that your name? I think I would prefer not to discuss

anything with you at all.' Bethany stepped back to shut the girl out, almost closing the door when suddenly it hit her in the chest, sending her sprawling.

Angie slammed it shut behind her as she entered, stepping over Bethany before making her way into the living area.

'What the fuck do you think you are doing?' Bethany asked, fear making her voice shake as she scrambled to her feet.

'I need to talk to you. It's very important and I couldn't let you simply ignore me.' The young woman flopped down into the leather recliner, intent on staying.

'Get out or I will call the police,' Bethany said, picking up the telephone.

'I don't think so...' Angie let the sentence hang as she reached into her bag, pulling out a hunting knife that she laid on the arm of the chair, watching her all the while.

Bethany's mind raced through the possible courses of action open to her. If she fought the woman and lost, then there was nothing to stop Angie from getting to Tiana. She could run from the house in the hope that the woman would follow, but it was just too risky.

She had no choice but to bide her time and wait for an opportunity to present itself. Maybe the woman would become distracted enough for Bethany to sneak up and hit her with something, or steal the knife from under her nose. Of course, if Angie attacked her, then she had nothing to lose and would fight with everything she had to keep this woman away from her baby—the baby she prayed would sleep soundly enough not to make her presence known.

'What did you want to talk about?' Keeping one eye on the knife, she perched on the end of the sofa, as far away as she could get.

Angie didn't answer straight away, giving Bethany the opportunity to have a good look at her. In her early twenties, the woman was slight and pretty with long legs and baby blonde hair. She didn't look physically capable of harming anyone, but Bethany didn't like the look in her cornflower blue eyes. They had a steely edge that was muted slightly by the dark rings under them, caused by an obvious lack of sleep.

A look of pure hatred marred her lovely face as she leaned forward to speak. 'I want you to keep out of my relationship with Ruben.'

'What relationship?'

‘We have been sleeping together, on and off, for about three years.’

Bethany answered without thinking, confusion and hurt at Angie’s statement making her forget the delicate situation. ‘I have been seeing Ruben for the last year. I think I would have heard about you.’

‘He didn’t tell me about you either,’ Angie smirked. ‘I guess we’ve both been played?’ The smile died on her face as she leaned forward. ‘We were together before he even met you. Point is, I’m sick of you coming between us.’

‘Look, I don’t think it’s really me you should be talking to.’ Bethany couldn’t believe a word she was hearing, simply because she had been with Ruben day and night during the tour; however it didn’t seem wise to call the woman a liar. ‘What does Ruben say about all this?’

Angie shrugged. ‘I guess when we got back together after he dumped me the first time, he thought I wouldn’t find out about you.’ She picked up the knife, digging the tip into the leather, cutting idle patterns into the hide as she spoke. ‘To tell you the truth, I didn’t expect to see you again after you left him in Budapest.’

Bethany was shocked. ‘How did you know about that?’

‘I know much more than you realize.’ Her grip on the knife tightened. ‘Like the trip you took from Vegas with him on his jet and the first time you fucked him in that hotel in LA.’

‘Ruben told you that?’ She doubted it but how else could Angie have known?

‘What do you think Bethany,’ she smiled. ‘He couldn’t keep you his dirty little secret for long.’

Bethany realized she was in trouble—Ruben would never have told Angie anything so personal—and especially not where she lived. ‘That doesn’t explain how you knew Ruben was with me last night,’ she said, the need to know what was going on temporarily winning out over her rapidly deepening sense of dread. If the woman was as crazy as she’d begun to seem, then Bethany had to find a way to get her out of the house and away from Tiana. ‘Did you follow him here?’

The question flustered Angie. Running hands through her hair, she exposed her wrists. Bethany noticed the scars—scars that didn’t look much more than a few months old. She knew then that the woman meant to harm her.

She couldn't know about Tiana. *Shit, even Ruben hadn't known.* If Angie did follow him as closely as she appeared to, then she wouldn't have been anywhere near Bethany in months. The problem was how to get her out of the house before she found out.

Bethany changed tack, hoping to confuse and disorientate the girl just long enough to be able to summon help. 'You know, Angie, I am glad you told me this.'

'You are?' she asked wide-eyed, not looking entirely convinced.

'Yes, I am. It's about time Ruben realized he can't treat me this way.' Bethany jumped to her feet, pacing back and forth as if in a rage. 'I wish that bastard had still been here when you arrived. Let him try and deny it with you facing him.'

'What would you say to him?' she asked.

'I'd tell him it was over and that I never wanted to see him again.' Bethany saw that Angie was pleased at the turn of events, so she played to her audience. 'I knew he was thinking about someone else most of the time we were together. I guess I just ignored it, wanting to believe it was me that he loved.'

Moving carefully away, Bethany put the sofa between her and Angie, talking fast to distract her attention. 'God, I hate him. I just wish he was here so I could tell him to his face.'

Angie continued to watch her silently, apparently taking in everything Bethany had to say. She seemed to be weighing up her options, deciding what to do next. Suddenly, she spoke. 'You could call him,' she suggested.

'Do you think so? What should I say?' This was going better than Bethany had hoped.

'Don't mention me or tell him I'm here. Just say that you never want to see him again—say that you know he is in love with another woman.' Angie leaned forward, fixing Bethany with a cold stare as she began to turn the knife between her hands. 'I am going to be listening very carefully to every word you say. Don't make me angry with you, Bethany.'

Heart thumping hard, she nodded silently. Picking up her phone and beginning to dial before Angie could change her mind, her brain raced, wondering how much she could say. Praying that he answered the phone she took a step nearer the door.



‘Hello?’ She could tell from the way he answered that he was surprised to hear from her so soon. ‘Everything okay?’

‘No, Ruben, everything is not okay,’ she said, hoping her voice was more convincing than it sounded to her own ears. ‘I don’t want to see you anymore.’

‘Bethany—what’s wrong?’

‘Nothing is wrong. I have simply come to my senses.’ Daring another step backwards, she prayed Angie was focused on what she was saying, rather than what she was doing. Ruben seemed to be stunned into silence by what she had said, making it impossible to turn the conversation to her advantage. ‘I finally realized that you are in love with someone else.’

Her worst fears were realized as she heard a faint whimper coming from down the hall. Glancing quickly at Angie to see if she had heard the baby, she knew the time had come to up the stakes and ensure the safety of her child. Turning on her heel suddenly, she ran to the door, trying to tell Ruben as quickly and clearly as she could what was going on.

‘Get help quick—there’s a woman with a knife,’ she screeched, fear making her voice rise as she heard Angie’s shouted curse and the sound of her footsteps approaching. Reaching the door, she flung it wide, running wildly out onto the drive with Angie close behind her. Ducking to the left, she forced herself to stay put until Angie raced through the doorway, looking for her. It only took a split second for the woman to stop, realize where she was and make a grab for her, but it was just long enough for Bethany to swing the door shut – trapping them both outside whilst locking the child safely inside the house.

‘Bethany! Bethany, answer me!’ She could hear Ruben frantically shouting her name as she managed to twist her arm from Angie’s grip and began running again, around the side of the house.

‘Angie...she’s here...threatened me to stay away...from you.’

A sudden, violent force sent her sprawling to the ground and the phone flying out of her hand. Scrambling to retrieve it, she felt a knee in the center of her back, forcing her to stay down. Angie’s hand reached down into her line of vision and retrieved the phone.

‘You forced me to do this, Ruben,’ she heard her say. Bethany strained to listen to his reply, praying that he wouldn’t say anything to infuriate

Angie any further. She spoke again. 'Oh, she's here...but she won't be in our way for much longer.'

## Chapter 25

*Angie?* He didn't know an Angie. Ruben froze in confusion for a split second, scanning his memory for her. He didn't have time to think. Whether he remembered her or not, she seemed convinced they knew each other and that Bethany was keeping them apart.

'Don't you hurt her,' Ruben yelled into the phone. Byron stared at him in alarm, unsure what to do before following Ruben's frantic gestures and instructing the driver to turn the car around.

Angie screamed in rage. 'Why do you love her so much, Ruben? What makes her better than me?' He could hear the bitter tears in her voice. 'Why do you keep hurting me?'

Byron caught his eye, mouthing soundlessly that he should call the police. Ruben shook his head covering the phone with a hand to whisper that the woman had Bethany at knifepoint and that they shouldn't do anything to put her in more danger.

'Angie, don't do anything hasty.'

'I'm tired of being lonely. She's in the way and I can't wait any longer for you to be free.'

Ruben decided that keeping her on the line and saying whatever she wanted to hear was the best way to keep Bethany safe. 'If you hurt her, then we will never be together.'

'Because you love her so much?' Angie laughed. 'In that case, then I have nothing to lose.'

'No,' he shouted before managing to calm his voice. 'I...I mean that we can't be together if you end up in jail, Angie.' Encouraged by her silence, he ploughed on. 'Let me meet you, talk with you,' he pleaded.

Her bitter laugh did nothing to calm his nerves. 'Why would you want to talk to me? You don't even remember me.'

Ruben struggled to read the frantically scrawled note Byron held in front of his face. "*Angie—wasn't that the name of the girl you were with the night you got lost in LA?*"

Realization dawned. *Oh God—Byron was right.* He'd regretted that night ever since, knowing it was a mistake, but never realizing that it would come back to haunt him this way. Damning his own stupidity, he was at least grateful that he now knew who was on the other end of the line.

Using the information to his advantage, he forced a friendliness that he didn't feel into his voice. 'Of course I remember you, Angie. That night with you in LA was one of the best ever.' He heard her gasp. 'I was angry the next day when I realized I had been too drunk to get your number. I've been looking for you ever since.'

'But you called out her name,' she cried, sounding a little less sure of herself.

'I did?'

'Yes. How can you say you enjoyed being with me when you were thinking of her?'

*Damn!* Unable to think of a logical explanation, he tried to refocus her attention. 'I did warn you I was drunk,' he said smoothly, 'but not too drunk to remember how hot you were that night.'

'Then why were you with her in a hotel room all last night?'

*How the hell did she know about that?* Ruben worked out quickly that she must have been following him. 'It was just a one off as I was in town,' he lied, 'but I wish I had known you were here. I would much rather have spent the night with you.' Her feminine laugh bolstered his confidence, confirming that he was on the right track. 'I can't wait to see you again. Let me come get you.'

'Now?'

'Why not?'

She began to sound worryingly flustered again. 'I can't leave her here...she will call the police as soon as I go.' Ruben could barely hear Bethany's faint voice in the background assuring Angie that she would take no action if she simply left right now.

*Thank God she is still okay,* he thought as he heard Angie scream at her to shut up. She didn't sound hurt and he prayed he would reach her before she came to any harm. The limo screeched around another corner and he

realized he was on Bethany's street. Just a few more minutes and he would be there.

'Bethany will do as I tell her, Angie—put her on the phone.' Sure she wouldn't fall for it, he was out of ideas and simply desperate to keep her mind occupied.

'I don't want you talking to her,' she said coldly. 'I don't trust her—or you for that matter.'

The car stopped outside the house and he leapt from it quickly, rushing up the path to ring the doorbell. 'She still works for me. Tell her if she doesn't want to lose her job, she will keep quiet about this.'

Ruben heard her repeat his words as he paced in frustration, wondering why there was no answer at the front door. He walked around peering through the windows, trying to catch a glimpse of them. Turning onto the path running along the side of the house, he paused, spotting Bethany laying flat on the ground with Angie straddling her, knife in one hand and phone in the other.

'Angie,' he said loudly as he disconnected the call. She jumped at the sound of his voice, scrambling to her feet as she dropped the phone, allowing Bethany the opportunity to crawl away from her with it, unnoticed.

She walked toward him—trancelike—the knife still clutched in her shaky fist. 'What are you doing here? I thought you had gone?'

'I came back to get you, Angie. Will you come with me?' He didn't know what the hell he would do with her if he did manage to get her away from the house, but he knew he had to try.

Glancing over her shoulder, he couldn't risk trying to send Beth any signals, but he took the opportunity to scan his eyes over her quickly, checking that she was okay. The frankly beautiful young woman continued to approach, wariness still showing in her eyes. 'It's so good to see you again. I've missed you so much, Angie.'

Sizing her up, he could see she was exhausted and barely keeping it together judging by the dark circles under her eyes and the shakes racking her body. A moment of sadness hit him—how could he have had such a devastating effect on the life of a woman he barely recognized. He knew he wasn't responsible for her mental instability, but it was still shocking to see it up close and to know that her happiness depended on him. Praying his

instincts that she wouldn't hurt him were right, he allowed her to walk into his embrace, knife still in hand.

'Ruben—watch out!' Bethany shouted, beginning to run forward.

Feeling Angie tense, as if to pull away, he held her firmly. 'Stay back,' he shouted. 'If I need your help Miss Shaw, I will ask for it.' He hoped Bethany would read his dismissive tone and understand what he was trying to do. They couldn't let Angie know the truth about their relationship or the depth of their connection. 'In fact, we don't need you at all. Go back into the house and wait until you receive further instructions from me.'

Putting Angie at arms length to look down into her face, he answered her trusting smile with, what he hoped, was a convincing one of his own. Sliding his hands down her arms, he held his breath as he reached the bunched fist still holding the knife. 'We don't need this...' he soothed, working her fingers loose, letting it fall to the floor.

'And you won't be needing this,' she said, quickly removing the phone from the pocket he had placed it into moments earlier, throwing it over her shoulder. He hoped she hadn't just taken away his only chance of calling for help if he needed it.

Placing a firm arm around her shoulders, he led her from the yard, down into the street toward the waiting limo. A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed what he already knew—Bethany was watching their departure with a look of sheer terror, tears streaming down her face. Able to do no more than throw her a wink and a smile before turning away, he hoped the display of a bravado he didn't feel would reassure her a little.

Byron and the driver stood waiting nervously at the side of the road, leaping forward as they saw him approach. Ruben decided then that he couldn't put Byron at risk either—who knew how this would play out? The driver would be safe ensconced behind the bulletproof glass separating him from the body of the limo.

Taking her hand to help her into the back seat, he realized she had no intention of letting go of him until he followed, robbing him of the opportunity to speak to his manager. Holding his ground for a brief moment, he turned to Byron, placing a hand on his chest to show him that he couldn't come with them. 'We're going to the hotel. Ring forward and arrange a room, will you?'

Staring hard into his worried eyes, he hoped Byron's usual intuition didn't fail him now. Ruben knew that he would be on the phone to the police the second he got a chance, but they hadn't used their regular hotel this time out. He'd had no intention of staying overnight before talking to Bethany's niece less than twenty-four hours earlier. *Shit, had it only been that long?*

Settling into the seat beside her as the limo pulled away, Ruben prayed Byron would send the police to the right hotel.

## Chapter 26

Angie clung to his arm, laying her face on his shoulder. Feeling the warmth of his body seep into her skin, she tried to commit it to memory—knowing that this would be the last time she would ever be with him.

*Ruben must think her stupid if he believed she had fallen for his lies.* She had watched him for too long and knew him too well to believe that his relationship with Bethany was a casual one.

She'd had to think fast when confronting her earlier that morning. There had been no doubt in her mind that Bethany would die, but her plans had been altered slightly. The stupid bitch had believed every word Angie had said, becoming convinced that Ruben had cheated on her. The chance to rob her of the one thing Angie could never have was impossible to resist. Bethany would die bereft of the love she thought was hers alone and Ruben would know how it felt to have something you cared about brutally ripped away from you.

But her plans had been sent into chaos when Bethany had tried to lead her away from the sound they had both heard—a baby's cry. Angie realized her mistake too late. She should have gone for the child. Ruben and his whore would have been at her command if she had only grabbed the child. *His child?*

Wasting time talking to him on the phone had been foolish, but she'd had no idea he was still so close. Once he'd arrived, she'd been unable to finish what she had started with so many witnesses around. The decision to abandon her plans for the time being had been an easy one when the opportunity to spend time with Ruben had presented itself. She was no fool and knew it was a ploy to keep Bethany and his child safe, but Angie wasn't strong enough to resist. If she allowed Ruben to walk away from her this time, she knew for sure that she could never again hide behind her



anonymity. *He would never forget her face.* This would be their last time together unless she could make him want her.

Angie could almost smell the fear radiating off him in waves. He'd fallen quiet, sitting beside her stiffly, allowing her hands to roam wherever they wanted. She dug her nails into his thigh, smiling in satisfaction as she felt him tense. Sliding a bold hand onto his groin, she massaged his cock through the denim of his jeans as she kissed his neck. He remained flaccid and lifeless under her hand. *Why wouldn't he respond? He had always been interested in her before.*

She pushed away from him in disgust. The shaky smile he tried to maintain as he asked what was wrong made her want to gag. He was only doing what he thought was necessary to protect the people he loved. Tears rolled down her face as she finally saw what she had known all along—he didn't want her—not now, not ever.

Angie began to speak, not really caring if he listened or not. She told him of the many nights she had lain waiting for the day she would be with him again. Of the hours she had watched him go about his day-to-day life without knowing she was there, loving and wanting him. About the agony of seeing him with someone else, when she had never been given the chance to show him what life with her would be like—how much she would cherish and love him. She spoke of their last night together in Los Angeles and the way hearing Bethany's name on his lips had almost ended her life and how her scars were a permanent reminder that their experience was real—not imagined.

His face drained of color as he picked up her wrists to look at the scars. Kissing one gently, he clasped her hands together in his, looking deep into her eyes...and he told her he was sorry. Angie watched a tear roll down his face as he continued to stare at her. The guilt and pain she saw in his eyes hurt more than anything she had ever known. She wanted his love, not his pity.

*His look turned to one of fear when she asked if he could ever love her. If he lied, she would know, but he didn't even try. Solemnly shaking his head, he couldn't hold her gaze as he saw her hope morph into pain at his reply.*

Ruben's offer of help wasn't what she wanted to hear at that moment. Angie wasn't surprised that he thought she needed to 'talk to someone'. He thought she was crazy.

He continued to speak but she wasn't listening to the words coming out of his mouth. She allowed his voice to trickle over and into her—felt his eyes on her face—and knew that the love she felt for him was unconditional. Bethany may have stolen everything she ever wanted but she could never take her love.

Finally, Ruben knew her...really knew her. *Angie*. Not some faceless fan with a crush on him. Not some stranger he had used and thrown away. She had made a personal connection with him that neither of them would ever forget. In the absence of any other emotion, she would settle for the knowledge that she would never again be a nameless face in the crowd. He knew her—a flesh and blood woman who loved him more than life itself.

Angie lifted a hand to smooth his face, touching him for what she knew would be the last time. He flinched away before regaining his composure, forcing himself to sit still for her touch although it clearly repulsed him. Ruben thought she would hurt him. Hadn't he listened? Didn't he know how much she loved him?

A flash of red caught her eye and she looked out of the back window, seeing for the first time the police cars following them silently. The brief moment she had stolen with him would soon be over, but she had no intention of watching him walk away from her ever again. She would be the one to leave this time.

Scooting away from him to perch on the edge of the seat, she waited until he looked away before grabbing the door handle. Angie paused, looking down at the road speeding away beneath them.

'I love you, Ruben,' she shouted as she flung open the door and jumped out. In that last brief moment, she saw the shock on his handsome face as he grabbed for her and she knew, finally, that he would never forget her.

She felt pain...searing pain...the ground ripping at her as she rolled over and over. Then a noise, louder than she had ever known...a large shadow racing towards her...the squeal of tires as it tried to stop. A bright glint of sunlight bouncing from the chrome...the roar of an engine...

...And then nothing...

\* \* \* \*

Bethany paced back and forth in front of the lounge windows, watching the street for a sign of Ruben.

The police had long since left, after informing her that the chase had come to an abrupt end and that Ruben was safe. Despite her persistent questions, they had refused to go into details, leaving her to wait and wonder about what may have happened. She guessed Angie was in custody, but kept the front door locked just in case. Bethany wondered if she would ever feel safe again.

Donna's touch on her shoulder made her jump. 'Hey, Beth. You have got to calm down. Come sit on the sofa with me.'

'I can't—not until he is here.'

Donna sighed, but didn't try to force her. 'Wonder what's taking so long?'

Bethany fought the urge to give voice to the thoughts that had been running through her brain for the last couple of hours. *Maybe if she didn't speak them out loud, they wouldn't be true?*

She turned to watch her sister rub a weary hand over tired eyes. Bethany felt totally responsible for her sister's exhaustion—caused entirely by the emotional roller-coaster ride that they had all been on in the last twenty-four hours. Donna had even offered to take the baby again when Ruben finally did return, but Bethany had said no, sensing that he would want and need to spend time with her and the baby. Donna had not argued, but refused to leave Bethany on her own until Ruben arrived.

Byron had left earlier with the police, insisting that they take him to Ruben despite their protests. Bethany had not been able to do the same. She didn't want Tiana out of her sight for even a second, but had no intention of taking her baby anywhere near that mad woman. Donna had turned up too late to allow her to leave with them.

Finally allowing her sister to coax her down onto a sofa, Bethany cast a protective look over at Tiana, still sleeping in blissful oblivion. Angie hadn't gotten anywhere near her daughter—*thank God*—but it had shaken Bethany to the core at just how close she had come to losing everything today. She shook away thoughts of how far the tortured young woman may have been prepared to go.

The doorbell rang, jolting Bethany to her feet. She ran to the door and almost flung it wide before fear grabbed at her. Checking the spy hole, she sobbed in relief as she saw Ruben's dark head. Opening the door to him, Bethany stepped back in shock as she saw his ashen face. He gave her a shaky smile that did nothing to make her feel better.

'Ruben. What's wrong?'

He didn't speak. Stepping in through the doorway, he pulled her to him, almost squeezing the breath from her lungs as he held her tightly. Bethany felt him begin to shake moments before she heard the first sobs begin. Casting a quick glance over her shoulder at Donna, she was relieved to see her sister gather her things before quietly slipping passed them and closing the door.

Bethany held onto him as tightly as she could, stroking his hair and talking to him quietly —telling him it was over and that they were all safe. Finally, he began to calm down, releasing his grip on her gradually before turning his back to wipe roughly at his face.

'I'm sorry, Beth. It should be me comforting you,' he said shakily, smiling a little more convincingly than he had before. 'Are you okay?' He grabbed her shoulders to stare hard into her face. Bethany nodded in reassurance.

'I need a drink,' he said gruffly, shrugging off his jacket and walking over to stare down at the sleeping baby. 'I don't know what I would have done if...if...' His voice broke and he turned away quickly, as if to shrug away the thought and the tears.

Bethany took his hand, forcing him to sit on the sofa as she got them both a brandy. Ruben threw his down in one gulp, holding the glass out to her again for a refill. Taking a small sip before placing the glass on a table, he held his arms out to her. She sat in his lap, needing to be as close as humanly possible after the experience they had all been through.

'Is it over now?' she whispered. 'Will Angie leave us alone?'

Ruben inhaled sharply, causing her to raise fearful eyes to his as he spoke. 'It's over, Bethany.' He closed his eyes. 'She won't bother us again.'

'Where is she?'

Ruben pushed her off his lap as he scrambled to his feet. Pacing briefly, obviously lost in his thoughts, he finally turned to her. 'I wasn't going to tell

you this, Beth, but I guess you will find out anyway.’ He dropped to his knees, gathering her hands in his. ‘Angie was very badly hurt.’

She gasped in shock. ‘How?’

Any color the brandy had restored to his cheeks quickly drained away. ‘Oh Beth, it was awful.’ He shook his head. ‘One minute, she was talking...telling me about the things she had done and how long she had followed me...and the next, she threw herself from the car.’

‘Oh my God!’

‘I tried to grab her, but it was too late. She was gone before I could react.’ Ruben closed his eyes, forcing himself to continue. ‘She was hit by one of the patrol cars following us.’

Bethany couldn’t speak. She hadn’t known the woman at all, but the news of the tragic turn of events left her shaken. *Why hadn’t anyone intervened?* Angie’s instability couldn’t have gone unnoticed for long by her loved ones?

‘Has anyone notified her family?’

Ruben flopped down onto the seat beside her. ‘She has an aunt in New York, but nobody else. Her father died last year, which according to the police is when her aunt lost contact with her until a recent suicide attempt.’

‘I wonder what happened to her—why did she become so obsessed with you?’ The question had been rhetorical, but the expression on Ruben’s face as he cast his eyes downward made her very nervous. ‘Ruben?’

He cleared his throat, obviously preparing himself before turning to face her. ‘There’s a lot more to this story that you need to know.’

## Chapter 27

Ruben sank down gratefully to rest in the shade of the small tree situated on an incline overlooking his parent's garden. The deep sense of peace resonating through him was a new experience and was taking some getting used to.

Shielding his eyes against the low evening sun, he scanned the faces of the people gathered below, looking for her. His eyes found her finally, sitting in the shade of the veranda, feeding their daughter. He smiled as he saw his mother fussing around the baby again. Beth had been really patient, allowing her to interfere constantly without complaint. Ruben felt grateful in a way he never thought he would.

The memory of the awful events of three months ago had finally begun to fade. They were all safe now and, after their wedding earlier that day, they were at last a family.

Ruben shuddered at the thought of how easily he had almost lost it all. After confessing to Bethany that he had actually caused Angie's obsession with him by sleeping with her—not once, but twice—he had been prepared for the worst.

Beth's reaction had surprised him. *Hell, she always surprised him.* She had listened quietly, letting him explain that he didn't even know her when he had first met Angie. Then, when they'd met again, he had been drunk and desperately miserable and hadn't even remembered the poor girl. Daring to look at her as he'd finished telling the story; he had been amazed and grateful to see compassion in her eyes.

Beth had told him that she loved him more than ever and that his ability to be open and honest with her—even at his own expense—was all she had ever needed from him. Ruben would never understand how admitting to something so awful had actually made his relationship stronger, but he was glad it had.

Shame at the thought of how easily he'd used and forgotten Angie had haunted him for many weeks. He knew he wasn't to blame for her mental illness, but he was responsible for his own actions. *How many other women had been that deeply affected by his behavior toward them? Maybe it was better if he never found out.*

He thanked God that she hadn't been killed that day. Her injuries were such that she would never lead a normal life again. Ruben had made sure she would always have the best care his money could buy. She had no idea he was paying her medical bills. Her aunt had been grateful and suggested as tactfully as she could that any mention of his name would be damaging to Angie's recovery. Her injuries were severe, but she would survive them. Her mental state, however, was very fragile and needed careful monitoring. She had finally accepted that there was nothing between her and Ruben and the ensuing depression that realization had caused had been deep and far more life threatening than any injury she had sustained in the accident.

An update on her condition a few weeks ago had sounded promising. The therapy she was receiving—both physical and mental—was helping her greatly.

Beth's support during those first few weeks had meant the world to him. His love and respect for her had grown immeasurably. The decision to propose had been made many days before he actually asked her to marry him. It hadn't seemed right somehow—considering how dangerously ill Angie had been at the time. The words had finally come one morning when he, Beth, and Tiana had been laying in bed on a sleepy Sunday.

Her answer had been instant and her reaction enthusiastic. She'd cried joyful tears and kissed him until the baby had protested loudly at being sandwiched between them for so long.

As he looked down over the small throng of people below, he felt complete for the first time in his life. Those who meant the most to him were present...Beth and Tiana...his parents...even Byron. He'd brought John along to the wedding as his guest and Ruben loved seeing him happy and relaxed for once.

He looked at Beth for a few moments before she lifted her head, as if feeling his eyes on her. She got up to come to him, but was stopped briefly by his mother who grasped at the opportunity to hold the baby. He could see her gesturing and talking and he knew, without having to hear the words that

she was saying she would keep the baby and that Bethany should go to her husband.

It made him proud that his request to get married at his parent's home had made them so happy. Their reaction had surprised him. Sure, he had known they would be thrilled, but he had no idea how desperately they had needed his respect. For so many years he had felt like an emotional orphan, abandoned by parents too wrapped up in their own lives to care if he had a happy childhood. He had slowly come to realize that it was he who had abandoned them by withholding his love and acceptance. Ruben knew he had been trying to punish them by staying away, never allowing them the chance to make up for their mistakes. Letting go of the anger had finally allowed him to see them for the people they were. Fact was, he not only loved them immensely, he actually liked them a hell of a lot.

Ruben laughed. *How had he ended up with everything he ever wanted after screwing up so badly for so many years?*

He had no time to think on the answer as he saw Beth approaching. She still wore her wedding dress—a pretty, cream colored, floaty thing in a fabric that she had told him the name of, but he couldn't remember. Her hair had flowers in it, sort of nestled between the curls. Beth had told him she would keep things simple and didn't want a full-blown gown, but she couldn't have looked any more beautiful.

His gaze began to rove down over her curves as she got near, causing her to smile almost shyly as she approached. 'You shouldn't be looking at me that way,' she said, sinking down to lean against him. 'I'm a married woman now, you know.'

'I know.' He smiled before leaning in to kiss her. 'Your husband is a very lucky man.'

Beth laughed throatily. 'Well, he's about to get even luckier.'

Ruben groaned before nodding toward the guests still gathered below. 'It's killing me Beth, but we have to wait. We are not alone.'

She leaned in to kiss him on the cheek, allowing her lips to trail over to his ear. If she didn't stop, they would be consummating the marriage right there and then under the tree— guests or no guests. He began to pull away. 'Beth, that's not fair,' he complained, not entirely happy that she would try to seduce him in such a public place.



'I am simply following orders, Baby,' she said before standing up. 'Your mom says there is a car waiting out front to take us to a little hideaway down the coast that your parents arranged as a wedding gift.'

'They arranged it?'

'Yes, they did everything. There is champagne on ice and food in the refrigerator. Your mom even had our bags taken there earlier.' Bethany smiled. 'Come on. Let's say goodbye to Tiana.'

'Isn't she coming with us?'

Beth shook her head with a smile. 'Your mom insists on keeping her here for a couple of nights. Like I said, I am on strict orders to take you away from here and spoil you for a while.'

Ruben got to his feet, pulling her back under the tree for a kiss. 'You can't possibly spoil me any more than you do already,' he said. 'I am going to spend the rest of my life trying to make you as happy as you make me.' Tears sprung to her eyes, but were quickly chased away by a twinkle of devilry.

'Yeah, well good luck with that.' She laughed, before kissing him quickly and running down the slope. Laughing at her teasing, it took him a moment longer than expected to catch up to her, by which time she had reached the safety of the guests.

Five minutes later, they had kissed a sleeping Tiana and said their goodbyes before walking through to the front of the house and the guests waiting in the courtyard. Stopping briefly in the open doorway for yet another photograph, Ruben checked behind them, ensuring they were alone before taking the opportunity to exact his revenge.

He knew his face was a picture of innocence as he turned towards the camera. The hand that had been around her waist slid slowly from view, resting for the briefest moment on the small of her back before he trailed a finger down over the cleft of her buttocks. He felt Beth jump imperceptibly before her skin quivered at his touch and he flicked a quick glance her way. As usual, her class and composure impressed him. Nobody could tell by looking at her face that her husband was touching her so intimately. Only the slight flush on her cheeks gave any clue as to what was going on.

'Touché,' Beth whispered as she turned toward him, forcing him to behave. Her eyes and her smile were full of promise and he moved away quickly, his own body threatening to betray him.

*Hell, even when he tried to seduce her, all he did was become more enslaved himself.*

The need for a distraction became urgent as he saw her nipples poking through the thin fabric of her dress. A foolish, romantic urge, one that he knew she would tease him for later, overtook him and he swept her up into his arms to carry her over to the waiting convertible.

## Chapter 28

Dr. Bethany Navarro reached across and smoothed down a lock of her husband's hair. She knew his body better than she knew her own, but his achingly beautiful face never failed to dazzle her. *How could she have thought his features were too strong when they first met?*

She had been plagued with memories since arriving at the apartment earlier. Something about the events of the day and taking this new turn in the road of her life had forced her mind back into the past.

The journey to where and who she was at that very moment hadn't been an easy one, but she was glad she had been brave enough to see it through. The lonely doctor with a broken spirit had changed more than she could ever have imagined back then. She was now a wife and mother to a beautiful daughter and she was doing an important job that she loved.

Bethany wasn't sure if she valued her life more because she had almost had everything that mattered to her ripped away by the hands of a dangerously ill young woman. Even after all that had happened, she still felt lucky. People like Angie would never have the sense of peace, love and acceptance that Bethany had—and not because the world wouldn't give it to them—but simply because their own minds would never let them be happy. She hoped that Angie could one day find even a small fraction of the bliss that she had.

Ruben stirred in his sleep, reaching for her as he always did. She allowed him to pull her close, almost suffocating in his tight embrace, but needing the reassurance of his nearness. Her eyes pricked with tears as his warm breath caressed her neck. She loved him so much and felt awful that she had teased him earlier.

'Ruben,' she whispered

No answer. She gave him a nudge. 'Ruben.'

'Hmm?'

‘Are you awake? Did I wake you?’

A low rumble of laughter, muffled by his mouth against her skin, made her realize what a stupid question that had been. ‘Were you trying to wake me when you yelled my name and shoved me?’ he asked in a sleepy voice.

Bethany gasped. ‘I did not shout.’ She laughed. ‘And I only gave you a little push.’

Ruben laughed. ‘Then, yes—you woke me.’

‘Sorry,’ she said, before her voice broke on a sob. She tried to stifle it, but he had heard her, raising his head in concern. ‘I am just being silly,’ she said, when he asked what was wrong. ‘It’s been an emotional day.’

‘Bethany. It was an amazing day.’

His smile reached inside her, chasing away the temporary bout of sadness. She quickly wiped away the tears, resolute in her mission to tell him just how happy he made her.

Stumbling over her words, she was glad when he put a finger to her lips, silencing her and showing her with his body that he knew what she was trying to say, because he felt the same way.

When they fell apart moments later—still breathless and sweaty from consummating their marriage vows yet again—Bethany wondered if the sex would still be this great when they were ninety. They made love less often these days. The sense of need and urgency that had been present in the early stages of their relationship was no longer there, but the intensity remained. Ruben raised his head and gave her a look of such undiluted lust that she knew the answer to her question. The man could still make her wet just by looking at her.

A sudden memory caused her to smile. ‘And to think you were scared to take off your shirt when I first met you...’

Ruben’s puzzlement lasted only a second before he caught her humor. ‘You were very forthright and a little intimidating,’ he admitted with a laugh. ‘No woman had ever told me to get undressed within minutes of meeting me. I wasn’t quite sure how to take you.’

‘And now?’

‘Now? Now, I can’t remember who I was before I met you.’ His sudden change of mood surprised her. ‘Before I became your husband and Tiana’s father, I was just killing time.’

Bethany kissed him, remembering herself that there had been a time when she had 'waiting'. Her life had changed beyond recognition and all because she had been brave enough to let down her guard and take what she wanted...for one night only.

**FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY**

**THE END**

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

I live in a beautiful part of the Southwest of England with my fiancé of 15 years and our dog. We have our own small business which allows me to work from home and leaves plenty of free time for my hobbies.

My first experience of writing was creating what is known as 'fan fiction' on the Internet forum of one of my favorite artists. Lots of my readers gave me really positive feedback and encouraged me to write more and take things further. Without them, I would never have had the confidence to submit a manuscript. I enjoy the process of writing and creating characters I would like to meet and situations I would love to be in.

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