



PHAZE
ROCKS

BORN TO FLY:
LANDING IN
LOVE

ALIYAH BURKE

Born To Fly:
Landing In Love

A Contemporary Romance Novel by

Aliyah Burke

Published by Phaze Books
Also by Aliyah Burke

Add a Little Mistletoe
Born to Fly: Landing in Love
Just a Dream
Sin is Not a Four-Letter



This is an explicit and erotic novel
intended for the enjoyment
of adult readers. Please keep
out of the hands of children.
www.Phaze.com

Born To Fly: Landing In Love
Copyright © 2010 by Aliyah Burke
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Edited by Lourenza Helena Adlem
Cover Art © 2010 by Amanda Kelsey

First Edition June 2010
ISBN-13: 978-1-60659-991-4



Published by:
Phaze Books
An imprint of Mundania Press LLC
6470A Glenway Ave., #109
Cincinnati, OH 45211

All rights reserved under the International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher, Mundania Press LLC, 6470A Glenway Avenue, #109, Cincinnati, Ohio 45211, books@mundania.com.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without permission from Mundania Press LLC. Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights and livelihood is appreciated.

Chapter One

Major Erich Stark swore under his breath as a woman shot out from the back of *Atlantis* and damn near ran over him. As it was, she hit him dead on and he grabbed her arm to not only steady her but also keep her from falling to the ground.

“Easy there,” he drawled.

Her head jerked up and he found himself gazing into a pair of dark brown eyes framed by thick black lashes. Smooth mocha skin covered her lithe body. She had a heart shaped face with a flatter, cute button nose. Full, tempting lips were parted in shock and surprise.

“*Con permiso*,” she mumbled in a raspy alto voice and stepped out of his hold.

Erich’s gaze skimmed her and he couldn’t stop the flare of desire. She wore a pair of white cotton pants, which sat low on her hips and a gold cutoff shirt that exposed her flat, defined abdominals and the shapely tuck of her waist. *Damn! She’s in awesome shape.* Still, none of it took away from her femininity. “No problem,” he said, not minding at all how she felt in his arms. “You new here? I don’t ever remember seeing you dance here before.”

Her arched brows snapped together and her chin lifted in haughty arrogance. “Excuse me?” she snapped in English.

He pointed to the building she’d just vacated. “The *Atlantis*. You just came from the back, like employees do. So I’ll ask again, are you new here?”

Erich fought the urge to shuffle his feet as her gaze seared him. No woman since his mother had ever wielded the power to make him squirm. Until now. She raked her gaze from the top of his head down to his boots and back up again.

“And I suppose you know all of the ladies that work there, don’t you?” she asked in a sharp tone.

Her condescension raised his hackles. “You have a problem with men going to these places and yet you’re coming out of one? How else do you earn money if you don’t have patrons?”

“I’m surprised you would recognize my face at all. I’m sure that’s not what you’re used to paying attention to.”

She's mighty snippy. Not that it mattered to Erich. He liked his women with fire. The desire to needle her a bit more roared over him with the force of a gale. Dropping his gaze he stared at her open toed sandals and smiled at the metallic green polish on her toes. A gold chain with small bells circled her left ankle. And around her right one was a tattoo he longed to get a closer look at.

"Tonight your first night?" he queried. *I'm coming back to see you dance, whoever you are.*

"You know, not everyone who leaves an establishment like this...a gentleman's club...works in one. Some women are capable of and actually *enjoy* making a living *without* gyrating around a pole, and having men leer at them."

She pushed by him and Erich turned and watched her walk to a waiting convertible and jump in over the door. A low growl left him when he saw the handsome younger man at the wheel kiss her cheek and then drive them both away.

"Hey Erich." The sound of a voice pulled his head back around. It belonged to Donovan "Livewire" Leegen, friend and pilot.

"Donovan, what's up?" he asked his friend.

"You know Bliss?" his friend asked, peering past him in the direction the car had left.

"Bliss?" Erich's body hardened as the vixen's image popped back into his mind. *Bliss. That is a damn good name for her. What's Donovan doing here?*

"Yes, Bliss. The dancer." Donovan frowned at him. "Dude, you were just talking to her. Hot as all get-out. A body made for—"

Narrowing his eyes at his friend, Erich ground out in a tone laced with death, "If you value your life, Captain Leegen, you'll refrain from completing that sentence."

His fists were clenched at his sides and he longed to smash one into Donovan. *Hell, why not both?* It didn't make sense, but he wanted nothing more than to stop the phrase coming from the other man's mouth. Preferably with a violent manner. Bliss, if that was her name, was his.

Donovan arched a blond brow at him and crossed his arms. "What does it matter to you what I say about her?"

"She. Is. Mine."

"Since when?"

The second she walked into my arms. Setting his jaw, Erich lifted a brow of his own and stared at Donovan. He wasn't backing down from

this. Granted he hadn't known her for longer than about two minutes, and that hadn't even included a formal introduction. But it didn't matter.

"Don't fuck with me on this, Leegen," he bit off.

Green eyes narrowed. "Jesus, Daredevil, you're serious."

"Deadly." Erich didn't even flinch at the use of his call name.

"Do you even know her?"

"Not yet." He paused. "Where do you know her from?"

"Dancing."

I thought she didn't work here. Erich relaxed his fists and sighed. "You've seen her dancing here?"

"Here? No. Not here."

That bit of news didn't sit as well with him as he'd hoped. There were other strip clubs around and he didn't want to have to go through and find her. But, if that's what it took, he would. "I have to go. See you, Donovan."

Donovan smiled. "Yes, I'll see you around. Hey, Daredevil, about what I said, I didn't mean anything by it, just that she's hot, ya know?"

"Aren't you engaged?"

"Sure am."

"Then you don't need to be looking around anyway."

"I'm engaged, Daredevil, not dead."

"You will be if you insist on looking at my woman."

"Did you even know her name before I told you?"

"What I knew or didn't know ain't none of your business." He licked his lips. "I will find out everything about her."

"Since when are you so possessive over a woman?"

They walked toward his car. Once there, Erich leaned on the hood and hooked his ankles as he stared at his friend. "When did you know about Carissa?"

A purely masculine smile filled Donovan's face. "The second I laid eyes on her." Erich merely lifted an eyebrow and waited. Donovan murmured and nodded. "Okay, I get it. Not anything you can explain. You just know."

"Exactly." Erich pushed off the hood and scanned the darkening sky. "I'll catch you around, Donovan."

"Yes. And...good luck."

Erich merely waved, not entirely sure Donovan wasn't being totally sarcastic in his well-wishing. He paused with his hand on the handle of his

door. "Bliss," he muttered. "Well, not much to go on, but it's more than I had."

A fleeting thought that Bliss may just be her working name crossed his mind. Sliding across the leather seat of his T-Top Monterey maroon Chevrolet Camaro, Erich started the powerful engine and pulled out of *Atlantis'* parking lot. Erich drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and, with a sigh, headed back for the base. Tomorrow he would begin his search for his woman. He had a flight to get ready for.

After a smooth flight Erich headed back across the base toward his room when he heard his name being called. Stopping, he waited for his friend to catch up. "What's up, Tom?" he asked.

"I need a favor," the man said, a desperate gleam in his eyes.

* * * *

Bliss Esparza smiled with well-learned patience at Jorge Colón sitting across from her at the outdoor café. She settled back in her chair as Jorge continued to prattle on about how she needed to settle down with a man and give him lots of children. It was a familiar lecture, so she allowed her mind to float away like the warm breeze which blew around them. The air was filled with the smell of rich foods, music, laughter, and conversations. From behind her mirrored shades she began to people watch.

Sipping her coffee, she thought about the man she'd met outside the *Atlantis*. Well, bumped into actually. He was tall with short brown hair and cobalt blue eyes. His voice had been deep and lined with a twang. A lazy drawl that made tendrils of desire unfurl within her and spread throughout her entire body. Her lip curled in a snarl when she recalled the way he'd assumed she worked at *Atlantis*. And yet, she wanted to touch the muscles which bulged under the tight brown tee shirt he wore. He'd also had on a pair of skin tight blue jeans and cowboy boots. His eyes had been full of masculine appreciation and arrogance.

I bet he's a military man. He had that serviceman haircut. She fought her smile when she remembered the spark of attitude which had popped up when she'd made her snide comment. *I'm usually nicer to people.*

"Bliss," Jorge said touching her arm.

"What?" she asked trying desperately to recall what he'd been blathering about.

"What do you say? Dinner tonight?"

Swirling her iced coffee, Bliss took a slow drink and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Jorge. I can't. I have a class tonight."

"You *always* have class."

Bliss narrowed her eyes at his tone. "Which is no concern of yours. Don't think you're going to start running my life, Jorge." She pushed to her feet. "I've made it perfectly clear my life is just that, mine." Without another word she walked away.

Jorge fell into step with her. "I'm sorry, Bliss. You know how I feel about you."

Without stopping, Bliss said, "And I've been totally straight from the beginning, Jorge. Friends only. Nothing else."

"You've told me." He sounded bitter.

"Then why do you persist in trying?"

"Why don't you give us a chance?" This time it was anger which laced his words.

"Aside from the fact I'm not attracted to you like that? There's the way you treat your girlfriends. Women are good for more than keeping a house clean, cooking, and giving you kids, you know. Oh, and then there's your issue with my career. Is that enough reason?" Bliss groaned. "I'm going home, Jorge. I'll see you later."

She walked off toward the place where her car was. *There are some days I'm really not sure why I'm friends with that man.* As she approached, Bliss saw her brother, Mateo, sitting on the back, chatting up a few young women.

He glanced at her and waved, a huge grin on his face. The trio of females looked at her and back to him.

"Hey, Mateo, I need to get going," she said with a nod to the women there.

"No problem, Sis. I'll take you home." Mateo stared at her and she could read in his eyes the desire to impress the ladies there.

"Thanks," she replied, grumbling to herself as she climbed into her car and sat in the passenger seat. *My car and I'm letting my brother drive.*

Her younger brother vaulted easily into the driver's seat and with a wave to the girls he shifted into gear and headed out of Morón de la Frontera and got them on the road to their house in Seville.

"New friends?" she asked over the wind that flowed around them.

He flashed a grin which made her think of their father, Óscar. "Yeah, they're going to be at the party tonight."

She caught her frown before it crossed her face. *I can't treat him like a baby*. He was seventeen and thought of himself as grown up. Bliss had to admit he seemed to be confident in most things he did.

"I see. And this party is where?"

"It's at Jamie's house. His parents will be there."

"Okay. You know I have the class tonight but call me if you need me and—"

"Bliss. I'm not a baby."

"I know. But, that doesn't mean I won't still worry."

"Are you driving back down there tonight?" he asked as they pulled into the outdoor covered parking area.

Bliss stared at the backyard and shook her head as they walked through, the air pungent with the numerous varieties of roses which her mother had planted when her parents first purchased the house. That was before she'd even been a gleam in her daddy's eye.

"No. There will be someone here to pick me up. But I'll be gone before you, I'm sure." They entered and she slipped off her shoes, the slick marble cool on her bare feet. "I'll be down to make lunch in a bit, Mateo, I want to get my stuff ready for this evening."

"I'll get it started," he said easily.

Bliss jogged upstairs to her room. After the death of their father it had taken a while but she had eventually taken over the master bedroom. She packed a bag and took a quick shower before dressing in another pair of soft cotton pants and a grayish-blue spaghetti strap shirt. Staring at her reflection, Bliss sighed and picked up her anklet. Her eyes drifted to the photo of her parents which still sat in the center of her dresser.

"I miss you both, so much."

The bells on her ankle bracelet tinkled lightly as she touched the frame. She walked to her bed, placed her foot on it and latched the thin gold piece of filigree jewelry. Standing straight, she rolled her shoulders and then headed back down to the first floor and set her bag by the door before walking into the large kitchen. Mateo had already pulled out sandwich makings and had begun to stack himself a tall one.

"Hungry?" Bliss teased, watching him pile on a few more pieces of sliced meat to the already overloaded sandwich.

"Hey, I'm a growing boy."

"That is true. Can't argue about that." Reaching for the tomato, she sliced it up swiftly and rolled her eyes when they vanished before she even

finished. "Leave me one or two will you? I have to have some energy for the class tonight."

"Please, you could fast all day and still have energy," Mateo commented while putting two of the slices back beside her.

"Thank you." She knew he was right but this was the last tomato in the house and she wanted some. "I'll go shopping tonight when I get home, or tomorrow."

Bliss looked up and saw her brother was paying her absolutely no attention. He was having a stare down with his sandwich as if unsure of the best way to attack it. Or get his mouth around it. Pointing the knife at him she cleared her throat. Mateo glanced up. "You make a mess in my kitchen and I'll be using this knife on you," she warned, only partially playing.

He grinned and put it back on his plate. "I'll eat this outside on the patio."

She sighed as he vanished from view. He was the last link to her parents and she'd protect him with everything inside her. *He is not a boy anymore, he is a young man. I should really let him do his own thing more.* It was hard for her to release the reins over him. He'd been her "child" since the day he was born.

Her own sandwich made, she grabbed a drink and took it outside where Mateo was doing a fairly good job of getting his sandwich to fit in his mouth. Then she went back for her plate and soon they were eating and talking over lunch. Once they'd finished and cleaned up, Bliss began working in the backyard while Mateo mowed the front. While he mowed the back, she made dinner for him and slid it into the oven to begin cooking.

Her brother was in the shower when the doorbell rang. *That should be my ride.* Hurrying to the door, Bliss pulled it open and froze. Standing before her was none other than the man she'd run into outside *Atlantis* earlier in the day. And damn if he didn't look just as mouthwatering now as he had then.

She didn't say a word, just scanned him from head to toe. His brown hair looked as shiny as it had before. He wore a faded gray tee shirt with a cowboy riding a horse on the front. The shirt was tight and hugged his body, showcasing his impressive arms. It wasn't tucked in and hung over the waist of his fitted blue jeans. And like before he wore cowboy boots. Dragging her gaze back up his hard physique, she fought the urge to lick her lips at the heat flaring in his cobalt gaze.

“You live here?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said answering him in English. “Can I help you?”

“Yes ma’am, I’m sorry. I’m here to pick up Ms. Esparza. Major Tom Brentwood sent me.”

Her insides flipped at the way he said her last name. “I’m Ms. Esparza.” *This...this is the Major Erich Stark that Tom said was coming to pick me up? Sweet Mother.*

His gaze narrowed. “You?”

“Yes. Just a moment.” She stepped back into the house. “Please come in. I’ll be just a moment.” Bliss closed the door behind him and shivered when she inhaled his masculine scent. Sandalwood and leather. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Water would be wonderful, thank you.”

She sensed his presence behind her as she led him across the floor to the kitchen where she grabbed bottled water. Bliss set it down upon the counter before him. Then she checked the oven and lowered the temperature.

“Thank you,” he said in a low seductive voice.

Her skin prickled and she sighed, grateful she faced away from him. “No problem,” she assured him.

“Bliss!” Mateo hollered.

She stood and smiled as her brother walked in. He came to a halt when he saw the man standing in the kitchen. Bliss made introductions then moved to stand near her brother and they stepped a bit away to talk privately.

Chapter Two

Erich couldn't believe it. His jaw almost hit the floor when the front door had opened and he'd found himself gazing upon the woman from earlier. He'd had to stop himself from reaching out and touching her, just to make sure it wasn't his imagination. Tom had asked him to pick up a woman who was teaching a class for some of the wives, and husbands if they wished to go.

He'd not expected the beautiful villa he'd pulled up to and he definitely hadn't expected the woman who'd opened the door and told him she was whom he had come to get. Bliss Esparza. Erich looked around the house while she conversed with the young man who'd come into the kitchen and looked at him with suspicious eyes. The same young man she'd gotten in the car with. He could understand them for he was fluent in Spanish, but he made no indication he had the slightest clue they occasionally spoke about him. Mostly it was Mateo asking if she was going to be okay with him. Erich felt his lip lift when he heard the familiar way she talked about Tom.

Who is this woman to have a house like this? And why does the one talking to her warrant such fondness? There was obvious affection between them but he wasn't sure what to make of it. So he focused on the house. A large entrance hall lead to the split level lounge/dining room. There was a lot of painstaking work put into this home and the craftsmanship was amazing. He glanced around the kitchen and moved to sit at a small round table by a patio door. He stared out over the backyard. *Damn.* Erich found himself in view of a large pool.

"Sorry about that," she said behind him, once again speaking English. "I'm ready to go."

"You have a lovely home," he told her, getting to his feet and pushing his chair back in.

"Thank you."

That was it. She left the kitchen and he followed. Not that he minded, for he had a great view of her ass as it moved with each step she took in her black pants and heels. At the door she kissed Mateo on the cheek and led the way down to his car. Erich looked at the young man who watched

him with calculating eyes. He wanted to assert his claim on Bliss but he controlled himself. *Have to have a decent conversation with her first.*

"Nice meeting you," he said to the boy before he hurried down the red walkway to where Bliss stood by his Camaro, her bag in hand. Reaching around her to open the door, he inhaled and found his senses swimming in the scent of lemon drops. His body reacted hard and immediately.

"*Gracias,*" she murmured as she climbed in and set her bag at her feet.

"*De nada,*" Erich said in her ear as he shut the door.

The way she stiffened told him she hadn't been expecting that. He hid his grin and hurried to the driver's side. Soon they were driving back toward the Morón Air Base. She sat ramrod straight, one hand curved around the handle of her duffle.

"Are you okay?" he asked with a glance after they had gone the majority of the way in silence.

"Fine, thank you."

Erich frowned. "Besides our rough meeting outside *Atlantis* have I done something to offend you?"

She finally turned her head toward him and he found himself wanting her to remove those damn mirrored glasses which hid her eyes from him. "No. And I apologize for that as well."

"Apologize for what? I'm the one who made an assumption about you."

"As I did of you. I assumed were I employed there you'd not know me by looking at my face."

"Can we start over?" Erich stuck out his hand and said, "Erich Stark."

It felt like she was staring between his face and his hand but he couldn't be sure. His cock pulsed when she placed her hand in his. Her skin was smooth and soft. Yet he could feel strength in there.

"Bliss Esparza."

"Bliss," he said allowing her name to slip from his mouth in a drawl.

"Yes, Erich, that's my name."

His lips kicked up into a smile at the bite to her tone. "I think it is a great name." He reluctantly let go of her hand.

"That's it?" she queried. "Nothing else to say? No jokes?"

"Not a single one." Her harrumph told him she didn't believe it. "Have you known Tom long?" he asked, trying to think of a subject she'd been comfortable talking to him with.

She smiled gently and he was once again flooded with the desire to maim one of his friends. "About a year or so now. He's a wonderful man."

"Where'd you meet him?"

"At work."

Erich frowned but remained silent as he withdrew his ID and held it out for the gate guard. He received a salute and soon they were on the base. "You do know he's married right?" His tone was hard. *What the hell is Tom doing with her if he's married? I mean, I know married men go to places like Atlantis but she seems so familiar with him.*

"Yes, Lisa is a very nice woman."

He pulled into the lot of the building Tom had asked to bring her to. His friend stood outside. "So if you like her, why would you continue to dance for Tom?" Erich stopped the car.

Her head snapped toward him and although she wore mirrored sunglasses it was easy to tell she wasn't happy. Bliss had her mouth set in a terse line. "I don't know what the hell kind of person you think I am, or what I do, but I assure you, Major Erich Stark, your opinion of me is wrong. All wrong."

"What do you call dancing for a married man?" he ground out, ignoring Tom's approach.

"I call my life none of your damn business." She jumped out of the car and closed the door with a bit more force than necessary. Bliss spun around and pressed a kiss on Tom's cheek before entering the building.

Tom leaned over the door to the car and gave him a grateful smile. "Thanks a lot for bringing her here, Daredevil. I just got off about ten minutes ago."

"What the hell are you doing with her, Tom? And to have her know Lisa as well? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

Black eyebrows rose. "What *are* you talking about? There is nothing between Bliss and myself."

"You met her at work. She's a dancer. Why are you hanging out in strip clubs?"

Tom burst out laughing. "Oh my God, is that what you think? You said something to her didn't you? That's why she looked pissed enough to spit nails." He shook his head. "Man, she is a dancer, but Bliss doesn't dance in clubs. She's a dance teacher. Lisa and I started taking lessons and we take them from Bliss."

Aww shit! "She teaches dance? I saw her coming out of *Atlantis*."

“Yes.” Tom continued to laugh. “Oh man, Bliss teaches some of the women who work there as well, if they want to learn a different type of dancing. Knowing her she was probably dropping something off for one of them. She’s one of the sweetest people I’ve ever met. Lisa absolutely adores her. She’s teaching this class here tonight for free, we just had to provide transportation.”

“And I basically called her a stripper,” Erich groaned.

“When did you start being so stupid?”

“Apparently the first time I laid eyes upon her.” Running his tongue over his teeth, Erich said, “I can’t believe it.”

“I have to get inside. I need to be there for the whole lesson or I’ll be in deeper water than you are with Bliss. A stripper,” Tom chortled and shook his head as he hurried to the door and slipped inside.

Erich glared at his friend before whipping his car into a vacant spot. For about two minutes he sat in the car, his eyes glued to the sight of the door in his rearview mirror. Climbing out, Erich ran a hand over his short cropped hair, strode to the door, and stepped through. The heavy clang snapped him out of his trance. With an assessing ear, he picked up on the music and followed it down the hall.

At the end, he saw two sets of double doors propped open. Hands in his pockets he moseyed up there and peered inside. Along the back stood a table covered with snacks and drinks. In the front stood Bliss who had apparently just finished demonstrating something, for the music stopped then started again and the couples there began dancing. Erich counted about twenty-five couples. He saw both officers and enlisted men, including Tom and Donovan, with their women. Bliss moved in and out of them, correcting when she needed to and praising all the time.

His gaze never wavered from her. He listened to her talk, her sultry voice stroking his cock into hard steel. Each move she made he felt it as if they were attached by a string. Shifting, Erich did his best to find a more comfortable position for his rigid erection. It didn’t happen. There was no way he would find one with her being so damn desirable. *Bliss*. He stared at her when she looked in his direction. If not for the way she dismissed him, he would have smirked, for he recognized the flare of heat in her eyes. She may very well not be happy with him but she couldn’t hide her attraction to him.

* * * *

Bliss almost tripped over her feet when she saw Erich Stark leaning against the wall toward the back of the room, thumbs hooked in his belt loops fingers pointing toward his groin. His unwavering gaze was transfixed on her. *Asshole or not, that man is just too damn fine.* He never moved, just stood there and watched. She half expected him to approach her during the break when people got drinks and a bite to eat if they so desired. He didn't. Instead he talked to the others there. His husky laughter skated up and down her spine, never letting her relax.

When she was about three quarters through, Bliss shut off the music and glanced around the group she had here and a smile crossed her face. She loved her job. "Okay. You all have done wonderfully. Is there a dance you would like to work on for the rest of the time? One you'd like a bit more practice on or something entirely new?"

"Could we learn the waltz?" a woman asked.

"Waltz? Of course." Bliss searched for some waltzing music. "The American Waltz okay?"

Agreements reached her. She put in the CD and pressed play.

Facing the group again, she glanced at them all. "Okay, I need a partner for the..." Bliss trailed off as she watched Erich stride through the group, a natural sexy swagger with each step. He stopped before her, his lips turned up in a slight smile. "What are you doing?" she asked trying to refrain from touching his chest.

"Figured you'd need a partner, what with everyone else already paired up."

Her mouth went dry and she could feel her belly clenching as his scent wove around her. *I can do this.* There was a vibe, a thread of something in his tone. *Okay, if I didn't know any better I'd bet he is commenting about something other than dancing.*

"Okay, fine." Stepping to the side of the large man, Bliss looked out at the people watching. "Major Stark has agreed to be my partner for this." A few of the guys had knowing grins on their faces. Turning them so the other couples could see the both of them, she gulped when he settled his hand upon her below her left shoulder. The heat from his touch seared her bare skin. "We'll do it once then I'll break it down and we can all do it."

"Don't worry," Erich murmured in a silvery timbre as he pulled her in closer, and captured her right hand, "I know how to waltz."

"We'll see," she said and placed her left hand in position.

With opening chords of a new waltz, they began. Bliss couldn't describe the feeling of being in his arms as they danced around the room.

Floated would be a better word. The other couples had backed out of the way to watch. Erich hadn't lied. The man could waltz. He was damn good. She closed her eyes and allowed the music and his touch to flow over her. He was extremely light on his feet for a large man. Each turn, every spin, each step and Bliss easily allowed him to lead. There was no need to coach Erich. His ability astounded her. *I should really stop making assumptions about people.*

The room erupted into cheers when the song ended. Clearing her throat, Bliss glanced at Erich and stepped back. "Very nice job." Then she focused her attention on the others in the room and began to break down the steps with Erich helping.

At the end of the class, she finished packing all of her things in her duffle when a shadow fell over her. Turning her head, her breath hitched again at the sight of Erich standing there. And they were the only ones in the room.

"Where'd everyone go?"

"They left. I promised Tom I'd see you safely back home," he said, stepping closer.

"Sure being seen with a *stripper* won't ruin your reputation? Or are you hoping it will boost it?" she snapped.

"I'm sorry about that. Yet another bad assumption of mine."

She shook her head. "I'm too tired to argue so let's go."

"Wait." He reached out and plucked the bag from her hand. "Let me buy you dinner as an apology for my stupid behavior."

A thousand reasons why she should refuse streamed through her brain and when she opened her mouth all that came out was, "Yes." *Crap. What the hell did I agree to that for?*

He smiled at her. Not a flashy one, but one steeped in sexual temptation. Her body shivered in response.

"Great," he said in his sensual, unhurried way.

Silent, she fell into step beside him and did her best not to whimper when he placed his hand at the small of her back. Her nipples tightened and her pussy throbbed with longing. They walked out into the warm night and to his car. Like a gentleman he held the door for her. Bliss slid across the leather seat and ducked her head when he shut the door.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," he responded in the same low tone.

Turning her head, Bliss watched him put her bag in the trunk and then slide behind the wheel. Even though the top was off the interior still

became smaller once he joined her. She licked her lips, suddenly uncertain and unsure of the emotions moving through her.

“Where to?” he asked as the motor came to life with a powerful purr.

“Somewhere casual.” She waved at her attire. “I’m not exactly dressed to the nines here.”

“Look fine to me,” Erich said. “But, if you want casual, you’ll have casual.”

I can think of a lot of things I could want from you, Erich Stark. She was silent until he got them on the road heading back to Seville. “Where are we going?”

“You know you’re safe with me, Bliss,” he stated in a calm tone.

“I know very little about you, Major Stark, other than you are a surprisingly good dancer.”

“Surprisingly? Did you not think I could dance? And how’d you know I was a Major?”

“Aside from the tags on your car? Tom called to let me know he wasn’t coming but you were. And let’s just say I was pleasantly amazed by how well you danced.”

They entered Seville and Erich drove to a restaurant and parked the car. She remained there until he walked around and opened the door for her.

“Well, I’ll be sure to pass that along to my mama, who I am sure will think I’m full of manure.” He assisted her out, then closed the door behind her.

She couldn’t stop the chuckle from escaping. “Wouldn’t want that now would we? I’ll tell her for you.”

“You’d do that for me?” He leaned in close. “Well hell, Bliss, I think you may just like me a little bit.”

“You’re not as bad as you first came across as.” She licked her bottom lip and held his gaze in the light from the parking lot. Heat flared in his eyes as he moved them to gaze from her eyes to her lips and back up again. “But, I wouldn’t say I like you.”

Closer he moved, his head blocking out the light. “No? What about attracted to?” His heat and scent wove around her.

Her heart pounded so hard she wondered could he hear it. “And if I say yes? What happens?”

“You have to say yes first,” he whispered.

Yes! Yes! Yes! Bliss bit her lower lip and shuddered when he stepped closer and she could feel the hardness of his torso touching her thin shirt.

This time the whimper couldn't be contained. Her lids felt heavy and she was mesmerized by his eyes and the myriad of emotions which swirled in them. Bliss couldn't think straight. All her synapses were misfiring.

"Bliss," he murmured, his mouth a hairsbreadth from hers.

"Yes," she said on a sigh.

Erich kissed her. Her world shifted and the ground moved under her feet. Fire didn't just spread; it exploded up from within her, reaching throughout her body. His lips were warm and moved over hers with masterful precision. He slid a hand around her back and cupped her neck and head as the other one settled on one hip. Light touches with his tongue slipped along her lips before he sought entrance.

Bliss opened. He began to explore the recess of her mouth. He was thorough but gentle. Erich tasted better than he smelled, and she didn't know that was possible. She trembled from the force of the sensations streaming through her. Reaching up with her hands she laid them against the solid muscle of his chest. His heart pounded beneath her palm and she pressed closer.

He ended the kiss slowly, drawing out her lower lip before it was over. Erich stared at her, his eyes smoky with passion and the fingers at the back of her skull were driving her crazy with the light circles he made. Not that the hand on her hip helped her brain make sense of anything. *Okay, I'll officially call his touch intoxicating and mind numbing.*

"I've wanted to do since you ran into me at *Atlantis*," he whispered.

Her belly began doing that strange flipping thing again. "Is that so?"

He nuzzled the hair by her ear. "So. Come on, I owe you a dinner."

She did her best to calm the rampaging storm within her. They entered and were seated at a small table in the back. Drinks before them, she stared at him while they waited for their meal. "Tell me about you, Major Stark."

He arched a brow. "Erich, Bliss, call me Erich."

"Very well. Tell me about you, *Erich*."

"About me. Okay. I'm a pilot here at Morón. Thirty-four, middle of three boys. Born and raised in Texas. And that pretty much sums up my life."

Bliss laughed. "I seriously doubt that. If you're thirty-four and have two brothers, I can't believe you can sum your life up in three sentences."

"I was giving you the condensed version."

"You think?" she teased as their food was placed down.

He explained in more detail as they ate their meal. When they finished he found her gaze and asked, "Dessert?"

"No, I can't. But thank you. I have to get home."

Erich nodded, paid, and took her straight home. He walked her to her door and stared down at her in the glow from the outside light. "Good night, Bliss." His mouth covered hers in a gentle kiss. She sank into him and had her hands along his sides when it ended. "Go inside before I forget to be a gentleman," he rasped. "I'll be seeing you again." Erich spun and left her there with a pounding heart, willing body, and a whimper of frustration on her lips.

Entering the house, she dropped her bag and slid down the door to sit upon the cool floor. "Damn," she muttered to the darkness. "Damn, damn, damn!" *Like I wanted you to be a gentleman.*

Bliss got up and headed up to her room. All through her shower and even as she climbed into bed, the memory of being in Erich's arms and his kiss, stayed with her. Tormenting her. Making her crave things she obviously wasn't getting this night.

She rolled over with a groan and shoved her head under a pillow. *Not like I've gotten any recently.* Bliss sighed and fell into a restless slumber, punctuated by flashes of the tall cowboy who'd swaggered into her life with his brown hair, cobalt blue eyes, and a body which would make a nun contemplate committing more than a few sins.

Chapter Three

Erich sat in his car and stared at the sign painted along the building's wall. *¡Vaya a bailar!* It was a beautiful mural with people—both young and old—dancing in bright colors and it exuded the promise of nothing but fun.

“Let's dance,” he murmured. “Great name for a business.” He got out of the car and locked the door.

Erich took a deep breath and headed for the door. He'd not been able to get her out of his mind since he left her at her front door two nights ago. With his schedule he hadn't been able to get back to Seville to see her, so since he had the day off, he'd gone to Livewire and asked him for her place of business. After only a minor amount of ribbing, Donovan had given it to him. So now here he stood late Friday morning.

And here I still stand with my hand on the door not moving like an idiot. Shaking his head, Erich entered and smiled. Bright, loud, and energetic were only a few words he'd use to describe it. He headed to where a few others sat around talking amongst themselves. Beyond them he spotted Bliss where she moved through those dancing, talking easily over the music. He understood her and it took him a while to realize she spoke Spanish, not English.

He nodded at those around him and leaned against the wall. She wore a tight white top, a red skirt with a slit up the left side, and she had heels on her feet. *Mine!* Erich watched while the dancers worked on their Foxtrot. His gut clenched when she finally saw him and flashed a smile in his direction, but she never missed a beat in the teaching.

Once class was over he sauntered to her side where she stood talking with an older gentleman. The man looked at him and nodded before walking away. Bliss met his gaze, her hands clasped loosely before her.

“Erich. What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you.” Erich fought the urge to kiss her. It wasn't an easy battle.

“Needing dance lessons?” she teased.

“If that's what it takes to be able to spend time with you, then tell me where I sign up.”

Bliss shook her head and dropped her gaze. “Crazy man.”

He lifted her chin so he could see into her dark brown eyes. "Not crazy. Serious."

"Well, I have an hour for lunch and then I've got lessons the rest of the day."

"I'll take what I can get. What about tonight?"

She waved to the last person and walked toward the back. Erich followed. He watched her pull a container from the fridge and pop the top a bit before sliding it into the microwave.

"I'm sorry, I have to go watch Mateo at school. They have a football game tonight."

"School?"

"Yes, my brother's in high school."

"Your brother? Mateo is your brother?"

"What'd you think he was?" she asked as she divided up the food from the microwave.

"I didn't know. You never said anything beyond his name."

"Hmm. Maybe I didn't. Well, now you know."

He accepted a plate and fork from her. "Thank you." Erich pushed the rice around before facing her again. "Where are y'all's parents?"

Bliss froze for a second before she sighed and licked her lips. "My mother died when Mateo was born and my father passed ten years ago."

"Darlin', I'm so sorry."

Her grin was more a grimace. "It happens. I was twenty-three and took over raising him. I'm sure at times it seems I'm more of a mother than sister."

So she's thirty-three. I want to take care of you, Bliss. "So you're going to his football game. European football or American football? And would you like some company?"

His cock hardened as he watched her clean the fork off and swallow her food. He wanted to drop his food and haul her into his arms. Erich remained sitting on the counter across from her and waited for her to respond.

"Please, its *fútbol* and American football. But I'm talking about what you refer to as soccer. You're into it?"

"I've watched a bit. But I want to spend more time with you. And I need your brother to like me, too."

"Why do you need him to like you?"

"I know how important family is, darlin'. His opinion of me will have a big impact on you."

“Shouldn’t you be more worried about *my* opinion of you rather than my brother’s?”

Erich slid off the counter and moved toward her, leaving his plate where he’d been sitting. Standing before her, he took hers from her and wedged his way in between her legs. The action lifted the high cut in her skirt and the sliding material showed off more mocha thigh. *By the star of Texas this woman is going to be my downfall.* He was so hard for her, it was painful.

“I think I’ve got your opinion of me, Bliss,” he drawled, loving how her eyes dilated when he laid on his accent.

“Really?”

Dragging a hand up her leg and side, Erich used the other one to wrap in her hair. “Oh yeah.” He drew her lower lip into his mouth and sucked on it until she whimpered. Then he kissed her. He slanted his mouth over hers and thrust his tongue deep within her. This wasn’t a gentle kiss. The hairs on his body stood on end at the electricity pouring through him. It was as if he stood at home holding onto the electric fence. But where that electricity repulsed him, these pulses made him want to dig his heels in and stay forever.

Erich dominated her mouth, taking what he wanted. Her submission. And when he achieved that, he took even more. Bliss purred a spine-tingling, sexy sound that made his erection even harder. The desire to be buried so deep within her so she didn’t know where he ended and she began roared over him, faster than he could ever go in his jet. She shifted against him as her arms wound around his torso, under his shoulders and her hands dug into the muscles, holding him tight.

He growled low in his throat and the hand on her side moved back to the slit in her skirt. *Mine!* The feel of her smooth thigh beneath his palm nearly snapped the last of his control. She whimpered again and his cock pressed tighter against his jeans.

“Bliss,” he barely managed to moan.

She drew back and slowly he watched as the raging desire in her gaze was locked up. Her lips were shiny from his kisses and slightly swollen from the force of his mouth on hers. She skimmed her tongue over her parted lips and he almost lost it. “I have a...a...um...”

“Class,” he murmured, allowing himself one more kiss. Erich forced himself to end it and step back from her. “And you need to finish your food.”

This time she reached up to her lips with a hand that trembled. “*Madre de Dios,*” she said softly.

“You said it,” he agreed and moved until he reached the side where his plate was. His own limbs trembled when he lifted himself up on the counter. *I can’t believe I’m this hard from a kiss. Just a kiss.*

The rest of the quick lunch was silent as they both ate and snuck glances at one another. Bliss was done first. She toyed with her fork. The door opened before he’d finished, the chime easily heard with no music playing.

“Bliss? *¿Donde está?*” a masculine voice hollered.

“*En la cocina, Jorge,*” she responded.

That said, Erich watched her slide off the counter and pat her clothes as if making sure she looked okay. *Who the hell is Jorge and why does she care how she looks for him?* He remained sitting as if he had every right to be there. *Which I do.* A low possessive growl rose up within him when he saw a good-looking man walk in as if he owned the place. He stopped when he spied Erich.

“*¿Quién es?*” Jorge asked Bliss with a jerk of his chin.

Bliss looked to him and Erich stayed quiet, waiting to see what she’d say. Her eyes moved between the two men and Erich wondered what, if anything, there had been between the two of them. Jorge had a gleam in his eyes which made him wonder.

“This is my friend, Erich,” she answered in English.

Dark eyes snapped to his and Erich arched a brow while the man sized him up.

“Jorge,” the man stated without offering his hand.

“Erich.” He leaned back and took another bite of food, making it perfectly clear he had no intention of shaking hands either.

“What are you doing here, Jorge?” Bliss rinsed her plate and set it in the sink.

“Came to see about tonight.” An arrogant smirk filled Jorge’s face when he looked at Erich.

“Tonight?” she asked finally turning back around. “What’s happening tonight?”

“Our date.”

“I don’t think so, Jorge. I have Mateo’s game. Not to mention you and I aren’t dating, so stop trying to push the issue.” Her eyes were narrowed and she’d stepped toward him. “This is getting to be a very old, redundant conversation and I’m tired of it.”

Erich put down his plate and watched in silence. He'd only interfere if the man thought to put a hand on her. *Well, maybe not if only then.* A flush rose up Jorge's cheeks and Erich knew his ego had been bruised. Bliss didn't seem aware of it or she didn't care.

"Then you should stop fighting it," the man snapped back in Spanish.

Erich slid off the counter and stood behind Bliss, his eyes narrowed in silent warning. Whatever was going to be said next was put on hold by the first few people to stream through the door, as indicated by a succession of jingles. Jorge glared between the two of them before stomping out.

"You okay?" Erich asked in her ear, cupping her upper arms.

"I will be. Thanks." She stepped away from him. "I'm done here in three more hours." Bliss shrugged. "You know, if you still want to go to his match." With a smile she left the kitchen area and headed out toward the people waiting for their lesson.

Erich washed the dishes and dried them before stacking them on the countertop. Then he walked out to where the music was once again blasting and saw her teaching basic steps. The class formed lines and followed her direction. Sitting in a chair, Erich stretched out his legs and laced his fingers behind his head.

I've got no intention of going anywhere, Bliss. Not at all.

* * * *

Bliss sat cheering for her brother, Erich beside her. *I have to admit it is very nice being here with him.* She slanted her eyes to him; his gaze sparkled as he watched the boys charge up and down the field. But as if he knew she watched him, he turned toward her and gave her a slow, seductive grin followed by a wink that skyrocketed her blood pressure. Still, she kept her feelings under control; she had to protect her heart.

He'd surprised her by staying with her at the studio. And she knew she'd turned the tables on him when she put him on the spot for another dance. Erich had agreed and again she was twirled around the room, held by a man who made it seem like her feet never touched the dance floor.

Erich leaned over and bushed a light kiss on her cheek. "Thanks for bringing me."

She blushed and smiled. About to say something to him, Bliss got sidetracked by the game. Bolting to her feet, she screamed, "Go, Mateo, go!" The closer they got to the goal the more nervous she became and it

was instinctive for her to grab Erich's hand. His warmth immediately flowed all through her.

At the end of the game, Mateo's team won, but it was a close match. She hung around waiting for Mateo, Erich still at her side. Her brother approached with a few of his friends and she did her best not to run to him and hug him. *He's a big boy. A man now. Don't embarrass him.*

"Wonderful game, guys," she said, automatically speaking Spanish.

"Thanks, sis," Mateo replied. He looked over at Erich who was beside her. "I remember you. You came to the house the other day. Erich, right?" he asked in English.

"Yes sir. Great game y'all played out there today."

"Thank you. Bliss? Can they come for dinner?"

She looked at the four faces of Mateo's closest friends. *Oh my goodness, can we say puppy dog eyes.* She chuckled. "Of course, so long as your parents are okay with it." All four thanked her and ran off to find their parents, Mateo with them.

"This a common thing to happen?" Erich questioned in her ear.

"More than you know." She turned her head and stared at him. "Would you like to join us?" Beyond him, she could see Mateo and his friends running back toward her.

"Try and keep me away." His eyes burned hot and her mouth went dry.

"Ready!" the boys said.

"Well, all this won't fit into my car," she told them.

"I can take two in mine," Erich offered as they neared the parking lot.

Bliss could hear the murmurs of awe when they saw his car. Not that she blamed them, for Erich had a very nice ride. Mateo and Jamie ended up riding with Erich and she took the other three boys with her. She rolled her eyes at the house when the three riding with her jumped out to stare at and look over Erich's car where it sat parked next to hers in the covered parking.

"I'll be in starting dinner. Make sure you're careful around his vehicle," she told them before heading inside. At the base of the stairs she paused and sighed.

"You okay, darlin'?" Erich's timbre wove out of the silence and surrounded her.

Bliss lifted her head when his hands settled along her waist. "I am. Thought you were outside with your baby."

"My baby?"

“Your car.”

“Stay outside with four boys who are swimming in the pool or be in here with you. No contest, darlin’, no contest.” He nuzzled the back of her neck and she shivered with longing. “I’ll pick being with you anytime. Now, what can I do to help?”

She spun around. “You can cook?”

He gave her a disarming grin. “Yes ma’am. And even if I don’t know what you’re makin’, I’m very capable of followin’ directions in a kitchen.”

Bliss quirked a brow. “Yet another thing I’m guessing I should thank your mama for?”

Erich winked. “Well, I wouldn’t complain if you wanted to thank me instead.”

“I bet not.” She smiled. “I’ll be right back, make yourself at home, I need to put on something looser.”

Flames flickered in his gaze and he cleared his throat. “I’ll be in the kitchen.” He clenched his fist. “Yes. Kitchen.” He spun on his heel and strode away.

She didn’t move until he vanished from view, only then Bliss hurried up the stairs and quickly changed into some comfortable worn gray shorts and a loose shirt of the same metallic green which covered her toenails. Pulling her hair back into a loose ponytail, she put her shoes in the closet and headed back down to the kitchen. She paused at the doorway and peered inside. Erich stood by the patio door and it appeared he was watching the boys.

“Somethin’ on your mind, darlin’?” he questioned, slowly turning his head to spear her heart with his intense gaze. Erich scanned her and gave a low wolf whistle.

Her insides flipped at the endearment and approval in his eyes. “Nope. They still swimming?”

“Yes. Amazing how much energy they have, especially considerin’ they just finished a game.”

He pushed away and strode toward her. His movement reminded her of a predator stalking its prey. *Which seems to be me. Do I mind? Nope, not really.*

“Didn’t you play sports in school?”

“Yes. I did. Football,” he winked again, “excuse me, American football.”

She chuckled. "Well, after a game you won in the last few minutes, didn't you have energy after?"

He was silent and she cocked her head to look at him. A sly grin crept over his face. "I guess I did."

Bliss snorted. "Of course. Let me just say I'm glad my brother isn't out doing what you probably were."

Erich clutched his heart. "You wound me."

"Right," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Tell me more about you, Bliss Esparza."

"You pretty much know all there is to know about me." She pulled out the needed items and began to make dinner. "I work and raise my brother." While it may be nice to share more of her with him on a personal level, Bliss didn't say more on the issue. Mateo was her responsibility and her fears and dreams where he was concerned were just that. Hers.

"Nothing more? What do you do for fun?"

"Dance. I love what I do, been dancing it seems since before I can remember. But if I had to pick other than dancing I would say long walks and good books."

"Weaknesses?"

A drawl like you have. And apparently brown hair and blue eyes. Okay, you. "Not sure. Oh, yes I know. Crisp apples with a light dusting of cinnamon sugar. That...is my weakness."

"I'll remember that." He winked.

Bliss whipped up the meal consisting of *jamón ibérico de bellota*, chickpeas, and tomato sauce as the main dish. She knew how much her brother loved the rich meat. Warm rolls and salad were also made. Setting the table in the dining room, Bliss looked over her shoulder and said, "Erich?"

"Yes darlin'?" He walked into the room carrying the pitcher of ice water.

"Can you tell them to come in and dry off? We're eating in ten."

He set the water down on the dark oak table and kissed her cheek. "Right away."

Soon the boys were back inside and dressed. Erich carried the main dish to the table while she watched the boys bring the salad and the rolls. The boys moved to free seats and Erich moved to the chair she stood by and pulled it out for her.

"Thank you," she said.

“My pleasure.” Erich stepped to her right to sit beside her but stopped when Mateo spoke.

“You can sit here.” Her brother pointed to the foot of the table, where he usually sat.

Erich glanced at her and she nodded. Soon he sat there and Mateo was at her side. They spoke English over dinner and for the most part Bliss was quiet, listening to the males talk about sports and cars.

Her heart lurched when Mateo turned to Erich and asked, “Do you like being a pilot?”

Spikes of worry shot through her. She’d thought Mateo was over this. Maintaining what she hoped was a neutral expression, she gazed at Erich.

“I love being a pilot. There is something so freeing about flying through the air. The world is a different place when you’re up there.” He glowed with enthusiasm. “You feel almost invincible.”

Her belly churned. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Mateo glance sideways at her before clamping his mouth shut and not asking anything else. But it was too late, she’d already seen the gleam in his eyes. Jamie picked up the questioning and she struggled not to demand a change of subject. To do so would be to open up a very sensitive subject between her and Mateo, and the last thing she wished to do was ruin the evening by putting her insecurities on display for everyone. After dinner, the boys even cleaned off the table and were back outside again while she and Erich were in the kitchen putting the food away, not that there was much of it left.

“Did you want to take any of this back with you?” Bliss asked, snapping the lid on the container.

“I don’t want to take your food.”

“Please, take it. Only if want it of course, don’t let me force you to take it.”

“I’d love it, thank you.” He put the empty pan in the dishwasher. “Everything was delicious.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.” *I feel almost like I’m packing his lunch for him.* Bliss almost smiled when she put the extra rolls into another holder.

After the boys had gone home and Mateo had retired upstairs to do schoolwork, Bliss walked with Erich to the front door. She handed him the paper bag with the containers of leftovers. He settled his free hand along the wood of the door behind her and blocked her in with his body. Determined eyes honed in on her and she swallowed hard and gave into the urge to lick her lips.

Erich leaned closer and whispered, "Do you know how much I want you, Bliss?"

She whimpered and shook her head. "No."

He allowed their bodies to touch and she could feel the hard length of his erection pressing into her. "Any doubt now?"

"No." Moisture pooled and she could feel the insistent throb of her pussy, craving attention. No, demanding it. "No doubt." Lifting her hands, Bliss touched his chest, sliding them over his rock hard pectorals and defined abdominals. Lust broadsided her and she could feel her body gravitating toward his. *I want him!*

"When can I see you again?" he asked.

"You're leaving?" The question slipped out before she could stop it. *Jesus, I sound desperate.*

"I'm leaving because I want you to be one hundred percent sure about this. There will be no going back when you say yes. And I have to be up in the air, early morning, which doesn't even begin to give me enough time to explore your body."

She damn near orgasmed from his statement. It may not make sense, but this man made her think of things in long term. She'd not known him long but it didn't change her feelings. "When's your next day off?"

"Saturday."

"Mateo's gone that day." Bliss dragged her hand lower and ran it along his length. He groaned and bucked against her. "Come when you're done with work."

"I'll be here, darlin'. Wild horses couldn't keep me away." He captured her lips and kissed her until she sagged into him. Ending the kiss, Erich pulled back. "Give me your phone number."

Still dazed she rattled it off to him and whimpered again when he pressed into her palm and kissed her hard and fast. Then he slipped out the door, leaving her wet and craving him with an intensity she'd never wanted another man with before.

Chapter Four

Erich walked up to the white door of Bliss' large villa with a bag tossed over one shoulder. He'd not seen her since he left here last Friday night. And he missed her. They spoke on the phone daily but it wasn't the same. It was barely six in the morning and here he stood. He pressed the doorbell and shifted his feet as he waited. His breath hitched when the door swung open and he found himself staring down into Bliss' brown eyes and was surrounded by the smell of lemon drops.

"Hola," she said, a small smile on her face.

"Hello, darlin'," Erich replied dropping his duffle and gathering her in his arms.

Sliding one hand along her face, he sank it into her hair and kissed her. Bliss responded to his kiss eagerly and hungrily, arching into him allowing their bodies to press tightly to one another. Erich looped one arm around her waist and lifted her off the ground, never breaking contact with their mouths. He stepped into her house, kicking his bag with his foot before shutting the door behind them.

Bliss sighed into his mouth and he broke the kiss. "Upstairs," she mumbled. "Then left."

"Wrap your legs around me," he ordered as he palmed her ass.

When she did, he flexed into her and ground his mouth over hers. Long strides carried him to the stairs and up. He walked into her bedroom and looked around as he put her on her feet. His thoughts of how pleasant her room was vanished the second her hands began tugging up his shirt.

Erich whipped his shirt off and removed his boots. Standing before her in socks and his jeans, he reached for her shirt and removed it. All the air shot from his lungs at the sight of her near naked torso. She wore a plain black bra. Dropping to his knees before her, he placed his hands at the waistband of her shorts. One jerk and they pooled around her ankles, leaving her in black bikini underwear. Looking up at her, Erich kissed her belly button and reached around her back to unhook her bra. When it fell away from her body, he palmed her full, firm breasts.

"Perfect," he whispered.

Erich rolled his thumb and forefinger over the tight nipples and watched her gasp. Slowly he lowered his hands and ran them down her

figure, snagging and removing the panties along the way. Bliss stood bare before him and his mouth watered. Her pussy was almost bare, there was a small, tightly trimmed triangular patch of hair, otherwise it was smooth. His cock pushed insistently against his jeans and he shoved to his feet.

"Fucking beautiful," he said on a guttural groan. Erich carried her to the bed and laid her back upon the sheets.

"Clothes off," she ordered.

He complied and soon he lay beside her, gathering her close in his arms and loving the way her naked body felt against his. Stroking his hands down her side and back up, Erich began to indulge in her body. He kissed his way down, making love to her breasts as he went. Her cries and mewls grew louder with each lick, each suck he gave them. She wriggled beneath him, her fingers gripping the bedding she lay upon.

Erich laved a path from her belly button to the top of her pussy before he stopped and moved to her leg. He kissed his way down her left leg until he reached the gold filigree bell anklet, the slight tinkling sound the only other noise in the room aside from their breathing. Switching to her right one, he kissed along the tattoo which was a chain of silvery-blue teardrops, all but two. Back up her leg he moved until he was over her core. The heady smell of her arousal teased him mercilessly.

Settling between her legs, he ran his tongue up the slit and circled her clit.

"Ahh shit!" she screamed and arched into him.

He slipped his hands under her and held her still while he feasted. Her screams were muffled by her thighs around his head, blocking his ears. His cock was painfully hard but he couldn't bring himself to pull away from her sweet nectar. When she came, Erich didn't move until she stopped shaking. Then he moved up her body and positioned himself at the entrance of her pussy.

"Look at me, Bliss," he rasped.

Her heavy lidded gaze met his and overflowed with passion and need. "Erich," she said, her hands gripping the blankets.

"Watch me as I slide into you." Their eyes locked and he flexed his hips, sinking into her wet heat. *Oh fuck me!* He hissed in pleasure as her body held him like a glove. "Ohh damn, darlin'. So tight. So fuckin' tight."

"Erich," she gasped, moving to grab his forearms as her nails pierced into his skin.

He pulled back and sank in again. Electrical impulses rocketed through him. Her pussy walls contracted around him, holding him like a vice. Lowering his lips to her mouth, he kissed her. Bliss wrapped her arms around his neck and held on as he began to move.

Back and forth. In and out. Deeper and deeper. He strove to maintain a steady pace, wanting to prolong the exquisite torture he was experiencing, but his balls began to tingle and he knew he wasn't going to last long. Erich slid his hands under her shoulders and began to power into her.

Bliss purred and hooked her legs high around his back. She moved with him easily, undulating, rotating her hips to allow him maximum penetration. He could feel his sweat gathering. His tongue thrust in and out of her mouth with the same determined motions as his cock. He shivered when her pussy began to milk him. Ripping his mouth off hers, Erich buried his face in the side of her neck and nipped along her pulsing carotid. She stiffened and then came apart around him, her scream filling the room. Erich let go himself and drove hard into her a few more times before he came with a shout to echo hers.

He collapsed onto her, making sure at the last second that he didn't crush her. His heart pounded erratically and he could feel hers tattooing into his chest from beneath. He turned his head and pressed gentle kisses into the curve of her neck. The saltiness of her sweat was embedded into his taste buds. Willing some strength back into his arms, he slowly pushed up, his breathing finally leveling off. Her eyes watched him from beneath lowered lids, filled with gratification and contentment. With care, he placed tender kiss on her lips.

He withdrew from her and got them both tucked in under the blankets which had been folded down to the bottom of the bed before he drew her back into his arms. She sighed heavily and curled against him, her hand over his heart.

"Bliss?"

"Hmm?" her sleepy voice came.

Erich held her tighter and brushed his lips over her temple. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." She kissed his chest and sighed again. "Are you?"

"Darlin', I ain't never been better."

"Glad to hear that. How long are you staying?"

"As long as you'll have me." And he realized that was true.

“Give me a breather and I’d love to have you again. I’m just exhausted, didn’t sleep last night.”

“Why didn’t you sleep?”

“I was at the hospital with a friend. I got home about fifteen minutes before you got here.”

“Sleep then, darlin’. Sleep and we’ll start all over.”

She burrowed closer and he held her. “So warm and safe,” Bliss sighed after a few moments of silence.

Erich held her until he knew she was sound asleep. Then he slipped from the bed and tugged on his jeans. Padding downstairs he grabbed his bag and went back up. Putting his duffle down by the door, he took the time to look around her room. Unlike the studio which had bright loud colors, her bedroom was done in calming, subdued hues. The bedding and walls were a blend of deep lilac, dark chestnut, and almond.

The room was huge, a balcony with an awning off one side. A low whistle left him when he saw the bathroom. A standalone shower and a pale blue jetted tub on marble floors, it was a stunning effect. His shaft hardened again when he envisioned himself and Bliss in the tub together. Walking back to the bedroom, he moved to her dresser and looked at the framed photo on the smooth surface. Reaching for the frame, he noted how devoid of objects her dresser was.

He figured the handsome couple must be her parents. Her mother was a beautiful black woman with a killer smile and Bliss’ father a handsome Spanish man. The love in his eyes was obvious as he looked at the woman beside him. With care, he replaced the picture and stared in the mirror to the woman who slumbered on the queen sized bed. Her left foot was sticking out of the bedding and he saw that bracelet on her ankle.

Erich wasn’t sure what to make of her. Simple jewelry, no makeup. No real trinkets or doodads lying around. Turning around, he strode to the bed and sat beside her. He readjusted her leg so it was back under the sheet then headed for the door.

“Erich?” her voice stopped him.

“Yeah, darlin’?”

“*A dónde va?*”

“I was going to go downstairs and make you something to eat.” He faced her, her hair tousled, eyes sated and sleepy.

Bliss pulled back the blankets and said simply, “Stay.”

Erich didn't have to be told twice. In seconds he was sliding back into her bed and moaned contentedly when her hand curved around his hardening erection.

"Bliss," he ground out from behind a clenched jaw.

She pushed him back against the mattress and pressed her curves into him. "My turn."

Closing his eyes, Erich allowed her to explore at her leisure. He was covered in sweat all over again by the time she rose up and lowered herself slowly down upon his firm shaft. "Fuck," he uttered as Bliss closed her eyes and found a rhythm she liked.

Bliss sucked her bottom lip as she watched Erich bend over to take his shot. They were playing billiards, having finally made it out of the bedroom. Her skin still prickled at the memory of Erich's arms. *He even cooked me breakfast.* She walked to the other side of the table and bent over so she could stare into his cobalt gaze.

"Something the matter? You've been staring at the ball for a while now."

His gaze grew hungry. "I was thinking of you bent over this table, it seems to take up my concentration."

She quivered. "That won't win you the game."

Erich lifted a brow. "You sure, darlin'?"

"Take your shot, you're holding up the game."

"Nice evasion tactic."

"Thanks." Moving to her drink, Bliss took a sip and allowed her fingers to trail over some pictures which sat upon the piano.

Warm hands wrapped around her midsection and she smiled before leaning back into Erich's strong body. He lowered his head, resting his chin on her shoulder. She was surrounded by his scent; sandalwood, leather, masculinity, and pure Erich.

"You okay here, darlin'?"

"I'm fine. Just got a bit lost in memories."

"Your mama was beautiful. I see where you get your looks."

She flushed. "Thank you."

"Do you play?" he asked reaching around her to trail a finger up the keys.

"No. Mama played. I danced. Mateo can play though. He's really good."

"And your father?" He put his hand back against her abdominals.

“Papa built things. He did most of the renovations in the house. Jack of all trades.”

“This house is beautiful.”

“It was his pride and joy.” She dropped her head and struggled for control. “I know he was looking forward to teaching Mateo what he knew.”

“Did he teach you?”

“All I wanted to do was dance. They indulged me. I wish now I had shown an interest.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, darlin’. You couldn’t know this would happen.”

She nodded. “I know that, really I do, but some days...”

“The emotional outweighs the intellectual.”

He was dead on. “Right,” she said. With a deep breath, she turned in his arms and stared at him. “Is it my turn now?”

“Yes,” he grumbled.

“Good.” Ducking under his arm, Bliss headed for the table and placed her cup on a nearby stand. Picking up her cue she lined up to take her shot. A wolf whistle filled the air and she turned her head to find Erich grinning shamelessly at her. “Stop trying to distract me.”

“Hey, I’m the one being distracted here. You bent over like that is one hell of a temptation, darlin’.”

“Too bad. After this game you said we’d go take a walk in the park.”

He pushed away from where he leaned and prowled toward her. “So I did.” Erich caressed her ass as he bent over beside her. “Would you like some help handling the stick?”

Her tight nipples rubbed against her bra and her breasts felt heavy. The pulsing in her core told her she was losing the battle of being good. *I want him again. As if I haven’t been in his arms for most of the damn day.*

Erich moved behind her and lowered his powerful physique along hers. She could feel his erection pressing into her. Callused hands ran down her arms to where she held the cue. “Bliss,” he murmured. “Do you want help?”

She rubbed against him and his chest rumbled against her back. “I want something.”

His mouth nibbled along her neck and one hand slid back to settle upon her thigh, just under where her shorts ended. “What is it you want, darlin’?”

The flames were almost already out of control. “You, Erich. I want you.”

“Here or upstairs?”

It was hard to think, much less speak. “Up...up...down this hall to the spare room.”

The words were barely out of her mouth when he swept her up in his arms and carried her out of the room in the direction she’d said. He kicked the door shut behind them and tore off her shorts and panties. In one thrust Erich was completely sheathed within her.

“Ahhh!” she moaned, arching her back. Without breaking his strokes he palmed a breast and pinched the nipple. With the door at her back and his warm body in front, Bliss was in heaven. He powered into her, filling her as he had the first time.

“Jesus, Bliss,” he swore.

Cracking open her eyes, she stared at him. His strong jaw clenched and she could see wildness in his gaze. “Let go, Erich. I won’t break.” She needed it too.

“Bliss,” he said.

Threading her fingers through his short hair, she put them nose to nose. “I’m actually pretty strong, Erich. Trust me.” She nipped his lip and rotated her hips on his thrusts.

Bliss found herself on the bed, on her hands and knees. Before she could blink it seemed Erich had driven back home. His strong hands gripped her hips and he began to power into her. Dropping her head to the bed, she grunted with each stroke. She could feel him, so deep within her.

“Ohhhh!” she screamed as her orgasm washed over her.

“Fuck you’re so tight!” he growled, increasing his speed.

Clamping down on his shaft with her internal muscles, Bliss undulated against him, allowing him to go even deeper. The fire grew again. Euphoria seemed just out of reach.

“Erich! Please...I...ne...need...give...let...” she begged without shame.

He drove harder and faster until he came with a low roar. His release triggered hers and she convulsed around him. They fell forward on the bed, Bliss trapped between the bed and Erich. His heart pounded rapidly into her back.

“Bliss,” he muttered.

“Hmmm?”

Erich moved off her and rolled her to him. Brushing some of her hair back he stared into her eyes. "I think you've killed me, woman."

"Are you complaining?"

"Hell no, darlin'. Feel free to kill me like that anytime."

"Well if I killed you, I'd not get any more."

"True." He kissed her. "Come on, let's get cleaned up and get to the park."

"You don't want to finish the game?"

"Billiards was my choice. You like the park, we go to the park."

"Better be careful Texan, you're beginning to spoil me."

"Just now figured it out?" He smacked her on the ass and got off the bed before tossing her the discarded clothing.

"Slow learner."

She watched him shimmy into his pants and she found herself getting wet again. *Think of something other than sex.* Erich picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder and carried her upstairs where they were both in the shower in moments. It was early evening before they made it to the park.

He bought them dinner and she spent the evening sitting by the pool on a double chaise held in Erich's arms. One of his hands ran up and down her exposed arm. His chin rested upon her head and his fingers were interlaced with hers. *I could see myself falling in love with him.* If she allowed herself to love anyone other than Mateo it would be Erich. The idea to be loved in the way her parents were in love held such great merit, but she was petrified. Petrified of finding love and losing it again.

"Tell me about your tattoo, darlin'," he asked.

The nocturnal lighting surrounding the pool cast an intimate glow around them. She could see his skin glow dusky gold in the dim lights. The mild wind caused the water of the pool to lap gently against the sides. The serenity of the atmosphere helped calm her enough to comply with his request.

"I got it done when mama passed, a circle to show infinity and tears because I'll never stop mourning the loss of her." She cleared her throat. "When papa died I went back in and had the two drops at the front of my ankle done in the color of their birthstones. The rest remain silvery-blue."

"I would have liked to have met your father. And your mother."

She chuckled. "No you wouldn't have. My father wouldn't have liked you."

Erich tightened his grip on her hand. "Why not? I'm a nice guy."

“You’re a man. I don’t think he was ready to let me go.”

“Mmm, I don’t reckon I could hold that against him. I think I’d be the same way with a daughter.”

A weird feeling crept up in her stomach. “You have children?”

“Not that I know of.” He released her arm and readjusted so they could see into one another’s eyes. “Not unless you’re carrying my child.”

It hit her like a brick wall. They’d not used protection any of the times they’d made love. Her face must have betrayed her thoughts for he sighed heavily.

“Bliss, if it turns out you are pregnant I’m not going anywhere.”

“I can’t be pregnant,” she mumbled. *Pregnant. What the hell was I thinking? Oh, crap.* Her heart began to pound erratically.

“Come here, darlin’,” he commanded softly.

Erich didn’t give her a chance to resist, just drew her back in, close to his body. Erich continued to hold her and murmur softly, until his thick Texas twang eventually calmed her.

Chapter Five

“Daredevil. You’re quiet today. Everything okay?” another pilot asked.

“I’m good, Livewire. Great actually.” He smiled as he streaked across the clear blue sky in his F-22 Raptor. With a glance to his left he watched as Livewire’s plane lifted parallel to his and the man glanced in his direction. “What? Had to come check for yourself?”

“Something like that. You sound happier than you usually do. Just wanted to make sure it was you and not some alien life form who’s taken your place as an imposter.”

Flipping his friend off, Erich “Daredevil” Stark laughed. “Don’t you think if I was an imposter clever enough to take his place I’d look like him too?”

“Nawh, an alien would have gone with a much more handsome mug. Like mine for example.”

Erich choked on his amused snort. “Livewire, I thought I told you to stop sniffin’ glue before we go up. You know the government ain’t gonna be happy with you if you crash one of their expensive toys.”

“Oh, so it’s the plane you’re worried about. What about me?” he questioned with false indignation.

“Hmmm good point, it *would* be a pain in the ass to train another wingman.”

Erich laughed hard at the muttered words from Captain Donovan “Livewire” Leegan and pushed his jet for more speed. Soon they were screaming across the Pyrenees Mountains and out over the Mediterranean, before turning around and coming back.

As they flew, Erich thought about Bliss. They’d been officially dating now for two and a half months, and it was early autumn. She hadn’t been pregnant, which he knew was a huge relief for her, but for him, it was a different story. He found the idea of her carrying his child held immense appeal to him. Now they used protection, but he still held out hope there would be an “oops” and she would end up pregnant.

I want forever with her. He wasn’t so sure about her, though. He could sense there was something she kept from him. Her love and devotion to her brother was obvious, as was the way she protected him

like a mama bear protecting her cubs. He wanted her to trust in him and his feelings for her enough to open up completely. He wanted her love.

He had spoken to the youngest Stark brother and they were all trying to go home for Christmas. Garrick, who was now back in the States, said he had a woman he was doing his damndest to get to agree to come along and Erich had told him he'd try to get Bliss to agree as well. Neither of them had been able to get in touch with their eldest brother, Dominic, but they had both left messages.

Bliss. She was everything he could ever think of wanting in a woman, and then some. He knew it was hard for her, but she made time for him. He knew Mateo came first, and then things dealing with dance. She took her role of raising Mateo very seriously. *But he's almost eighteen, maybe she'll be willing to discuss a future with me soon.*

He and Mateo had gotten closer. At first Erich could tell Bliss was a bit hurt by that, but either she hid it well or she was fine with it by now. Today he had agreed to pick him up from school and take him car shopping. Mateo knew the car he wanted, but he had asked Erich to come along with him.

Back at the base, he climbed down from his plane and saw Livewire waiting for him. "What's up?"

"Just wanted to see if you wanted to have dinner tonight. Carissa has a thing with the support group."

"Sorry man, I've got an appointment." At the questioning look, Erich continued, "I'm going car shopping with Bliss' brother."

"Damn man, you're really serious about her, aren't you?" Donovan asked while they walked to their locker room.

"I told you that from day one." Erich sighed and Donovan punched him. "What?"

"Stop looking like you just got some."

He laughed and shook his head. Changing quickly, Erich got to his car in record time and was out the gate on his way to Mateo's school. He didn't wait long before Mateo showed up.

"Hey, Mateo," he said with a smile.

"*Hola*, Erich." The young man climbed in. "Thanks a lot for going with me. I just want to make sure I don't get an...how do you say it...an orange."

"I think you mean lemon," Erich corrected with a chuckle.

"Right, a lemon. Bliss doesn't know very much about cars."

"Hers is nice," he said, thinking of her convertible.

“Yes. And she told me I could have papa’s car, but...” Mateo paused.

“Kind of a rite of passage, getting your first car on your own, and not having it handed to you.”

“Exactly. Did you do that too?”

Erich nodded as they drove through Seville to the dealer. “Yes. I took my older brother with me.”

Mateo smiled and ran a hand through his inky black hair before settling back against the seat. At the dealership, Erich stayed in the background and let Mateo ask questions. After they test drove the car, Erich gave him a few more things to ask about. He didn’t say a word as they haggled over the price. But for the life of him, Erich couldn’t have been more proud of Mateo when he walked out with the keys than if the boy had been his own son. Mateo had gotten it for a lot less than the asking price.

“Congratulations, Mateo,” Erich told him as he stood by the red truck.

“Thank you.” He tossed his school bag in the front seat. “I can’t wait to show it to my friends.”

“And your sister?”

“Yes, her too. But my friends’ first.”

Erich couldn’t blame him. “Okay. Have fun.”

Mateo paused with his hand on the open truck door and glanced up at him. “Erich?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. Not just for this, but for making my sister so happy. I know it’s hard for her a lot of the time, putting me first.”

“Bliss is very lucky to have a brother like you, Mateo.” He gave him a sharp nod and headed to his own car.

“Oh, you do know she’s not at home, right?”

“Where is she?”

“Studio. She’s practicing for the show.”

He furrowed his brow. *Show? She didn’t say anything about a show.*

“Okay, thanks. Drive carefully, Mateo.”

Mateo grinned and jumped in his new vehicle. Erich waited until the red truck pulled away, then he headed for the studio. He parked by her car and walked inside. The music was fast and loud. Erich came around the corner and saw Bliss dancing with another man. One he’d not met before. And he was a handsome man, who wore nothing but a pair of black pants and shoes. Bliss wore a tight tank top and short shorts with canvas slip-ons. A rumble of possessiveness welled up within him.

Not saying anything, he moved to sit on a chair along the wall and watched. Bliss smiled and waved at him, but didn't break. Both of them were covered in sweat but they didn't stop. Erich listened while they spoke, corrected, and laughed with one another. Thirty minutes later they took a break. A towel in one hand and a bottle of water in the other, Bliss walked to his side and pressed a light kiss to his lips.

"Hey. What are you doing here?"

"I missed you," he said drawing her down so she was on his lap. The urge to claim her in front of this other man was strong. "So after Mateo and I went to get his vehicle I came here."

"What'd he get?" she asked.

"Nope. I'm not saying a word, he wants to show you himself." Erich gestured in the direction the other man had gone. "Who's he?"

"That is my partner, Raul Santiago."

"Partner?"

"Yes. For competitions he's my partner."

Swallowing back his concern, Erich said, "Oh right, Mateo said something about a show coming up."

"Yes, in about three weeks. All the dance studios around put on a thing. Give out prizes and let our students compete. Then we also compete."

"And Raul is your partner."

"Si." She jumped off his lap. "We have to practice one more dance, then I'm done." Bliss stared at him. "Can you stay?"

"Of course."

Her smile melted him. "Great." Bliss hurried to the stereo and changed the music. "Come on, Raul. Let's go."

The man appeared again and barely spared Erich a glance, just moved to Bliss' side and they spoke quickly before he took her in his arms. Whatever bit of calm Erich had felt vanished in a puff of smoke when he watched the dance unfold.

Ah, hell no! The anger roared up fast and fierce. There was no light between their bodies. *Is this even legal?* Erich could feel his fingers biting into the edge of the chair as he strove to remain seated and not punch a hole right through the man. It was as if he wasn't even in the room and they were expressing their love for one another, short of making love on the dance floor.

Just when he didn't think he could take any more of it, his phone rang.

“Major Stark,” he snapped out.

“Get back here. We’ve got a situation,” his CO’s voice whipped out the command.

“Yes sir. On my way.”

Shoving to his feet, he stared at the dancing couple before he spun around and walked out. On his way back to the base, he called her cell phone and explained he’d been called back. Anger fueled him as he envisioned them dancing like that over and over. And now he wasn’t there to stop anything if it started. The scowl on his face remained there even after they took to the sky and headed out over the Atlantic Ocean.

* * * *

One minute he was there and the next he was gone. Bliss was shocked enough that she almost missed a step. *What the hell? I thought he said he was staying.* Disappointment welled up within her, but she shoved it to the back of her mind and concentrated on the task at hand. Maybe things weren’t as okay between them as she’d hoped? A small seed of doubt flickered in her mind.

“Thanks for swinging by, Raul,” she said when they’d finished.

He sat beside her, towel draped over his neck. “I’m sorry I wasn’t back sooner. We have to cram because I’ve been gone.”

“It’s okay. We’ll get it in time. I’m not worried.”

“Where’s your man?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Bliss tried to ignore how much that fact hurt, but she had a hard time doing so. Getting to her feet, she grabbed her things and walked out to her car with Raul by her side. Once seated in her car, she pulled out her phone and saw she had a missed call. It was Erich.

Bringing up her voice mail, she listened to the message. “Bliss, sorry I had to leave without a word, darlin’, but I didn’t want to interrupt your...practice. I got called back to the base, not sure what’s going on but I’ll call you when I can.” Then he was gone.

“Well, that makes sense.” Tossing her phone to the seat, Bliss started her car and headed home, exhaustion flooding her body. On the way she wondered about the slight pause before he said “practice”. Still, when she pulled into the driveway and saw her brother standing beside a red truck, a smile crossed her face.

“What do you think?” he asked after she’d parked and gotten out.

“I think it suits you. Congratulations, Mateo.”

“You’re okay that I asked Erich to come with me, right sis?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Mateo frowned and looked around. “Where is he? Erich said he was going to the studio, I thought he would be coming for dinner. I wanted to run some ideas by him about what to do to with my new truck.”

“He got called back to the base.” Mateo met her gaze and arched a brow. Bliss shrugged. “Hey, all I got was a message on the phone. You know this can happen, Mateo. He’s a fighter pilot.”

Her brother sighed heavily. “I know. I was just excited.”

“I know. Look, I need to go shower. Think about what you want to eat.” She walked away without another word.

Bliss stood in her shower under the pulsing spray and thought about the message again. *Why would he hesitate? Did he leave because he thinks there is something between me and Raul?* With a sigh, she sank to the floor of the shower and pulled her legs up to her chest and rested her head on her knees. *Don’t think like this, Bliss*, she admonished herself. But the thoughts wouldn’t stop. Even after she’d finished her shower, dressed, and was fixing their meal, the treacherous thoughts continued to weave through her mind and made her doubt everything they had shared. The hesitation in his message was really giving her pause. He’d seen her dance with other men before but Erich hadn’t met Raul before today. *I must be being foolish and just tired to be thinking things like this.*

Mateo kept the talk light, almost like he knew she was preoccupied. After the meal she headed down to the basement which she’d turned into another dance studio. Staring at her reflection in the wall of mirrors, Bliss sighed. She was tired. Grabbing the music she wanted, Bliss began to head back up. At the top of the steps, she paused and tilted her head.

Piano music filtered to her ears. Walking slowly to the billiard room, Bliss paused in the doorway and her breath caught in her throat. Mateo sat at the piano, playing. He stopped and she said, “No, please. Go on.”

His smile, although sad, was there. “Okay.”

Bliss sat down in an overstuffed chair and rested her head on the arm. Her brother played with a passion she remembered her mama playing with. She drifted away on a tide of memory.

The room was lit with only a lamp when she woke. Bliss smiled and burrowed deeper into the blanket her brother had covered her with. She had no clue what time it was, although she sensed it was day.

“I must have been exhausted.” Instead of getting up, she sighed and closed her eyes. “Still am.”

It was early afternoon when she woke again. She knew it was because she could see her clock. *What the hell? I am almost positive I was sleeping downstairs.* Peering under the blanket she saw she was still dressed. *Okay, this is weird.*

Bliss pushed up to a sitting position and looked around her room. Everything seemed to be fine. Climbing out of bed, she showered and dressed in clean clothes. She walked downstairs while she pulled her hair up off her neck. Hand on the banister, she paused when muted conversation reached her followed by the sound of balls hitting.

Mateo must be playing billiards with some friends. Bliss entered the room and feet stopped. It was Mateo and someone else, but not any of his school friends. Leaning over the table and taking his shot was Erich Stark. Both men fell silent when she walked in and she began to feel self conscious.

“Hello, darlin’,” Erich murmured as he sank his shot.

Well now I know how I ended up in my bed. He looked so good. She gulped when he rested the cue along the wall and strode towards her. Bliss remained still and followed him with her eyes, her head tilting back the closer he came. His cobalt eyes bore into hers and he ran his knuckles along her cheekbone.

“I missed you,” he said before kissing her.

Bliss closed her eyes and allowed his strong body to hold hers up. His tongue stroked through her mouth and when he ended the kiss, she wanted more. So much more.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked, swiping his thumb along her lips.

“I did. And now I know why I was moved. You wanted to be able to play without waking me.”

“See,” Erich whispered in her ear. “I see it as me wantin’ to hold you in my arms.”

Like the damn hussy she was for him, her body reacted, violently. Her mind wasn’t so easily swayed, and she hesitated. “Why didn’t you stay then?”

“I didn’t know you wanted me to.”

“I always want you to,” she admitted, for once ignoring the self-preservation alarm going off within her. Stepping away from his touch, she looked around him to where Mateo stood by the table pretending he

wasn't paying attention. "What were you two talking about when I walked in?"

"Nothing," Mateo said.

Bliss narrowed her gaze. *He's lying.* "Mateo?" she warned.

Erich distracted her with a kiss. "Nothing, darlin'. Just a little talk between men."

She glanced up at the tall Texan who'd swaggered his fine ass into her heart. *Okay, I'll let it go.* "Fine. Don't tell me. I'm going to eat something and then I have to get some things done, so, have fun and don't leave any watermarks on my furniture."

Bliss walked out without another word and headed to the kitchen. She grabbed a grapefruit, sliced it in half and sat at the small table in the kitchen to eat it. It was a leisurely breakfast for her, snatches of masculine laughter made her smile. It was good for Mateo to have an older male in his life. When she finished her light meal, she cleaned up after herself and walked out into the back garden.

It was autumn and she was beginning to ready it for the winter by laying mulch and cutting back plants. She sat beneath one of the olive trees, which her mama had told her was over a hundred years, and took a break. Bliss opened her eyes when a shadow blocked out the sun. Erich stood staring down at her.

"Finished playing?" she asked, reaching up a hand to him. He took it and she tugged him down beside her.

"Yes. He's out here working on his truck. I guess he has a date tonight with Julia."

"Jamie's sister. He has had a thing for her for a long time."

Erich repositioned her so she sat between his legs, her back against his chest. "He told me."

That must be what they were talking about. She was glad that her brother seemed to be content with playing sports and putting the crazy idea of joining the military out of his mind. Turning her head, Bliss smiled at the sight of her brother dutifully cleaning his truck. "It's not even dirty," she muttered with a laugh. Taking a deep breath she faced forward again. "Everything go okay yesterday?"

"Fine," he said.

"Okay. I'm glad."

"Sorry about leaving like I did."

"I understand. When you are called you have to go."

"Did you date a military man before?"

“No. Mama was military. I remember her telling stories of being called back off leave and stuff like that.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Mama was stationed over here and met papa at something, not sure. He came to Seville and bought the house, began fixing it up and mama went back to the States and had me, got out and moved back here.”

“You were born in America?”

“Such shock in your voice. Yes, I have a dual citizenship. She wanted me to have the option of where I wanted to live.”

“And you picked Spain?”

“Well, when mama died, I helped raise Mateo. My wants didn’t matter anymore, well, they took a backseat. Then papa died, and here we are. Guess I just never really think about it anymore. I have pretty much all I could ever want here.”

Erich kissed the skin behind her left ear. “Bliss? Can I ask you something?”

“Anything. But, be forewarned, if you ask if I strip I’ll hurt you.”

His rich chuckle flowed over her. “Nothing like that. I want you to come to Texas with me for Christmas.”

“What?”

“Don’t answer me now. Just think about it, please.” He got up and headed toward Mateo who was calling his name.

“Christmas? In Texas?” Bliss remained sitting there and just watched the men as they stood by the truck, talking.

Chapter Six

“What’s got the scowl on your face?”

Erich opened his eyes and stared up from where he lay bench-pressing and found Donovan looking at him. Shutting his eyes again he continued with his set. The burn was almost too much.

“Okay enough, Daredevil,” Donovan said, spotting him and guiding it back. “What the hell is going on with you, man? Two weeks ago you’re all smiles. You can’t honestly still be mad you got called for a mission.”

“No, that’s not it.” Erich sat up and reached for his towel. “I don’t know what to do, though. For the life of me, I don’t.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked, totally serious.

“Bliss has a dance partner for competitions, I watch them practice and I damn near come unglued. The way he touches her, looks at her...it makes me want to give him a good ole Texas ass-whuppin’.”

“Well, I’m far from levelheaded, but you knew she was a dancer and if I’m not mistaking she’s never given you any reason to doubt her.”

He draped the towel over his head. “I know, I *know*, but damn it all, it ain’t easy. I’m not that easygoing.”

“You know, I have this friend who gave me some advice I’m going to give to you. Talk to her, don’t sit on it and let it fester.” Donovan clapped him on the shoulder and walked off.

Erich groaned. *I gave you that advice, jackass*. Still, he had to admit, Donovan had a point. His watch beeped and he pushed to his feet. Tonight was her show and he was going to be there. Hurrying to the shower he got cleaned up then went to his room before heading off to Seville.

He arrived at the gym and smoothed his hands down his suit. Once inside he smiled when he saw Mateo.

“You came. I know she’ll be happy.” Mateo gestured down closer to the floor. “I’ve got seats down there.”

“Excellent.”

Erich followed him down and sat in the seat. He watched people moving back and forth and there was the scent of excitement and nervousness in the air. Then his nose filled with the alluring smell of lemon drops. Turning his head to the side, he inhaled sharply at the vision before him.

“Hey Texan,” she said leaning down to kiss his cheek.

He captured her chin and covered her lips with his. Slipping his tongue into her mouth, he stroked it along hers until she whimpered. Then he ended the kiss. “Hello, darlin’,” he murmured. Erich released her chin and she slid into the seat next to him.

“I’m glad you came.”

“Don’t you have to be down there?”

“They do the students first. I stay out here and cheer them on.”

Taking her hand in his, he laced their fingers and paid attention to the dancers. The urge to confront her about her partner almost won, but Erich decided to save it for a time when they were alone. He was surprised to see Tom and Lisa out there on the floor and cheered them on right along with Bliss.

“They’re really good,” he whispered to her.

“I know.” Erich could hear the pride in her voice.

When she got up to leave, that same push for the confrontation rose up within him and he struggled to tamp it down. Bliss looked at him and winked before she slipped away. Mateo slid over a seat and leaned toward him.

“My sister is the best.”

“What about the man dancing with her?”

“Raul? He’s very good too. They work hard together and practice a lot.”

Just what I needed to hear. Erich nodded and sat back in his seat.

He was blown away. Erich had no other way to describe his reaction to watching her dance. Bliss was total grace and beauty. Elegant and one hell of a seductive vixen. When he wasn’t charmed by her poise, he was shifting in his seat, trying to find a more comfortable position for the erection he sported. Despite that, he felt the familiar wave of jealousy and anger rising up within him as they danced the Rumba.

Bliss and Raul took first and Erich stood and whistled along with everyone else. He went with Mateo to find her afterward. His heart skipped a few beats when he found her. She looked tired but there was a huge grin on her face. Raul stood at her side. Erich frowned at the sight of his arm around Bliss. As they got closer, the arm fell away and to Erich’s amazement, a slender dark-haired woman jumped into Raul’s arms and began kissing him.

“Congratulations, Bliss,” he stated.

“Erich,” Bliss replied kissing first her brother on the cheek then moving easily into his arms.

“You are amazing,” he admitted giving her a quick, thorough kiss.

“Thank you. Come meet Sonia.”

“Sonia?”

“Raul’s wife.”

He’s married? Okay, can I just say how glad I am I kept my mouth shut about my fear. “Lead on.”

Erich settled an arm around her shoulders. After introductions had been made and Bliss left to get her things, Erich went to talk with Tom and Lisa. They were in the middle of conversation when a light touch on his back drew his attention. Glancing down, he smiled at the sight of Bliss standing there beside him.

“Ready darlin’?” he asked, leaning down for a brief kiss.

“Yes.” She touched Lisa’s hand. “You two did amazing tonight. I am very proud of both of you.”

They said goodnight and Erich took her bag before leading her out into the night. He held the door for her and soon was driving back to her house. The ride was silent and he was okay with that, sure she wanted a bit of time to decompress. Mateo wasn’t back yet when they got to her home so she pulled him up the stairs with her. Not that he had any arguments.

“Did you want me to run you a bath, Bliss?” he asked as she pulled her shirt off. *Oh my.*

“No thank you. If I take a bath I may fall asleep. A shower works just fine.” She stared at him and began lowering her pants. “But thank you for the offer.”

With an expression which had to be more a leer than anything else, Erich strode to her and pulled her tight for a passionate kiss. His cock pressed insistently against his slacks and he moaned when she lightly raked her nails over his hard length.

“Bliss,” he growled.

“Erich,” she responded in a same low tone.

“You’re tempting me.”

“Is that what I’m doing?”

“You...shower. I’ll be downstairs.”

She stuck out her lower lip. “You don’t want to join me?”

He thrust into her hand. “I want, but you deserve to relax a bit.”

“Okay,” she said squeezing him again.

He clamped his eyes shut and prayed for strength. Her touch vanished and he remained there until he heard the shower turn on. Slowly opening them, he swore again at the sight of her bra and panties at his feet. Erich was halfway to the bathroom before he forced himself to stop and leave her bedroom.

In the kitchen, Erich took a drink of water and turned when he heard footsteps. Not Bliss, Mateo. He gave the young man a nod.

“Do you have a minute?” Mateo asked looking over his shoulder briefly.

“Sure. What’s up?”

One more glance behind him and Mateo moved a bit closer. “I wanted to talk to you about...being a pilot.”

“Okay, what do you want to know?”

“What’s it like?”

Erich smiled. “The most incredible rush in the world. To me anyway. And my brothers. They’re pilots too.”

“I know it helps to have people write letters to get into a military academy. Would you consider writing one for me?”

Wow. Erich leaned against the countertop. “You want to join the military?”

“Yes sir. I want to be a pilot.”

I know that look. My brothers and I all had that look. “I understand that calling.”

“Do women find pilots attractive?”

Erich hid his smile. *I remember thinking like that when I first became one.* “I’m sure there are some who go after pilots specifically.” A statement he knew to be fact. Mateo smiled and Erich knew the young man was pleased and so kept his mouth shut about making sure you became a pilot for a reason other than to impress women.

They chatted a bit more about what Mateo wanted to do and Erich answered some more questions. After a while, he added, “I’ll be happy to write a letter for you. You let me know to whom it needs to be addressed and I’ll get it written up for you.”

“Thank you. With your recommendation I may have a shot of getting in.” Mateo’s smile seemed almost too large for his face. He went to the patio door and slipped outside.

Erich shook his head and took another sip of water.

“How dare you!” Bliss hissed from behind him. “How fucking dare you.”

Turning quickly, Erich was stunned by the fury in her expression and the venom in her voice. “How dare I what?”

“Encourage him to be a pilot.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Look here, I’ve done a damn good job of raising him and I don’t need you coming in here putting ideas like that in his head.”

He shook his head in confusion. “Wait, you’re mad at me because I said I would write him a letter of recommendation?”

“That’s my brother. *Mine!* He’s all the family I have left in the world and you try to get him to not just join the military but to be a pilot. Get out.”

Erich tipped his head to the side. “What?”

“Get. Out.”

Her face was set in a mask and Erich’s heart fell. “Okay. I’ll call you tomorrow, darlin’.” Moving to her side, he tried not to let her stiffening when he leaned down to kiss her bother him, but it did. A lot. “For what it’s worth, Bliss. I only thought I was helping.”

She stared beyond him at something only she could see. With uncertain steps Erich grabbed his suit coat and headed to the door. He paused at the handle and looked back toward the kitchen. She wasn’t in view. *What the hell did I do?* At his car, Erich stole one more glance back at the white villa and knew that was where his heart belonged. Bliss was where his heart belonged.

“Bliss,” he muttered, climbing into his car and driving away. *Maybe I should have stayed and pleaded my case.* All sorts of scenarios moved through his mind and he liked none of them. “Tomorrow. She’ll calm down and we can talk about it tomorrow.”

* * * *

Bliss shook with the force of her anger. She’d come down from her shower and overheard Erich encouraging Mateo to join the military. Not just to join, but becoming a pilot. The world shifted on its axis and not in a good way. Not in the least. She’d done her best to encourage Mateo to do something other than the military. Sports. Piano. Something that didn’t put his life in danger.

“Where’s Erich?” Mateo asked coming back inside.

“He left,” she bit off.

Mateo stood in front of her. “You overheard?”

“Yes.”

He didn't drop his eyes, Mateo held her gaze. “I know you don't want me to join the military, Bliss, but I want to serve. And I think I would be a great asset to the Spanish Armed Forces. More specifically, the Air Force.”

“And the danger?” Her belly clenched with nauseating fear at the thought of losing him.

“The world is a dangerous place. I can help keep you safe if I'm out there, as I would be charged with protecting the sovereignty and independence of this country.”

“You know what? You're damn near old enough to do what you want. You want to join, join. In fact,” she tossed her cell phone at him, “take Major Stark's number off my phone and call him.” Blinded by tears she refused to allow to spill in front of Mateo, she stumbled upstairs and collapsed on her bed.

Bliss cried until there were no tears left to cry. Pushing up from her position, she headed to the bathroom and ran herself a bath. She grabbed her music, stripped, and put her ear buds in before stepping into the warm water. Sinking down to her neck, she leaned her head back against a towel and put her player beside her and closed her eyes. The jets in the tub massaged her muscles and relaxed her. She felt betrayed. That was the bottom line. She felt like her territory had been encroached upon. Bliss was bitter and angry. With a deep breath, she cleared her mind and allowed the instrumental music to flow through her. Bliss remained in the tub until the playlist had shut off. Feeling a bit more in control, she turned off the jets and slowly got out.

Dry, the anger began to surface again. *How dare he? How dare he try to influence my brother like that!* Her hand clutched into a fist and Bliss struggled for control. *I need to let it go. Mateo is a man who can make up his own mind.* The pep talk didn't help. She'd really hoped Mateo had gotten this out of his system, in fact she'd believed he had. He'd not mentioned it to her in a long time.

Bliss headed to bed. *Sleep. Maybe all I need is some sleep.* She crawled beneath the dark chestnut and lilac comforter, curled up into a little ball and fell into a troubled rest. It was early when she woke and got out of bed. Almost in a trance, Bliss got ready for her day. Bag in hand she walked downstairs and out the door, opting to get coffee on her way to work, instead of making it at home.

Once at her studio, she warmed up and began to dance. Before too long, Raul arrived and they began to work on their dance for the annual fair in Seville. They practiced long and hard until her first class arrived. With a kiss on the cheek for Raul, she turned her attention to her students. All day long she kept pushing. Not giving herself a moment to stop and think about what she may have lost. Or what she may lose if something happened to her brother.

At the end of the day, Bliss found Jorge waiting for her by her car. Rolling her shoulders, she stared at him. "Hey, Jorge."

"English?" he said lifting a brow.

"Not in the mood for your shit, Jorge," she snapped, still speaking English. "You have a problem with the language I'm speaking? Go away."

Jorge planted his hand on her arm. "Bliss, I know I can be a pain more often than not, but I do consider us friends. Talk to me."

She shuddered and didn't argue when he wrapped her in his arms. *He smells weird to me. I miss the sandalwood and leather that combines so well with Erich's scent. Jorge smells designer.* "You know I've done my best to keep Mateo away from the military," she said in Spanish.

"Of course. Everyone who knows you does. Why?"

"I caught him having a conversation with a pilot who agreed to give him a letter of recommendation to help his chances of getting in." Bliss licked her lips. "I feel so...I don't know what I feel. Hurt. Pain. Betrayal. And yet part of me I don't think I have a right to be."

Her hands curved into fists and she rested the heels against her eyes. Sitting on the trunk of her car, she took deep shaky breaths as Jorge rubbed his hands up and down her arms, the top of her head against his chest.

"You have a right to be, Bliss. Stop trying to be so perfect all the time." She lifted her head from her hands to stare at him. He merely arched a brow. "Don't give me that look, Bliss Ceri Esparza. We both know you never want anyone to see you at your weak times. I was there when you lost your mama and when you lost your papa. You didn't want to cry in public." He gripped her chin and held her immobile. "You are human. You are allowed to have moments of stupidity, selfishness, and even irrationality. So let yourself be emotional and human, Bliss. Just let it happen."

This is why I put up with him. Because there are these moments. "There are moments where you are actually very insightful and dare I say it...sweet, Jorge Colón. Thank you."

“Only to you, Bliss. No matter what, we’ve been through a lot together. And I will *always* be here for you.”

Wrapping her arms around him she held him close. “I know you will. And thank you for that. But I don’t want to be nice. I want to be angry.”

He shrugged. “Then be angry. Just remember, Mateo isn’t seven anymore and you know he loves planes. He’s just tried not to show you that since you were so against it. Why wouldn’t he ask the man you bring into his life who happens to be a pilot?”

“Then let him fly commercial planes!” she cried. “Why does he have to join the military?”

“You need to talk to him about that, Bliss. I can’t answer it.” Jorge stepped back and met her gaze. “Come on, how about dinner with an old friend?”

“I’d like that.” Wiping her eyes, Bliss slid off her car and moved to the driver’s door. “Where to?”

He stared at her, one brow raised. “Really? You have to ask?”

“Just making sure,” she hastened to reassure him. “I didn’t want my *old friend* to assume I was using him for his restaurant.”

“Right,” he scoffed. “I’ll meet you there.”

Not much later she sat across from Jorge at a table in his establishment. Bliss felt better as she joked with Jorge. Pointing her fork at him, she said, “I like this side of you, Jorge. You’re actually a lot of fun when you’re not telling me I need to marry, cook, clean, and bear kids for some man.”

“I just want you taken care of, Bliss.”

She laughed. “How is all of that me being taken care of? I’d be busier than I am now.”

“I know and I realize that. I guess I had always wanted you in that position with me, but watching you these past few months with Major Stark I’ve come to see you happy. Truly happy and that’s all I want for you.” Jorge scowled slightly. “Even if he is a Texan.”

Bliss ate a bite of her churro and rolled her eyes. Jorge did his best to forget she had dual citizenship with the United States. He didn’t like that country much. “Well, that relationship is questionable now.”

“Because of the letter?”

“It’s like he walked into my house and tried to recruit my brother. My *baby* brother,” she seethed.

“Who’s almost eighteen.”

With a sigh, Bliss looked at him. “So you’re saying I overreacted.”

It wasn't a question. It didn't have to be asked. She knew she had. *Damn it all, it's my job to protect my family. I can't...I won't apologize for that.*

"I'm just saying there's more to this than what you overheard."

"You're right. Did I forget to mention the talk about the number of women who liked pilots?" Her fingers clenched the fork in her hand as if it were a piece of coal and she was trying to create a diamond.

"Nothing I say is going to help, we both know that. If it would have, I'd tell you to listen to what you're raving about. It's not fair, not to Erich, not to Mateo. And not to you." Jorge stood and reached out a hand. "Come on, Bliss. Let's take a walk."

It was past midnight when she made it back home. Mateo sat on the bottom of the stairs and pushed to his feet when she entered.

"Bliss," he said, reaching out a hand to her.

"I'm tired."

Bliss moved past him and went to her room, closing the door with more force than necessary. Despite the late hour she arrived home, Bliss was out of the house by five the next morning, courtesy of the phone call she received at four-thirty.

Chapter Seven

Erich checked his phone for the twentieth time in five minutes. The base was on lockdown, he couldn't leave. All day yesterday he'd tried calling Bliss and had gotten no response. At ten when he'd called the house, Mateo told him she wasn't home and he had no clue where she was. Now it was nearly noon and he still hadn't gotten in touch with her. Back and forth he paced, like a caged tiger.

Each second seemed like an eternity to him. Flipping open his telephone, he pressed the call button. One ring. Two. Three. Four. And five. Then the message.

"Bliss, it's Erich. I've been tryin' to get in touch with you, darlin'. We can't leave the base, please call me and let me know you're okay. I need to know if *we're* okay too." He paused. "I miss you, darlin'."

Erich ended the call and ran a hand over his face as he sat down on the bench. "This is not what I need right now," he groused.

After another five minutes of waiting, he got to his feet and shoved his phone in his pocket. Walking around he waited impatiently for his phone to ring. A few guys caught up to him and roped him into playing basketball. That took a few hours and he checked to see if she'd called as he headed back to his room. She hadn't. Keeping an eye on the time, he called her house around eight. Nothing.

With a muttered curse, he scrolled through his call list and pulled up Mateo's number. While the phone rang, he sat down on the edge of his narrow bed and toed off his cowboy boots.

"*Hola*, Erich," Mateo said.

"Hi, Mateo. Sorry to bother you again, but I'm trying to get in touch with your sister."

"She's avoiding you."

Erich slid back to rest against the wall. "Because I offered to write a letter for you?"

"*Si*. I'm sorry, this is my fault and when she gets back I'll help you corner her so you two can talk."

Cornering her may be the only way that happens. "It's not your fault, Mateo. But can you tell me why she's so against you joining?"

"I think she's scared I will go and never come back, I really don't know. I did my best to try and love something else, but the sky calls to me. Does that make sense?"

So she wants to keep her brother safe. And to her that means keeping him out of the military. Why is she dating me then? Does she not think of this like I do? His heart sank again. "Yes, it does." Pulling his legs up on the bed, Erich switched the phone to his other ear. "Now, you said 'when she gets back'. Where is she?"

"She left today for Vila Nova de Milfontes."

He frowned. "I don't recognize the name. Where is that?"

"Portugal, a small town along the Atlantic Ocean."

"Oh, did she say when she was coming back?" *Why is she in Portugal?*

"I'm not sure. She got the call early this morning, I guess it was, that her friend, Mirari, was having her baby. All she left me was a note saying where and why she was going, not when she'd be back."

"Okay. Thank you, Mateo."

"For what it's worth, I know she really doesn't blame you. She was just taking it out on you."

"Thanks kid."

"You're welcome." Mateo hung up the phone.

Closing his cell, Erich rested his forearms across his knees. "Seems like you and I have a bit more talking to do, Bliss Esparza."

As he sat there, Erich realized that during the time he and Bliss had been together, she always seemed to keep a part of her out of his reach. He knew she was a private person, but maybe it was her way of maintaining a distance, just in case.

"We should have done a lot more talking."

With a glance at the clock, he got to his feet and changed into workout pants and a comfortable shirt. Opening the door, he made it one step before his cell rang.

"Major Stark," he said.

"We're up in twenty." The line went dead.

Spinning around, Erich got into his flight suit and hurried to the hangar. The rest of his squadron arrived not long after. Their CO briefed them quickly and before he knew it, Erich was waiting for the go signal for takeoff. He streaked down the runway and took to the night sky, adjusted trajectory and headed for the Atlantic Ocean.

Erich could feel the exhaustion weighing upon his shoulders when he finally made it back to Morón. He kept to himself as they walked from the hangar. A jeep pulled up beside him and he looked over to see Tom sitting in it.

“Let me give you a ride,” Tom said.

With a shrug, Erich jumped easily up in the vehicle. “Thanks.”

“I owe you. You had to go up because I’m grounded until they give me another eye exam.”

“Sorry to hear that, Tom.” Erich meant it. This was something all pilots dreaded, failing their eye exam. “I hope it all works out for you.”

“Me too, but Lisa, I think she’d be fine if it didn’t, to tell you the truth. She’s been after me for a while now to think about something else.”

He glanced at his friend. “And?” Erich asked. “What are you thinking?”

“I live to fly. She knew that when she married me. I don’t know if I can quit. Even if I can’t fly again, I don’t think I’d give up the Air Force.”

Bliss’ face came to mind. Could he give this up for her? Swallowing, Erich shifted on the seat. “I wish there were something I could say, Tom.”

“Not your fault. Good news though, the lockdown is over, so you can get to Bliss.”

“Bliss is in Portugal.” *Not to mention there is still no message from her.*

“I don’t think so, man. I know you’ve been gone for a week, but I saw her last night for our lesson. So unless she has a perfect double, she’s back.” Tom stopped in front of the building where his room was and Erich jumped out. “Although, maybe you should leave her alone a bit. She looks exhausted.”

“What do you mean exhausted?” Erich demanded, leaning back in the jeep, one hand resting upon the frame.

“The usual definition of the word. Tired. Worn out.”

“Did she seem okay?”

“Daredevil, do I look like Dr. freakin’ Phil to you? All I know is she looked exhausted. Damn man, go call your woman.”

“Yeah. I’ll do that. Thanks for the ride.”

Tom waved and drove off.

Erich entered the building. Go call your woman. *Hell, I’ve done that so much I could officially be called a stalker. And yet, there was nothing from her.* Sticking his hand into his pocket, he withdrew his phone and it began to ring. *Okay, that was just freaky.*

The caller id said it was Mateo's number. "Mateo?" he asked. "Everything okay?"

"Are you free for the rest of the day?"

"As far as I know, yes." He walked to his room. "Why?"

"Can you come to the park in two hours, the one the three of us had lunch one day? I need to talk to you. I'll be by the flamenco statue."

There was an odd tone to his voice. "Of course. Mateo, are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Two hours." Click. He was gone.

After a hot shower, Erich got ready to go. He knew he would be early, but damn it, Mateo sounded stressed. *Besides, after I talk to Mateo, I can go to her house and get this straightened out.* So he left.

Bliss tried to ignore the fear that had lodged in her chest. She ran through the park, desperate to get to her brother. *What the hell is going on?* They hadn't said much to one another since the whole thing with Erich, but she'd be damned if she wasn't there for him. She didn't feel any better when the statue came into view. It was huge and surrounded by a small pool of water. People hung out there, tossed in coins, sang, and more.

None of that mattered, all she knew was that Mateo wasn't on this side of it. She ran around the other side. "Mate—"

Ummph. She hit something hard and got the wind knocked out of her.

"Easy there." Hands settled around her waist, steadying her.

The voice was deep, masculine and drawling. *I know that voice. And I definitely know the hands around me.* Opening her eyes she gasped at the sight. Tall, tanned, and Texan. Erich Stark and his incredible cobalt blue eyes stood there.

"Bliss," he said. He sounded relieved.

Instead of letting go, he drew her closer to him. It was heaven being in his arms again, but there was something more pressing she had to deal with at the moment.

"Mateo. Have you seen him?" Erich frowned slightly. "Have you seen my brother?" she asked, peering around him, her hands resting against the bend of his arms.

"No, and I don't think you'll find him here," Erich commented in his lazy sensual tone.

She snapped her gaze up to his. "What do you mean? He just called me, said he was here and he needed me."

One brown brow rose. "Oh, so your phone *does* work, I had begun to wonder."

Her cheeks reddened with embarrassment. "Why do you say I won't find him here?" She was determined not to get sidetracked.

"He called me too. I think this is your brother's way of getting us together to talk." His fingers began to move in small circles on her sides.

Erich's words and his touch were making it very hard to concentrate. Pushing against him, she found it was no use. She couldn't escape his embrace. "Do you mind?"

"Why didn't you return my calls, darlin'?" You had to know I was worried."

"I need to talk to Mateo, could you let go so I can get to my phone?"

"You gonna run if I do?"

"No." He released her so that she could step back and reach into her pocket for her phone. She called her brother and waited for him to answer. It seemed only natural to sink against Erich's large chest when he stepped closer. She kept one hand on his arm and he curved his arm fully around her waist, anchoring them together.

"Don't be mad, Bliss," Mateo said when he picked up.

"Do you have any idea how scared I was by your call?" she hissed.

"I'm sorry for the deception, but you're miserable. You need to talk to him. There's a basket by the back of the fountain for you two." Her brother hung up.

"He okay?" Erich asked.

"A lot better than he'll be when I get my hands on him." She stared back at the man who not only still had her pressed close to him, but also took up a bit too much of her oxygen. "Thank you for not letting me hit the ground and I'm sorry about running into you. If you'll excuse me, I have to go."

His blue eyes narrowed and he shook his head. "Oh no, darlin'. I can't bear these evasion tactics of yours any more. We need to talk this through."

"Why?"

Erich's face lowered to hers. "Really? You are asking me why?"

"What difference does it make if I'm in your life? There are plenty of women who go after pilots," she snapped. "Weren't those your words? So go after them, or better yet go back to the ones you meet in the strip clubs you apparently frequent. After all that's where I first met you," she sneered.

He nodded and his eyes hardened. "Yes they were my words, but that's not fair. Did you even hear what your brother asked me? And as far as the other, I've not set foot in one since the day I met you."

No, I didn't hear what Mateo asked. Bliss looked away from the intensity in his eyes. She peered down and saw a basket beside him that had a large white sheet on the top with "Erich & Bliss" written in black marker. "You found the basket," she muttered, more to herself than anything.

"Talk to me, Bliss. I don't want any other woman. Darlin', if I wanted another woman why would I have called you so much, left so many messages, begged you to call me back just so I would know you were okay?"

"I don't know," she said. Her belly churned and her head began to spin. She wanted to run and hide, her emotions had begun to careen out of control and she wanted to stop it. Deep within her, she also wanted to jump into Erich's arms and have him hold her. To feel the protection and comfort being in his arms brought her. Like, nothing could touch her. But she couldn't.

Erich lifted the basket and threaded his fingers through hers. With a gentle tug he led her to a slightly secluded area. Apparently her brother had thought of everything, for soon, Bliss was seated upon the blanket, Erich's strong arms wrapped around her, warming her. Despite her attempts to remain stiff and unyielding, she found herself sinking into him.

"Bliss," he whispered in her ear. "I'm sorry you feel I overstepped my bounds. That's not what I wanted to do. Not at all. I look upon Mateo as my own brother and when he asked me for help, I agreed."

He thinks of Mateo as his brother? "And the women?"

"Darlin', he asked me if there were women who liked pilots. I told him yes there were. That's it. I didn't mean that he should join just for the women."

Bliss worried her lowered lip and thought about his words. "I just...when I overheard..." she trailed off. Apologizing was never easy.

"Bliss, if you have a problem with something I've done, said, or you think I even thought, come to me." Erich turned her body so they were facing one another. "Do you know what it was like to not be able to get in touch with you?" He lifted her hand and pressed his lips to the back of it. "Not because I wanted to keep tabs on you, but because I was scared this attraction between us would disappear if we didn't get a chance to be face to face."

Her belly tightened and she found herself held prisoner by his eyes. They gleamed in the setting sun. *Why is he saying things like this?* Bliss searched for the words she longed to say, but she couldn't seem grasp a single one.

"I need to ask you a question, Bliss." Erich set her hand back down and reached out to slide his callused palm along her cheek until his thumb caressed her lips and his fingers teased the hair at the back of her neck. "What is it you're keeping from me? There is a part of your heart you keep locked away."

She dropped her gaze, unable to hold his any longer. Shaking her head, Bliss got to her feet and gasped when his fingers closed about her wrist. Erich stared up at her with a plea in his gaze, a plea to allow him the knowledge to understand.

"I have to go, Erich," she barely managed to whisper. "I've been gone from home for a while and I need to make sure Mateo is okay." Bliss pulled on her arm, but he didn't release.

"Why are you running?"

"I'm not," she lied. "I just have to get home."

A flash of something filled his gaze and he released her. Immediately she missed his touch, but Bliss kept her face composed. In a single fluid motion, Erich pushed to his feet and towered over her. He shoved his hands into his pockets and sighed.

"I guess you must do what you need to, then."

A sharp stab of pain lanced her heart. *Why am I surprised? I'm the one who's running away.* "We could talk later maybe?" she offered.

"Yeah, sure. Call me when you want to talk." Erich walked away and never looked back.

"Way to go, Bliss," she muttered as she gathered the blanket and put it in the basket her brother had packed. "How hard is it to say you're scared?" *Considering I didn't say it, apparently very hard.*

Walking back to her car, she cursed herself the entire way. Erich had been right. She was keeping part of herself from him. The sole reason was that she was frightened. In her car, she didn't head home, but drove to her studio. Her heart jumped in her throat when she pulled in and saw a maroon Camaro under the light. Reclining on the hood, against the windshield, was Erich. He'd backed into a parking spot, so she could see him watching her as she parked beside him.

He slid off the hood and opened the door for her. "Did you really think I'd let it go like that, Bliss?" he asked, assisting her out and reaching back in for the basket.

"Why...how did you know I'd come here?"

"Dance is what you turn to, Bliss. When nothing else makes sense to you, you turn to dance. Plus your brother is home and you really don't want to deal with him right now, either."

He really has me figured out. Locking her car, she led the way inside the studio and turned on some lights. He walked to the middle of the floor and spread out the blanket. Bliss watched him pull out sealed containers from the wicker case. She went to the stereo and turned on some low music.

"Come here, darlin'," he drawled, holding out a hand.

Bliss took the few steps to the blanket and reached out for his hand. She sank down and stared at the food before them. Two fingers lifted her chin and she looked into his eyes. The blue was deeper than she recalled it ever being and it swirled with untold emotions.

"Erich," she breathed.

His gaze burned her as it moved from her eyes to her mouth and back again. "Let's eat, Bliss," he said in a low tone.

She nodded and turned her attention to opening the fare before them. Her brother had packed finger food. Erich took a carrot and bit into it. Bliss looked at him and sat back on the blanket, folding her hands before her.

"I'm scared, Erich," she blurted out.

Her admission obviously surprised him, for his eyes grew wide and he swallowed quickly. Putting the carrot down, he licked his lips and asked, "Scared of what?"

Don't wuss out now, Bliss, she told herself. "Loving." Holding his gaze she reiterated, "I'm scared to let myself love you."

He wanted to touch her, she could see that, but he remained where he was. "Why?" His voice croaked.

"I've loved three people in my life. Two of them are dead." She bit the inside of her cheek. "When you offered to help Mateo all I could see was myself losing the third."

"We'll get back to Mateo in a second. Are you telling me aside from your family, you've never loved anyone else?"

“No. I have close friends, but I always have a form of protection up. I don’t give them all of me. I *can’t*, I don’t know how.” Bliss turned her head away.

“Bliss.” She looked at him. “Do you love me?”

“I want to.”

“No, *do* you love me?”

She could feel the tears gathering at the back of her eyes. “Yes,” she whispered. “I love you.”

Chapter Eight

I love you.

Erich would have fallen to the ground had he not already been seated. She loved him. His heart stopped and then began beating fast. Pushing the food out of the way, he hauled her up against his chest and kissed her. Into the kiss he poured all his feelings. Ending it, he pulled back and stared down into her glazed eyes.

"I love you, too, darlin'. I love you, too." Resting his forehead against hers, Erich allowed this new experience wash over him. He'd never told a woman he loved her before and wouldn't again, those words belonged strictly to Bliss.

"I'm scared, Erich," she murmured again. "I don't know how to deal with these feelings. They make me feel out of control."

"We'll figure it out together, Bliss. Together."

"It's like I'm stuck standing on the edge of a cliff. And I'm scared to move. I'm scared to let myself fall."

"Step away, Bliss. I'm right here. No matter how far you fall, I'll always make sure you'll be landing in love."

"But for how long?"

"Darlin', it doesn't matter how far away I am from you, my feelin's won't change. Unless it's to grow deeper." He readjusted so he could see her face. Tears hovered in her big brown eyes. "You are the only woman for me, Bliss. Trust me."

He was awarded a slight nod. "I'm sorry I didn't call you back."

I know, darlin', you were tryin' to put distance between us. "Water under the bridge. Will you come home to Texas with me, Bliss?"

"I've never spent the holidays away from Mateo before," she touched the side of his face, "so can I talk to him about it?"

"Of course." Erich put his fingers on her face, loving the difference in their skin tone. Her mocha skin to his sun kissed fingers. A beautiful blend. "You are so beautiful, darlin'."

Heat flared in her eyes and she dropped a hand to his chest. "Erich." Her voice rasped deeper than usual and his body reacted.

"What about dinner?" he asked, trying desperately to remain a gentleman.

Bliss got up and sat across from him. "Fine. We'll eat."

"Don't pout, darlin', I'm trying to be good."

"Okay."

Somehow that didn't make him feel any better. And in two seconds, he knew why. With each bite she took, she moaned. She lifted a carrot and slowly slid it between her lips, her eyes hooded and sensual. Then it was the same thing with all the finger foods. In between each bite, she would suck her finger into her mouth and lick it clean, a deep throated groan emerged each time. The sight of her finger slipping from her full lips, glistening with her saliva, sent rockets of lust through him. He became harder and harder. His pants were uncomfortably tight. Erich swore and fought the urge to rip her clothing off. After dinner was finished, they put the containers back in the basket along with the blanket. Mateo had even included her favorite dessert, apples lightly dusted with cinnamon sugar, which Erich had taken great pleasure in feeding to her.

"Erich?" she asked from over by the stereo.

"Yes darlin'?"

"Will you dance with me?"

"Anytime."

She dimmed the lights so only one set was on and came to stand before him. He held his arms for the waltz but she shook her head.

"Hold me close," she whispered, stepping flush to his body.

That wasn't going to be a problem. Erich held her as close as he could while soft music played in the background and the low light added ambiance to the room. His eyes drifted shut as they moved slowly around the floor, bodies in perfect tandem with one another. For that space and time, nothing else existed but the two of them. Her curvy figure seemed to meld into his and Erich swore he could feel the final bit of her hesitation fade away.

After they danced a while, they headed back to her house. Mateo waited for them and Erich hung back as she strode directly to her brother and wrapped her arms around him. The young man's eyes shone with tears as he met Erich's gaze. He nodded at him but didn't say a word.

When they separated, Mateo took the basket and asked, "So, I take this to mean I'm not in trouble?"

Bliss glared and Erich laughed. While he longed to spend time alone with Bliss, he didn't push the issue, allowing her to decide when to leave her brother. She made some snacks and curled up beside him on the couch while he and Mateo played a video game. It was near eleven when she got

to her feet and kissed her brother goodnight. Bliss reached out her hand to him and he took it immediately. With a wave to the man he knew would be related to him soon, Erich followed Bliss' seductively swaying hips out of the room.

Erich scooped her up into his arms and carried her up to her room where he closed the door behind them. "I love you, Bliss," he murmured against her mouth while his hands began tugging up her shirt.

"I love you too, Texan."

* * * *

Bliss bit down on her lower lip as she rocked against Erich, his erection deep within her core. The heated water of the jetted tub surrounded them. Her hair was plastered to her head, his hands were on her breasts and she sat in his lap, moving at her own speed.

"Jesus, Bliss," he groaned, pinching her nipples. Lightning shot through her and she tightened her internal muscles and rotated again.

Her fingers dug into the edge of the tub as she moved faster. Erich released her nipples and put one hand on her waist while the other found her clit and rubbed it.

"Shit!" she hissed.

"Stop torturing me, darlin'."

"Erich...uh...oh...damn...please..." Her words fell away, her head dropping and her eyes rolling back.

"Ride me, darlin'," he commanded. "Come all over my cock as I thrust deep inside you. So deep you'll feel me even when I'm not there." His finger flicked her clit again.

Spirals of fire exploded throughout her and she gripped the sides harder. Leaning up, she began to go faster. Erich continued to use his lethal voice as a weapon and it didn't take long for her to bury her face into the side of his neck and scream out her release. As soon as she came, he released her clit and grabbed her other hip before powering up into her. He stiffened and shouted. She could feel his body shaking as he came in deep and powerful spurts.

She sagged against him until no more mini tremors flooded her.

"I'm sorry," he uttered.

Drawing back, Bliss stared at him. His face flushed, eyes dark with passion. "For what?"

"No condom."

Her breath caught and she tensed before relaxing. "Can't worry about it now," she mumbled against his lips. "Come on, you have to get some sleep if you're going to be back at the base bright and early."

Bliss never lost her smile or the glow which seemed to surround her. She stood while Erich dried her off before carrying her back to the bed. They made love one more time before she fell asleep. Erich woke her before he left, promising to be back as soon as he could.

At breakfast Mateo had a grin on his face that not even the threat of death could wipe off. Sitting across from him at the table, she fiddled with the fork.

"What is it, sis?" Mateo asked.

Just bite the bullet and tell him. "Mateo, Erich asked me to go home with him for Christmas. To Texas."

His eyes grew wide for a moment. "You going?"

"I told him I wanted to talk to you first."

"I say go. Jamie and his family are always inviting me to be with them. We can do something when you get back or before we go." He reached across the table and took her hand. "You've always put me first. Go with him, have fun."

"You sure?"

"So long as you call me I'll be fine."

She nodded. "Okay. I'll tell him I'll go."

* * * *

Texas

Bliss stood with Erich, her lip caught in her teeth. His hand curled around hers, offering strength. Her belly was in knots and she hadn't even left the airport yet.

"Relax darlin'. They'll love you just like I do."

"What if I say something stupid, or do something stupid or forget English, or—"

He slanted his mouth over hers and silenced her tirade with a kiss. Immediately all thought but how he felt vanished. When he ended it, she licked her lips and stared at him.

"Stop worrying, Bliss."

He signed the form for the rental and they walked out into the cold night. Erich held her hand on the drive out to his family's ranch. Once there, he helped her out and they walked up to the front porch. She paused

and stared through the large glass door. The large home, decked out for the holiday, shone a welcoming light out into the night.

“You okay, darlin’?” he asked, leaning close to her ear, his warm breath skating across her skin.

“A bit nervous.”

“I’m right here, darlin’. I ain’t going anywhere without you. I love you.”

With those words ringing in her ears and surrounding her heart, Bliss walked up the steps and through the door of her future, confident that the man who was beside her, Major Erich “Daredevil” Stark, would keep his word. No matter what the cliff she faced, when the time came to jump he would never fail to make sure she would be landing in love.