

ELLORA'S CAVE *BRANDED*



Love Game
CINDY JACKS

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Battling housework, Sandi wonders if the spark in her marriage has disappeared. When her husband interrupts their hot-shower lovin' to take a call from work, she's positive the magic is gone.

In an attempt to spice things up, she gets a makeover and sets a date with her hubby for a night of passion and romance. There's only one problem—Roberto doesn't show. But all is not lost. Alejandro, a silver-tongued Latin loverboy wrapped in an expensive suit, volunteers to keep her company for the evening. He says all the right—and deliciously wrong—things, leaving Sandi no choice but to see him again...and again and again.

One by one, Alejandro strips away her inhibitions, pushing her to act out her darkest fantasies, desires so private she's never mentioned them to anyone, not even her husband. Blindfolds, bondage with silk ropes, sex on the roof—nothing is off limits. But everything is not as it seems. The game's afoot—a love game—rekindling the scorching-hot passion in Sandi and Roberto's marriage.

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Prologue

Blindfolded and facedown on the bed, I felt him spread my legs and bind them to the bedframe with satin ties. A dusky laugh bubbled up in my throat. "Roberto, what are you doing?"

"Shh. You'll find out soon enough."

It'd been several months since we'd been in this hotel room, but for our anniversary he'd managed to book the same suite.

He slid the straps of my dress down my shoulders, pulling my arms through, then pushed the skirt up over my hips, the silky fabric still clinging to me. He placed a single kiss on each of my shoulders and at the nape of my neck, sending shivers down my spine. As he adjusted my position so that my arms were tucked loosely beneath my chest, he secured my wrists together and placed a couple pillows beneath my head.

"Comfy?" he asked.

"Very." I wiggled my bare buttocks at him. A light brush to one ass cheek gave me a start. I chuckled and squirmed. "What's that?"

But Roberto didn't answer. A few more strokes and I figured out he was running a feather over my body. He traced my thighs, my calves, and tickled the bottom of my feet. Each time he brushed it over my skin, chills rippled through me, the sensation almost unbearable but exquisite at the same time. Making his way up my thighs, he slowly drew the feather between my legs, flicking my labia and clit. Goose bumps rose on my skin and I let out a low moan.

Light, fluttery strokes led up my back and he swiped the tip over my neck. An involuntary shudder darted through me again. He brushed the feather against the sides of my breasts and dragged it softly down to the cleft of my ass. Repeating this circuit

several more times, he teased me with the downy plume until I was writhing and panting, every nerve in my body crackling.

I felt his hands on my back—so solid and warm in comparison to the feather—and he caressed down the slope of my backside, parting my folds with two fingers. One hand still on my buttocks, he worked the fingers inside me. With gentle flicks, he massaged the sensitive spot that made my legs tremble, that made me plead for more. Pleasure burst through me and I ground my hips against the mattress but all too soon, he withdrew his fingers.

I groaned in complaint. “No fair.”

“What did I tell you before?” His voice was light and playful. “It’s not supposed to be fair.”

Every inch of my skin tingled and my heartbeat pulsed between my legs. Flexing my thighs, I could feel my slit was wet. “Please, Roberto. I want you inside me now.”

“Ooh, I like when you beg me.” He ran a hand over my buttocks. “Maybe I need to cool you off a little.”

I heard a clatter and rustle, then something cool dripped between my shoulder blades. I gasped. Freezing cold met my spine and ran down to my hips. My breath caught in my throat. Was that...an ice cube? Shivering, I gritted my teeth to endure the sting of the ice as he traced my arms and legs, but when he drew it across my clit I couldn’t contain a yelp.

“T-too cold,” I stammered.

“Oh yeah?”

He pushed the ice cube into my slit and another shudder racked me. Writhing against my restraints, I gulped for air. The bed shook and I felt him behind me, between my legs. He covered my opening with his mouth, licking and sucking as the cube melted. The fiery and icy sensation heightened the pleasure. Abdomen and legs taut, I struggled to crest the growing climax, but just as I reached the edge, Roberto pulled away.

“No.” I said, my voice raspy. I struggled to move though I knew there was nothing I could do. “Please, don’t stop.”

Shifting, he pressed his pelvis against my buttocks and plunged into me. My body quaked of its own accord. His mouth came to rest against the back of my neck and he drove his cock deeper.

My hands still bound, I longed to reach for him, to rake my fingers through his hair, to pull his mouth to mine, but I was helpless. Utterly helpless. And I loved the sweet frustration. I melted beneath him, muscles liquid, senses reeling. Hard and fast, his thrusting took me higher and higher.

“Roberto—” Lips tingling, I could barely speak. Tears gathered in my eyes, every muscle spasmed in unison and I came, hot juices spilling down my legs. My heart pounded in time with the pulses of ecstasy and I let loose a stream of indistinct cries. He drove his shaft into me, his hips flush with my ass, bucking in the throes of his own orgasm. Violent quakes rocked us, gradually decreasing in intensity until we lay together – one quivering mass of flesh.

He took a deep, cleansing breath and planted kisses down my back. After withdrawing, he loosened the blindfold. At first I saw only white light. My eyes adjusted while he untied my wrists and ankles. Finally able to move, I curled into a ball and sighed. Climbing into bed next to me, Roberto kissed me gently. Infused with a warm glow, I draped my body against his as if I were a rag doll. He stroked my hair, caressed my back. We lay in the peaceful quiet, both exhausted and sated.

Being in this room again brought back a flood of memories. I was suddenly aware of Roberto’s cologne. With its citrus overtones, it was the only thing that felt out of place.

“What are you thinking about?” he murmured, lips to the top of my head.

“Alejandro.”

Roberto chuckled. “Mmm...at least this time you didn’t call out his name.”

Blushing and giggling, I hid my face in the pillow. "I'm never going to live that down, am I?"

"Nope. It was funny. And I didn't mind. Alejandro deserves his props, he taught us a lot."

Glancing up at my husband, his eyes still alight, I nodded. "He definitely did."

All joking aside, I wondered how many more anniversaries Roberto and I would've had without our "friend".

"Te quiero, mami," he said.

"I love you too. Very much."

As the pull of sleep took me under, I cast my mind back to nights of indulgence and passion. Six months ago, when it was Roberto, Alejandro and me...and our love game.

Chapter One

Six months earlier

His scent stirred something inside me – not his cologne, not his body wash, but the sweet musk of his skin. With a feathersoft touch, he used one finger to slide down the strap of my tank top. His lips warmed a trail of kisses against my bare shoulder, strong arms encircled my waist.

“Let’s go take a shower,” he murmured.

My hands dripped suds onto the tile floor, the never-ending stack of dirty dishes begging my attention. “I’m not finished with the kitchen.”

“Come on, Sandi. I’ll finish it up for you before I go to bed.”

But I knew he wouldn’t.

“Did you check on Danny?” I asked.

“He’s sound asleep.”

Roberto’s hands roamed over my hips and up to my breasts.

“Stop, I’m busy,” I said, a halfhearted protest.

“I know, but when was the last time we took a shower together?”

I stopped scrubbing to consider his point. I couldn’t remember the last time. A twinge of sorrow tugged at my heart. Distant memories of making love in the shower every night engulfed me. That is, of course, how we came to have a beautiful little five-year-old. Five years old? Could Daniel really be five already?

Light nuzzles returned to my shoulder and short-circuited these thoughts. Roberto’s breath on my neck sent shivers through me. I dried my hands and turned to face him.

“Ahhh.” A smug grin spread across his angular face. “You see, I’m winning you over.”

“I concede nothing,” I teased.

“*Claro que no.* I wouldn’t expect you to, *mi amor.*”

“Pulling out the big guns, are you?”

He knew the effect speaking Spanish had on me.

“No, *Señora Velasquez*, I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Seeking out his mouth with mine, I gave myself over to our shared urgency.

We scampered into our bathroom shedding clothes as we went. Our bare bodies pressed together, his heated skin melting any residual resistance I harbored. Chores could wait, kissing Roberto became my only need. And I could tell his need matched mine, a growing erection pressed into my hipbone.

“Want to skip the shower?” he asked.

“Nope. You sold me on some hot-shower monkey-love.”

“All right. Hot-shower monkey-love coming right up.”

He started the water and adjusted the temperature, then shooed me into the shower.

“I’ll join you in a sec,” he said, snapping the curtain shut.

Curiosity piqued, I occupied myself by soaping my hair. Perhaps he’d run to the kitchen for a bottle of wine. Maybe even candles and strawberries. *Okay, Sandra, let’s not expect too much.* By the time I slathered on the cream rinse I’d started to wonder if Roberto planned to join me at all.

Poking my head around the shower curtain, my previous excitement sank to my toes at the sight of him on his accursed cell phone. I didn’t need to ask why. Something must’ve come up at work. Something *always* came up at work.

“What’s going on?” I mouthed to him.

Robert held up a finger.

Grabbing a hold of my outrage, I forced my focus on to rinsing my hair and lathering my body.

Ten minutes later, Roberto climbed into the shower, sidling up to me.

"You have to be kidding me," I said.

"What's wrong?"

"You get frisky with me in the kitchen and then take an after-hours business call before getting into the shower. And you ask me what's wrong?"

"I wasn't gone that long. What's the big deal?" he asked.

How to explain? On second thought, why should I have to explain? "If you don't know, I can't tell you."

He rubbed my arms in an ineffectual attempt to comfort me. "I'm sorry, *mamita*, if I'd known it would bother you so much, I wouldn't have done it."

I turned toward the stream of water, perhaps with the hope it could wash away my frustration. Considering how things had begun in the kitchen, I hadn't expected to finish the shower feeling disappointed, perplexed and—truth be told—second fiddle-ish.

Roberto pressed his slick torso against my backside. He folded his arms around my shoulders and peppered my cheek with soft kisses.

"Yeah, that ship has sailed, buddy," I said, shaking off his advances.

"Thought I'd give it a try."

"Not gonna happen."

After squeezing the excess water from my hair, I stepped out of the tub.

"You're leaving me?" he asked.

"Yep, I'm going to finish the kitchen."

He peeked his head around the edge of the shower curtain. "I thought I was going to do it later."

"It's fine. I'll do it now."

I dried my body and wrapped my hair in another towel. The cool air from the half-open window made me shiver. I pushed it closed then rummaged through the dresser to find undies and a nightgown, then returned to the kitchen, my mood worse for wear.

It took longer than anticipated to finish the kitchen. Someone had exploded something in the microwave and allowed it to crust over. A chisel would've been useful to chip it off. Not having a chisel, I made due with a spatula and a scrubber sponge.

After taming the kitchen, I sat down at the glass-top table in the breakfast nook, stack of bills and laptop in hand. The credit cards were due, utilities, car payments, insurance. The stack seemed endless. And the mortgage was due on the first of next month. I could remember a time when Roberto and I had a combined income of fifteen hundred a month. The bills were easy in those days—rent, food, electricity. *Period.* At the time, we'd thought we were miserable, but now I looked back on our efficiency apartment over Mrs. Gordon's garage with affection. True, the graying linoleum floors clashed with the mint-green walls and the door to the tiny bathroom couldn't be opened if someone was on the toilet, but my favorite version of Roberto lived in those memories. A hungry, lean, driven, version who dreamed big. He also played hard. Somehow we managed to pull off parties with dozens of friends in that funky little place.

Now Roberto made several times more than fifteen hundred a month all by himself. I'd taken on the household duties after Daniel had come along. Our middles had grown a little softer, the fire of ambition doused by comfort. We had a good life, but not an extraordinary one.

Looking back on the plans we'd made in old lady Gordon's place, I couldn't think of one we'd accomplished. Roberto sought to be a world-famous soccer—excuse me, *fútbol*—player, but a torn ACL had quashed his hopes. And I wanted to be...well, that was the problem. I'd wanted to be a great many things. A dancer, a poet, a ceramicist, a pastry chef. All good ambitions, but I'd lacked the discipline to accomplish even one of them.

Once I finished depleting the checking account and romanticizing our younger days, I frosted the cooled cupcakes for Danny's class party tomorrow, placing measured amounts of sprinkles on each. The Great Cupcake Squabble from his fourth birthday had taught me uneven sprinkles would only lead to an ugly power struggle amongst the youngsters.

I rounded up his shoes, backpack and lunchbox to avoid the mad scavenger hunt in the morning. His sandwich with the crusts cut off, juice pack and pudding cup waited at the ready. Ground beef for dinner tomorrow sat defrosting in the fridge. My mental checklist finally finished, I dragged myself to our room.

Roberto had climbed into bed already, engrossed in a paperback with some twisted political plot. When I slid in next to him, he set the book aside and snuggled up to me.

"¿Ya estas enojada?" he asked.

"No...Yes, I'm still mad at you."

"Anything I can do?"

I shook my head. "I'm beat."

"I know you are. You want a massage?"

"If it's just a massage."

He kissed my cheek. "Only a massage. I promise."

I stripped off my nightie and rolled onto my stomach. Roberto straddled me and rubbed my lower back. The gentle pressure of his hands relaxed my tired muscles. The tension of the day ebbed from my body, then from my mind, but the peaceful feeling fell away, replaced by an awareness of his body close to mine. The heat of his groin radiated through the thin jersey material of his pajamas. I turned over beneath him.

"I thought you wanted a massage," he said.

"I changed my mind."

"Oh yeah?"

He grazed his lips across my nipples, sending a shiver through me. I gripped the spindles of our wrought iron bed, giving him full access to my body. The silent invitation caught his attention. He set upon me, licking from my breasts to my neck, then to my mouth. Just as he captured my lips with his, the bedroom door squeaked open. Roberto shifted off me and covered me with the sheet. In the doorway stood our sleepy little guy.

“¿Que paso, mi’jo?”

“Bad dream.” Danny’s eyelids drooped and he swayed a bit, still sleepy.

“You want me or *papi*?” I asked.

“Mommy,” he replied.

Roberto shot me an apologetic glance. I slid into my discarded nightgown and pulled myself to my feet.

“Come on, sweetheart.” I took his chubby baby hand in mine.

Once we reached his bed, he flung himself onto the mattress and I nudged in behind him.

“Want to talk about your dream?” I asked.

“I had a dream about a monster.”

“But there’s no such thing as monsters.”

“He was gonna eat Carlos.” He hugged his beloved teddy bear close.

“No monster will eat your bear. I promise. Next time you dream about a monster, remember, all you have to do is beat him up.”

“I forgot.”

“It’s okay, baby. Now close your eyes and no more bad dreams, only sweet dreams,” I told him.

“Tell me what to dream about.”

“How about ice cream and birthday cake?”

“Yeah, what else?”

"Your bicycle."

"What else?"

"Your friend Billy."

"And Sammy," he said.

"Sounds good. Now close your eyes. It's sleepy-sleep time."

"Mommy, sing to me."

"What song would you like me to sing, sweetheart?" I asked.

"Favorite place song."

"You like that one, don't you? All right—"

Singing an endless loop of his favorite lullaby, I snuggled with him until he finally drifted off to sleep. When he gave a soft, throaty snore, I knew I could get up and go back to my bed, but I didn't want to. I lingered with Danny a while, enjoying the rare peaceful moment with my baby boy. The warmth of his little body and the soft lavender scent of his hair soon comforted me into a drowsy state. The lyrics echoed in my mind. My eyelids drooped. Finally I gave in to the pull of sleep.

* * * * *

The coffeepot huffed out a burst of steam. Too impatient to wait the thirty seconds more it would take to finish its brewing cycle, I plucked the carafe from the hot plate.

"Cuppa joe?" I asked my mom.

"Please."

After pouring Mom's coffee, I mangled a slice of pecan pie with a dull knife and smeared it onto a small plate for her.

"The scrambled pie smells great." Mom eyed the heap of goo.

"Sorry, the first piece is always a bitch to get out. You want a prettier piece?"

"I'll stick with this one. It's all going to look the same later anyway."

“Ew, Mom.” I choked on a sip of coffee. Eager to change the topic, I asked, “Did I tell you what Roberto did to me the other night?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Okay, first let me ask you a question...” Loath to approach the topic of my parents’ sex life, I chose my words carefully. “Was Dad always attentive to your needs?”

“You know the old-fashioned Southern gentleman your father was. Very kind, very thoughtful.”

“Right, but I mean other needs,” I replied.

“He always put food on the table, paid for the roof over our heads. You kids never wanted for anything.”

“But did you feel special or wanted?”

“I don’t know, Sandi. What’s this all about?”

I sighed heavily, then relayed the incident.

Mom shrugged. “Maybe he really had to check in with work.”

“Fine, but what kind of message am I supposed to take away from that?”

“Did you tell him it upset you?” she asked.

“Yes. Believe me, it’s not a new topic of conversation, just a variation on the same old theme.”

“Well, I’d say you had the right to be annoyed, but try the intimacy again when the moment presents itself.”

“We did, later, in bed. Then Danny woke up with a nightmare.”

“You poor thing.” Mom snickered into her coffee cup.

“It’s not funny.”

“It’s hilarious, honey. You just have to think of it that way. Be patient. The romance will return one day.”

"I'm glad you find the decay of my marriage funny."

She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, Little Miss Drama. The thing is, sweetie, all marriages go through times when the passion isn't there. Romance is hard when you have a young child at home, but you two have to work to keep it interesting."

"I know, I know. Women's magazines say, 'Put a chocolate kiss in his lunch with a sexy note. Give him a blowjob for no reason.' Stuff like that."

"Get dirtier with it. Cover yourself in chocolate and let him nibble it off."

"And when am I supposed to do that? Between spin cycles or while Danny is watching Saturday morning cartoons?" I asked.

"Drop Danny off at my house one day, then go home. Put on a schoolteacher outfit and give Roberto a good spanking."

Trying to ignore the fact that this suggestion was coming from my mother, I said, "Kink isn't really my thing."

"I'm not saying you should put Roberto in a gimp suit and lead him around on a leash, but mix things up a little, honey."

Eyes wide, I stared her. "How in the world do you know what a 'gimp suit' is?"

To be honest, I wasn't a hundred percent sure what it was, but I knew it was something way out there—Mapplethorpe kind of out there—definitely something my sweet, aging mother should have no knowledge of. As she opened her mouth, I realized I didn't want to know the answer to my question. I shook my head. "Never mind, Mom. Really. Don't tell me."

With a shrug, she turned her attention to her coffee again. I sighed and ran a hand through my bangs.

"What I really want is to be seduced, you know? To be spoiled and sweet-talked. I want to spend hours and hours just kissing. Or spend the whole day in bed naked, with only a bottle of Gatorade to keep us hydrated."

"Then tell him that," she said.

"I *have*, and you see how his latest attempt turned out."

Mom tilted her head, the way she always did when she was about to say something I wouldn't like. "You know, you're putting all the responsibility on Roberto to light the flame, but you could put in a little more effort yourself."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Now don't take this the wrong way —"

"Mom, nothing constructive ever started with the words 'don't take this the wrong way.'"

"Hush now, listen to your mother. Attraction is a garden you *both* have to tend. I know you've got a lot on your plate, believe me I know better than anyone else, but take the time to spruce up a bit. When was the last time you had your roots done? Or a manicure— And stop biting your cuticles. Throw out those flannel PJ bottoms you always wear around the house. If you look sexier, you'll feel sexier and Roberto will respond. That's how your father and I kept things fresh all those years."

"Stop right there." I held up a preemptive hand. "I don't need to hear about how you and Dad kept things sexy and fresh."

"What's wrong with me saying your father was a good lover? *He was*. That man could —"

"Mother. Save this story for the gals at the bridge club, please."

"Fine... I do miss him, though."

I patted her plump hand. "I do too, Mom."

"Give me a tissue, honey. Great, I'm misting up. You know if I get started I can't stop."

I had to run to the hall bathroom to fetch some. When I passed the mirror, what I saw arrested me. *Mom's right*. I looked worn out and sloppy. Limp hair, dull skin, sluggish posture. And my PJ pants had a hole in the thigh. *Very sexy*. Okay, but I could

rectify this easily enough. After grabbing a handful of tissues I headed back into the kitchen.

"Thank you." She took them from me. "You should have some of this pie. It's delicious, but you always were a better baker than me."

"That's okay. I've got ten pounds I'm trying to take off."

"You *always* have ten pounds you're trying to take off."

I chose to ignore the comment. "Mom, do you have Bruce's number?"

She wiped her eyes. "I should, in my purse."

"Let's have a girls' day."

"Atta girl." Mom rummaged through her enormous bag. "Here, give him a call. He may be able to squeeze us in today."

I dialed the salon. Bruce was booked today, but he'd had a cancellation for tomorrow morning if we wanted the slot.

"He can do us both at the same time?" I giggled. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, honey. He can handle it," Bruce's receptionist said, a smile in his voice.

I replaced the receiver. "Appointment's all set for tomorrow at eleven," I told Mom. "Hey, can you pick up Danny from kindergarten tomorrow?"

"Of course. I'll take care of the baby. *You* take care of your man."

Chapter Two

Sasha wrapped a lock of my hair around an enormous wire brush, the blow dryer on low.

"This color is *fabulous*," he said.

"You don't think it's too much of a change?" I asked.

"It's only a couple shades lighter. Don't want your hair to match your dishwasher."

"Do you think the eye makeup is too heavy?"

"You look sultry. The black kohl is perfect."

Bruce appeared behind us, one hip cocked to the side. "I *know* you are not curling her hair *under*."

"What? It falls that way naturally," Sasha said.

"Oh my god, what's *natural* got to do with it?" Bruce snatched the brush and dryer from him. "We're going for a *waterfall* of hair. Booty-call hair, not PTA-meeting hair."

Sasha flounced away in a snit.

"You want something done right you have to do it yourself." Bruce twisted a section of hair around the brush in a spiral.

"You should be nicer to your assistant," I said, amused.

"He's being a little bitch today. Man troubles, you know?"

"Believe me, I do."

"Girl, your mother told me Mr. Roberto hasn't been giving you your *propers* lately. Don't you worry, I'll make you so sexy, all his body parts will stand at attention, if you know what I mean." He laughed at his own joke. "I love working on your hair. It's so long and thick. I want to yank it off your scalp and make a wig for myself."

"Could you try not to do that?"

"I'll do my best to contain the urge."

After drying my hair, Bruce made a side part, dipped his fingertips in hair mud, then with a few expert swipes gave me a sexy "bedhead" look.

"Ah...perfect, JBF hair without the BF," he said.

"JBF?"

"Just been *fucked*."

"Nice." I shook my head in mock exasperation.

"All right, let me see the nails."

I placed my freshly manicured hand in his.

"What's this length?" he asked. "I specifically said 'diva'."

"I asked Bebe for active length. I can't function in diva."

"If you don't get any today, don't blame me."

"I promise I won't. Besides, I doubt Roberto will be looking at my nails."

"True 'nuff. Where are you and Mama June going to next?" He walked me to the front.

"Trina's Closet."

"Ooh, get the pink strappy thing they have in the window... Here she is." He presented me to Mom, who sported a chic ultra-short 'do.

Bruce disappeared into the back. We paid our tabs and left a healthy tip for the whole crew.

Once at Trina's, I barricaded myself in the dressing room with a pile of dresses and began the painful process of trying them on. Feeling like a sausage bursting out of its casing, I eyed my reflection with disdain.

"The pink strappy thing is a definite no," I called to Mom.

She pushed her way through the door. "Let me see. Honey, it looks good on you. Why don't you like it?"

“It bulges in all the wrong places. Not the dress’s fault of course.”

“I don’t know why you’re so hard on yourself. A woman is supposed to have curves.”

“But if I’m not comfortable in what I’m wearing, I’m not going to feel sexy.”

“Good point. Try on the red one. I’ll go look for more.” She slipped out of the dressing room.

The red empire waist dress fit better, but the clingy fabric showed how flat my tummy *wasn’t*. I sighed. I hated my body. What was the point of getting a new dress?

The chocolate Shirred number couldn’t contain my bosom and left no room for a bra. The blue halter dress was labeled my size but fit like one size smaller.

“You want me to get a larger one?” Mom asked.

“No,” I groused, sinking my head into my hands. “Let’s go home, Mom.”

“Come on, now. Keep your eyes on the prize.”

“This is making me feel fat.”

“You aren’t *fat*. You look healthy. At your height, you’d look skeletal as a size six. We haven’t found the right dress yet.”

Clad in only my bra and panties, I looked myself over after Mom went out. Maybe my body wasn’t terrible. Voluptuous. I’d always hated that word, but it pegged my figure to a tee. D-cup breasts, ample hips. If I could get rid of the remnants of the butt-gut and saddlebags – gifts from pregnancy – I’d feel more comfortable. I needed to start working out again, but I never had time.

Mom flipped a black and red floral print dress over the top of the door.

“How about this?” she asked.

It hung with grace on the hanger, spaghetti straps with a fit and flare shape, built in push-up bra. The unadorned full skirt would fall a few inches above the knee. The deep red roses against the black background enhanced the sexy silhouette. Suddenly I felt I’d be a whole new person in this dress. My lips pursed in silent prayer. *Please, please, please*

let this one look good on me. My heart would be broken if I couldn't pull it off. I'd already fallen in love. I stepped into it, whispering the mantra, "Please, please, please."

"Can you zip me, Mom?" I opened the door.

To my surprise, the zipper glided up without a hitch. Holding my breath, I turned toward the mirror...but I didn't see myself in it. At least the woman peering back at me didn't seem like me. No, a Gypsy queen or perhaps flamenco dancer stared back at me. Or maybe the consort of some handsome but tyrannical sultan. She couldn't be Sandi Velasquez, housewife and known wearer of sweatpants. I burst out of the dressing room.

"What do you think?" I asked my mother.

"Oh, Sandi." She nodded. "Yes. *That's* the dress. You look stunning."

I couldn't take my eyes off myself, smitten with my own reflection.

We abandoned the inferior frocks to the return rack. Mom reached out and snapped the tag off.

"Go take off your bra and wear the dress out of the store. I'll pay for it," she said.

I shimmied out of my brassiere without undressing. Could be I'd never take this dress off again. Well, maybe not *never*. Then again, Roberto could work around it.

We ducked into a designer shoe boutique. I picked a pair of scarlet stilettos with a four-inch heel, an open toe and straps that wound up my ankle. My gait faltered in the shoes at first, but I paced around the store until I had the hang of walking in them.

"All right, I'm going to pick up Danny. You go knock 'im dead," Mom said.

"Phasers set to kill."

"Right. But no more *Star Trek* references, dear."

"You make a good point." I walked to my car.

It was only two-thirty. I had a couple hours to waste before Roberto would get back from the job site. I decided to go window-shopping downtown, near the pub where we'd agreed to meet. We'd need a new sofa soon.

Parallel parking proved an adventure in the heels, but on my third try I succeeded at cutting the wheel and depressing the gas pedal with the right timing. This section of town, still paved with cobblestone, gave me a little trouble as I crossed the street, but somehow I avoided a broken ankle.

I stopped in front of a froufrou store. The upholstered pieces in its display window always called to me, but the image of Danny pressing chocolaty hands onto a silk damask-covered chaise popped into my head.

Oh, why not take a look? Today was a day of fantasies. I might as well go in.

An enthusiastic salesperson greeted my entrance. He pressed his card into my hand.

“So, tell me about the room you’re shopping for today,” he said.

“Hi,” I read the name on the card, “William, I’m just looking.”

“Wonderful. Please take your time looking around the showroom. May I direct you to a specific room setting?”

“No, thank you.”

“All right, ma’am. May I check back with you in a few minutes to see if you have any questions?”

“Sure,” I agreed, more to get William to leave me alone than from the desire for him to check on me.

The handful of times I’d visited this store to dream, no one had ever shown much interest in me. I caught my reflection in a mirrored china cabinet and realized I’d never appeared here as Sandra the Great—or anywhere else for that matter. Could all the window dressing I had on prompt people to treat me differently? Beauty came with its own set of privileges.

My exploration of my new persona continued after I’d finished a little mental masturbation with room settings I had no intention of buying. I walked into more fashionable shops I’d avoided on other trips to this neighborhood. The moment I

walked into each one, customer service reps greeted me with an abundance of smiles and offers of assistance. I brushed them off, but still they lurked several paces behind me, as if I could afford to purchase something now that I'd run up my credit card on my appearance and outfit.

Satisfied with my experiment, I headed for the rendezvous with Roberto. When I passed a scaffolding full of construction workers, I heard them make lewd catcalls and whistles at some poor woman. She must've been mortified.

"Hey, sexy, as long as I have a face, you have a seat," one of them yelled.

I looked around to see who they were yelling at, but I saw no young woman hurrying past the site or flipping the guys the bird.

"Yeah, you, Blondie. I'm talkin' to you," said the crude, mustached man.

A scarlet flush spread from my neck up to my freshly colored roots. These jackasses were yelling at me. The nerve. On the other hand, though I didn't appreciate the sentiment, I felt heady with the power of my new look.

Chapter Three

The clock above the bar read quarter of six. Typical Roberto, running late. I kept an eye on the door to no avail. Frustrated, I turned back to my cosmopolitan. My cell phone buzzed, alerting me a text message had arrived.

Can't make it 2 Soledad. Stuck n mtg. Lo siento. Luv R –

Well didn't that just beat all? New hair, new dress, new shoes, new *Sandra*. Same old Roberto. I felt foolish, all dolled up and no one to care I'd gone through the effort. The Brazilian wax had been no picnic.

"Pardon me, Miss," a deep but familiar voice murmured from behind me. "I hope I'm not being too forward, but when I saw you I thought to myself, I have to tell her what a vision she is."

I turned to face the man who addressed me, my mouth open to reply but he shook his head.

"No. Please, don't say anything. I'm sure a woman of your beauty has a man who loves her very much. I just wanted to tell you how lovely you are."

I burst out laughing.

"Too much?" He flashed a self-deprecating smile. "My name is Alejandro."

His boldness caught me off guard, but then I thought, why not play along? "Hi, Alejandro. I'm Sandra."

"*Mucho gusto*, Sandra." He took my hand and dipped his head to me.

"*Yo también*," I replied. It was nice to meet him as well.

"Oh, you speak Spanish?"

"A little. My husband is from El Salvador."

"Your *husband*. Yes, I see...you do have a ring on your finger. How sad for me. How lucky for him."

"I guess so. He's supposed to meet me here."

"Is this your way of telling me to beat it?"

"Not really. Since he's not coming."

He leaned against the bar. "This may be bad form to ask, but can I sit with you? Just to keep you company."

I debated with myself, but decided there was no harm in a little conversation. "Sure, have a seat."

"*Gracias, señora*. May I order another drink for you?" He motioned to my nearly empty cosmo.

"Maybe one more. I have to drive home."

Alejandro hailed the bartender and ordered a round of drinks—another cosmopolitan for me, tequila on the rocks for him.

"May I ask your occupation?"

"I'm just a stay-at-home mom."

A quizzical look passed across his face. The bartender brought our drinks and Alejandro took a sip from his.

"Why would you understate such an important job?" he asked.

I arched an eyebrow. "Are you condescending to me?"

"Not at all. I believe it was Mao Tse-Tung who said, 'Women hold up the other half of the sky.'"

"I'm sure it's the half that needs to be laundered."

Alejandro chuckled. The timbre of his laugh caught me off guard with its rich sincerity.

"*Que chistosita tu eres*."

"I'm glad you find me amusing."

"Please, reply to me in Spanish. Clearly, you can."

"No, I can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm not very good at speaking Spanish. For some reason I understand more than I can speak," I explained.

"So, you can practice with me."

"No, thanks."

"Why not?"

I took a sip from my drink, unsure if I wanted to be candid. But what was the point of indulging in the company of a stranger if not to take chances?

"I make a lot of grammatical errors. My husband makes fun of my Spanish."

"*Perdoname*, forgive me for saying this, but what kind of man would mock you for trying?"

My cheeks flamed. I hadn't meant to bad-mouth Roberto and yet, part of me agreed with him. I made an honest effort to learn Spanish, so why did Roberto poke fun instead of helping me?

"I've touched a nerve. I'm sorry," Alejandro said.

"No. It's okay. I was thinking about what you said. Maybe I agree with you. I suppose that's hard for me to admit."

"I'm sure. You love your husband?"

"I do."

"And he is a good man?" he asked.

"Yes, very."

"Then, it is hard to admit he has faults."

"I suppose."

"He's a lucky man."

"Alejandro," I said, "could we talk about something else?"

"*Por supuesto*. What would you like to talk about?"

I huffed a laugh. "I don't really know... How about you? What do you do?"

"I run the family business. I import coffee from El Salvador and Costa Rica."

"You have family there?"

"Yes."

I paused to take another drink from my cosmopolitan. My mind drew a blank, I couldn't think of anything else to ask this handsome man. At least nothing appropriate. I sneaked a glance at Alejandro and his dark brown gaze fixed on me. An arrogant smirk crossed his lips.

"I like you, Sandra." His fingertips brushed mine. "And I think you like me. Am I wrong?"

"I don't even know you," I replied.

"What would you like to know?"

"I-I don't know. It's not like I can just pull out a list of questions..."

"I've made you uncomfortable."

"A little, yeah."

He dipped his head. "My apologies."

"Apology accepted."

"And there's no possibility we can be friends?"

I took a breath. Could we be friends? "I don't know."

"But you'll think about it?"

After fishing a twenty out of my purse, I placed it on the bar and slid off the barstool. "Thank you for keeping me company."

"Wait. Where are you going?" He pushed the money back to me.

“Home. I’m going home. Thanks again for the company.”

His hand caught mine and I flinched at the contact.

“Please, let me go,” I said.

He released my hand. “I’m sorry. I don’t want you to leave like this. Please, stay. We can keep talking.”

“I don’t like the direction of the conversation.”

“And again I find myself offering an apology. I promise, I’ll behave myself.”

I sank back onto the barstool. “As long as you promise.”

“Of course. Let’s see, safe topics of conversation... Do you have any children?”

“One son. He’s five. And you?”

“No, I haven’t found the right woman to settle down with.”

“That doesn’t mean you don’t have any children.”

He chuckled. “Yes, this is true, but I don’t have any or as you say here, ‘none that I know of.’”

We continued talking about inconsequential things. Mostly he let me talk about myself. No doubt my life bored him to tears, but if it did, he didn’t show it. His side of the conversation consisted of superlative interjections and polite questions posed here and there. More than once he broke out in laughter or gave me a heart-stopping smile. After about an hour, I checked my watch.

“My god, is that really the time?” I jumped up. “I’m sorry to run out, but I really have to go.”

“I wish you didn’t have to. How will I see you again?” he asked.

“You probably won’t.”

“That can’t be. Come on. Name the time and the place.”

A shiver ran through me. What was this guy’s game? One look at his dark eyes and I went all gooey inside. A flutter of intrigue rose in my stomach at the thought of seeing him again.

"Maybe I'll turn up here some other day," I said.

"When?"

I shrugged. "Who knows?"

With that, I walked away, knowing his eyes followed my retreat.

Chapter Four

The drive home gave me plenty of time to consider the strange encounter with Alejandro. I felt like the heroine in some pulp fiction romance. Mysterious, handsome strangers didn't drop into my lap every day. The last time someone so charming and attractive had come my way was the day I met Roberto. I'd just graduated from college and was getting ready to move in with my longtime boyfriend. My girlfriends and I cut loose for a night of dancing. The DJ spun a *Salsa* record, a hand caught mine and turned me around. The hand belonged to Roberto, his request—that I give him one dance. Lost in his brown eyes, I jumped at the chance. One dance turned into two, which turned into us closing down the club. I couldn't get enough of his body, his rhythm, the outrageous swivel in his hips. He was simply the hottest guy I'd ever met. I broke up with my boyfriend the next week. From then on, Roberto and I were inseparable.

Pulling in at home, I noticed Mom's car in the driveway. Danny played with his remote-control car in the front yard.

"Mommy." He flew up to greet me at the car door.

"Baby. Did you have fun with Grammy after school?" I asked.

"Yeah, she bought me chocolate."

"Hey," Mom said, "that was supposed to be a secret."

"You look pretty, Mommy," Danny said.

"Thank you, sweetheart. You ready to help me with dinner?"

"Oh yeah." Danny ran into the house, abandoning the remote-control car.

I stooped to pick up the toys and almost lost my balance. Mom threw out a hand to steady me.

"Thanks."

"Where's Roberto?" she asked.

"He should be here soon."

We walked into the house to find Danny with his kiddie apron on, a spatula in one hand and an ice cream scoop in the other.

"You look ready to cook," I told him.

"*Quiero carnitas*," he said.

"Sounds good," I agreed, pulling a plastic container of shredded pork from the freezer.

The ease with which Daniel switched between English and Spanish never ceased to amaze me, his little brain a sponge, absorbing anything it came across.

"Let Mommy go change and we'll start the tortillas." I headed for my bedroom.

My feet sighed in relief when I slipped out of the stilettos. Standing flat on solid ground felt wonderful. I had to contort myself to snag the zipper on my beloved dress, but finally caught the tab and wiggled it down. A bit of sadness gripped me since I'd had such a magical day in it, but the softness of yoga pants and a cotton tee soothed my overactive mind. It'd raced a mile a minute since I'd transformed into a Gypsy queen.

I emerged from the back of the house as my same old self, except for the wild hair that still tumbled around my neck and face. A few turns of the wrist and a hairpin fixed it into a neat French twist for cooking. Not a pleasant experience to find one of my hairs in our food.

Danny had already pulled out the corn flour for the tortillas. I popped the *carnitas* in the microwave to thaw it and retrieved my favorite mixing bowl for the *masa*. Mother made herself scarce, cooking not being her strong suit. I heard strains of R&B coming from the living room. She must've been playing with the stereo.

Amid the cheerful din, Roberto came in through the kitchen door.

"Tortillas smell good," he said, giving me a kiss on the cheek.

"Here, *papi*." Danny handed him one of the first we had made.

Roberto took a bite and nodded.

“Very good,” he mumbled around a mouthful. “Wasn't today supposed to be makeover day?”

“Yep, you missed it. I bought a new dress and everything, but I didn't think I could pull off dinner in it.”

“Darn, I'll have to get a private viewing later.” He arched an eyebrow to make his lascivious intent clear.

His hands tugged at his tie and stripped it off. He sank into a kitchen chair. “What a day.”

“How was the late meeting?” I asked with a smirk.

“Fine, just fine,” he replied. “I'm going to change.”

Once Roberto returned, clad in sweats and a wife-beater, Danny deserted us to play in the living room with Grammy. I studied my husband's broad shoulders. I'd always loved his stocky build.

“Hey there, sexy,” I said.

“Hey, *mamita*. Need some help?” he asked.

“Sure. You do the Spanish rice since you're better at it anyway.”

“It's not your fault the rice doesn't cooperate with you, *juera*,” he teased.

“That's it, I'm spitting in your tortilla.”

He laughed.

I let my gaze wander down his muscular back to his round ass, watching him cook. My thoughts turned to the way he looked when we first met, the nutty aroma of the rice toasting reminding me of the first time we'd made love. He'd cooked for me then too. Though he was in good shape even now, when he'd been in his twenties—Lord have mercy. Chiseled abs and pecs encased by smooth skin the most gorgeous shade of cinnamon I'd ever seen. His full mouth resembled a ripe peach—and that night he proved to me he knew how to use it. I remembered every detail—the feel of his hands

on my body, his hips between my thighs, the moment he sank himself inside me. We'd been a perfect fit from the start.

"Whatcha thinking about?" Roberto interrupted my thoughts.

"The first time you made me Spanish rice."

"Oh...that was a good night."

"Yeah, I broke Peter's heart because of you."

"Can't say I feel bad for him. I wanted you more than he did."

Would Roberto respond in the same way now, should our relationship be challenged? I shook the thought from my head. "And you ran circles around him in the bedroom."

"Of course I did. It's *los R-es*. Any man named R-r-r-roberto has to be a good lay," he exaggerated the rolling Rs in his name.

"You're the only Roberto I've ever had, but I have to agree."

"I better be the only one." He nudged me with his hip.

I prepared a lettuce and tomato salad for myself for dinner. The meal skipped by in a blur of lively conversation and devolved into a Weber-Velasquez family tradition, The After-dinner Napkin Brawl. Mom got in a few good shots before announcing her departure.

Walking her to the door, I thanked her for watching Danny.

"Did you have a good time this afternoon?" she asked.

I wondered how much detail I should give her. "Yes, I had a wonderful time."

"Well, that's what's important." She gave me a kiss on the cheek and headed out to her car.

The dishes awaited me in the kitchen and, to my surprise, so did Roberto.

"You need some help with the kitchen?" he asked.

"That's all right, thank you, though. Danny in the shower?"

“Yep...I’m going to work on a few reports,” he said and kissed me, then headed to his study.

I daydreamed my way through the dishes, my hands in suds, my thoughts far away and restless. Though I tried to focus on other things, inevitably they turned to my encounter this afternoon and the memory of Alejandro’s penetrating gaze. Goose bumps rose on my skin and a flush heated my chest and belly, working its way south. I squeezed my thighs together, enjoying the sudden pulse of arousal. Under my breath, I let out a quiet giggle. It’d been years since I’d felt this lighthearted.

* * * * *

Melted chocolate beckoned to me from the double boiler on the stove. Since I rarely ate candy anymore, I adored the smell of it. I hovered over the pot. The scent of chocolate, butter, sugar and vanilla drove me wild. A kind of olfactory porn.

I filled the baking pan and slid it into the oven. The aroma of brownies filled the house. I lay on the couch waiting for the soft beep of the timer. My brain screamed at me to go to bed. It was three-thirty in the morning and I couldn’t sleep. Strange restless thoughts filled my head. Since tossing and turning in bed had proven futile, I did what I always did when I couldn’t sleep – I baked.

In some ways the baking served as a creative outlet, but it also doubled as a masochistic ritual. Tempting myself with cakes, cookies and pies I wouldn’t allow myself to eat, making them just for the smell, just for the deprivation – maybe I needed a shrink.

A half hour later, the timer went off and I pulled the brownies from the oven. They were perfect as usual. The thin crust of flaky chocolate on the surface of the chewy fudge center crackled a little as it met the cooler air of the kitchen. I longed to take a knife – no not a knife. A fork. Better yet *a spoon*, and shovel large amounts of it into my mouth. I could eat the whole thing with a fresh pot of coffee, but I wouldn’t. So accustomed I’d become to self-denial, an indulgence such as a brownie seemed like a

sin. Food as temptation, as wrongdoing—how absurd a notion. But indiscretions had dominated my thoughts. Indiscretions represented by a tall, dark man in an immaculate suit.

“Baking at four in the morning?” Roberto’s baritone voice startled me.

“Jesus!”

“No, just me,” he joked.

“You’re up early.”

“I could say the same for you.”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“Ah. I have to go in early today.”

Roberto worked many early mornings and late nights. Were I suspicious by nature, I might have taken exception to his long business hours, but I couldn’t muster the energy or the paranoia to think ill of him.

“Should we try our date again this weekend?” he asked.

“Sure, if Mom can take Danny.”

He cut a large square of molten brownie for himself. “Would you like some?”

“No, thanks.”

“I’m proud of you, honey. You’ve lost a lot of weight.”

“Thanks.” I sighed. “It’s been a long haul, but I’m almost down to the weight I was when we met.”

“And you’re as beautiful as ever.” He kissed my cheek. The chocolate on his breath went to my head. I turned into his lips and explored his mouth with my tongue.

“Mmm...chocolaty,” I said when our mouths parted.

“Just eat one if you want.”

“I can’t.”

He put on a pot of coffee. When it finished brewing, he retreated to the bedroom with a cup and a second brownie. Exhaustion set in on me. I had to get some sleep, Danny would be up in a few hours. I followed Roberto and crawled into bed, watching him dress.

He appeared conservative when he dressed for work in a stylish suit and tie. Men's fashion didn't escape his interest. I'd accused him of being a gay man who just happened to enjoy sleeping with women. His sense of color rivaled my own. In fact, he owned more shoes than I did.

"Kenneth Cole or Gucci?" he asked, holding up two pairs.

"Kenneth Cole," I yawned.

He dropped the shoes to the floor and slipped them on.

The warmth of the quilt that shielded me from the cool of the open windows dulled my senses and sleep encroached on me. Roberto's lips on my cheek bidding me goodbye was the last thing I remembered as I gave over to the comfort of darkness.

* * * * *

The calf-length pencil skirt had occupied the back of my closet for as long as we'd been in the house. It still had the tags on it—I'd never worn it. Two months after I'd purchased it I'd found out I was pregnant with Danny. The "baby fat" took me five years to lose.

I slipped it on with a summer-weight cropped sweater and twisted my hair into a tight bun. Mom had offered to take Daniel for the whole weekend. I knew she'd pump him full of sugar and potato chips, but she'd given me a much-needed break and Danny seemed to benefit from "breaking the rules" at Grammy's.

Work had summoned Roberto this morning, something about making up for weather delays on his current construction-engineering project. He looked sexy when he'd left the house in jeans, a t-shirt and construction boots, a far cry from the suits or shirt and tie ensemble he wore when he met with architects and corporate yes-men. A

few hours at the building site, then he would hit the gym before meeting me at Soledad at six.

At five-thirty, I stepped into a pair of black high-heeled Mary Janes. The chunky heels gave me a steadier gait than the red stilettos, but I felt just as fabulous in this outfit. My driver's license, credit card, lipstick, mini-bottle of perfume and cell phone fit neatly in the matching evening bag. My "big mama" purse sat deflated on my dresser.

The restaurant filled up by six so I sat in the bar to await Roberto's arrival. By the time I'd ordered my second cosmo, I began to wonder if he planned to show up. Then a familiar handsome face entered my peripheral vision.

"*Señora*, I'm happy to see you again." He dipped his head to me. "Alejandro."

"Yes, of course I remember your name." I extended my hand. "Fancy meeting you here."

"You did say you would turn up again and here we both are."

"Yes, except this time Roberto *is* on his way."

"Then I'll let you be. I don't want to trouble your husband."

"Humph." I took a sip of my drink. "He should be troubled. He's late *again*."

"He does have a very bad habit of leaving you alone."

"Doesn't he? Hey, last time you bought the drinks, may I return the favor?" I asked.

"I couldn't allow that, *Señora*. But I'd be happy to order another for each of us. Cosmopolitan, correct?"

"No, no. You shouldn't have to pay all the time."

"But I insist. Where I come from, it's correct and polite for me to do so."

"Okay... If you insist." I checked my phone, nearly six-thirty.

"Is he really late?"

"About a half an hour."

"I hope everything's okay."

"I'm sure he's fine," I replied.

Alejandro handed me a fresh drink and held his up to me. "To new friends."

"To new friends." I clinked my glass against his. "So, how's the coffee business?"

"Good. Thank you. How goes your household?"

"Fine. Running smoothly."

"Of course it would be with you at the helm."

"Oh, yes. I'm sure that's why," I said with an amused tone.

"I *am* sure that's why."

A Marc Anthony tune played in the background.

"I love this song," I said, changing the subject.

"You understand the words?"

"I think so. He's saying it was worth everything he had to go through to be with her, to find shelter in her love. *Valio la pena.*"

"*Muy bueno.* You know how to dance?"

"Yes, actually I do. Roberto used to take me all the time. Before our son was born."

"And now?"

I cleared my throat and shrugged a little. "We're both very busy."

"But you have to take time to have fun."

"You sound like my mom."

"Your mother's a wise woman."

"That she is."

"Please, excuse me for a minute." Alejandro rose and walked in the direction of the restroom.

I took another sip of my drink. My common sense needled me. Was this sensible? As I batted the internal argument around my mind, my cell vibrated at the arrival of a text message.

Car trouble, mi amor. C u @ home. Luv, R –

Alejandro returned to the seat next to me.

“I suppose I should get lost before your husband shows up,” he said.

“Please, sit, stay a while. Roberto’s having car trouble.”

“Does he need a lift?”

“I’m sure that wouldn’t go over well. No, it’s fine. We have roadside service.”

“Good. Can I buy you dinner?” he asked.

“I’m not sure I should.”

“You need to pick up your son from the sitter?”

“No.”

“Then what’s to stop you from having a meal with me?”

I balked. “I just can’t.”

“Why not?”

“It would be inappropriate.”

He leaned in to me, his breath whispered against my neck. “Inappropriate can be fun.”

Startled by his blatant overture, I knocked my drink into his lap. “Oh, my god, I’m so sorry.” I grabbed a handful of cocktail napkins and dabbed at the stain on his thigh.

“Don’t be. I suppose I deserve a little cooling off. *Lo siento, Señora*. I was too forward again.”

“You could put it that way.”

“I don’t know why, but when I’m near you, all sense of propriety goes out the window. Let me make it up to you.”

“That’s not necessary,” I replied.

“Allow me to take you out dancing.”

“If that was an attempt at propriety, you’ve still missed the mark.”

“Not if you say yes.” He caught my hand and held it.

Electricity churned in my chest. The heat of his hand against mine held at bay all the objections I could think of. Again, that damn smoldering gaze snared me.

“If I say no?” I asked.

“I’ll wait for the next time you sit here alone and ask again.”

“And if I still say no?”

“I’ll keep asking, every time I can until you finally say yes.”

I pulled my hand away from his and asked the bartender for a pen. After scribbling a few lines on a napkin, I handed it to Alejandro.

“Thank you for the drink. I’m really sorry I spilled half of it on you. Good night.” I rose and walked away from him. My nerves and my pride wouldn’t allow me to cast a glance back at him, though I was dying to see his reaction. On the napkin I’d written, *Suavemente Nightclub, Saturday, 8 p.m.*

* * * * *

Marc Anthony blared in the kitchen. Roberto strolled in the door and shimmied up behind me.

“It’s been a long time since you’ve played this CD,” he said.

His hand grasped mine and he spun me across the ceramic tile floor. The song ended with an abrupt blast of horns and a crash of cymbals.

“How’s the car?” I asked, smoothing my sweater.

“It’s fine. The battery must be going bad, but roadside assistance gave me a jump. I’ll have Sal look at it tomorrow.”

“You hungry? I picked up a roasted chicken at the grocery store.”

“Sounds good.”

He handed me two bags. One held his stinky gym clothes, which I took directly to the laundry room and put in a mesh hamper set aside for them. The other held a suit to

be dry-cleaned. I tossed it on the growing pile and made a mental note to run to the cleaners' tomorrow.

"Sorry I stranded you again," he said once I returned to the kitchen.

"It's okay. I had a couple drinks and came home."

"You look gorgeous." He took me in his arms. "One of these days, if you keep showing up alone at the bar, someone's going to try to steal you away from me."

A sly smile twisted my lips. "Maybe. If you're not careful."

He dipped his head to kiss me. "We can't have that."

I ran to the bedroom to shower and change clothes. The steam of the hot water relaxed my racing mind. Had I really set a date with Alejandro? Indeed I had. Question was, would I keep it?

Readying myself for what I hoped would be a night of lovemaking, I slipped into a silk baby doll. A few dabs of perfume here and there completed the effect.

But once I returned to the living room, I found Roberto sound asleep on the sofa, TV remote in hand. An irritated sigh escaped me. I could attempt to wake him, but he'd had a long day. Instead I pulled a quilt from the cedar chest and covered him.

After putting away the leftover chicken and steamed veggies, I trudged to the bedroom and stripped off the baby doll nightie. The book on my nightstand had sat neglected for weeks. I nestled under the blanket and sheet, reading for a couple hours before nodding off.

Chapter Five

I'd made a deal with myself— If during the course of the week I'd seen to every chore on my to-do list, I could keep the date with Alejandro. *Date?* I felt foolish referring to our rendezvous as that. It wasn't a date. It was two adults getting together to engage in a mutually enjoyed activity. Okay, for the sake of brevity, I referred to it in my mind as a date.

By Saturday afternoon a tickle of anticipation built inside me. I crossed the last item off my list. All the laundry sat clean and folded in dresser drawers, the fridge sparkled inside and out. I'd shampooed the living and dining room area rugs. Danny's toys and clothes had been sorted and pared down. I'd even driven the bags of donations to the church thrift store. A roast simmered in the crock-pot with baby potatoes, carrots and celery. Danny would have plenty to eat during my night out.

Each time I thought of meeting Alejandro, my mind toyed with the mystery the night held. How far would I let this adventure go? After all, I'd indulged in this flirtation to break up the monotonous routine I'd fallen into. No, that *we'd* fallen into, Roberto and I.

I put on a black wraparound dress and knee-high boots. Though I'd considered a sexier outfit, I thought Roberto would find it odd of me to get dolled up to "go out with the girls". That he'd bought the weak cover story at all surprised me. Most of my friendships had faded since I'd left my full-time job several years ago, but I still kept in touch with a couple of the ladies. Of course I couldn't remember the last time we'd all gone out together. The time I'd stolen to explore the budding friendship with Alejandro gave me a sense of wicked freedom.

After kissing Daniel and Roberto goodbye, I climbed into my car and set out on my escapade. The first go around, I missed my exit. It had been ages since I'd been to the

club. I worried it might not still be there at all, but when I took a right off the highway, the neon lights of the theater-turned-discotheque greeted me. Roberto had been part of the renovation years ago.

I parked in a nearby garage. Judging from the number of empty spaces, the joint hadn't started jumping yet, but I didn't mind. I'd never liked a packed dance floor.

The spring air hung heavy with moisture. A haze of fog marked the warmth of the day meeting the cool of the evening. I rushed to the club, wishing I'd brought a cardigan. Saturday night was Ladies' Night and I didn't have to pay a cover. When the heavysset bouncer asked for my ID, I handed it to him with pleasure.

"Wouldn't have guessed that birthdate." He wrapped a plastic over-twenty-one bracelet around my right wrist.

"Thanks. You're a sweetheart." I tucked my driver's license into my bag and stepped into the club. A hard Latin beat surrounded me, beckoning me to the dance floor, but I'd wait for Alejandro to arrive. I fished my compact out of my purse and checked my makeup one more time. Snapping it shut, I put it back in my purse. Why was I so nervous? True, I was here to meet my beautiful man of mystery, a man who sent my pulse sky-high. What if he were a far superior dancer? What if he said or did something inappropriate? What if I got lost in his eyes again and let him? The very thought of Alejandro set my body to tingling. No, I shouldn't be nervous, I should be terrified. In desperate need of a drink, I took a spot at the bar, which ran almost the entire span of the back wall.

"What can I getcha?" the bartender yelled to me.

"Vodka on the rocks with a twist." I handed him my credit card to start a tab.

Soon enough the crowd started to thicken and the bartender hurried off to earn his tips elsewhere.

I swirled the vodka slush in the bottom of my lowball glass, then drained it. Right after I'd hailed the bartender for another round, a whisper of a touch on the back of my

arm compelled me to turn. Behind me I found Alejandro's chiseled face smiling down at me.

"*Hola, preciosa. ¿Como estas?*" he asked.

"Very well, thanks. And you?"

"*Bien, gracias.* You look..." He blew out a long breath. "Wow."

"Thank you. You look good yourself."

A dark, collared shirt, a sports coat and tailored slacks had replaced his usual suit.

Alejandro handed the bartender a credit card. "Cancel her tab and put her drinks on mine."

"No. You don't have to do that," I said.

"We've been over this. *I do.* That doesn't look like a cosmo, though. What can I order for you?"

"Vodka on the rocks with a twist."

"*Dos, por favor,*" he said to the bartender, then turned back to me. "No mixer tonight? Someone is letting her hair down."

I ran my fingers through the tips of my hair. "I haven't been dancing in so long, I need a little liquid courage."

"Don't worry. I'll take it easy with you tonight."

"Much appreciated."

The bartender returned with our drinks. Alejandro tipped his glass to me.

"*Salud,*" he said, tossing back his drink.

"*Salud.*" I took a sip.

"How was your week?"

"Fine. Productive. And yours?"

"Long," he said. "I thought today would never come."

"Me neither, I was so excited. Not that I was excited to see *you*. I mean—"

His piercing gaze locked on mine. "It's okay if you were. You can tell me."

"No, what I meant was I was excited about going *dancing*." I finished my drink, anything to shut me up.

"Of course. Shall we?"

I took a deep breath. "Might as well jump in, right?"

"Right." He extended a hand and escorted me to the dance floor.

Placing his right hand under my left shoulder blade and grasping my right hand in his left, he pulled me into a closed dance hold. His posture arrow straight, shoulders down, head held high, he reminded me of a bullfighter taking the arena. I started to break on the first count of eight. His grip stiffened and he stopped me.

"This is *Mambo*. Wait for it, *mami*," he said.

On the next set of counts, his lead told me to move on the two count. He started off with basic forward and backward steps. My rhythm faltered. He had me stepping on the two and six count.

"I'm sorry, I'm rusty." I grimaced.

"*No te preocupes*. Don't worry. Your body knows how to move. Let go and relax, trust me to lead you."

Wrangling a hold on my nerves, I gave myself over to Alejandro. Though he held me in a proper dance frame, the warmth of his torso so close to mine excited me. I closed my eyes and breathed in his cologne. Its gentle spiciness carried on his body heat. The strength of his posture, his authoritative presence—I had no choice but to do as he led me to do—and to my surprise, I liked it. There was something about the way he danced...something...as if he were commanding me to follow him, but at the same time asking if I belonged to him.

And I found out he was right. My body did know how to move. Now I had to listen to it instead of fighting it. By the end of the song, I had gotten used to his rhythm. But of course the style of music changed, leveling my excitement.

"*Bachata*," he noted the beat.

Inwardly I groaned, because I'd never been any good at *Bachata*, but I trusted Alejandro. He'd get me through it. I hoped.

He released my back and adjusted his posture. Holding both my hands in his, he led me through subtle pushes and pulls in time with the tinkling guitar. I watched the gleam in his eyes, the hunger there. His lips parted in the whisper of a smile. So caught up in his handsome face, I stumbled over my own feet.

"I'm terrible at this," I said.

"No you aren't. *Chasse, mami*. Like this." He slid his right foot to the side then slid his left to meet it. "And a step-touch. Let the guitar guide you."

"I might have to sit this one out."

"No, you won't. Come on. Take a chance."

I worked at the subtly complicated step. "I feel like an idiot."

"But you look beautiful and it's all about how you look, right?"

I laughed. Many times Roberto had tried to teach me other Latin dance styles, but I found him intimidating on the dance floor. Not to mention he lacked the patience to teach me. But Alejandro made me feel daring. I figured what the hell, why not? Opening myself to the risk of looking foolish, I did my best to keep up with him. He kindly kept the steps simple. The song drew to a close, filling me with relief.

Then, a *Salsa* beat blared from the amps around the club.

"Finally." I sighed. "*This* I can do."

"By all means, show me whatcha workin' with."

Breaking on the one, he placed his hand in the small of my back and started with a simple step. My comfort with the style made itself apparent, I felt confident in my movements.

"*Suave* step," he said.

Again, the implicit question— Did I belong to him?

Rocking me back, he positioned me to execute the move. With a measured cross step, he released my waist and clutched my right hand to his solar plexus. The heat of his body spread across my palm and I could feel his heart pounding. I wanted to press closer to him, to feel his skin against mine, to taste his lips, but did none of those things. Instead, I danced just for him. *Yes*, I answered silently. In that moment, I did belong to him. The loss of control felt a little wrong and oh so right at the same time. It intoxicated me.

He walked me through the step, did a full turn and caught my left hand. We didn't miss a beat.

Alejandro nodded at me, a hint of a curious smile on his lips. "Nice."

"Thank you."

"Butterfly spin?"

"Bring it on."

Again on the one beat, he did a cross-right lead, then pulled me forward with his right hand. My back to him, he prepped me for the spin and twirled me three times. We picked up the basic step without hesitation.

"*Dale, mami.*" His face lit up, but not with a spark of competition as Roberto's often did. An expression of desire and wonder played across Alejandro's features. I basked in the glow of his admiration. He pulled me closer than necessary to dance, but I didn't object. The fire passing between us rippled through my abdomen. We moved in sync, his arms and hands tensed before each new combo, telling me with precision what he wanted me to do. A sheen of sweat clung to us, his spicy cologne enveloped me and I inhaled deeply. The dance fueled fires that flared in my brain and between my legs, as if we were making love with our clothes on. I imagined him playing my body like an instrument, his hands on my bare skin, his hips setting the rhythm for mine, burying himself inside me until I came. Breathless. Flushed. All just for him.

Far sooner than I would've liked, the song crashed to an end. Alejandro dipped me back, cradling me in his arms. Our eyes met and he held my gaze for a second longer than was comfortable

"Wow. You were amazing," he murmured.

"Thanks."

He continued to hold me a few inches or so from his lips. *Was he going to kiss me? Should I kiss him?* I glanced down, trying to focus on anything but his mouth.

"Are you going to let me up?" I asked.

"If you insist." He boosted me to my feet.

To hide the fact that I was short of breath for more reasons than one, I dabbed a bead of sweat from my brow.

"Should we sit the next one out?" he asked. "I could use a drink."

"You read my mind."

He wrapped my arm around his elbow and we exited the dance floor. Though the club continued to fill, we managed to snag a pub table with two stools.

"You wait here. I'll get the drinks," he said.

"I'd love a diet soda."

"With or without rum?"

"Without, please," I replied.

"*Claro que sí.* Of course."

An eternity seemed to pass after he left to fetch the sodas. I amused myself by watching other couples on the dance floor. Many of them were quite good, way out of my league.

In my youth, I dreamed of becoming a dancer. Nature had ensured ballet wasn't a possibility. Growing up, I envied the nubile, lithe girls graced with long lines and not so much flesh. Of course if I'd applied myself to another style of dance, I could have at least competed at an amateur level, but then my lack of self-discipline had been epic. I

still didn't have much. If I did I would still work out and swim laps at the gym. Sure, I liked to complain and say I didn't have time, but with Daniel in school, I could've pulled off an hour at the gym every day. In truth, I couldn't force myself to hold to an exercise routine. Keeping to the housework schedule took all the willpower I had. There wasn't any left over to push me into regular workouts.

Finally, Alejandro returned and handed me my drink. "Here you are."

"Thanks." I took a desperate gulp.

"Tell me, where did you learn to dance?"

"I took a *Salsa* course in college to fulfill my phys-ed requirement."

"Clearly you took the class to heart. You seem like you practice a lot."

"Thank you. I enjoy dancing. Sometimes I...oh, never mind."

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing, I was going to say something stupid."

"I'm sure that's not true."

My cheeks burned at the thought of the silly confession I'd almost made. Alejandro had a way of lowering my defenses.

"*Por favor, dimelo,*" he prodded. "Tell me."

I heaved a sigh. "I can't believe I'm going to tell you this. Okay, sometimes I put on music and dance around the house with the vacuum cleaner."

I hid my head in my hands awaiting a burst of laughter, but none came. His fingers pried my hand away from my face.

"What's embarrassing about that?" he asked.

"Oh, come on. It's a ridiculous thing to do."

"Not if it makes you happy. And the way you move, your vacuum must be one hell of a dance partner."

"Please don't make fun of me."

"I'm not. In fact I'm jealous of your vacuum."

"Sure, thanks." I swirled the straw in my soda. "Hey, to make me feel better, you have to tell me something embarrassing about you."

"To even the playing field?"

"Exactly."

"Okay, let me think." His face scrunched in exaggerated thought. "Ah, here we go. I sing in the shower."

"A lot of people do. That's not embarrassing."

A picture of him naked and soapy flashed through my mind, but I fought the temptation to take that image further.

"You wouldn't say that if you ever heard me sing. My neighbors called the police once because they thought I was murdering a goose."

I giggled. "Must be pretty bad."

"Terrible, but still, I enjoy doing it."

"That's great. I tend to shy away from things I'm not good at."

"You shouldn't. How will you ever get any better at them?"

"Has your singing improved any in all the years you've howled in the shower?" I asked.

"To a point, yes. Of course I am limited by a complete lack of talent."

"I'll take it under advisement."

We continued to chat as we finished our drinks and I watched his mouth as he spoke. Lips the color of a peach and just as plump, a little pouty even, and turned up at the edges as if he was always considering something naughty. *A mouth like that was made for kissing*, I thought, and then I caught myself. It was the second time that night the idea had occurred to me and I shouldn't be thinking about kissing him.

The perfect distraction presented itself—the DJ played another *Bachata* song. I decided to take Alejandro's advice.

"All right. Let's see if I can get better at this," I said.

"That's the spirit." He tossed back the last of his soda and took my hand.

Holding my hands in his, he led me in a simple *chasse* pattern. I had to admit, I'd started to pick up the rhythm. I felt comfortable enough to give the steps another go with the next song.

The night rolled on in a blur of dances. His command over his own form impressed and aroused me. Again, my mind made the inevitable connection between his moves on the dance floor and his moves in the bedroom. That swivel in his hips—I could easily imagine him executing that move between my thighs, our naked bodies sliding against each other and his mouth covering mine. Before I could stop myself, I pressed closer to him, allowing my breasts to graze his chest. A tingle spread out from my nipples, turning into a shiver and then an indistinct ache.

Easy now, I warned myself. But judging from his grace and enthusiasm while dancing, he'd have to be one hell of a lover.

By eleven o'clock, exhaustion and perspiration overwhelmed me. Begrudgingly, I called it a night.

"Let me walk you to your car," he offered.

"You don't have to."

"Yes, I do, but also, I'd like to."

"Okay," I agreed.

The night air chilled my damp skin and I shuddered against it. Without hesitation, Alejandro stripped off his coat and draped it around my shoulders. It was warm and fragrant. I drew it tight around me.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I wouldn't want you to catch cold and get too sick to come out dancing again next Saturday."

"Who said I would be available next Saturday?"

"I'm sorry, you're right. *Señora*, would you be available to go out dancing next Saturday, perhaps a little dinner before?"

A flush of excitement spread over me, but I demurred. "I-I don't know."

"Unless you tell me otherwise, I'll meet you at Soledad at seven."

Ignoring his presumptuous declaration, I stopped at my car and thanked him for the evening.

"You really have to stop paying for everything. Friends share the expense of an outing, you know," I said, handing him his jacket.

"And you have to stop arguing the point with me. It's my pleasure to pay."

"Feels too much like a date when you pay."

He lifted my hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss into it. "It is what it is, *Sandrita*."

"And what is it?"

"*Que será, será*." He lifted his shoulders in a shrug.

I climbed into the car and closed the door behind me. After I turned over the engine, I let down the window. "Hey, I need your phone number."

"*¿Por qué?*"

"In case Saturday doesn't work out for me."

"As I said, if I don't hear otherwise I'll assume you'll meet me at Soledad. Seven o'clock."

"Right, I need your number if I have to cancel."

He flashed a killer grin, wished me good night and strolled away. I shook my head and yet, something about his arrogance attracted me.

Chapter Six

On the drive home, questions about my sanity swarmed in my brain. The momentum of this game with Alejandro had swept me along to this point, but soon I'd have to make a decision to stop playing or make a bold move forward. With every meeting, we inched closer to crossing the line. If I didn't call my own bluff soon, I'd go careening over the edge. But part of my aching heart—the part that Alejandro breathed life into—looked forward to taking part in something scandalous. My wildest fantasies included a secret affair with a dark and mysterious man. Alejandro had no compunction about taking our relationship forward. Then again, he wasn't the one facing infidelity.

Mom startled when I opened the front door.

"Shit, Sandi, you scared the bejesus out of me," she said.

"Oh, sorry. Everything okay?"

"Everything went fine. Danny's getting used to having Grammy around on weekends. And I'm not complaining. I think it's great you and Roberto are taking time for each other."

I nodded noncommittally to this statement.

"I'm going to take my old bones home," she said.

I walked her to the driveway. While I stood waving goodbye to her, Roberto pulled up and hopped out, a big grin on his face. He offered no explanation of where he'd been.

"Hey, *mamita*. I wasn't sure if you'd be home yet. How was your girls' night out?" he asked, strolling with me into the house.

"It was good. We went dancing. I need a shower before bed."

"That can be arranged."

I cleared my throat. "Mom made the assumption we were out together."

"Oh? That's funny. By the way, Tomas says hi."

"How nice of him. Next time you play soccer with him, tell him I said hello."

"*Suegra* offered to babysit next Saturday too. You want to go out to dinner?"

"Sure, if you want. Might as well take advantage of Mom watching Danny."

"Doesn't sound like you want to."

"I want to. It's no big deal. The girls talked about getting together again next week. Maybe making it a regular thing, but I can call Jane back and reschedule."

"No, no. Don't do that. I'm glad you're getting out of the house. Developing a social life again."

A social life. Sure, we could call it that. I thought maybe to cancel my flirtation and have dinner with my husband, but part of me railed against the idea. I wanted to see more of Alejandro. The thought of his body brushing against mine while we danced sent shivers through me.

In the bedroom, I stripped off my damp dress and underwear and hung them to dry before I'd toss them in the laundry basket.

Roberto, half-undressed, pulled me into a hug. "You ladies must've gotten down tonight. Your hair's still sweaty."

"Yep. It was fun."

"Is that a new perfume?" he asked.

"What?"

"You smell...spicy."

Alejandro's cologne smelled "spicy". I controlled my reaction. "Yes, it's a sample I picked up."

"You should wear it again. Smells good on you."

Once I'd stepped into the shower, I let the water wash away the foreign scent. But I couldn't wash away the yearning. Pressing against the cool tile wall, I closed my eyes and pictured his fluid hips and broad shoulders. I could still feel his arms around me and longed to find out what the expanse of cinnamon skin that lay beneath his dress shirt, what his rounded backside looked like beneath his slacks. With a shaky breath, I tried to clear my head, but it was too late. I was already too far gone. I slipped a hand between my legs and massaged my clit, imagining it was Alejandro's hand instead. A slideshow flashed through my mind. His dark eyes, his cocky smile, his muscular throat. I pictured running my tongue over that throat, coming to rest with the bridge of my nose nestled in the crook of his neck as a tremulous orgasm swept through me.

* * * * *

I squared off with my dance partner, afternoon sun filtering through the drapes. The strains of complex guitar notes tripped from the stereo speakers. Practicing my *chasse*, I pushed the vacuum cleaner to the *Bachata* beat. Granted the vac didn't take an authoritative lead like Alejandro did, but it proved a workable substitute. We meandered around the room, ridding the rug of debris in the process.

Relishing the private time and the freedom it afforded me, I started to sing. For some reason, I could sing in Spanish, no problem. Once I'd looked up and memorized the lyrics, anyway.

In my mind, I often pictured myself as this wildly glamorous woman. Songstress and dancer extraordinaire—Sandrita. Foolish for a grown woman, but the daydreams kept me sane.

And I thought of Alejandro. I imagined the feel of his hands on my bare body. He would turn me around and kiss the back of my neck. Slipping my panties down my legs, he'd drop to his knees and kiss between my legs. Then he'd lay me on the bed and press himself between my legs. Would his body feel heavy on top of mine? Would he make love or fuck like an animal? Maybe a little of both.

I turned to find Roberto leaning in the entryway, a curious smirk on his face and I shrieked in surprise.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?” I snapped at him.

“No, *mi amor*. I was enjoying the show.”

Embarrassment flushed my cheeks and ears. “You’re a shit sometimes, you know that?”

“I assume from your language Danny isn’t home.”

“He’s at soccer practice. I have to pick him up in a few minutes.” I checked my watch. Two-fifty. “What are you doing home at this time?”

“We wound things up early today. Boss is off to Baltimore, thought I could play hooky.”

“That’s nice.” I wound up the cord on the vacuum and put it in the hall closet, then moved to turn off the stereo. Really, I wanted to sink into the floor. He could’ve made his presence known. A cough, a sneeze, something. God only knew how long he’d been standing there watching me make an ass of myself.

Roberto’s hand caught mine. “Leave it on. Let’s dance. When was the last time we went dancing?”

“It’s been awhile.”

“You’ve picked up a lot of new stuff.”

“Thanks.”

“Come on. *Bailamos*.” He took my hands just as Alejandro had except Roberto had more give in his posture. We started off fine. He nodded his head and murmured a little encouragement. The quick rhythm of the song proved a little difficult for me to keep up with. And instead of keeping the steps simple, Roberto did what he always did. He started to show off, using more complex footwork and jerking me into turns I didn’t know how to make. We collided and I trampled his feet.

“Sandra. Follow my lead,” he said, his annoyance apparent.

"I would if you'd actually *lead* me."

"You're moving all the wrong way."

"I don't know which way you want me to move. You lead like overcooked broccoli."

"And you dance like a white girl," he teased.

We made jokes like this all the time. To outsiders, it might appear we were being cruel to each other, but we weren't. It was our way of easing the cultural differences. Interracial relationships come with their own set of challenges right off the bat. Roberto and I always dealt with them by turning the friction into laughter. And any other day, I would've laughed. Not today.

"Maybe that's because I *am* a white girl," I yelled at him. Storming into the bedroom, I slammed the door behind me. Tears welled up in my eyes, familiar frustrations bubbled to the surface. Funny that we'd met on a dance floor because now the activity often led to arguments. And who asked him to intrude on my alone time anyway? No one invited Roberto to butt in and humiliate me. His superiority on the dance floor was well established. No need to gloat about it.

I was perfectly fine practicing new steps with Hoover the Dancing Vacuum Cleaner. Hoover didn't showboat or ridicule me. Perhaps I should've married Hoover. Perhaps I needed professional help since I'd anthropomorphized the vacuum cleaner. Snatching a handkerchief from Roberto's nightstand, I knocked a bit of clutter to the floor. After I picked up the matchbook from Suavemente and a pair of nail clippers, I blew my nose.

A splash of cold water in the bathroom and some powder on my nose and cheeks, and my face looked good as new. Danny didn't need to see I'd been crying. His five-year-old brain tuned in to the mood in the household with ease. I loved this about him and I dreaded that as he grew into a man, he'd probably lose the ability. Case in point—when I left to pick up Danny, Roberto sat watching soccer highlights on the sports channel, oblivious or apathetic to the fact he'd upset me.

"Drive safe, *mi'ja*. Love you," he called to me.

"Yeah, kiss my ass," I said.

I expected to leave the house without another word from him, but he shocked me by flipping off the TV and crossing the room.

He hugged me and kissed my cheek. "I didn't mean to upset you earlier. I was just kidding."

I chewed at the inside of my bottom lip. "Well, you did."

"Sorry, *mi'ja*."

My face grew hot and I felt embarrassed that I'd underestimated him. "It's okay."

Roberto kissed my forehead and then I turned again to leave.

"Drive safe, love you," he called after me.

"Love you too."

Maybe there was hope for Danny yet.

Chapter Seven

The week slipped by in a blur of chores and dinners, as usual. Roberto and I had made up, but I promised myself my dancing days with him were over. Finally, Saturday evening came and I found myself across a table from Alejandro.

The restaurant he'd chosen was located downtown on the first floor of a sleek, modern building. I'd been surprised by the change of venue after we'd met up at Soledad. This new restaurant shone with more elegance than the little tavern. Everything sparkled—chrome, glass, polished stone—but for all the cool detachment of our surroundings, the look in his eyes kept me plenty warm.

The waiter took our drink order—mine an earthy pinot noir and Alejandro's usual tequila. I looked over the menu, which consisted of rich, decadent fare with too much butter and red meat—even the salads contained cheese or capicola.

"Do you know what you'd like?" he asked.

"I'm not sure yet."

"You don't like the menu?"

"Oh, I love the menu, I just—I usually eat a salad for dinner."

"But tonight it's okay to indulge."

"Yes, it is." Still I struggled with a decision. "Maybe the spinach salad with zucchini and pancetta."

He made a noncommittal sound, continuing to peruse the selections. The waiter returned, poised to take our order.

"For the lady?" the young man asked.

I started to answer but Alejandro preempted me. “We’ll start with the honeyed figs. For dinner we’ll have the prime rib au jus for two—rare—and I’d like that with a cabernet sauvignon, whichever one you recommend.”

“Very good, sir.” The waiter took the menus from us and strode away.

I sat astounded, unable to speak at first, but soon my shock settled into annoyance and I found my voice.

“Did you just totally ignore my dinner order?” I asked.

He nodded. “I did. No salad tonight, *Sandrita*.”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t mean to sound like I’m ordering you around. But tonight is our first meal together, to celebrate our relationship.”

“We don’t have a relationship. In fact, we barely know each other.”

“Then, let’s use tonight to get to know each other better.”

“Well, you can exhale on that.”

“I’ve made you angry. *Lo siento, preciosa*.” He covered my hand with his. “I was only trying to open you up a little. To pamper you with good food.”

My mouth still open, a snarky reply dissolved on my lips. Had he really just apologized? Just like that? Had Roberto been sitting across from me, hurt feelings would’ve escalated into hurled accusations and our civility would devolve from there, but Alejandro’s soft words and warm hand soothed my ire.

“I don’t like being condescended to, like I don’t know what I want or what’s good for me,” I murmured.

“And I didn’t mean to come off that way. Let me guess, your husband does that?”

Again, he left me at a loss for words. Maybe I’d been too hasty, jumping on the defensive. Truth be told, my default position was defensive and just when I’d fallen into that habit, I couldn’t say.

Fiddling with my silverware, I said, “I’d rather not discuss him right now.”

“Whatever makes you happy, *preciosa*.”

Realizing his hand still held mine, I moved to pull it away, but he tightened his grip. Chin raised, gaze trained on me, he lifted his brows, clearly waiting for my response to his unspoken request for submission. My breath quickened and my heart clattered, my instincts urging me toward defiance. Instead, I relaxed my hand, conceding the small conquest to him. His attention remained fixed on me. Beautiful women came and went around us, but his gaze never strayed to them. Perhaps a little tractability went a long way. When the waiter came with our first course, I didn’t object to Alejandro’s insistence that I eat.

“If I put on ten pounds because of this meal, it’ll be all your fault,” I said.

“Your figure would be stunning with ten more pounds, even twenty more pounds. You’re a little thin.”

I burst out laughing. “You, my friend, are full of it.”

“Why do you say that? It’s true.”

“I’ve been accused of many things, but ‘too thin’ has never been on the list.”

“I happen to be an expert on hips, breasts and thighs. I say you need to eat more, not less.” He picked up one of the figs with his fingers and placed it to my lips.

The lush, fragrant fruit made my mouth water. I took a tentative bite. It burst with complex flavors—honey, peach, strawberry, maybe a background of vanilla. I sighed in delight at the flavor. Then I noticed his fingers lingering near my mouth, poising near my chin as if he were offering me more of the fig, but I knew he wasn’t. I tilted my head, my nose pressed to his skin. His scent flooded my nostrils and I breathed it deep into my lungs. Closing my eyes, I visited a familiar internal landscape, the place where my cravings for him lived. It wasn’t so much populated with imagery or anything definable, just emotion. Pure, raw emotion.

I opened my eyes, swallowing hard. “Delicious.”

Alejandro fed himself a bite and nodded in agreement, but I wasn't referring to the appetizer.

He picked up the second fig and offered me some. I bit into it without hesitation, my lips skimming his fingertips. Desire coursed through me. I took another bite, allowing my tongue to lick at his thumb. He drew in a sharp breath and I was suddenly aware of what I'd set in motion.

"I'm sorry." I wiped my mouth on the cloth napkin. "I shouldn't have done that."

"Why not?"

"You know why."

"But it feels good to give in to temptation, doesn't it?" He held out another fig.

I leaned across the table and took a mouthful of the sweet fruit. Once I swallowed, I replied, "Actually, it feels good just to be tempted."

"Ah, see, now you've shown me your hand. *That* you shouldn't have done."

"And what do you intend to do with this information?"

"We'll see."

Our next course arrived. The meat was served blue, plump and juicy, its rich aroma setting off more cravings I'd suppressed for too long. The waiter plated up my portion first and I used the last of my restraint to stop myself from tearing into it.

When Alejandro picked up his knife and sliced into his cutlet, I followed suit. My teeth sank into the tender flesh and I nearly cried. It'd been so long since I'd indulged in a meal like this for no reason other than the indulgence itself. Juicy, buttery, rich and *not* a salad. Even the asparagus hollandaise and roasted potatoes went untouched. I wanted meat and more of Alejandro's pampering. More of his flesh to my lips. More of...everything. Whatever he had to offer. My inhibitions fell away, I felt unlaced like a corset that's popped its ties.

Alejandro watched me eat, clearly pleased with himself. He fed me strips from his plate, again using his hands, the contact of his skin with my mouth adding to the pleasure of the meal.

The waiter stopped by with the dessert cart after we finished our entrée.

“What would you like, *preciosa*?” Alejandro asked.

“You choose. Everything you’ve picked thus far has been perfect,” I replied.

He took a moment to study the choices. “We’ll have the chocolate genoise.”

The young man disappeared into the back of the restaurant and returned with two slices of chocolate sponge cake filled with hazelnut ganache. Alejandro’s gaze followed the path of the fork to my lips, I groaned as the chocolate melted on my tongue. With each mouthful, I discovered a new subtlety to the dessert’s flavor and texture. Each component of the dessert held separate pleasures and satisfaction—the delicacy of the cake, the velvety filling—I took extra time to savor the last bite, then immediately mourned its end. Somehow in my mind, the pleasures of dinner had become linked with the pleasure I longed to experience at Alejandro’s hand, in his bed, but sadly this gourmet preview was over.

“I can’t remember the last time I enjoyed a meal so much.” I sighed.

“You have the look of a well-satisfied woman.”

“I am, thank you for this, Alejandro.”

“*Es un placer, señora*. My pleasure.” He placed his napkin on the table. “Where to next?”

While I longed to jump at the chance to spend more time alone with this man, I decided I should play it safe. How much I’d indulged myself concerned me, especially when it came to Alejandro and his charms.

“I think it’s best if I go home now,” I said.

“What? Why? Are you unhappy with me?”

“Quite the contrary. Tonight has been perfect, but I’ve given in to temptation as much as I should for one evening.”

He dipped his head to me in a gesture of concession. “I understand.”

Alejandro settled the check and we took a leisurely stroll through the evening neighborhood. A different energy than in the harsh light of day sparked the neighborhood to life. Colorful signs for the surrounding restaurants and lounges promised a variety of entertainment. Young people laughed. Older couples walked hand in hand. I almost reversed my decision to call it an early night.

“You sure I can’t convince you to stay? Come dancing with me,” Alejandro murmured.

He stopped next to my car and leaned against it. He ran his hand the length of my hair then brushed my cheek. My voice caught in my throat. I dropped his intense, searching stare and studied the ground. The tide of his breath suddenly close to my ear shortened my own breathing to a shallow pant.

“I don’t want you to go,” he whispered.

“I don’t want to, but I have to. I have to get home.”

“Just one more hour. There’s a lot we could do in an hour.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Don’t be.”

The palm of his hand tilted my face toward his. My heartbeat fluttered, half in expectation and half with apprehension, but I made no move to evade his full mouth as it approached mine. The instant our lips touched, I knew defeat loomed on the horizon. My mind went blank, unable to object any longer. The aroma of his skin filled my nostrils. Every short breath I could manage pulled his scent into my lungs. The world narrowed to only the sensation of his mouth on mine, the heat of his skin, the silky feel of his hair clutched in my fingers. I clung to the urgency of the kiss.

Lost in his embrace, I had no idea how long we stood, connected to each other. Thoughts whirled around my brain, I rode a wave of enticement and lust. When his mouth retreated, I gasped for air. The hustle and bustle around us returned to me in stages. First the sounds, then the sights, then the solid nature of reality. I shook my head to clear it.

“Why did you do that?” I asked.

“So you could enjoy being tempted. *¿Te vas o te quedas?*” he asked, my face cupped in his sizable hands.

“*Me voy,*” I said without thinking about it, then caught myself. “I mean I’m going.”

“No, it’s good you replied in Spanish. See, I’m good for you. I’m teaching you.”

“I know.” I extricated myself from his embrace. “But I can’t stay.”

“As you wish, *preciosa.*”

He kissed my hand and walked me to the driver’s side. “Next Saturday. The usual place, the usual time?”

But I didn’t answer. Instead, I hurried into the car lest I decide to steal another kiss or abandon my resolve altogether.

He pressed his hand against the window and I placed mine against the glass, wanting so much to feel his touch just once more. Finally, I willed myself to turn over the engine and drive away.

* * * * *

Sleep eluded me, which was just as well since I needed to bake a cake. Roberto couldn’t function in the morning without a piece of cake with his coffee and Danny had snagged the last piece for dessert. I decided to make a double chocolate snack cake.

The recipe held little challenge, very much like muffins but without having to fuss with little paper cups. I sprinkled a layer of chocolate chips over the top just before I put it in the oven. Damn thing smelled incredible while it baked.

I thought back to the decadent meal I'd shared with Alejandro. Cravings had haunted me for days since I'd tasted his lips. He'd thrown a huge wrench into my routine and though I'd thought that was what I wanted, now the same-old-same-old seemed unbearable. Sensuality oozed from every experience he touched. Everything he did, he did in grand style. Including the kiss. Those lips and the scent and the feel of his skin pressed to mine. All smooth and creamy like butterscotch pudding and if I could've eaten him up with a spoon I would've. And I wouldn't stop there.

His deep voice replayed in my head. "What would you like, *preciosa*?"

What would I like? I'd like his face between my legs and my fingers intertwined in his hair. I'd like to lick honey off every inch of his caramel-colored body. Closing my eyes, I could feel the warmth of his embrace and parts of me started to get pretty warm too. Oh and I'd like him to sink himself into me one inch at time until I begged him to fuck me already.

Oh god, what was I thinking? I wanted the man so badly I couldn't stand it. Sinking my head into my hands, I took a slow, deep breath to clear my head. Great, now the smell of the cake was driving me mad.

To escape the scent of chocolate and the feel of phantom lips on mine, I headed into the laundry room. The dry cleaning pile threatened to take over if I didn't attend to it soon. I picked through the clothes, turned Roberto's shirts and slacks right side out and checked pockets. My hands fell upon the fitted jacket I'd worn to the restaurant with Alejandro. A small drop of red wine marred the collar. I put the jacket to my nose and inhaled. Though the scent had faded, I could still make out overtones of Alejandro mixed with my perfume. A fire started in my chest and spread to my nether regions, leaving me with a slow, throbbing ache deep inside. His lips, his broad shoulders and that soft spot at the base of his neck that pulsed with his heartbeat flashed through my mind. Leaning against the cool washer, I struggled to slow my racing thoughts. I couldn't escape him and the indulgence he represented, not even in the most mundane

room of the house. I cast the jacket aside and finished organizing the rest of the dry cleaning. The timer for the cake sounded.

The aroma of chocolate hung heavy in the air. I pulled the cake from the oven, tested the center and set it to cool on a wire rack. It was now five o'clock, Roberto would be up soon. I put on a pot of coffee and turned to get a jump on the dishes before batter dried on the mixing bowl and beaters. Without much conscious thought, I ran my finger along the edge of the bowl and took a lick of batter. The flavor rushed me back to my childhood. Mom used to make a box cake that tasted very similar and she always let me lick the beaters. The ritual was our "girl secret" – before the horde of my brothers and their friends got their grubby paws on dessert, I got to try it first.

I turned to look at the cake. One forkful wouldn't hurt. Before I had time to debate with myself, I pulled a fork from the silverware drawer and scooped a bite into my mouth. Tender pieces of cake coated my tongue. The chocolate chips, still half-melted and gooey, turned into a river of fudge in my mouth. I poured a cup of coffee to wash down the bite, which took the experience to another level. *When was the last time I'd had coffee and cake?* I couldn't remember.

One more forkful wouldn't hurt. Who was I kidding? I carried the warm pan to the kitchen table and fell upon the cake with the ferocity of a starving wild animal. I had been starving. For the last two years I'd eaten only what I needed to survive. Sure, there had been notable exceptions, but a handful of holiday dinners and an annual slice of birthday cake could hardly be called extravagance. Spurred on by every delicious bite, I retrieved a jar of *dulce de leche* from the fridge and poured a pool of it in a bowl. With each caramel-covered, chocolate mouthful, I made pornographic sounds. And I could've carried on with my feeding frenzy until the whole cake was gone had Roberto not appeared.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," I mumbled, my mouth glued shut with caramel.

"Holy crap, did you eat half that cake all by yourself?"

“Uh-huh.”

He smiled and shook his head. After pouring his own cup of coffee, he joined me, fork in hand.

Before diving in, he asked, “Diet’s out the window?”

“Don’t remind me.” I shook my head.

“Hey, I think that’s a good thing.”

We cut a slice to save for Danny, then polished off the rest of the cake without another word.

Chapter Eight

Saturday, finally. Alejandro met my arrival at Soledad with his lips against mine. He didn't waste any time proposing a change of location. The heat in his eyes melted the last of my reserve. We took separate cars to his building – one of those places where executives who traveled a lot could arrange for long-term suites.

The cool air in the room smelled of his cologne. He turned on classical Spanish guitar music and drew the curtains. I let out a staccato breath.

"You're nervous, *preciosa*?" he asked.

"I'm not sure I can go through with this."

He took me in his arms, his warmth and now-familiar scent enveloping me. Then another kiss. Just a whisper, his mouth glancing across the surface of mine. With one hand, he skimmed the edge of my breast and passed it down to my waist, but didn't push any further.

"No need to be nervous. We'll only do what you want to do, okay?" he asked.

Butterflies still flitting around my stomach, I felt soft, pliable...enchanted. I couldn't have turned away from him if I'd wanted to, but I didn't want to.

"Would you like a glass of champagne?" he offered.

"I'd love one."

He pulled a chilled bottle from the ice bucket, popped the cork and poured two glasses. That he had everything set flattered and disconcerted me at the same time. Alejandro had prepared for this moment, the consummation of our relationship a given in his mind.

"*Al amor dulce.*" He clinked my glass.

I made no reply, instead draining my glass in one gulp.

“Would you like another?”

“Yes, please.”

I downed one more glass and felt a little more relaxed.

Alejandro took my face in his hands. “*Bonita, bonita*. You are so beautiful.”

He captured my lips with his, fingertips stroking my neck. I trembled, sinking into the dark, liquid space in my mind reserved only for him. Fever coursed through me and I yielded to him, opening to his searching tongue, melting in his arms.

Holding my body flush against his, he took measured steps toward the bed. Desire and trepidation swirled in my stomach. Was I going to submit to his implicit request? I knew I would. His bulky frame felt right meshed with my body. He cradled my back and laid me onto the comforter.

He inched his mouth down my neck, searing a path as he went. My breathing quickened and the room spun. Of their own accord, my fingers tripped to the buttons on his shirt. Without a word, he caught my hands, caressed them, then returned them to the mattress. Alejandro lifted the edge of my blouse and planted kisses along my waistline. I shuddered with the anticipation.

He stripped off my blouse and nuzzled between my breasts, drawing a deep breath.

“You smell good,” he murmured, his lips grazing me.

I couldn’t reply, too choked by arousal. The rush of my pounding heart hummed in my ears. I felt helpless in his embrace.

He slid his hands underneath my skirt and wrested my panties over my hips, down my legs. He moved up and cradled me close in his arms, quieting some of my quaking, kissing me with more ardor, greater need. Gasping to catch my breath, my mouth strayed to his chin and neck. He stroked between my thighs and parted the folds of skin. His fingers entered me. My sigh vanished into a crush of kisses.

My body responded to his exploration. Washing me in a surge of pleasure, his fingertips probed deep within me. His thumb played along the outer edge of my

opening. I grew slick with excitement and he increased the pressure of his rhythm. My breathing became erratic, catching in my throat.

Freeing himself from his pants, but still mostly clothed, he parted my legs and slipped deep inside me. A heavy exhalation passed between us, his gaze locked onto mine. With each thrust, he clutched me closer, my legs entwined with his. I clung to his shoulders and neck. Using long, deep strokes, he moved inside me. He caressed my face and murmured soft words – a mixture of Spanish and English – sweet nothings.

I closed my eyes and gave myself over to the pleasure of the rhythm he'd set. The scent of his skin and breath surrounded me. My legs shook, a climax building within me.

"Alejandro," I whispered, almost inaudibly.

I could no longer control the tremors racking my body. Moans and pants heaved my chest against his.

"*Que rico, mi amor.*" His lips grazed my ear.

The wave of ecstasy broke loose, tearing through my body. I held him as close as I could, clutching at him to weather the powerful orgasm.

Once the spasms ebbed to quivers, I wilted against the bed. Alejandro adjusted his position, his body still covering mine. He wrapped one of my legs around his hips and pushed farther into me.

I spread my arms across the width of the mattress, my body splayed beneath him. He swooped in to taste my neck and my shoulders. I sighed and shivered, my legs parted wider to take in more of him.

His strong arms supported his weight with ease. He moved with grace, pushing upward with every forward thrust. I grasped his waist and pulled myself up to capture his mouth. The sweat from both our bodies mingled together. His movements became shorter and jerkier. I wrapped my other leg around him and held him fast.

He broke away from the kiss, his breath coming in hot, ragged bursts, his muscles straining and twitching. With a final powerful shudder, his body came to rest against mine.

A sated silence settled over us and we sought out each other's mouths, our bodies still joined. He smoothed my hair across the pillow. Finally, our breathing slowed.

Alejandro placed my hand against his chest. His heart still beat hard, though not as quickly as earlier.

"I don't know what to say," I murmured.

"We don't have to say anything." He looked down at our half-clothed state and chuckled. "Though I suppose we should get undressed."

"This probably sounds stupid, all things considered, but I'm still nervous about being nude in front of you."

"I wouldn't say stupid, but you don't have to be nervous about anything with me. Let me see all of you." Alejandro moved off me and settled onto his back. "I'll go first. Would that make you more comfortable?"

I propped myself up on my elbow. "It might."

He made short work of unbuttoning his shirt and discarding it on the floor, his slacks soon joining the shirt. The deep cinnamon color of his skin glowed in contrast to the crisp, white linens. I reached out to touch his firm abdomen.

"Would you like to help me take off my boxers?" he asked.

I hesitated, but then accepted the invitation. I tugged at the waistband of his boxer briefs, pulling them over his thick buttocks and shimmying them down his legs. I noted the stir of arousal in him again and rubbed my hand over his awakening erection.

"Come here." He pulled me onto his lap.

I straddled him, still bare under my skirt. He freed me from my bra and cupped my breasts, running his tongue over my nipples, sending a fresh current of excitement through me.

Alejandro unzipped my skirt and worked it off over my head. My heart raced again—I felt exposed but found myself enjoying the vulnerability. His gaze roamed over me and his breath quickened. He arched an eyebrow and licked his lips, fire in his eyes. My self-consciousness evaporated. I ran my hands over his chest and abdomen.

“I like the feel of you on top of me,” he said.

“I’m kinda digging it myself.”

He threw his hands out to the side. “Have your way with me, *mami*.”

A wanton smile spread across my lips and I leaned in to kiss him. His pelvis swayed back and forth, sliding against my moist folds. I maneuvered to take him inside and pushed myself to engulf all of him. Hands on my hips, he held me tight and I sat back to gain better momentum. Riding him with a gentle rocking rhythm, I flexed my thighs and relaxed.

His long shaft massaged all the right places as he worked his torso against mine. Relaxing into his rhythm, I closed my eyes and let pleasure ripple through me. We moved together, our bodies responding intuitively.

Another orgasm swelled inside me. My muscles contracted in a tight grip around him, taking the sensations to a new pinnacle. His powerful but controlled thrusts spurred on our shared climax. His gaze never left mine and I stared down, only half seeing him. I drifted through the awareness of my physical responses to his every move. My nipples hardened into tight buds, electricity crackled beneath the surface of my skin. With each stroke, my slit grew wetter, each breath brought me closer to coming. My lower abdomen constricted and I began to quake. Alejandro didn’t falter in his pace.

Tears sprang to my eyes and I crested the peak of an orgasm. His hands captured my hips and held me close against his gyrating body. I felt him burst and jolt beneath me, our muted moans of rapture mingling around us. The vibrations of our climax slowed, then stilled. My body went slack and I draped myself over him. He withdrew from me, folding his arms around and spooning with me.

Emotions I'd kept boxed up for too long overcame me. Though I fought against the tears gathering, I began to weep. The harder I fought to stay quiet, the more the sobs escaped me.

"Sh, sh, sh." He rocked me. "*No lloras*. Please, don't cry."

"I'm not sad," I wailed.

"Then what's wrong, *preciosa*?"

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong. That's why I'm crying."

"I don't understand."

I turned to face him. "I couldn't tell you the last time I felt so...so complete."

"Ah, these are happy tears then?" He wiped my eyes with a soft touch.

"Yes. But I can't stop crying."

I buried myself in this chest and he uttered comforting shushes and tongue clucks, smoothing my hair until the storm of tears passed. A profound exhaustion settled over me and I let myself doze in his sheltering embrace.

After the grand luxury of a nude nap, I freshened up before driving home. To my surprise I felt nothing short of glorious. Whatever expectations I'd had for the first time I gave myself to Alejandro, glorious hadn't been among them. Words like "queen", "goddess" and "seductress" floated around my mind. I turned up the volume on the radio and sang along to Alicia Bridges' *I Love the Nightlife*.

I crept into the silent, darkened house through the kitchen door. Danny was staying the night at Grammy's house. I didn't bother with the few dishes that sat crusting over in the sink. They'd be there tomorrow morning. My feet rejoiced at the removal of my gray croc-skin pumps. After stowing them in the closet, I showered and changed into an oversized t-shirt.

The smooth coolness of my bedsheets soothed my worn body. Just as I drifted to sleep I heard the click of the front door, Roberto returning from his night out.

* * * * *

A set of twenty laps wore me out, which spoke volumes about my fitness level—or lack thereof—but making the effort lifted my spirits. I'd forced myself every day for the past three days to drop by the community center for a swim. I found if I left the house ninety minutes before I had to pick up Danny from kindergarten, I could squeeze in a workout and put myself back together before I had to be at the school.

Ibuprofen had become my best friend. My arms and legs ached, still unaccustomed to the new demands put upon them. Aches and pains aside, I felt spectacular and sweated less over each morsel I put in my mouth.

Today I'd left the house a few hours before school let out. I wanted to fit in a trip to the mall before two. The idea of purchasing a treadmill had taken hold of me and I thought I should price shop them before I decided on anything. Roberto wouldn't care if I spent the money, but part of me couldn't drop a thousand bucks unless I knew I'd spent it wisely.

On the escalator I surveyed the surrounding shops. The usual trinkets and anonymous mannequins lined storefront windows, but one mannequin in particular caught my attention. In the window at Victoria's Secret stood a faceless beauty clad in a raspberry and black merry widow. An idea bubbled up in the back of my brain. I'd never been one for lingerie, but I could picture myself dolled up in it.

My mind ran with the image. I could wear it under a plain dress and no one would know what lay underneath. Over dinner, I could tease Alejandro under the table with the feel of the garters. The look on his face when I let my dress fall away to reveal my naughty undies... Smiling to myself, I wandered into the store. A size four pixie greeted me at the door. I fought the urge to vomit on her.

"I'd like to try on the black and raspberry ensemble in the window," I said.

"Thirty-eight?" she asked.

"Yes," I lied. More like a forty-two bust, but I wanted to kiss her for guessing a smaller size.

I followed the tiny woman to a dressing room, undressed and waited for her to bring the bustier. She called out to me once she'd hung the item outside my room. It took some wrangling to stuff the twins into the bra cups, but with everything strapped in, I allowed my gaze to drift up my reflection. Relief and surprise washed over me. The outfit covered little, but enough to accentuate the positive. I was almost nude, but *better*. The sides of the garment hid the stretch marks on my hips, the Lycra in the body of the lingerie smoothed my familiar bulges. Yes, I could see myself poised over Alejandro clad only in this.

After I'd wrestled my way out of the complex straps and hooks and changed into my ordinary clothes, I took the merry widow to the front with a pair of black, lacy stockings.

"Everything fit to your satisfaction?" the pixie asked me.

"Yes, thank you."

"Would you like to see more bras in thirty-eight double D?"

"Oh no. I'm a D-cup."

"Did you like the fit of the bustier?"

"Very much."

"It's a thirty-eight double D," she replied.

"Get *out*." My mouth fell open. "I've been a D-cup as long as I can remember."

"A woman's body changes on many occasions in her life – puberty, pregnancy, any time there's a hormonal change."

"My son gave me another cup size?"

"Could be."

"Well, it's nicer than the stretch marks and big ass he gave me."

She laughed. "My two kids wreaked havoc on my body too."

I repressed the impulse to slap her. "Not that I can tell."

"You have beautiful curves. Let's find some undergarments to show them off."

In my head, I rearranged the “misc.” column from our monthly budget. I could afford to treat myself. And Roberto wouldn’t object to new lingerie. What man would?

“Sure.” I checked my watch. “I’ve got an hour to kill.”

“Right this way.”

Seven bras with matching panties, two teddies, a flyaway baby doll and one more bustier with garters—my credit card squealed as it passed through the reader. Buyer’s remorse clawed at me, tempting me to make a break for it without buying a thing, but I reminded myself I deserved a treat. I had, after all, taken off twenty pounds in the last year. Not to mention I rarely bought anything for myself. And these undies weren’t just for me anyway. Roberto would appreciate them. *And*, the devil in me thought, *so would Alejandro*.

I picked up Danny from school on time. He spied the pink shopping bag and cheered.

“What did you buy me?” He grabbed it and rifled through the contents. “What’s this stuff for?”

“Those are Mommy’s. I didn’t buy you anything.” I stuffed the lingerie into the bag and strapped him into his booster seat.

A mischievous grin spread across his face. “Are those for your *boobies*?”

I barked a laugh. “Yes, they are.”

“I thought ‘bras are evil,’” he quoted a common utterance of mine.

“You’re getting too big for your britches, boy.” I buckled my seat belt.

“Well, are bras evil or not?”

“They’re not. Mommy’s joking when she says that.”

“I don’t get it,” he said, shaking his head.

“And you probably never will, sweetie. Ready to go home?”

“Can I get a treat too?”

“You *may*, what would you like?”

“Chicken nuggets.”

“You’re a cheap date,” I said, heading for the nearest drive-through.

When we pulled into the driveway at home, Roberto’s car was cooling in the garage.

“Papi’s home!” Daniel wiggled out of his seat belt and ran inside, kiddie meal in tow.

I grabbed my gym stuff and Victoria’s Secret bag, then headed inside. Roberto was in the kitchen working on *güisquiles relenos*.

“I feel so bad. We didn’t get you anything from the drive-through.”

He kissed my cheek. “That’s okay.”

“What are you doing home?”

“We finished up early today so I thought I’d make dinner.”

“Okay, where’s my husband?” I teased.

“Ha ha. I know I haven’t been home much and... Is that a Victoria’s Secret bag?”

I smiled and clutched it closer. “It is.”

“See, you got me a treat after all.”

Daniel chimed in, giggling, “Mommy got presents for her *boobies*.”

“Stop talking about your mother’s boobies.” Roberto ruffled our boy’s hair.

Singing a chorus of “*boobies, boobies, boobies*,” Daniel skipped into the living room to watch TV and eat his meal.

“You need help peeling the *güisquiles*?” I asked.

“Nah, I got this, *mi’ja*.” He ran the squash under a stream of water. “But I will take a fashion show after Danny falls asleep tonight.”

“If you’re a good boy.”

Roberto clacked away with the veggie peeler, pausing to wash the sticky sap from his fingers every now and then.

"How much did you spend?" he asked after a while.

"More than I should have. I know, I know."

"No, I don't mind, don't get me wrong..."

His words heralded an impending open-mouth-and-insert-foot event. After so many years of marriage, I could sense these things coming. I hurried to gather my things and make a break for the bedroom before Roberto said something ill-advised and hurt my feelings.

"I mean," he continued, "shouldn't you wait until you're done losing weight before you spend that kind of money on new panties?"

Too late.

"Do you think I should lose more weight?" I asked.

"Ten more pounds would be fine."

I spun around to face him. "Did you *really* just say that to me?"

"What? What did I say?"

"You're kidding me, right?"

"What, Sandra?" He raised his eyebrows. "You're the one who's always telling me you want to lose more weight."

"And maybe I wouldn't feel like I have to if you didn't say sh—*stuff* like that."

"Are you PMS'ing?"

"Do *not* go there. I'm not premenstrual."

"Look, I know we're both chunkier than we used to be. It doesn't matter."

I glared at him in disbelief. "So I'm chunky?"

"Not in a bad way. I love your body, just the way it is. I loved your body when you were heavier. I love *you*."

"Which is such a condescending thing to say. What you're really saying is 'I love you *despite* the fact that you're a big fat pig.'"

“Oh my god, where do you get these things, *mi'ja*?”

“Well, how would you feel if I told you that you need to lose more weight? You're right, you know. That six-pack you used to have has turned into more of a pony keg.”

“Now you're just being mean.”

“How does it feel?” I asked.

“I wasn't trying to hurt your feelings.”

“Which is *worse*, Roberto. After twelve years how can you *not* know what will hurt my feelings? Honestly?”

For this he had no reply. I stormed into the bedroom and tossed the new underwear in the trash. Dissolving into tears, I sank onto the bed and waited. I waited for Roberto to come check on me though I knew damn well he wouldn't. Just once when we fought, I wanted him to come to me and say, “Even though I'm not sure why you're mad, I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. Please, Sandra, explain to me why you're upset. I'll listen and keep my mouth shut.”

Riiight. Roberto's stubbornness ran too deep to give in or even to meet me halfway. No, our arguments always ended in the same way. I'd spend two or three days shooting him dirty glances but not speaking to him. I'd go about my usual duties, but with none of the extra niceties for him. Eventually he'd make an effort to make me laugh and like an idiot, I would laugh, though I wouldn't want to. He'd take this as a victory and pretend we'd never fought. When I'd try to broach the subject with him again, he'd sigh and tell me to let it go. We never resolved anything and as a result, I seethed with frustration.

After my crying jag and self-pity party ended, I fished the Victoria's Secret bag out of the bathroom trashcan and threw it on top of my dresser. I wouldn't let him ruin the happiness I'd felt earlier in the day. I freshened my face and joined Danny in the living room.

Dinner passed with few words. I cleaned the kitchen, got Daniel ready for bed and organized him for school. Tucked away in his study, Roberto hadn't bothered to emerge

by the time I decided to head to bed myself. And I didn't bother telling him good night. Instead I slipped between the sheets feeling lonely and unappreciated. Tomorrow when I discussed this with Mom she'd call me a drama queen and tell me to get over myself, a sentiment Roberto seemed to share. Thing was, just because no one agreed with how I felt didn't make the emotion any less real. If Mom and Roberto expected me to get over myself because they deemed it necessary, why didn't they have to validate my feelings because I needed them to?

Chapter Nine

When Saturday rolled around, I didn't feel like keeping my date with Alejandro, though I did. Picking at my meal, I couldn't muster the energy to laugh when he made little jokes or volley back the conversation as he made small talk.

"You seem down, *preciosa*. Did I do something wrong?" he asked.

"Not you." I kept my reply terse.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I'm sure you don't want to hear about my problems with my husband."

He wiped his mouth with a linen napkin and took my hand. "I don't mind. I'm a good listener. *¿Que paso?*"

I sighed. "Earlier in the week, he hurt my feelings and then made me seem unreasonable for getting upset. He still hasn't apologized."

"What did he say that upset you?"

"He made a comment about my weight. And I know I'm overly sensitive about it, but if he knew me at all, why would he even bring it up?"

"Maybe he didn't mean to hurt your feelings," Alejandro said.

"Then why can't he just say that instead of exacerbating the argument. Would it kill him to say, 'Honey, I'm sorry,' even if he doesn't quite understand why he's apologizing?"

"But it would be nice if he understood why?"

"I'm not asking for miracles."

"What exactly did he say?"

I exhaled. "I was really happy because I'd gotten some new clothes, which I usually don't do. And he said something like I should've waited to spend the money until I was at my target weight."

"Ay, qué idiota."

"Then, he tried to say we are both chunky now. What woman likes to be described as chunky?"

"And what did you tell him?"

"I tried to explain to him that he'd upset me, but he just shut down and got defensive."

"You feel like he doesn't listen to you?"

"Yes."

"And you feel unappreciated when he ignores your feelings."

"Exactly." Tears welled up in my eyes. "And I want him to think I'm beautiful."

"Sh, *preciosa*. Don't cry. And I'm sure he thinks you're the most beautiful woman in the world." He stroked my hand. "On behalf of my gender, I apologize that you have to withstand our collective stupidity."

I chuffed a laugh and wiped my eyes.

"Let's talk about happier things. What kind of clothes did you buy?" he asked.

"New lingerie."

"¿En verdad? Now I know he's a fool. Did you wear some of your new clothes today?"

"I did. Just a bra and cami set, but they're pretty sexy."

Alejandro caught the waiter's attention. "Check, please."

* * * * *

I perched on the edge of his bed as he hung up his sports coat. He walked over and took a seat next to me. Fingertips skittering to the hemline of my dress, Alejandro said, "Now, what about those panties I've heard so much about."

"Not yet." I pushed his hand away.

He pouted, sliding off the bed onto his knees. "You want me to beg you?"

Peering down at him, I put a finger to his lips. With a swipe of his tongue, he licked the skin between my thumb and forefinger. I laughed and gave him a gentle shove. His gaze boring a hole in me, he lunged and took me down onto the mattress.

I worked the buttons on his shirt and he sloughed off the garment. For a moment, I stared up at him and the gorgeous expanse of his unblemished chest. He nuzzled my jawline and moved his lips past my ear. "Let me see you."

At first, I wasn't sure what he wanted me to do, but when he moved off me and propped himself up with pillows, arms folded over his torso, I realized he expected a show.

"I was promised sexy underwear." He motioned with his hand as if to say the floor was all mine.

Taking a deep breath, I decided I could do this. In fact, it might be fun. I crawled off the end of the bed, kicking off my heels.

"Leave the shoes on."

A mocking expression on my face, I stepped into the stilettos again and propped one leg on the bed, pulling up the skirt of my dress to give him a peek of the red lace beneath. A wicked grin parted his lips.

I unzipped my dress and slipped it down around my waist. Immediately, he focused on the plump mounds of cleavage formed by the cups of the camisole and he swallowed hard. The power I had over him went to my head and I grew bolder. I let the dress flutter to the ground and stepped out of it. Doing my best supermodel strut, I walked to the side of the bed. Knees together, I dropped low, licking my forefinger and

running it between my breasts. For just a second, I spread my legs, giving him another peek at the panties and then promptly closed my thighs. A low growl rumbled in his throat.

I stood, hands on my hips, and swiveled to display the bow at the cleft of my backside, looking over my shoulder to watch his reaction. He clambered off the bed and caught me around the waist. For all his talk about wanting to see the lingerie, he stripped it off me and threw it to the floor.

Brushing my hair aside, he kissed the back of my neck and I felt him unbuckle his belt and shed his trousers. He pressed his hard cock against my ass and I thought he was going to take me right then but he didn't. Instead, he pulled me onto the bed, positioning me on top of him.

I kissed his bare chest, skimming my tongue over his skin down to the little patch of hair just below his bellybutton. Alejandro writhed in anticipation, but I shied away from his nether regions and kissed my way back to his lips.

"What a tease you are," he murmured, his voice dusky.

"Maybe you need to teach me a lesson."

"Maybe I do."

With measured aggression, he traded places with me and pinned my body beneath his. Exploring with his mouth, he brushed past my lips...my neck...then my shoulders and breasts. He moved down until he settled his face between my legs. He let out a hot, slow sigh that sent shivers through me.

He swiped my clit playfully at first, then built pressure and speed with his tongue. I tangled my fingers in his hair, moving my pelvis against his face. Using long, deliberate strokes, he laved down my folds and back up to my swollen bud. He kept his rhythm steady and focused until I shook with desperation to climax. My legs locked and he planted his mouth against me, his hot breath and saliva mixed with my own juices. Finally, I reached the thunderous pinnacle and trembled as I came. The shock waves still gripped me when he pulled his mouth away, only to plunge himself into me. I

came harder still. But once my body quieted, he began to move within me. I hooked a leg over his shoulder.

A hungry grin curled his lips. He moved in for a kiss, thrusting into me as he sucked on my tongue. Hanging on to my hips, he moved in and out of me, hard and fast. Each time he pushed into me, he hit the spot deep inside that sent waves of pleasure throughout my body.

My arms around his neck, I clung to him, my lips quivering against his. He was everywhere at once, over me, inside me, his taste in my mouth and his scent on my skin. A trickle of sweat ran down his temple but he didn't stop to catch it. Matching the rhythm of his strokes, his breath quickened.

Alejandro could read my body like a book, every ripple, every shiver, every muscle contraction. He knew I was about to come again even before I said the words, and picked up his pace and the pressure.

"Don't stop," I murmured.

He pushed me over the edge and I gave in to the second climax that crashed over me. My body shuddered and he drove into me for a few more strokes before he too exploded.

He pressed his forehead against mine and huffed, somewhere between laughing and hyperventilating.

"*Ay, mami rica, me muero pa' ti,*" he whispered.

"I don't want you to die." I kissed his cheek. "You know the French call the lightheaded feeling after orgasm *le petit mort*. The little death."

"That is a good way to describe it."

"I don't know. I feel more alive."

"Yeah. I can see that."

We rested against each other in quiet afterglow, but he shifted positions a few times as if he couldn't get comfortable.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Just wondering." He laid his head against my chest. "Would you share something with me?"

"What's that?"

"Your wildest, darkest desires."

I shrugged. "I don't know that I have any."

"Everyone does."

He was right, I did, but none I wanted to share. There were unexplored corners of my psyche, but I'd never dared talk to anyone about them. Not that they were so bizarre no one would understand, but I'd never trusted anyone enough to spill my secrets. Not even Roberto.

"Come on, *preciosa*. Tell me, how can I take this to another level for you?" he prodded me.

I cleared my throat. "I don't know. It's hard to say."

"You can tell me anything. No judgment."

"What about you?"

"Would you like to hear mine first?" he asked.

"Yes." My mind buzzed with excitement and foreboding. "I would."

"I'd like to tie you up. Control you."

His candor caught me off guard, but were I honest with myself, I'd have to admit the idea turned me on.

"I think I'd like that."

An encouraging smile formed on his lips. "I know you would. What else?"

"I don't know, the bondage thing sounds hot enough."

"What *else*?"

I struggled with my confession. How to phrase it? Would he be taken aback? I took a deep breath and steadied myself.

"I've always wanted to try sex somewhere public. Somewhere we could get caught," I said in a small voice.

"*¿En verdad? Ay, mami.* How naughty you are."

"I know. It's absurd—"

"No, it's sexy."

"Really?" I asked.

"Really. Next Saturday, let's start living some fantasies."

"I'm not sure I'm ready."

"You're ready," he insisted.

Electricity crackled in the pit of my stomach and a throbbing ache formed between my legs as I imagined us casting aside boundaries. I snuggled closer to him as if I needed shelter from my own longings. Wrapping his arms around me, he pulled me into a deep kiss and that unlaced feeling swept over me again. I'd laid bare thoughts I hardly allowed myself to entertain much less share with someone else. The more I entertained the notion of submission, the hotter the fire in me burned. Reaching between his legs, I stroked his awakening shaft.

Alejandro ran a finger between my already wet folds, chuckling. "Oh, you're definitely ready."

Instead of giving a reply, I kissed my way down his torso, brushing my lips over the head of his cock before I took it in my mouth. He moaned his appreciation, no more words needed.

Chapter Ten

My trysts with Alejandro became totally separate from my life at home. I started to recognize a duality in my personality. Around the house I gave over to my domesticity, the tame role expected of me. I understood my responsibility to hold up a certain half of the sky. But with Alejandro, the sky was too broad an expanse to be sectioned into halves. I could only hold a small piece at a time and the portion I controlled shifted from meeting to meeting. He embodied every form of temptation I craved.

I knocked on the door of his suite and he answered with a warm, outstretched hand.

“Right on time, *preciosa*.” He bowed his head to me.

I took his hand and he led me to an isolated chair near the window.

“What’s this all about?” I asked.

“Do you trust me?”

“That’s a loaded question.”

“Do you trust me?” he insisted.

“I think so.”

“Yes or no?”

I sighed, steeling myself to take the plunge. “Yes. I trust you.”

A lascivious smile spread across his angular face and he motioned to the chair.

“*Siéntate por favor*.”

I sat and Alejandro moved behind me. Onto my lap he placed a box of Godiva truffles. A blindfold fell over my eyes and I felt him secure it.

I sucked in an unsteady breath.

“Sh. *Preciosa, no te preocupes*. Don’t worry,” he said.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re going to play a game, if you want to.”

“And if I don’t?” I asked.

“We stop right now.”

“Good thing I want to, then.”

Running a hand along my shoulders and down one arm, he moved in front of me.

“The rules are simple.” He rustled the box of chocolates. “In this box are different flavor truffles. I’m going to give you a taste of each. For each one you guess correctly, you get a treat, deal?”

“What kind of treat?”

“That’s the mystery.”

“Okay, I’m game,” I replied.

My hands strayed to the blindfold. I enjoyed the sensory deprivation it provided, but I also felt self-conscious. Alejandro’s hand moved mine into my lap. His face moved closer to mine, the heat from his skin and scent of his cologne intensified.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Silky, fragrant chocolate kissed my lips – Alejandro’s unspoken request that I open my mouth. I grazed my teeth over the surface of the truffle.

“Take a big bite,” he said.

Emboldened, I did as instructed. Sweetness – fruit, the flavors burst in my mouth. My tongue rolled the chocolate around, exploring the taste before I swallowed.

“Strawberries and white chocolate?” I asked.

“Very good.” Alejandro moved in to give me a soft kiss. Licking at my sticky mouth, he murmured, “Delicious.”

Another truffle pressed against my mouth. This time I didn't hesitate and took a bite of it. The flavor burst to life, much richer than the first, creamy and complicated with just an edge of bitterness on the finish. Powdered cocoa tingled on my lips.

"Dark chocolate ganache?"

He chuckled. "Maybe this game is too easy for you."

"Well, I do know my chocolates."

He slid his hand down my face then cradled my neck. The heat of his mouth and tongue met my throat at the base of my ear and traveled down my collarbone. I shivered and reached to touch him but he nudged my hand away. Undeterred, I tried to catch his shoulders, but again he pushed my hands on my lap and held them there. His exhalations grazed my cheek, I could smell the chocolate on his breath. I could feel his lips pass so close to mine it would've only taken a small move forward to kiss him, but I knew he'd only pull away. Chewing my bottom lip, I did my best to resist the temptation. He was going to make me wait for him whether I wanted to or not. The same authoritative energy he'd displayed on the dance floor oozed from him. I could picture him, a cocky grin on his face, mischief twinkling in his eyes as he anticipated controlling my body. Except this time he wasn't asking, he was telling me I belonged to him.

I heard the crinkling of the box lining.

"Ready for another?" he asked, amusement lifting his tone. He was enjoying his little game, enjoying the power he had over me. I wasn't about to let him have all the fun.

Keeping my voice even, my reaction minimal, I replied, "I am."

"Something more difficult this time."

The creamy texture threw me off for a moment, but the tropical flavor pushed itself forward.

I smiled after I swallowed. "Coconut."

“Right again.”

He undid the pearl buttons on my blouse and kissed my chest, between my breasts, brushing a thumb over one nipple. A miniature shot of pleasure raced through me. Breath as steady as I could make it, I pretended to be unaffected. With gentle pressure, he raked his teeth across my bottom lip. I did nothing.

Exhalations coming fast, closer to a pant, he nuzzled my cheek and gave me a warm, full kiss. As he lingered, the kiss softened. Opening my mouth, I tried to draw in his tongue, but a rush of air told me he'd moved away.

“This isn't fair.” I groaned, flexing my thighs. The pressure focused the growing ache, making it worse. I tried to relax a little though I found it difficult, his body heat distracting me.

“It isn't supposed to be.” He brushed a truffle past my mouth and I moved to bite it, but he pulled it away. Rubbing my lips with it, he teased me with the chocolate until I finally managed to snap a taste. It was buttery, maybe a little nutty. The sweetness reminded me of something earthy, but I just couldn't place it.

“Praline?” I asked.

“Ay, I've stumped you at last. It's maple syrup.”

“I should have known. So...what do I get for being wrong?”

Alejandro didn't reply but took my hand and placed it palm down against the arm of the chair. I heard the tear of Velcro, then felt something soft wrap around my wrist, binding it to the chair. Drawing in a breath, I savored the arousal building between my legs. Heated blood coursed through me and my breathing sped up. He really was going to do the things we'd talked about.

“Every time I get one wrong, another limb will be tied?”

“*Sí, mi amor.* Ready to guess again?”

I imagined myself half-naked, trussed up, completely at his disposal. Would he spread me open and take me while I was bound and blindfolded? Head spinning, the idea intoxicated me, adrenaline surged through me. "I'm ready."

The next one was coffee and the one after that caramel. Running his tongue over my abdomen, he hitched my skirt over my thighs.

He huffed in amusement at the discovery I wasn't wearing panties, only a hip-hugging garter belt. "Such a bad girl."

"I thought you'd like that."

He flicked his tongue along the crease between my thigh and groin. Heartbeat racing, I longed for him to keep going, to ease the throbbing between my legs, but he didn't.

"Stop teasing." I groaned.

"Should I tie you up and do what I want?"

"Isn't that against the rules?"

He swiped a finger over my clit a few times but then withdrew with a throaty laugh.

Squirming with anticipation, I let out a grunt of frustration. He covered my mouth with his, running his tongue along mine. Yearning to reach out for him, I clutched at the seat. My head tilted, I brushed the tip of my nose against his cheek. It was all the contact I was allowed to make. Savoring the moment, I inhaled the scent of his skin, notes of his natural body chemistry playing beneath his cologne.

"Just one more," he murmured as our lips parted.

The last chocolate offered left me a little puzzled. I wanted to say marshmallow, but I knew Godiva had no such flavor.

Finally I confessed, "I don't know."

"I can't say I'm disappointed that I've stumped you. It's French vanilla."

"Ahh and I missed such an easy one."

He took little time to strap my other wrist to the arm of the chair. A firm tug on my legs scooted me to the edge of the seat. His hands parted my knees and I felt his hot breath move closer between my thighs. Blindfolded and partially immobilized, my body teemed with excitement. Alejandro pressed his face between my legs, stimulating me with the full length of his tongue. I gasped at the burst of pleasure that shook me, craving more, but he switched tactics, using just the tip of his tongue to tease me. An unbearable tension radiated from my clit out to my thighs and my abdomen. I struggled against the restraints, panting and desperate for release.

He brought his broad shoulders up beneath my knees and I hooked my legs over them. The slight angle change gave him greater access and he laved me with more ardor. Waves of ecstasy rolled through me, my lungs strained for air. Unable to grasp his hair or thrash about, I broke through my usual reservation about making noise while having sex and let out a steady stream of exclamations. I didn't have to be quiet and I embraced the freedom of giving voice to my delight.

As he sucked at me and continued to change his technique, he built a wall of sensation that loomed over me. I longed to break through it, I had to come. Sighs and moans turned into gasps and shouts, my body close to climaxing. He buried his face between my thighs and moved his tongue from side to side, brushing it across my engorged clit. Finally, the wall tumbled down, I came wildly and shook with ecstasy. Alejandro still kissed and licked the throbbing folds of skin, fueling aftershocks that made me twitch and struggle for air.

"Stop...please stop," I said. "I'm too sensitive."

He disentangled from my legs and peeked under the blindfold, then discarded it altogether. A self-satisfied gleam in his eye matched his smug grin. His lips crushed against mine and I wiggled against the wrist straps, desperate to touch him.

His mouth still on mine, he released the restraints, but as quickly as he'd freed me, he caught the straps and led me to the full-length mirror on the wall. He positioned me in front of him and looked over my reflection in its state of half-dress.

I stood still though he'd released the restraints again. He traced his fingers along the open buttons of my blouse. With little effort, he pushed it off my shoulders.

"Look at how beautiful you are."

He brushed his mouth against the nape of my neck, sending shivers through me. I regarded myself in the mirror. I did look pretty good in a push-up bra and knee-length, flowing skirt. A pink blush from exertion and desire colored the apples of my cheeks and my eyes glowed with a fire I hadn't seen in ages.

With slow, deliberate steps, Alejandro positioned himself between me and the mirror. My gaze tripped down his heavy frame and alighted on his round backside. Before I had time to make a move to undress him, he shed his clothes and tossed them aside. I drank in his nude form, his muscled back, and again my gaze snagged on his lush rear.

He dropped to his knees in front of me. Using the palms of his hands, he slid my skirt down my legs. I stepped out of it and moved to unhook my stockings from the garters but he caught my hand. With a firm tug he pulled me to my knees.

I expected him to set on me like a hungry tiger, but instead he cupped my face in his hands and pulled me to him in a deep kiss. Anticipating his next move heightened my arousal. And Alejandro did not disappoint.

He repositioned us both on our knees facing the mirror. Leaning me forward a bit, he pushed inside me. I moaned at the sensation of being filled. He eased back on his haunches and pulled me with him. I straddled his lap, my back pressed against his front. The feeling of his shaft buried inside me spurred the throbbing between my legs. He picked up the straps and wrapped my wrists behind his back so I embraced him in a backward hug. His arms engulfed me as he secured the ties around both our waists, fastening our bodies together.

I wiggled my hips and squirmed playfully, exploring my immobilization. The restraints forced my body to move in time with his, the more I tensed against him, the less I could control his rhythm. I discovered if I relaxed into his thrusts I could then

make small adjustments. With each shift or flex, Alejandro stimulated me in a different way. If I leaned forward, I could slide his shaft out to the tip, allowing my folds almost to meet before he thrust upward and stretched me again. The movement tugged at my clit, spreading a delicious warmth through my groin. But if I leaned back...oh if I leaned back...he delved deep into me, the head of his cock massaging my walls. Tremors of pleasure rocked me. I closed my eyes and let my head loll against his chest. Alejandro cupped my breasts, then one hand strayed between my thighs. The added stimulation sent bolts of excitement through me. My body responded on its own, the muscles inside me contracting, gripping his cock. I quaked, swept along by a tide of sensation, unable to catch my breath.

“Open your eyes,” he murmured, “watch yourself.”

I did as I was told. The image of us intertwined aroused me even more—his hands on my skin, my hands bound to him, my legs trembling as the orgasm broke over me. I watched my mouth fall open and utter cries of ecstasy as though I were watching myself in a dream. Alejandro shifted his hands to my hips, pulling them flush against him as he burst inside me. I watched his face tense then go slack with fulfillment.

A bead of sweat trickled down my face and I went limp against him. He stroked my cheek and unfastened the knot that still held me captive. We tumbled to the floor together, weak laughter and kisses marking our mutual satisfaction and exhaustion.

“You’re amazing.” My voice shook.

“No, *preciosa*, you’re the amazing one.”

“I mean it.” I kissed the sole patch of hair on his almost hairless chest. “Just being around you makes me feel sexier.”

“I don’t think you need any help to be sexy.”

I smiled against his skin. His words sent a shiver through me. At the moment I did feel like the sexiest of women. If only I could somehow bottle this feeling and take it home with me. *Home*. The thought drooped in my mind, weighing down my elation. I

pushed it away, back into its proper emotional compartment. Home was home and Alejandro was – well, my beautiful, decadent, spectacular Alejandro.

Chapter Eleven

The following Saturday, when I stepped out of the house, I could hardly wait to see what my lover man had in store for me. Feeling buoyant and effervescent, I wore a playful pink and black slip dress that matched my high spirits. Underneath I wore only a sleek, black, strapless bustier and thong accented in back by a pink rhinestone heart.

When I reached Alejandro's suite, a note taped to the door greeted me. It read simply, *Encuéntreme en el techo*.

Okay, *encuéntreme* meant "meet me", that much I knew, but what was *el techo*? *El techo, el techo...* The word circled my brain. I'd heard it, Roberto used it. Ceiling? "Meet me on the ceiling" didn't make any sense. Where was I supposed to meet him? Finally, the other meaning of the word dawned on me. *The roof*. What in the world did he have planned for tonight?

I skipped back to the elevator and rode to the top floor. From there I found a stairway to the roof. A heavy metal door opened onto a landscaped rooftop, the warmth of the night air embracing me. Stars blanketed the dark sky.

"*Es un placer a verte, preciosa,*" Alejandro greeted me with a soft kiss and a glass of champagne.

"Thank you, it's nice to see you too."

"*En español, por favor.*"

I sighed in mock exasperation. "*Gracias, es un placer a verte también.*"

"Was that so hard?" he teased.

"I guess not."

He clinked his glass against mine. "*Salud.*"

"*Salud.*"

We took simultaneous sips of champagne. He held my hand and led me to a cozy bench tucked away behind a trellis. The scent of wisteria surrounded us. Condensation beaded a large ice bucket that held two bottles of Dom Perignon, next to it was a picnic basket full of untold goodies.

"Alejandro, this is amazing. You never cease to surprise me."

"Well, I wanted to make tonight extra special because I'll be away for a couple weeks."

"What? Where are you going?"

"Costa Rica, on business. I'm sorry, *mi amor*."

"I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you too." He planted a kiss on my forehead. "Want to come with me?"

I laughed without humor at the absurd notion. "*Right*."

Suddenly the stars didn't seem quite so bright, the champagne not as delicious. My buoyant mood deflated, but I did my best to occupy only the present with Alejandro. We had no past and we had no future. And he wasn't leaving forever. I sloughed off the irksome disappointment.

We settled in on the bench. He'd picked up a fabulous dinner for us with chocolate-dipped tangerines for dessert. We fed each other and lounged over our meal. After he gave me the last tangerine slice, I stretched my legs out across the bench and rested my feet in his lap.

"Such pretty little feet," he said, plucking off my black stilettos.

Alejandro pulled me to him in a deep, wet kiss and slipped his hand up my dress.

"Should we take this downstairs?" I asked.

"Why? I'm all right here." He leaned in for another kiss.

"Don't you want to get intimate?"

"And what's wrong with right here? No one else is around."

"What? Are you crazy?"

“Come on, *mami*,” he urged me. “Didn’t you say you wanted to make love in public?”

“I did, but—”

He covered my mouth with his, cutting me off mid-sentence as he resumed his exploration beneath my dress. My heartbeat thundered in my ears. Yes, I’d said I wanted to do this, but could I really carry through with it? After batting this question around for several moments, I decided to give myself over to the heat of the moment. If things went further than I could handle I could always put on the brakes.

Caressing between my thighs, he grazed his mouth over my neck and shoulders. A soft breeze aloft on the fragrant night air moved over my skin with equal loving care. I inhaled the musk of his aromatic skin. Electricity seemed to crackle in the scant space between us. I felt bold, daring, heightening the ache building inside me. Swept along by wild abandon, I wanted him now—forget the foreplay, I wanted to fuck. *Now*.

I slid from the bench and climbed onto Alejandro’s lap. My dress hitched up my thighs and he wasted no time taking hold of my bare backside. Our mouths crushed together, two hungry animals feeding on each other. The idea that someone could come along at any moment heightened my excitement. I couldn’t get his pants undone fast enough. Once I freed him from his zipper and boxers, I lowered myself onto him.

The feeling of liberation intoxicated me. I rode him as hard as I could. He met my furious rhythm with powerful upward strokes, bursts of pleasure rippled through me. We’d never made love with such aggression before, but all my inhibitions had fallen away. I gripped the back of the bench for better leverage and leaned back to take him into me deeper. Instead of waiting for an orgasm to wash over me, this time I pursued it. Every thrust, every gasp, every inch of him I took inside pushed me closer to my goal. Tangling my fingers in his once perfect hair, I clung to him.

I slipped a hand between my legs and massaged my clit. He licked his lips and watched me play with myself, still driving into me. My heartbeat raced, I could feel it

pounding in my groin, blood rushing to my swollen folds. The tension grew to the breaking point, I trembled on the brink of climaxing.

“Come with me,” I said in a low moaning tone.

“I’m with you, *mamita*.”

The torrent of sensation gripped me and rendered me unable to move. I arched my back to keep the full length of him inside me. Indiscreet cries clenched my throat and I struggled to keep them to myself. Alejandro, too, appeared to wrestle with his own display of enjoyment. He scooped my chest closer to him and buried his face between my breasts. Quiet gasps and grunts shook both of us. I clutched handfuls of his hair, squeezing his thighs with mine.

Little by little, we slid from the peak of ecstasy. I released his hair, smoothing it and kissing his forehead. His breathing calmed from ragged to merely rapid and he lifted his gaze to meet mine. An enormous but exhausted smile played across his lips. I returned the blissed-out expression, still descending from my own orgasm.

“You found the courage, eh, *preciosa*?” he teased.

“Somehow I managed.”

“You did more than ‘manage’.”

I did my best to extricate myself from his lap. My courage waned with the decline of my hormone-induced bravado. “Should we move the party inside?”

“Whatever you’d like.” He stood and straightened himself, then offered me his arm. “Shall we?”

We fled the scene of our crime with a blend of real and feigned alacrity.

* * * * *

The two of us were drenched in sweat, he covered my body with his. With feathery kisses, he brushed his lips over my forehead and cheeks. Our rooftop escapade had ended a couple hours earlier and we’d made love two more times since. Exhaustion

claimed me and slumber in Alejandro's arms became my only objective. My eyelids drooped and I started to doze.

Alejandro pressed his soft mouth against my ear to rouse me. "Wake up, *soñadora*."

I startled awake and checked the bedside clock. Thank goodness I'd been asleep for only half an hour.

"Don't worry, I wouldn't let you oversleep. I know you have to go home," he said, seeming to sense my thoughts.

The cozy bed and his warm arms too inviting to resist, I nestled in against him again. Another several minutes passed in comfortable silence, neither of us compelled to speak. But sooner than I would've liked, the time I usually departed rolled around.

"I don't want to go home," I said.

"Then don't. Stay here with me tonight. No one's waiting up for you, right?"

I debated the proposition, wanting to tell him yes, but we'd agreed when we'd first started this liaison I would never spend the night. I didn't want to cross boundaries just because I could.

Swinging my legs over the side of the mattress, I pulled myself upright. "You know I have to go."

Once I'd dressed, I leaned against his shoulder. An arm hooked around me, he stroked my hair, tucking a lock behind my ear.

"*¿Que vas hacer sin mi?*" he asked.

"I don't know what I'm going to do without you," I replied honestly. "Are you going to miss me?"

"*Claro que sí.*"

Dread gnawed at the pit of my stomach. I didn't want to lose the fantasyland we'd constructed for ourselves. Sure, it was just for a couple weeks, but I mourned its absence already. If only I could stop time or fast forward to when Alejandro and I could meet again. Lacking the ability to manipulate time, I knew I had to keep moving

forward. I stood and collected my things but Alejandro caught me by the hand. He pulled me down to the bed again and rolled on top of me. I giggled in spite of myself.

“What are you doing? I have to go.” I made a poor show of struggling against him.

“I need to feel you against me just one more time.”

“Stop. You’re going to make me cry.”

“We can’t have that. It breaks my heart to see you sad.”

Alejandro kissed me again. I savored the taste of his lips and scent of his skin.

When our lips parted he murmured, “Don’t be sad, *mi amor*. Think of it this way – if we never part, then we can never have the pleasure of reuniting.”

“I suppose.” I sighed, unconvinced.

Though reluctant to do so, he released me and helped me find my shoes. He walked me to my car keeping my hand clasped in his. Our gazes locked, he pinned me against the car. His mouth hot and searching, he demanded all of mine. My homeward bound determination buckled.

I tore my lips away from his, my chest heaving. “I-I can stay if you want me to.”

“No, *preciosa*. I’m not asking you to break your own rules.” Alejandro opened the car door. “I just wanted to give you something to think about while we are apart.”

My heart fell down to my shoes, but I pulled together the last shred of resolve I possessed and pressed a forlorn kiss to his cheek. Finally, I stepped into the car. “Good night. See you in a couple weeks.”

“*Buenas noches, querida*. I’ll think of you every minute we’re apart.” He pushed the door closed and stood in the empty, late-night street, watching me drive away.

* * * * *

The beginning of the week had been a breeze, no different from the routine I’d fallen into. Thursday and Friday lacked their usual luster since I had no preparations to make for Saturday. No outfit to plan, no lingerie to coordinate, no reason to get

anything waxed, though my legs were starting to resemble Christmas trees. Truth be told, the respite from my new beauty regimen felt like a treat. I was free to be as funky as I wanted to be. When Saturday rolled around, the flannel jammie pants made a triumphant return, but even they were cold comfort.

I tried to keep myself busy which was easy enough to do without Roberto around to help.

Work had ramped up and he'd been pulling twelve- to fourteen-hour days, six days a week, and sleeping almost all day on Sunday.

On the bright side, Roberto's absence gave us little time to argue. The downside—it only served to underscore my loneliness. Particularly as Saturday afternoon turned into Saturday evening. Roberto stumbled in around seven, Danny was singing in the shower, more like squawking—a habit he'd inherited from his father, as was the tone-deafness. I'd just packed up the last of the leftovers.

"You hungry, sweetie?" I asked.

"Too tired to eat," he grumbled.

"You sure? I can nuke a plate of spaghetti for you."

"No, thanks." He retrieved a beer from the fridge and trudged into the living room.

I ignored his protest and heated up some pasta and meat sauce. Shrieking like a lunatic, Danny skidded through the kitchen naked and dripping wet.

"*Paaapi*," the boy yelled, running into the living room.

I heard Roberto laugh and Danny squeal.

"Hey, kiddo," I called from the kitchen, "put some clothes on, the drapes are open."

After I pulled one of Roberto's white t-shirts from a clean pile of laundry in the washroom, I wrangled the excited five-year-old and slipped it onto him. The undershirt hung off him like a dress, but at least he wasn't flashing the neighbors anymore.

Roberto put on a movie and snuggled up with Danny on the sofa. Distracted by the last of the pots and pans, I'd forgotten all about Roberto's dinner so I reheated it. A healthy sprinkle of Parmesan cheese and a chiffonnade of basil revitalized the dish.

With a flourish, I twirled into the living room to present the meal and a fresh beer to Roberto. My enthusiasm deserted me at the sight of my guys nestled together on the couch, sound asleep. I sighed and returned to the kitchen. I managed to schlep Danny to his room without waking him and Roberto stirred to a half-conscious state long enough to give me a sloppy good-night kiss and stagger to bed. With another sigh, I sank onto the sofa.

The house rang with silence, too much silence. I flipped through TV channels and happened upon a science show focused on the Costa Rican rainforest. On any other day, I would've watched it with great interest, but tonight Costa Rica was the last place I wanted to think about. In restless disgust, I turned off the television.

I picked up the novel I'd been trying to read for six weeks but found it too tedious to slog through. Accepting defeat, I turned the TV on again. If nothing else, I could find a syndicated crime drama. Damned if I didn't find one where the plot revolved around a Latino entrepreneur in the import business. I shook my head and laughed to avoid dissolving into tears.

After I'd switched off the television, I lay back on the couch. Thoughts in all directions swirled around my brain. I thought of Alejandro and his delicious rhythms. Every single muscle within the man pulsed with raw energy and sexuality. Not so different from Roberto in his younger days. And the potential had never deserted him.

Dreaming of husky Latin whispers and unbridled kisses, I slipped my hand inside my panties. My fingers found the right spot with little delay. I drew in a deep breath, relaxing into the pleasure...

"¿Mamita?" Roberto's voice interrupted my interlude.

I sighed. "Yeah?"

"You coming to bed?"

"In a minute." I extricated my hand.

He turned then stopped. "I don't sleep well when you're not there."

The simple truth in his words registered with me and I closed away my need to exist outside of him. The decision to join him in bed was an easy one to make.

Once I'd settled in with him under the quilt, he curled himself around me.

"G'night." He gave me a light kiss.

"Good night," I replied, feeling secure in the tender moment we'd created by accident.

* * * * *

Sunday afternoon passed in peace and quiet to the point of being eerie. Danny had gone to a friend's house to play. Roberto still slept, a fact that irked me. Though I knew why he stayed in bed, his absence irritated me nonetheless. The origin of this crankiness required little effort to figure out, but I chose to ignore my better sense on the subject.

When two-thirty rolled around I shook my head in disgust. Sleeping until ten o'clock was sleeping in. Sleeping until noon was decadent. But sleeping until two-thirty in the afternoon was just plain lazy. I wanted to burst into the bedroom and shove him out of bed, but my last shred of reasoning prevented me from doing so.

Dark clouds rolled in on the horizon. A spring thunderstorm had been in the forecast. I hurried outside to take in the rugs airing on the clothesline before the downpour started. A few drops had already started to fall. I rounded up the carpets and headed to the side entrance. My stomach sank as I realized I'd failed to unlock the door.

Oh, fuck me, I sighed to myself.

The rain started to fall in earnest and thunder rumbled in the distance. I hurried to the front door but found it locked too. How stupid that I'd locked myself outside? I rang the doorbell a few times to no avail. The sky opened up and dumped a torrent of rain on me.

I ran around the side of the house and knocked on the bedroom window.

"Roberto," I yelled.

No answer. I rapped harder.

The window behind the bed rattled open. "What are you doing, *mami*?"

"I'm getting soaked, that's what I'm doing. Could you please let me in the kitchen door?"

He lumbered to his feet and headed down the hall. I sprinted around the side of the house. Shivers racked my body once I stepped into the air-conditioned house.

"Could you get me a towel, please?" I asked, struggling to remain calm.

"Sure." He shuffled off.

His return seemed to take forever.

A grimace tightened my mouth. "Thanks."

"What's wrong, *mami*?"

"I'm wet and cold. And you've done nothing but sleep all freaking day."

His eyebrows raised in a quizzical expression. "What does one have to do with the other?"

"Well, if you'd been awake, maybe you could've gone out to get the rugs." I tossed the sodden mats on the floor. "Or at least you could've let me in before I got drenched."

Anger flashed across his face but to my surprise, he curtailed it. "I'm sorry. I'm exhausted. It's been a long week at work."

"Your favorite excuse," I shot back, in no mood to cut him any slack.

He slumped into a chair at the kitchen table. "It's not an excuse."

"It's just as hard on me when you're not around, but you don't see me sleeping until three o'clock."

He gripped his temples. I waited for the snide comment brewing inside him, but none came. "You're right, *mamita*. You must be just as tired."

“What?”

“I’m saying it must be hard. When I’m not home, you’re with Danny all the time. Plus there’s all the cooking and cleaning and laundry. Hey, at least when I get off work, I’m off. But what you do, there’s no real time off. Except for the Saturdays you’ve been taking for yourself and this week you couldn’t do that. You must be exhausted.”

Instead of placated, I felt even angrier about his uncharacteristic insight. I threw my hands in the air and stomped out the door and slammed it behind me. The rain that had infuriated me only a few minutes ago now washed away my anger with Roberto and laid bare a deep-seated sadness.

Why had he suddenly come to understand how worn-out I felt most days? And more than tired I was bored. I was bored out of my mind. I loved our son and our family and our life, but I had nothing that was just mine, except as Roberto had pointed out, the Saturdays I stole with Alejandro. Really, even those weren’t mine. I’d become defined by the roles I played – wife, mother, lover. But who was I when not in relation to another person? That part of my identity had disappeared and I didn’t know how to get it back. Could just-plain-Sandra be gone for good?

Wiping tears from my face, I headed back to the house. Roberto stood at the coffeemaker scooping far too many grounds into the filter.

My sneakers squeaked across the kitchen tile. I took the scoop and coffee can from him. “I got this.”

“Are you okay?”

“No,” I said, choking with tears.

Roberto skipped to the laundry room and came back with a towel. With gentle care, he dried my hair, a section at a time. “You should get out of these wet clothes before you get sick.”

I sniffled. “Wet clothes don’t make you sick.”

“For once, could you not argue with me, woman?” An exasperated smile pulled at the corners of his mouth.

“I’m sorry.” I lunged forward and hugged him. A long pent-up torrent of tears let loose, my chest heaving.

“Sh. It’s all right, *mamita*. Everything is all right.”

He held me until my sobbing quieted and kept me warm though my hair and clothes dripped rivulets down both of us.

“Hey, I have an idea,” he said. “Let’s get you dry and then we can both take a nap.”

I nodded slowly. “Okay.”

Taking me by the hand, he led me to the bedroom. I let him strip the wet clothes from me and rough me dry with a fresh towel. He slipped one of his extra-large white t-shirts over my head and curled up with me in the bed.

“I think I’m lost, *papi*,” I said.

“No, you’re not. You’re just buried beneath the other half of the sky that needs to be laundered.”

I laughed at the reference and pulled his arm tighter around me.

Chapter Twelve

On the fourth ring without an answer, I fought with the urge to hang up without leaving a message. The invitation to Jane's engagement party proved she wanted to hear from me. Guilt for my neglect of this once-strong friendship swept over me. At least she wasn't home—voice mail provided a welcome cop-out. I left a lighthearted message asking her to forgive the length of time that had passed since I'd last called, but the alien abduction had made phone calls an impossibility. Hopefully she'd find the excuse funny.

Danny peeked into the kitchen, "What you makin' for dinner, Mommy?"

"Arroz con pollo."

He wrinkled his nose but left without voicing his obvious displeasure. Chicken and rice wasn't my favorite meal either, but after the last two weeks, I lacked the energy to undertake anything more ambitious.

I gave the concoction one last stir, then sat down to look over the community college continuing education class schedule. The cake sculpting class had been calling to me all week. My nerves and self-doubt kept me from registering. Really, though, how hard could it be? And so what if I buried my classmates beneath a failed attempt at *croquembouche*? I could think of worse things than an avalanche of cream puffs. Before I had time to talk myself out of the endeavor, I pulled out the laptop and registered. A quiet sense of excitement wriggled in the pit of my stomach.

The phone chirped. I checked the caller ID and saw Jane's number flashing back at me. The speed with which she'd returned my call unnerved me. I'd expected to wait a couple of days, to have a chance to mull over what to say to her. I plucked up the receiver with trepidation.

"H-hello?"

“My god, Sandi. How the hell are you, hon? Back safe and sound from the mother ship?”

I laughed. “Yup, the probing was minimal.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not.”

“Me neither. But enough about that. I can’t believe it. You’re getting married, Janie?”

“I know, right? Brad’s finally going to make an honest woman out of me.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“I’m so glad you called. I’ve missed you. Are you coming to the shindig?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“And you’ve got to see the ring. It’s to die for.”

“Hey, I have an idea. Would you like to go out for a drink this weekend? We can catch up over a couple cosmos and you can blind me with the rock Brad bought you.”

“How about Saturday evening?”

I hesitated, accustomed to reserving that night, but decided to roll with her offer. “Saturday would be perfect.”

“I’ll see you then, hon.”

We said our goodbyes and I hung up. The timer for the rice sounded and I called Danny to the table. He helped set out the bowls and silverware.

Though he’d objected to the dish earlier, he shoveled large spoonfuls into his mouth as quickly as he could. While we ate, I asked him about staying at Grammy’s on Saturday.

“Where are you going on Saturday?” he asked.

“To see a friend.”

“Again?”

"Yes, again," I replied, feeling the slightest twinge, but this time I really was going out with Jane and not just pretending to.

* * * * *

The diamond on Jane's finger was roughly the size of a hazelnut.

"Good lord, girl, how the hell do you lift that hand?" I asked.

She giggled. "I told him he had to buy me a carat for every year I waited for him to pop the question."

"I bet he regrets holding off for three years."

"I didn't think he'd take me seriously."

"Lucky for you he did."

"In the end, it's just a ring. He better bring his A-game to playing the hubby," she said. "And how's that fabulous man of yours?"

I fought off a mischievous smirk. "He's great."

"Uh oh. I know that look. What have you been up to?"

"Nothing, really."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"I couldn't tell you." I shook my head and took a sip of my wine.

"So all's good with Roberto?"

"Yeah, it really is. Poor thing's been working like a dog lately."

"I don't know how you do it. I think I'd lose it at home all day."

I took a deep breath. "Well, I think I did lose my mind for a little while, but I've started to regain my sanity."

"Good for you."

"Yeah, I signed up for a cake-sculpting class. It starts in a couple weeks. I'm hoping I don't chicken out."

"No way. I won't let you chicken out. You have to take the class. You're such a good baker."

"I guess, thanks."

"Actually I was going to hit you up for a favor."

"Sure, anything. What's up?"

"Will you make my wedding cake? I'll pay you of course."

"Oh, Jane, I'm flattered, but I don't think I can pull that off."

"Yes, you can. You forget I saw that castle and dragon cake for Danny's fourth birthday."

"I don't know."

"Promise me you'll think about it. Please?"

"Okay. I'll think about it."

"Yea." She clapped. "It's gonna be gorgeous."

"Have you guys picked a date?"

"We're thinking early September."

"Wow. That's what...? Only six months to plan?"

"I know, but I don't want to give him enough time to back out."

"In that case you should head for Vegas, girl."

"Right? But I want my fluffy-white-dress moment."

"I gotcha."

We lingered over after-dinner coffee, consumed by the idea of Jane's wedding. Though I wouldn't admit it to her yet, the challenge of making the wedding cake intrigued me.

Around seven o'clock my cell phone buzzed. A text message from Roberto asked when I'd be home. I replied I'd get back around seven-thirty and asked him why. No answer came.

I hugged Jane goodbye in the parking lot and promised to call in the next couple days. Dazed and lost in thought, I drove home on autopilot. When I trotted up to the house, a soft glow from inside the living room greeted me.

I walked in through the kitchen door and heard strains of Enrique Iglesias.

“Roberto?” I called. No answer.

A floral scent drew me into the dining room. I gasped at a cloud of roses in a huge vase on the table—red, yellow, peach, pink and white, at least a dozen of each color. Sporting a smug grin, Roberto leaned against the far wall.

He handed me a glass of champagne and pulled me to him in a frenzied kiss. His cologne filled my nostrils—bergamot and sandalwood. Our lips parted and his gaze fixed on mine.

“Wh-what’s this all about?” I asked.

“Do I have to have a reason to romance my wife?”

“No, I’m just surprised. The roses are stunning.”

“That’s the point.”

I took a sip of champagne. “Well, it’s all lovely. Really lovely. Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I owe you this much for all the overtime you’ve put in lately.”

His lips captured mine again. The heat of the kiss overwhelmed me.

Without further discussion I gave myself over to him. We abandoned the champagne and stumbled into the living room amidst a flurry of turbulent kisses. He popped the buttons on my blouse, sending them flying. My calf banged into the edge of the sofa and Roberto lowered me to the cushions. He fell on me, pinning me beneath him, my legs spread wide.

Desire flamed inside my chest, the flush spreading quickly throughout my body. I pulled at the button on his jeans and slid down his zipper. He slithered his hand under

my skirt and inside my panties, slipping two fingers inside, sending shivers of electricity through me.

“Oh, Alejandro,” I groaned. Too late, I realized my mistake. My hand flew up to my mouth.

Roberto stiffened, our momentum grinding to a halt. He slumped off the couch and onto his haunches. His gaze bored into me. I remained motionless, watching for his reaction. Time seemed to have stopped, but finally a response came.

A smile twisted the corners of his mouth and we both dissolved into laughter.

“Well, it had to happen sooner or later.” He shook his head.

“I’m so sorry.” I still shook with amusement. “I guess I miss your alter ego.”

“Yes, I suppose you just put an end to that little game.”

“We could keep pretending.”

“No, the rule was we had to treat it like a real affair. If you were really having an affair, you’d be busted right about now.”

“True.”

He pulled me to him in an affectionate embrace. “We had a good run, didn’t we?”

“We did... To be honest, in a way I’m glad the game is over,” I said.

“You know in some ways I am too. The wardrobe changes were killing me.”

“I’m sure. That was a nice touch, by the way. But sometimes Alejandro made me sad.”

“Why, *mamita*?”

“He was so romantic and considerate. He never made fun of me. He was patient. He never had to cancel plans because he was too busy. Made me wonder why you can’t be that guy all the time.”

Roberto released me and thought for a minute before replying. “Those things were easier when I played the role. Alejandro didn’t have work pressures, he didn’t have

money worries, he didn't have a wife and family to take care of. He existed only to make you happy. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"But guess what?"

"What?"

"I've got the next two weeks off. We're between projects and I cleared it with the boss. I'm all yours for a while."

I cupped his face in my hands and planted an elated kiss on his lips. "You're the best, honey. Danny will be thrilled."

"I did learn some things from Ale, I do ignore you too much. I do get so caught up in work that I forget what's important."

He settled in next to me on the couch, squeezing our bodies together in the narrow space.

"Hey, I have question for you," I said. "Why was Alejandro a better dance partner than you are?"

"Honestly, Sandi, you don't believe me, but you don't let me lead, you fight me. But you weren't like that with him. It's funny, sometimes I was jealous about how soft you were around him."

"You know, you're right. I noticed that I didn't mind dropping my defenses with him. I guess he taught me a few lessons too."

"You've really blossomed lately, *mami*."

"Hey, since Ale made us both better versions of ourselves, maybe he should still put in an appearance around here every now and then."

Roberto wrapped his arms around me and kissed the top of my head. "I think you're right, *mi amor*. He should...and I promise, from now on he *will*."

Our bodies still intertwined, I basked in the warmth of his torso against mine, in our own home, wearing our own true identities.

“Now,” I wiggled my pelvis against his growing erection, “where were we?”

He responded by sliding on top of me, his lips on mine. A mischievous grin interrupted the kiss.

“I think I owe you some hot-shower monkey-love,” he said.

I giggled. “That’s right. You do.”

Taking me by the hand, Roberto pulled me to my feet and we made our way to the shower, kissing our way through the house. I tugged at his shirt and trousers in a heated rush but he caught my hands to slow me down. Positioning me in front of the mirror, he slid my skirt down my legs and brushed my hair from my shoulders. With his lips on my skin, he lowered himself to his knees, running his mouth from my neck to the small of my back. I watched my reflection, my cheeks taking on a pink glow of arousal that spread to my chest. My heartbeat thundered in the hollow of my throat, echoing the pulsing between my thighs. He shed his shirt and pressed his warm skin against my bare body, sliding his way to standing again. We stared at each other in the mirror for a moment.

“You know I think you’re gorgeous,” he whispered. “I always have.”

I closed my eyes against the prickle of tears. “Thank you.”

He turned me to face him. Cupping his face in my hands, I moved in for kiss, my lips parted, my tongue playing with his.

He reached the faucet without breaking away from me and set the shower to a steamy downpour. I helped him out of his pants, taking time to study his body. His complexion darker than mine—a sea of *dulce de leche*—and his stocky build. With my palms flush against that beautiful skin, I ran my hands over his broad chest and down his strong back. Sinking my fingernails into his flesh a little, I gripped his round ass. He grunted and nipped at my bottom lip.

Still intertwined, we moved into the shower, hot water spilling over us. He pressed me against the wall, our kisses becoming more urgent. My hands on his hips, I grasped him as if he would absorb me if I let go, but he pried them free and broke away from

the kiss. Roberto intertwined his fingers with mine and gently pinned them against the tile. A smile in his eyes, he rubbed his cock against my clit, toying with me. I strained against his grip but he held fast. Hooking a leg around him, I pulled him closer. He ground his pelvis against mine, his shaft still teasing my bud. Each brush of his cock head against my clit built more heat, further engorged my folds. I tried to capture his mouth with mine, but he turned to the side, denying me access. Every fiber of my being longing to touch him, to join my body with his, a groan of frustration escaped me.

My legs trembling with excitement, I lowered the one around him to steady myself. Only then did I realize how to outsmart him. I slid down the wall, slipping out of his grasp, to the bottom of the tub. No invitation needed, he joined me, positioning himself over me and wrapping one of my legs around him. Finally, he pushed himself inside me. I moaned, the need for him to fill me sated, and looked up at him. His gaze met mine, his expression full of unspoken affection. Shifting my focus to his body, I tilted my hips to meet his pelvis. Every forward thrust filled me with ripples of pleasure. Our bodies melded together, moving with each other and against each other at the same time. Steam rose up around us, water beating against Roberto's back. I inhaled the humid air, warm water pooling under my backside. The extra heat added to the warmth radiating from my slit.

With steady, even strokes, he pushed himself deep inside me, spurring on more delicious tension. Though he held the full weight of his body off mine, the pressure of his shaft pushed me closer to the precipice of an orgasm. I clutched him, muscles straining to contain the ecstasy about to break loose. My chest heaved, I pulled him closer and spread wider for him. Panting out his name – my husband's name – I was so close to coming it hurt. And then the dam broke. I shuddered beneath him in the grip of an overwhelming climax. Roberto arched his back and buried himself in me. Groans on his lips, he spilled hot spurts, his hips bucking. I closed my eyes, holding my breath and rocking with diminishing spasms until one final shiver passed through me.

My senses quieted one at a time. First my ears tuned in to the patter of shower still raining down on his skin and the porcelain around us. I took in a deep, calming breath, the scent of our bodies thick in the billows of steam. Finally I opened my eyes—Roberto’s intense stare had softened to a sated glow. Between gulps of air, he landed flurries of kisses on my brow, my cheeks and lips. We lay in the tub, a twisted heap, touching each other until the water turned cool.

He scrambled to his feet and helped me up.

Clean, shiny and still basking in afterglow, we stepped out of the shower and toweled each other dry. Roberto led me to the bed, we slipped between smooth cotton sheets. He tucked my body beneath his and pampered me with leisurely caresses. Skimming his lips across mine, he nuzzled his nose against my cheek.

“I love you, Sandra,” he murmured.

“I love you too. So much.”

* * * * *

Roberto lay snoring softly in our bed. Restlessness moved me to abandon my efforts at sleep. I donned a robe and slipped into the den.

In Roberto’s desk, I found the rules we’d set for our adultery fantasy. We’d thought of the idea one night over a bottle of wine. He’d noticed the lack of spark in our relationship as had I, and we’d resolved to do something about it. The elegant brilliance of the plan had appealed to me. The guidelines stated we would keep our family life and our role-playing separate. We would act as though a real affair was going on, which required me to hide the fact from my husband and Roberto to come up with plausible reasons why he wasn’t home the nights he transformed into “Alejandro”.

At the beginning, the game felt awkward and silly, but after my second meeting with Alejandro, I’d begun to get into the freedom he afforded me. We’d both reinvented ourselves, as it turned out, for the better. The challenge of sticking to the lessons of our experiment lay ahead of us. Would we succeed? I hoped so. And if not, we’d at least

proven we knew how to take action should we start to slip into apathy again. Pretending to cheat on my husband had somehow saved our marriage.

Epilogue

Flowers cascaded and gushed from every surface that could hold them. Swags of peach organza draped the walls of the reception hall. I stole over to the cake table to sneak one last glimpse of my creation. The cream cheese fondant looked like rich velvet draped over all six floating tiers of the cake. Sprays of gum paste dahlias and bellflowers in shades of light orange, peach and cream spilled over the edges of each layer. I'd talked Jane out of the staid fall leaves theme for a September wedding and matched the flowers in her bouquet. The mass of sugar blossoms had taken me a week to sculpt. The cake required two days to bake and prep. I assembled it on site without a single hitch. The final product surprised even me. I'd taken a thousand photos before the reception started.

"You outdid yourself, hon." Jane caught me admiring my work.

I felt myself blushing. "Sorry, I just can't believe I pulled it off."

She hugged me. "I can. I knew you could do it."

The clutch of bridesmaids and well-wishers who followed Jane's every move caught up with us.

"The cake is simply gorgeous," one of them gushed.

"Thank you," Jane replied. "This lady right here made it."

They turned on me, some with mouths agape and some twittering praise. The sudden spotlight cowed me.

"Do you have a business card?" a bridesmaid asked.

Hands trembling, I managed to fish out a card from my evening bag. Roberto pushed me to have them printed once the incorporation papers had been filed. Mom, Roberto and I made up the partners of Cakes by Sandra.

A few more women took cards from me. With the referrals from Roberto's business contacts, I'd already booked several other occasions—two more weddings, a couple of birthdays and one anniversary party. Unsure of how busy I wanted to be, I'd kept the bookings down to one or two a month. The moneymaking side of the business mattered less to me than the satisfaction of the creative outlet.

The wedding planner swooped in with the groom and herded everyone for the cake-cutting ceremony. Tears of joy welled in my eyes as I watched two good friends squish my cake into each other's faces.

Roberto nuzzled up behind me. "I'm so proud of you, *mi amor*."

"Thank you. I love you."

"I love you too." He planted a kiss on my cheek.

* * * * *

Danny streaked through the kitchen naked as the day he was born. I laughed and shook my head. He sang a chorus of "Grammy's here," at the top of his lungs.

"Hush, baby, Mommy's checking messages. Go dry off and put your jammies on," I said.

He ran full speed down the hallway chanting, "Jammies on, jammies on." I envied his energy.

The week had worn me down a bit, but Roberto and I had decided to keep our date for tonight despite our mutual fatigue.

I made notes of the voice mails—a couple potential clients and one of Roberto's friends. The last message trilled with Jane's excited voice. She'd made it home safe and sound—"and sore," she added—from her month-long honeymoon. I'd call her back tomorrow to set up a lunch date.

Roberto slid into the kitchen wearing espresso colored slacks and an olive shirt. His favorite dress shoes peeked out beneath his pants leg cuff.

"Don't you look sharp?" I said, hanging up the phone.

“You’re no slouch yourself.” He twirled me around and drank in my Gypsy queen dress. “You haven’t worn that since the day you met Alejandro.”

“It’s our anniversary, I thought it was time to resurrect it.”

We tucked Danny in on the couch for a long night of kiddie movies with Grammy. He’d be a little cranky tomorrow for missing his bedtime, but we all needed a little special fun now and then.

Mom wished us a fun evening and we left through the kitchen.

After we settled into the car, I cast a sideways glance at Roberto. A puckish grin on his face, he looked almost giddy like a kid at Christmas.

“You must have one hell of a night planned,” I said.

Pulling a silken blindfold from his pocket, he arched an eyebrow. “Yes, I do.”

Excitement churned in my stomach and I ached for him already.

Fingers skipping up his leg, I crossed my legs, flashing some thigh. “Maybe we should skip dinner.”

A warm hand on the flesh I’d bared for him, he leaned in and brushed his lips against mine. “Up for a little game already?”

“Oh yeah.” I heaved a sigh of anticipation.

Roberto turned over the engine and tore out of the driveway. I was definitely up for a little game...a love game with the sexiest man alive – my husband.

About the Author

Prior to becoming a multi-published writer of romantic and erotic fiction, Cindy went to college at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and graduated with a BFA in Art. After a brief attempt at an art career, she decided the “starving artist” life wasn’t for her. She worked for ten years in the corporate arena, but now spends her days as a full-time author.

When not chained to her laptop, she enjoys hanging with her family, belly dancing and exploring the culinary arts.

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

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Also by Cindy Jacks

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