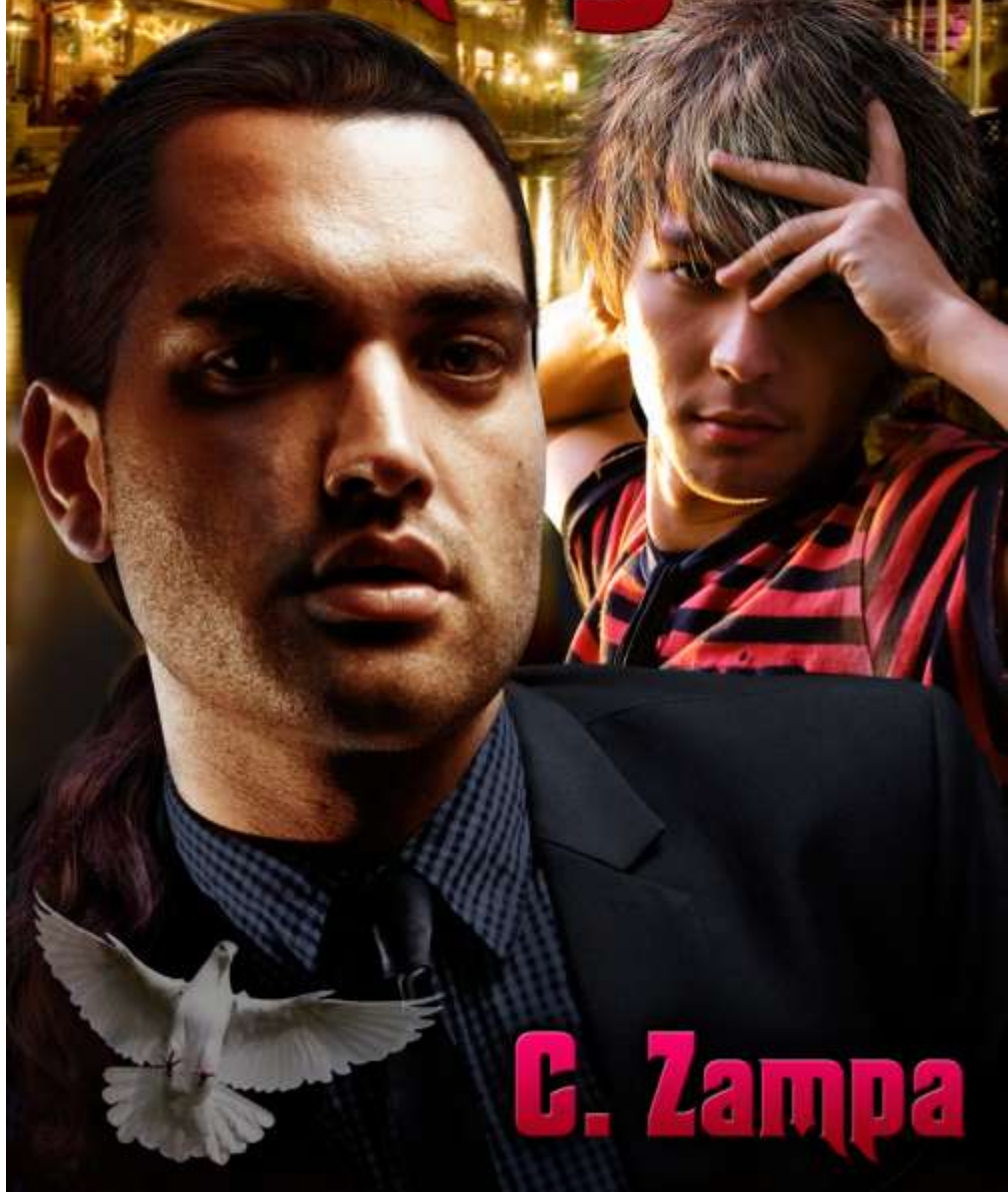


Candy C.



C. Zampa

Chapter One

I POPPED the tab and took a huge gulp of diet soda but kept my gaze on my car as it glided along the carwash conveyor.

Rogelio, the manager—all nervous and smiley—watched me from the cash register.

I hated that everyone walked on pins and needles around me. Most of their uneasiness, I supposed, was rooted in the fact that I was the former exclusive attorney for a very dangerous local crime boss, Teirso Flores. My impressive record of one hundred percent success rate—either by not-guilty verdicts or dismissal of charges—brought the term *criminal* defense to a new level in the community. Although I no longer counseled the drug lord and, in fact, had become a local hero for walking away from him, the intimidating image of Candy G., the name with which the press anointed me, still lingered.

The funny thing? This imposing presence of Candy G. was a far cry from the real man, Candelario Gonzalez. Those closest to me knew that beneath the bad-ass exterior beat the heart of a sentimental Latino romantic. They knew my Glock shared the glove compartment of my Mercedes with my boyhood teddy bear, and I loved tear-jerker movies, sad songs, and poetry.

I still practiced law but only represented clients I believed to be innocent, and since many of my customers were of low income, my fees were very minimal. But I owned a number of nightclub franchises which were managed by my best friend Jesse, and these interests were extremely profitable.

“How are you today, Mr. Gonzalez?” Rubbing his fingers together, Rogelio pounced from behind the counter and approached me with jerky steps. His glance darted around, landing on everything but me, and he gritted his teeth in a counterfeit smile.

I threw a look at him over my sunglasses,

Slowing to a stop, he nodded toward my car and asked, “Are they taking good care of you today, sir?”

“I’m sure they are.” I took another slug of soda, tossed the can in the trash, and walked past him.

He followed me to the entrance, and his Nikes squealed on the tile with each step.

I pushed open the door to step outside, and he hollered, “Mr. Gonzalez, it’s hot out. Your car won’t be long. Why not just wait inside while....”

I ignored him, closing the door in the middle of his sentence, and walked onto the covered patio. Restored pickup trucks and muscle machines, glistening in the evening sun, lined the lot near the busy street. Mexican and Vietnamese attendants, moving fast and silent, ran chamois cloths along the wet surfaces of the sparkling clean rides.

Sitting on a wrought-iron bench, I crossed my legs and watched as an attendant babied my car. Rogelio came out

but didn't sit, just stood there biting his fingernail. If he spoke, I didn't hear him. My attention was fixed on Carlos Alvarez, the worker who tended to my Mercedes.

Carlos was a young neighborhood man I'd met at my favorite little restaurant, La Abuelita's, where he waited tables. We often had conversations at the restaurant—usually about nothing in particular, just anything I could think of to engage him in talk, to have a chance to see him close up.

To my pleasant surprise, he began to work at Perez's Auto Clean, the carwash where I regularly took my car to be cleaned and detailed. He told me he'd been saving money to attend art school, and since La Abuelita's was only a part-time job, he needed the extra income. *Gran Dios*. Another opportunity to see him.

Maybe I was mistaken, but I'd sensed a growing attraction between us. Just that nice, nervous tension when eyes talk more than lips. While I watched him caress my car, my mind wandered back to my first encounter with him.

JESSE and I sat at our usual table at La Abuelita's. A new waiter caught my attention immediately in one of those movie-like moments where one spots a beautiful person and everything around them seems to fade.

My interest was sparked by his remarkable appearance—a short, toned body and a beautiful face with almost Asian features. His tawny skin was contrasted by

bleach-blond hair that spiked in wild, just-climbed-out-of-bed disarray.

He stood beside our table, and the moment I saw him up close, my casual appreciation zoomed to intense attraction. I was hypnotized by his soft brown, slanted eyes.

“I’m Carlos, your waiter. Are you ready to order?” he asked, his quiet voice shaking me from my trance.

I ordered but couldn’t take my eyes from his exquisite face while Jesse gave him his own selection.

Carlos nodded and thanked us, then sauntered to the kitchen. My gaze followed his tight ass, showcased nicely in snug black jeans, and the sensual sway of his slim hips ignited quick heat in my belly.

“Ay-ay-ay, Jefe.” Jesse tore the paper wrapper from his straw. “You’re not interested in that little vato, surely?” He crumpled the wrapper, laid it on the table, and stabbed the straw into his iced tea. “A little punky street kid.”

“Nice to look at, though, Jesse.” I shrugged.

Jesse rolled his eyes.

A short time later, Carlos returned with our food. “Careful. The plates are hot.” He leaned to place our dishes on the table.

His scent drifted to my nose. So crisp, masculine, with the faint undertones of spices, onions, and peppers which had seeped into his clothing from the kitchen. On his tan fingers, he wore several silver rings that flashed in the warm light from the candle on the table.

Straightening, he folded the dishtowel and cast a relaxed smile on me. A diamond stud sparkled just beneath his full bottom lip. “Can I get you anything else?”

The confident ease of his carriage, the feisty twinkle in his eyes, the soft voice. All these things intrigued me, warmed me to him.

“No, thank you.”

Perhaps it had only been my imagination, but I thought he glanced at my crotch and raised a brow.

I draped the red cloth napkin across my lap. Leaning my elbow on the table to sit back and observe him more closely, I said, “I’ve never seen you here before, Carlos.”

With his gaze fixed on me, he toyed with the towel. “I started this week, Mr. Gonzalez.”

Ah. So he recognized me. “You saved me an introduction.” I chuckled. “I’m not really as bad as what you might have heard.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jesse roll his eyes again. Even my friend picked up on the dribbling schoolboy tone that gushed from my lips. I couldn’t help myself, though. Something about Carlos’s uncommon beauty, his easy air, threw me into bumbling adolescent confusion.

“I’ve only heard good shit. I mean...well...” A blush crept to his tanned cheeks. “I admire you, Mr. Gonzalez. I’d hoped you’d come in here so I could meet you.”

Even with the flush on his face, the stuttering compliment, Carlos still held such an irresistible cockiness, and I found myself more and more drawn to him.

Beneath Jesse’s amused stare, I thought it best to curtail the conversation before I allowed my interest to become apparent to the young waiter. I smiled, nodding. “Then I’m glad, Carlos.”

One thing was sure. La Abuelita's would now become my most frequented place to eat.

THE honk of a horn on the street drew my mind back to the present, and I glanced at Carlos.

Sweat slightly darkened his tousled platinum hair. He pulled up the hem of his white T-shirt to wipe his brow, and I got an eyeful of a flat, smooth belly. Throwing back his head, he closed his eyes for a second and soaked up the breeze, then tossed a radiant smile to me before turning to the window and cleaning again.

That smile, so full of... something. Vitality? The eyes, so exotic and sultry yet so full of wide-open kindness.

And his body. I thanked God for sunglasses. No one could see me eating him with my stare. He bent to spray leather treatment on the inside of the door, and some Japanese letters tattooed across the slope of his slender hip peeked over the low-riding waist of his shorts. I wondered what his naked ass looked like, then figured it was probably as perfect as the rest of him.

He caressed oil onto the leather surface—slow and gentle—and I imagined those brown hands rubbing my body, fondling my cock. *La Madre de Dios*. Gentle spasms rippled through my groin at the thought of fucking the chico bonito.

My sensual reverie was interrupted by the cap breaking off his bottle and oily liquid spilling into the back seat. Carlos, his eyes huge, sprang back from the car as though it had exploded.

Spouting a mix of Spanish and English curse words, Rogelio dashed to the scene and shoved Carlos with enough force to knock him to the concrete.

I rose from the bench, and to show Carlos that he didn't need to be afraid of me, I walked casually to the car.

"Puto pequeno." Rogelio towered over Carlos, who was sprawled on the pavement. "You're fired, you swata."

"Are you all right, mi amigo?" I smiled and stretched out my hand to help Carlos to his feet. "What's the problem here?" I pushed the sunglasses up into my hair and peered in the car, rubbing my chin and pretending I didn't know what had happened. The carpet and part of the seat were soiled. I cringed.

Before Carlos could answer, Rogelio shouted, "You've ruined the carpet, you clumsy idiot. Get your fucking shit and get out of here. And don't expect any wages. Whatever you *did* earn will have to pay for the damages."

"Hey, hey, hey." I swerved around, holding up my hand.

Rogelio shut up but stood shaking and tapping his foot on the cement, clearly busting to say more.

"Muchacho." Facing Carlos, I spotted blood on his elbows and wrists. "I asked you. Are you all right?"

It took all my strength to keep from touching his cheek just to see if it was as soft as it looked.

"Yes, sir," he answered, so quiet I barely heard him. His voice raised a little, and he babbled, "I'm so sorry. The lid broke, and before I—"

“It’s no big deal,” I assured, shaking my head. “It’s just a car.” My gut lurched at that lie. The car was my baby. I pampered it. But the spill had been an accident.

“Mr. Gonzalez,” Rogelio blurted, “the carpet and upholstery will have to be cleaned. Like I told—”

My cold glance silenced him; then I said to Carlos, “Carlos, it’s no big deal—”

“Mr. Gonzalez!” Rogelio interrupted, but I shot him another pissed-off frown. He clenched his jaw.

“Carlos,” I continued, “it was just an accident.”

He wrung the chamois cloth. “I *will* pay you with my last wages, Mr. Gonzalez,” he murmured.

Shaking my head, I slapped Rogelio on his bony shoulder. “Nah, no need for that, Carlos. Rogelio here was only kidding about firing you.” I squeezed the manager’s shoulder so hard he grimaced. “Right, Rogelio?”

“Yes, Mr. Gonzalez.” He gritted his teeth and flashed one of those wait-until-I-get-my-hands-on-you glares at Carlos.

“And Rogelio won’t give you any grief, either, Carlos. Will you, Rogelio?” I smiled, sweet and soft.

Rogelio’s loud gulp told me he’d picked up my warning tone. His eyes turned to slits, his voice sickly sweet. “No, I’d never do that, Mr. Gonzalez.”

“Good.” I gave him a hard clap on the back, throwing him off balance, then said to Carlos, “It’s nearly quitting time, Carlos. If you’ll just finish up with my car so I can go, we’ll call it even. Bueno?”

“Bueno.” He seemed to fight a full-fledged smile, but even the shabby attempt he did make was so sunny it stirred warmth in my belly.

I nodded, pasted one more threatening frown on Rogelio, and returned to the bench to wait and watch while Carlos finished with my car.

Night settled in. The little strip blazed like Las Vegas with neon lights from booze shops, gas stations, diners, tattoo parlors, and convenience stores. Parades of low riders drifted in with the dark, their high-powered stereo systems competing for lordship over the crummy neighborhood.

Carlos waved his chamois cloth to let me know he was done, and the jab of sadness that hit me when I realized it was time to go confused me. I’d have been satisfied to have sat on that bench and watched him all night, and to leave now left me feeling empty.

He took my tip, and his eyes widened. Shaking his head, he tried to hand it back. “Mr. Gonzalez, this is too much. Especially after I messed up your carpet and upholstery.”

“Nah. Forget it.”

“Well... thanks.” His lips turned up in a dazzling smile, and he shoved the money in the pocket of his shorts. Raking fingers through his hair, he turned to leave.

My gaze trailed him to the building where all the other attendants had gone to clock out. His stride was smooth—a slender, sleek cat. He wiped his forehead with the T-shirt once more and disappeared around the corner.

Goddamn. I struggled to keep from calling out, offering to take him home, wherever home for him was. What the fuck had gotten into me? Good-looking men passed through my life regularly, and for a man with my money, my power, they were as easy to get as a snap of the fingers. But I'd never been so blind-sided by any of them. That soft fire deep in the sleepy eyes and the full, parted lips that seemed to whisper *fuck me* drove me loco. I wanted to touch him, fuck him, suck his cock until he came for me. There was something else, though. A fierce spirit mixed with something unidentifiable—something that spoke to me. A hint of vulnerability, whispering he needed to be loved, and he loved big in return. The combination aroused me, and in the year I'd known him, he'd grown to perfection in my eyes.

I slid into the car and answered an incoming call on my cell phone. While the party chatted on the other end, I only half-listened. My mind spilled over with a too-real picture of Carlos. Only in this vision he wasn't wearing baggy shorts and a white T-shirt. No, he was naked and squirming under me, and I was fucking him hard, ramming deep into that smooth, dark body. *Dios Santo. Stop this!*

After finishing the conversation, I plunked the phone on the center console and fastened the seat belt. I turned the key in the ignition and caught Carlos from the corner of my eye. With a backpack slung over his shoulder, he'd crossed the parking lot and headed down a worn grassy path toward the residential area of town.

Shifting the car into drive, I pulled onto the street, ready to make a left turn. But to the right I spotted a handful of *cholos* who walked up the path toward Carlos.

Because they looked rough didn't necessarily mean they intended any harm, but I eased the car in their direction just to make sure they didn't bother him. They spread out in front of him, and my pulse picked up.

Carlos stopped, bracing his shoulders and tossing back his head, and met their cool stares.

One of the gang leaned close to Carlos, nose to nose, and both their faces contorted in anger. The soundproof car prevented me from hearing them, but by the heated movement of their hands and the snarls on their lips, it was clear they shouted at each other while the rest of the small group watched with sullen frowns.

I drove slowly until I reached the group, then rolled down the window. People often got nervous when they saw my Mercedes headed toward them, and these mocosos were no exception. With one look at the S600, their badasses drooped like little chicas, but they put on their best nonchalant faces.

"Mr. Gonzalez." The leader of the gang—or the only one brave enough to speak—gave me a sideways glance and a tight smile.

"Hola, vatos!" I called out to them, my voice full of fake cheer. "Nice night out, eh?"

They all nodded in unison, but Carlos stood in place, clutching the straps of his backpack. He kept his stare glued to their faces.

"Señor Alvarez," I said, pushing the remote to unlock the passenger door. "How about a lift?"

Carlos jerked around and flashed a surprised look at me. He shot the bristling group a parting icy glance, then

walked slowly to the curb, opened the door, and climbed in the car. Once inside with the windows raised, he twisted out of the backpack straps, pulling it off and slapping it onto his lap.

“Friends of your, Carlos?” I blended back into the traffic.

Cocking his head to one side, he lent me a sarcastic laugh. “Did they look like friends?”

“Have they been giving you trouble?” Even though I kept my eyes on the street, I felt Carlos watching me.

He held up a hand. “If you’re thinking of taking care of them, I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah, I could *see* that.” I chuckled.

He turned his face to the window.

The traffic thinned, and the gaudy storefronts gave way to rows of gloomy, rundown houses. Junky cars hugged the curbs under the streetlights, making it hard to navigate the narrow space. It occurred to me that I didn’t have a clue where to take him.

“Where do you live, amigo?” I asked, allowing myself a good look at him in the soft glow from the dash. His hair—flaxen now that it had dried—feathered around his head, framing his incredibly beautiful face.

He scanned me through half-closed lids and picked at the zipper tab on his backpack. “You mean you’re not taking me to your home?”

That took me off guard, and I lost control of the car for a second, nearly sideswiping an old pickup truck. “What do you mean?” I braked to a stop. “Why would I take you to my home?”

His fingers slid the zipper up and down, and he shrugged. “Well, I figured when you picked me up....” His forehead scrunched, and he bit his lip. “I mean, you just started driving like you knew where you were—”

“I wasn’t thinking, Carlos. It just now occurred to me to ask where you lived.” Had he read my mind earlier somehow, seen the sex in my eyes? I had to know. “What would make you think I was taking you home with me?”

He stared straight ahead and really went crazy with the backpack zipper. “Word is that you’re—”

“I’m what, Carlos?” I knew what he was going to say, but my heart beat really fast anyway as though some sort of judgment hung in the air. Would the word come from his mouth with disgust?

He said, matter-of-fact, “Gay.”

Hearing him say the word *gay* with nonchalance, I breathed a private sigh of relief. I wasn’t sure why it mattered what this young vato thought of me—whether he approved of me or not—I just knew it *did* matter. But I didn’t feel comfortable that he’d assumed I’d picked him up for a fuck just because I was gay.

I pressed my foot on the gas pedal and asked, my tone as cool as possible, “So where *do* you live, Carlos?”

“Perdóne, por favor.” Sinking deeper into the seat, he shifted his gaze back to the road.

“Forgive you for what?” I tightened my grip on the steering wheel.

“I insulted you. I misunderstood what you.... I mean, I thought—”

“Forget it.” To steel myself from looking at him, I focused hard on the faded center stripe of the street. “I can’t just drive around all night, *amigo*. You’re going to have to tell me where you live eventually.”

Carlos ran his finger along the door handle. He leaned his head on the window but rested his sultry stare on me. “I’ll go home with you. You *know* that’s what you want.”

Fuck. Oh, fuck. The very thing I wanted, but it turned me off to have it offered so callously. My young dream lover had transformed into a street hustler right before my eyes.

I slammed on the brakes. “Thanks anyway, *chico*. I’ll pass.” I tried to glare at him, but his brown eyes melted me with the speed of an ice cube in the hot sun. I wrestled in his soft gaze, resisting with everything in me. “Besides, don’t you have homework or something? Curfew?”

“I’m twenty-five.” Throwing his head back, he flashed a wide-eyed, indignant frown at me.

“And I’m forty-two.”

“So?”

“Well—”

“You watch me. I know you want me.”

“*Muchacho*, I look at a lot of—”

“You’ve *always* watched me. And I’ve watched *you*.”

“Yeah, but—”

“It’s been almost a year now. And all of this time that I’ve gotten to know you, I’ve wanted you.”

Torn between yielding to the culmination of my dreams of this gorgeous man and the discomfort of the unexpected

advance, I protested, “Carlos. This just.... I mean, I’m not going to lie and say I don’t want you. But—”

“Please.”

In the dark, he touched my outer thigh and made a soft trail which stopped between my legs. His fingers rested there, and the light pressure—close, so close to my cock—gave me a slow, aching hard-on.

He whispered, his voice so low I had to strain to hear him, “Please. Please take me home with you.”

Chapter Two

PLEASURE shot through me so hard and fast I thought I'd pass out. *Hijo Jesu!* My fantasy was coming to life in the middle of a jalopy-lined barrio street. Carlos—the unbelievably beautiful chamaco who drove me mad with desire—sat inches from me, caressing the bulge in my pants. I squirmed under his touch, spreading my legs, allowing the heat to intensify in my dick. I moaned, “Se siente rico.”

“It feels good?” His voice was soft, so sweet. “Then please take me home with you.”

I put up a half-assed protest. “Carlos. Stop.”

Not that I'd suddenly developed a conscience, but I'd grown to like Carlos very much, and I wanted to know him more intimately than just fucking. I wanted the whole nine yards with him—to spend time with him, to hold him, to linger over every detail of him.

Craving such closeness with anyone was foreign to me. I'd recently walked away from a long relationship and never realized until it was over that, although the sex had been explosively erotic even until the very end, my lover's passion for me had been obsession, not love.

Because of this warped, sex-driven interpretation of affection, I no longer knew how to make the distinction

between lust and emotional need, and I dove headfirst into purely carnal connections with other men.

Something about Carlos, though, turned my detached heart into a tailspin, and I desired something more from him—I couldn't put a name on *what* that something was yet—that I'd never wanted from another. I at least *did* know this fondling in the car, in the middle of the street, was not what I'd longed for from him. This was something I'd done many times during nondescript encounters, and I couldn't bear to concede that Carlos might just be another drive-by blow job.

Everything in the world at that moment centered on my throbbing cock, and no matter how frantically my mind flashed a red light, I couldn't bring myself to end this wonderful pain. Visions of his naked body filled my mind and only heightened the sensation. *Ah, Dios*. Pushing back against the seat, I broke into a sweat, and even though he only rubbed my crotch through my pants, I was close to orgasm.

Carlos murmured caressing words in Spanish, and they jumbled in the thick haze of my mind.

My gaze wandered to the streetlight, and I tried to focus on something, anything, to break free from the spell the pretty young man had me under.

Funny how our minds sometimes careen on some crazed, out-of-control roulette wheel and land on the strangest things—things we'd ordinarily never notice. For some reason, I spotted a lone bird perched on the telephone wire in the dreary light. I swore the little bastard looked through the window right into my eyes, sadly judging me as I got my rocks off.

Birds, according to my elders, were supernatural messengers, sent as signs of good things to come or to warn of bad things. This tiny *cabrón* didn't seem to be one of the good birds. Whether or not he really watched the goings on in the car as a petite judge from the deities didn't matter. It still shook me up.

I grabbed Carlos's wrist and pushed his hand away. "Stop. Don't do this, goddamn it."

He slowly pulled back, his brow knitted. "You said it felt good."

To ease the tightness in my pants, I shifted in the seat. "Oh, *si muchacho*, *sí*. I do like it. I just can't—"

"I don't understand." He turned and glanced all over the dashboard. With a shrug, he blurted, "I thought you wanted me."

"Ah, chico, *me gustes tanto* but—"

"If you're attracted to me, then why—"

I pressed a finger to his mouth, then pulled my hand away, seeing that even the slightest contact with his body, his silky skin, was too tempting. "Carlos, I'm not going to lie to you. I get blow jobs all the time. I *give* blow jobs all the time." I laughed. "Hell, if I ever went to confession for all the blind fucking I've done, I'd be an old man before I finished telling the father my sins."

"Then why are you stopping *me*?" He jerked back, his eyes full of immature hurt.

I lifted my hand to his face once more and painted a line with my thumb down his smooth cheek. "Tell me, Carlos. Are you a whore?"

He squinted. “Do I *look* like the kind who sucks cock for money?”

“I don’t know. *Are* you the kind?”

His body stiffened. “Hell, no.”

“Then why are you trying to jack me off right now in my car like a whore would do, chico?”

Even in the limited lighting of the interior, his brown eyes turned warm and glazed, full of unmistakable, very adult want. He whispered, “I want to make love to you.”

Fuck, oh, fuck. Surprised by the apparent sincerity of his comment, I could only echo his words. “You want to make love to me?” I’d heard that proposal many times from horny men and women, but it had been so long since I’d wanted someone to mean what they said.

What if he was just a good actor and nothing more than a money-seeking little cocksucker? I couldn’t bear that. But why couldn’t I bear it? Why did I expect so much from him?

I squeezed his chin between my fingers, forcing him to look me in the eyes. “Let me tell you something, hombre. You want me so bad? If you do, then you won’t mind if I fuck you silly and not pay you a fucking red cent.”

Fire sparked in Carlos’s eyes, and his nostrils flared. “I just want *you*! I don’t want *money* from you.”

I relaxed my fingers and lowered my hand. “We’ll see, then.”

Resting his palms on the dash, he leaned closer and studied me as though I had a cock growing out of my forehead. “What?” He pointed a finger. “Are you old-fashioned or something?”

“In some things, I—”

“I mean, do you have to... well... like... go steady with a guy to fuck him?”

I saw red. Not angry, but embarrassed. As much as I’d like to have denied it, Carlos was closer to the truth than he knew, and the humor in his voice humiliated me. I felt ridiculous.

“Go *steady*?” I hissed, slapping his finger out of my face. “Are you making fun of me?”

“I’m sorry.” A lopsided smile crept to his lips. “I just meant you seem old-fashioned. Like you’re... well... serious about fucking.”

“Not really, Carlos. I never have been.” My gaze leveled with his, and much more of my heart seeped into my voice than I intended. “I am with *you*, though.”

An indiscernible expression crossed his face. “Really? Why me?”

A soft laugh. “Because I like you. Very much. I wouldn’t quite say I want to go steady....” Another chuckle. *Although, yes, I really do.* “But I’d like more than a middle-of-the-road-in-the-barrio blow job.” Quietly, I added, “I want you in my bed.”

“I’ve wanted to make love to you ever since I first saw you.” He clutched my hand. “I can show you something that’ll prove it to you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ll *show* you.” He grabbed the backpack, which had fallen to the floorboard, and unzipped it. After fumbling around inside, he slumped and sighed. “Damn. It’s not here.”

“What the *fuck* are you talking about?”

Nodding to the street inhabited by only decrepit houses and apartments, he said, “Take me to my place. I’ll show you.”

I scoped the seedy area and held up my hands in surrender. “All right, Carlos.” Seeing he relaxed a bit, I said, “Show me. Take me to your place. Show me you want me.”

I got weak in the knees at the eagerness in his eyes.

So cute and self-satisfied, he beamed. “The Conquistador Apartments at Rose and Algonquin.”

“Ah.” I nodded and drove ahead, easing deeper into the barrio. “My old stomping grounds.”

“I know.” He zipped the backpack and pushed deeper into the plush seat.

“You do, eh?”

“Who *doesn’t* know all about you?” He glanced out the window. “And how you made your way out.”

“Yeah, chico. And who doesn’t know the bad things I’ve done to do that?”

“You’re not in prison, are you?” He cocked a brow.

How fucking naïve could he be? I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at his cluelessness. “Oh, so that makes it all right, eh?” I nodded. “Just because I was able to continually keep a man out of prison, even though he *deserved* to be convicted, then I’m cool, am I?”

“Do you still hang with Teirso Flores?”

Teirso Flores. My former client. Since cutting myself loose from his organization, I’d never mentioned his name—out loud to anyone or even to myself. So much guilt walked

away with me when I left him. I somehow convinced myself that if I buried his name in my soul, my conscience couldn't haunt me for my years of keeping a monster such as Flores in business.

"No, Carlos. I do *not* hang with him."

The car burrowed deeper into the decaying wood-and-concrete jungle, and I tried to let the growing gloom distract me from the unwelcome memories of Flores. But the neighborhood only intensified the thoughts, because this was one of the most profitable areas of the community for the powerful dealer—a peddler on every corner, working out of every apartment complex, every park, every school.

"You got roommates, Carlos?" The thought of this beautiful kid living in such filth bothered me. Hell, the apartments had been trash even in the days I'd lived in the area, and I cringed to think how much they must have declined over time.

"No."

The Conquistador Apartments sagged in the darkness. They had deteriorated more than I'd imagined. Most windows were either covered with cardboard or shabby curtains, but the others poured pale light onto the grassless courtyard. Almost all the doors stood open, probably to let air into the dingy quarters which didn't have A/C units. Like scared roaches, tenants skittered from the yard into their apartments at my approach.

Carlos held the backpack close to his chest. "They're all running inside. They know your car."

“Hmm.” Even I was afraid to step out into the poorly lit parking lot. “Maybe I should take you home more often, chico. I don’t think I like you hanging here.”

He chuckled. “They won’t bother me if they see you with me. You’re Más Chingon. The baddest.”

“Well, what do you do when Más Chingon isn’t with you?” I unlocked the doors and opened mine. Stepping out onto the pavement, I checked the shitty surroundings and shuddered.

“I run.” Matter-of-fact.

Urgency grew in me to protect Carlos, and my heart beat fast. Although a tough street kid, he still seemed a delicate butterfly in this black, hopeless pile of rubble. I followed him down the walk, sidestepping beer cans, discarded diapers, and food containers. The stench of backed-up toilets met my nose, and the stagnant brown water from an abandoned swimming pool gave me shivers. We climbed a rickety, rusty set of stairs to the second story.

Something caught in my gut at the sight of Carlos—apparently ashamed, his shoulders hunched—in the doorway to his apartment. A huge need to hold him washed over me. *What the fuck has come over me?*

Apparently I was a curiosity to the tenants. Faces—men, women, children—with blank stares watched from open doors and through tattered curtains. I crossed the threshold of Carlos’s place. If I’d thought the inside of his dwelling couldn’t be worse than the outside, I was wrong.

I stayed near the door, scanning the depressing room. It was typical slum décor—a mattress on the floor so close to the midget stove that a person would have to cook while

standing in bed. No chairs, no couch. A grungy toilet, sink, and shower lurked behind a dirty sheer curtain. In the middle of the tiny living area crouched a dog-sized rat that didn't even scatter like any decent, self-respecting rodent, watching me with glittery black eyes.

"Wait just a minute." Carlos scurried to kneel beside the mattress and dug his hand into a hole in the side.

While he busied himself, I looked around and noticed some pencil sketches tacked to the peeling wallpaper above the mattress. I approached them, careful not to step on the brave rat that refused to move from its spot. The drawings were very good, very sensual. Some nudes, mostly Greek-type guys with muscular bodies and big dicks.

"Carlos, are these yours?"

"Yes." He pulled a folder from the mattress and opened it, sorted through some drawings and spread them out on the grimy tile floor. Rising, he held the sketches to me. "Do you really want to see this? The proof that I..." He lowered his gaze to the floor and blushed. "The proof that I told you about?"

"The proof that you... want me?" For some reason, the word *want* tried to stick in my throat. When the fuck did I become shy?

"Yes." His perfect face was so bright, hopeful.

"Show me."

The paper shook in his hands. "See?"

I took the sketches from him, gazing at the first one, and it took a second to recognize what I saw. It was a pencil drawing of me.

“Jesu Cristo.” I breathed the words, gazing at the image of myself. It was a bare-shouldered bust, and I had to admit—since it was a true likeness—I was quite a good-looking hombre. He’d captured my hair, combed back and tied in a queue at the back of my neck. I doubted if I really looked so dangerous with smoldering dark eyes, but Carlos seemed to think so.

“This is really good, muchacho.” I handed the picture to him and studied the second one.

I stared at the next sketch, and my pulse sped up, heat rushing to my face. In this drawing, I sat naked on the edge of a bed, the covers draping over the floor, and both hands cupped my crotch between wide-open legs. With my head thrown back, my hair fell free and wild onto my shoulders. The detail of the drawing amazed me—my nipples, swollen with arousal, and the hair between my thighs that my hands couldn’t cover. To see my likeness in such an erotic pose left me speechless, not to mention turned on.

“Are you mad?” Carlo’s quiet, nervous voice dragged me from my thoughts.

Shaking my head, I managed to say, “No, chico. How could I be mad at this?”

“Do you see what I meant?”

The numbing surprise started to wear off. “Carlos, why *me*? Why have you drawn *me*?” I held out the picture to him.

He took it, then set both drawings on the mattress. With a slight roll of his shoulders, he smiled and gazed full in my face. “Because you’re the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

The flame, the desire in his voice, the openness in his soft eyes shook me something fierce and sent warmth all through my body. Common sense broke in again, though. “But we’ve never.... I mean... all we’ve ever done is talk. You were thinking....” I pointed to the drawings. “*This?*” Did the excitement come through in my voice? The thrill of knowing just how attracted he’d been?

“When you talk to me at La Abuelita’s and at the carwash, I memorize you. All of you. I....” Pressing a hand to his mouth, he whispered, “I have a fucking crush on you.”

“Ah.” *And I want you.* I thought my heart would burst.

He ducked his head and swiped a hand through his hair, and the mussed blond strands sprang back into place. “I take every chance to get close to you when I wait tables. To talk to you.” Carlos grinned. “Well, that and you tip really good.”

That got a big laugh from me. “And no one at the car wash is allowed to work on my car except you. I know that you know that.” My smile faded, and I said, “Carlos, I’ve wanted you since I first saw you. I couldn’t stop myself from watching you. I wondered if you knew how I felt, but—”

“I knew you watched me. And I thought you might be attracted. But....” He rubbed his forehead. “You’re....” Stretching out his hands, he said, “You’re Más Chingon. A guy doesn’t just walk up to *you* and start making moves.”

I roared with another round of laughter. “I’m cursed. Apparently men are afraid to approach me.”

A wry smile stole to his lips. “Oh, I’d have gotten up the nerve.”

“I’d say you *did* get up the nerve, Carlos.”

“And?” He tucked his chin, his tongue snaking over the stud below his lip.

I murmured, “Well, let me put it this way. If I’d known you felt like this, I’d have tipped you much, *much* better.”

With my gaze I devoured him, his beauty, his spicy sensuality.

“Would you?” He inched nearer.

“Would I what?” Having lost my train of thought, derailed by his part-angel, part-whore smile, I swallowed hard.

“Tipped me. Much better.”

Carlos was suddenly no spunky kid but a fully fledged man whose sultry gaze fucked me right where I stood. He stood so close I felt his breath on my chest. His stiff cock rubbed against me, and my dick began to swell and ache again.

“*Much* better,” I whispered.

“With money... or....” His voice became husky.

I drew him closer and rammed my hands down the loose-fitting back of his shorts, along the satiny skin of his hips to cup his ass. What a perfect little butt he had. Need boiled inside me at the feel of the small, tight cheeks in my big hands, and I forced my finger into his crack, causing him to jerk and gasp.

“What sort of tip would you have wanted, chico?” I buried my face in the thick hair behind his ear.

He whispered, “For you to strip me....”

“Mmm?” My imagination ran wild with a vision of undressing him, kissing his dark body, his nipples, his belly, his ass, his cock. How I wanted him naked, to fuck him.

“And to touch every part of me....” He writhed slowly in my arms, his head tilted back.

“And?” I murmured against the smooth skin of his neck. Fuck, he smelled, tasted so good.

“And hold me.”

To be held. This surprised but pleased me. Was I right, then, that he wanted to be loved? “I’ll hold you, chiquito. I won’t fucking let you go.”

“I....” He moaned.

“Hmm, tesoro?”

“I want you inside me.” He wriggled, fumbling with the collar of my shirt, and cried, “Please fuck me, Más Chingon.”

“Not here, nene. Not here.”

Dios, this body, the very thing I fantasized about, pressing into me, begging to be taken. My decision was made. No force in Heaven or Hell could stop me now. The little devil made me crazy, and I had to take him home with me. I rested my hand over his chest, and his heart beat wild under my fingers. “You’re coming home with me.”

Chapter Three

RELUCTANTLY, I let go of Carlos's ass and nudged him away.

He stumbled back in a sort of daze, his eyes full of sex, and scrubbed his palms over his face. "What?"

"Nothing." *I'm going to cum in my fucking pants in this dump if I keep touching your ass.* "Get your stuff together. Let's go."

Kneeling beside two stacked fruit crates where some clothes were neatly folded, he grabbed a shirt and a pair of shorts and rushed to the bathroom to get a toothbrush from a cup on the sink.

"I'm hurrying," he called over his shoulder, so happy.

He rushed into the main room, the flimsy curtain billowing behind him. His smile turned the dimly lit room to blinding sun.

I leaned on the doorpost with my arms crossed, basking in his light. "Take your time."

He put the clothes in his backpack and met me at the door with a shrug. "That's about it."

"What about your rata grande? Shouldn't you invite him?" I glanced around for the big rat. It was nowhere to be seen.

"Nah." Carlos flashed another huge smile, then stopped, his brow wrinkled. "You got rats at your place?"

“Nah.”

He nodded and walked out the door.

Headed out of town, the Mercedes glided silently through the fog, and the soft bass throbbing from the radio was the only sound in the comfortable quiet. Carlos watched the night go by through the tinted glass.

So close to him in the cozy dark, I wanted Carlos more with each passing mile, crazy to get him home and relieve the sweet ache between my legs.

What he was thinking right now? Glancing at him, I broke the silence between us. “You’re quiet. Second thoughts?”

He laid a sleepy gaze on me. “No.” Turning to the window, he pressed his palm on the glass. “Is it true what they say? About your car?”

“What *about* my car?”

“It’s really bulletproof?”

The arousal in his tone bothered me. I weighed my words carefully. “You think that’s sexy, Carlos?”

He bit his lip. “I think it’s kind of exciting. Dangerous.”

“Exciting, eh?” I clenched my jaw. “It’s exciting that I can’t even drive my car without the chance of getting my goddamn head shot off?”

“I didn’t mean it like... well... I mean, I didn’t—”

“When I walked away from Teirso Flores, I condemned myself to a life of looking over my shoulder every second of every day. Any day could be my last. That’s my life, Carlos.” I held up my hand. “There is nothing exciting about that.”

“But—”

“Carlos, do you realize that even for one night with me, your life is in danger, too?”

Why was this just now occurring to me? I’d been so anxious to bed him that I’d never stopped to think about exposing him to the ever-present threat I faced.

“I’m okay with that. I’m not afraid.”

“I’m *not* okay with it. I *am* afraid.” I rubbed the prickling at the back of my neck. “It scares me bad, how much I want you, how my want is so big that I’m selfishly bringing you into my life, even for a night.”

“You take men to your home all the time. I know.”

“Yeah, I do. But they’re world-wise, chico, they move in my world....” I jerked my gaze from the road momentarily to shoot him a puzzled frown. “Wait a minute. I just now got what you said. What do you *mean*, you know I bring men to my house? What the fuck? Am I on *This is Your Life*, *Candelario Gonzalez* or something? How do you *know* that?”

“Hey.” A coy smile turned up one corner of his lips. “What kind of spy would I be if you *knew* how I found out shit?”

“I’m not so sure about you now, chico.” I circled my thumb over the sparkly stud below his mouth. “Kind of turns me on, though.”

“Maybe I’m not as nice as you think.” His tongue flicked over my thumb.

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Please.” He sighed. “I can *be* like those other men if you want me to.”

The gentle fuck-me-until-I-can't-see-straight heat in his eyes hardened my cock. "I don't want you to be like them, bebé. But, Carlos...."

"What?"

Just as I opened my mouth to answer, my cell rang. I grabbed it from the center console and answered. "Sí?"

"Jefe, where are you?" Jesse's voice boomed from the other end.

"I'm on my way home."

"Home? Why do you go home?" Exasperated.

"I'm...." I glanced at Carlos, who had turned his attention to the road. "I've got company."

"What about poker? Everybody's waiting, Jefe."

"I—"

"Don't tell me. It's that little waiter-carwash chavo, isn't it? I can tell."

Laughing, I shook my head. "You can *tell*? How can you tell, Jesse?"

"For anyone else, you would never have forgotten the game."

"I'm sorry, mi amigo."

"Yeah, yeah." He hung up.

I snapped the cell shut and tossed it back into the console.

Carlos glanced at the phone, its bright blue display still glowing. "Did you have a date that you forgot?"

"Nah. Just an appointment I forgot."

When we arrived at my home, I spoke into the monitor at the street entrance and the gate opened to the drive.

After parking, we crossed the cobblestone walk to the front door. Carlos's gaze wandered over the immaculately manicured grounds, and he started at the deep guttural barking of my guard dogs echoing all around the premises.

Peering into the shadows looming beyond the lighted circumference of the lawn, he shivered. "Are they chained?"

"How well can they guard me if they're chained?"

Carlos hunched his shoulders and edged closer to me. "They say you breed Presa Canario."

"Yes. My, you seem to know a lot about me." Mussing his hair, I chuckled. "They won't attack you unless you're an intruder." I raised a brow. "Or unless I command them to."

Carlos let out a wobbly laugh.

The expressions on the terrace guards' faces proved surprise at my change of pace in sex partners—a much younger man than my usual guests. Unlocking the door, I shot them a glare, warning them to mind their own business, and they turned their stares to the lawn.

"Fuck." Carlos stepped into the foyer and scanned the spacious, Spanish-style living room. "Your house is nice. And guards. I—"

"It's just a house." I tossed the keys onto a mosaic tile-topped table. "And if a man has to have guards, it means he's a stupid hombre who's made too many enemies."

How small he looked in the huge house. But he presented an exotic picture surrounded by giant potted plants, ivory-colored tile, and pale, whitewashed adobe walls—a beautiful cat out of place in a modern stone jungle.

Glancing around, noting the quiet, I chuckled. “Lucky for you, Aunt Dahlia is in Victoria, visiting family.”

“Who’s Aunt Dahlia?”

“My housekeeper, who practically raised me when my parents died.”

“Why am I lucky she’s not here?”

“You think the Presa Canario are protective? They’re nothing compared to Aunt Dahlia. You’ll escape her inspection. For now, anyway.”

Carlos sighed.

I folded my arms over my chest and eyed him up and down. “Okay, muchacho. I’m not going to beat around the bush. You’ve been sweating at the carwash all day, and I won’t come near your pretty ass until you’ve had a bath. Comprende?”

“Yes. Where do I go?”

“My bedroom is the first room on the right upstairs. Everything you’ll need is in the bathroom.” I waved my hand. “Now go. You fucking stink.”

I watched him climb the stairs—the young, slender back and tight ass, the blond hair, that little backpack—and all I could think about was lying naked with him in my bed.

Stirring around downstairs, I tried not to rush up after him. I poured a drink at the bar, flopped onto the couch, and took a sip. I drummed my fingers on my leg.

I imagined him upstairs, water running over his nude body, and I had to see him. My libido got the best of me, and I bounded up the stairs.

The moment I stepped into the bathroom, Carlos's face brightened.

Once I got my first eyeful of him in the suds—smooth brown shoulders and chest, silver rings piercing the dark nipples—desire shot warmth straight to my groin.

I put the drink on the counter, picked up a lighter, and strode to the tub, lighting candles flanking the wide edge. “Don’t mind me,” I said.

One by one, I lit each candle, and Carlos watched every move. My skin tingled. After setting the lighter down, I kicked off my shoes, enjoying the cool, plush rug under my bare feet. I began to unbutton my shirt, and Carlos shifted around in the massive granite bathtub, sloshing scented, bubbly water against the sides.

“You don’t mind?” I tossed the shirt to the floor, unbuckled the belt and pulled it off.

“No.” His answer was barely a whisper. He caressed his nipples seductively.

Damn. What waited for me beneath the thick bubbles? I’d undressed for so many men, but this was the first time I trembled under a man’s stare. The moment I tugged the pants past my hips, my cock sprang free, already erect.

I stepped out of the pants, and Carlos focused on my crotch, his gaze following me into the bathtub.

The moment I sank into the warm water, he rose to his knees and offered his glistening body to me, raising his arms above his head. He stretched like a sleepy cat—muscles with the same gentle sculpting of his Greek sketches, nipples puckered and begging to be sucked, a smooth, flat belly and not a speck of hair on him except for

the dark patch between his legs. From that thick hair jutted his cock—warm, stiff, and sudsy—pressing into my chest.

I wrapped my fingers around the hard, silky length, and the touch burned a blazing path to my dick. He gasped, arched his back, and grabbed my hair, and I slid my other hand, soapy and slick, past his balls toward his hole.

“Please.” Moaning, he threw back his head. “Más Chingon.”

“What, *mi lindo chico*?” Feeling his sleek body twisting in my hands made me so hard, so hot, it was mind over matter to keep from shooting my load in the water. “Tell me what you want.”

He writhed, his muscles contracting around my finger.

“I don’t know,” he cried, clenching his thighs together with my hand between them, slowly fucking my other hand, his beautiful cock sliding in and out of my curved fingers.

I bent and flicked my tongue over the tip of his dick as softly as I could, trying to memorize my first taste of Carlos. Could a man taste beautiful? He did. Soft, young—beneath the slight tang of soap—yet all man, potent sex. My tongue teased the smooth pink head, then traveled down the satiny length to nuzzle in the wiry hair at the base of his shaft.

With his fingers digging into my hair, he squirmed, moaned, and coaxed my lips apart with his dick. I took the long, thin cock into my mouth and swirled over the slit, sucking and swallowing the sweet salty precum.

“Not yet.” He pulled free, shivering, resting his hands on my shoulders. “I’m sorry.”

I wrapped an arm around his waist, looking up into his flushed face. “What is it, chico?” I murmured and lifted a hand to comb damp strands of hair from his forehead.

He fingered the gold crucifix around my neck. “Do I make you feel good?”

I swabbed a bar of soap over his taut flesh, and suds made a bubbly trail from his belly to his crotch. “You make me feel *very* good.”

He leaned against me, and the look of pleasure that flashed across his face sent hard spasms to my already aching groin.

Standing, I pulled Carlos with me. I turned on the faucet and, with the washcloth, rinsed the soap from our bodies, then took a towel from the bench beside the bathtub. With the soft terry draped around his shoulders, I drew him close and breathed in his clean scent.

“Kiss me,” he pleaded.

He strained to reach me, and I pulled him up to touch my mouth to his and finally knew the sweet taste of Carlos’s lips, so full, so ripe, so moist. His wild hunger matched my own.

His tongue tickled the seam of my closed lips. “I need you to....”

“*What* do you need me to do, cariño?” Trying to speak while his tongue slithered into my mouth and teased, I clutched him tight, pressing his dick between our naked bellies.

His slanted brown eyes, so drugged up with need, searched my face. “Tell me you want me.”

“I want you, chiquito.”

“How bad?”

“Me vuelves loco. You drive me crazy. I want you so bad I could die from it.” And it was true.

“Take me to your bed.” Melting into me, so trusting, he sighed. “Hold me. Make love to me.”

“I can do that.”

I kissed the velvety skin of his temple. We stepped out of the tub and crossed the carpet to the bed. Caressing the downy-soft terry over his wet skin, I gently dried his body, then toweled myself.

Carlos sank into the clouds of white covers and sent me a serene smile. He spread his legs, running his foot along the bed, displaying his hard, slim dick, which bounced against his stomach with his movements. “Candy.”

To hear my name slip so quiet from his lips gripped my gut and made my pulse race with the giddiness of a little chiquita. Right then and there, I knew Carlos Alvarez owned me.

“What, chico?”

I climbed onto the bed and crawled next to him. The glow of his dark golden skin, the smoldering flame in his brown eyes mesmerized me, flooded warmth through my body.

Turning on his side and scrunching against me, he pressed the length of his frame to mine, and his warm cock eased between my thighs. He thumbed my nipple.

“So you’ve watched me for a long time.”

“Sí.”

“Mmm.”

A shiver shot through me at the sensation of his fingers on my aching nipple. “Does that bother you? Does it scare you that I watched you and wanted to fuck you? That I get hard-ons for you?”

“No.” He squeezed closer, pumping his dick gently between my closed thighs.

To enjoy the silkiness of his stiff shaft, his warm precum on my skin, I clamped my legs tighter. I caressed the perfect slope of his hip with my palm and carefully grasped his leg, sliding it over my thigh. “Does it scare you that I have wet dreams about you?”

“No.” He let out a faint moan and arched his body. “Candy—”

“Does it scare you that I think about you sometimes and jack off?”

A weak smile turned up his lips. “No.” Squirming, he whispered, “Fuck me. Please fuck me. I want you inside me.”

“Not just yet.”

“Please.” His jaw clenched.

Releasing his leg, I sat up. “Come here.”

He lay there, dazed, disappointed.

I plumped the pillows onto the headboard and leaned back into them, then took his hand, pulling him up. Positioning him between my spread legs with his back resting on my chest, I wedged my dick against his ass. My lips cruised the sweet-smelling flesh at the side of his neck. “You like this, *mi bebé*?”

“Yes.” His hands reached up behind him to hold on to my neck, and his voice quivered. “What are you going to do?”

“I just want to... play with you.”

The back of his head dug into my shoulder. “A cat with a horny little mouse?”

“Ah. Sí.”

His smooth brown body writhed now. Oh, Jesu Cristo, the excitement of his exquisite form between my legs where he couldn’t do a damn thing but surrender to me hardened my cock even more. I wrapped my legs over his, holding his thighs wide apart with my feet. There was his pretty cock, bobbing on the sheets, ready for me.

Reaching around, I wrapped my big fingers around his shaft and began pumping it ever so lightly while rubbing my dick on his ass.

“Oh, God,” he whimpered, his fingers clawing into my neck. “Harder. Please.”

“Mmm?” I stopped my fisting just to torture him. “You in a hurry, bebé?” I tugged at one of the nipple rings. “You want to cum?”

“Yes. Yes.” His head fell back onto my shoulder, and his nails dug into my neck.

Precum dribbled from his slit, and I smeared it all over his cock, making the velvety skin slick. My own dick, with the friction from his ass, leaked as well and slithered like a well-greased piston rod on the tight cheeks. “Cum for me, mi tesoro.” Twisting the nipple ring, I bit lightly on his neck. My entire body tensed, my skin tingling with the nearness of a climax.

He turned his face to mine, crying but making no sound, and sought my lips with his. “Candy,” he managed to whisper.

“What, nene?” I ached for him, he was so beautiful.

“I want to cum while you’re inside me.” Those full lips, pouting. *“Please.”*

I jerked my head toward the bedside table. “Condoms and lube.”

Scrambling free of my legs, he slid off the big bed, opened the table drawer, and drew out a condom and the lube.

He climbed back on the mattress to lay them beside me, then reclined deep into the pillows and mumbled feverishly.

Kneeling between his parted legs, I opened the condom and rolled the latex sheath onto my cock.

His breath came in shallow pants.

I circled my fingers around his slender ankles, and lovely pain speared my groin with the sudden feeling of power over this pocket-sized chavo.

He closed his eyes and shivered.

I lifted his legs to rest them on my shoulders. Spread open, ready for me to take, was the beautiful ass I’d fantasized about so many times—smooth, dark, with the delicate pink hole that had brought me to orgasm in all my wet dreams. How I wanted to bury my face in the thick, dark hair that nested his pretty dick, to suck on him, to make him cum in my mouth.

Squeezing the cool lube into my palm, I rubbed my hands together to warm it, then massaged it onto my dick.

Carlos held his breath and trembled in anticipation.

I slathered the lube between his cheeks, rubbed it around and inside his small hole, then eased my fingers into the tight space.

He moaned and shoved into my finger, his body asking for more.

The moment I felt the fat head of my cock against his slick hole, my heart pounded. I inched into the opening of the hot, tight channel, and the ecstasy of finally being inside him almost sent me spiraling out of control.

Beneath me, he cried, “Please fuck me.”

I’d barely had time to pump before he came. Never had I seen a man reach orgasm so quietly. Letting out a tiny cry with his legs twined around my neck, he shot semen all over my belly and his.

His soft climax and the scent of his seed spewing between us wrapped me in a dark, warm, crimson glow. I pushed in a frenzy of need, rocking his small body with every violent thrust, hearing him but not hearing him crying out for me to cum.

I’d never been loud during orgasms, but from some fabulous abyss—emptying deep into him in a huge shudder of release—I heard myself shout, “Fuck, fuck, fuck. Goddamn!”

The beautiful, thick maroon cloud dragged me in. I fucked until nothing was left, then sank onto the bed beside him.

After a short rest, I went to the bathroom to grab a washcloth. I enjoyed the sated glow on Carlos’s face, the satisfied languidness in his eyes while I cleaned his belly. I

returned to the bathroom to rinse myself off, and by the time I stepped into the bedroom, he'd fallen asleep.

He slept in my arms all night, snoring lightly. Now and then he'd toss and murmur under his breath, and I'd hold him closer. A smile would touch his lips, and his body would go limp, nuzzling into mine.

By the time a pastel blue dawn seeped through the open window, I realized I hadn't slept at all. Something had changed my life that night, right there in my king-sized bed, and it rested like a kitten beside me. I'd lain down and let it take over, this huge change, and knew I'd never really had a choice.

Somehow this young man had slipped through my heart's door, a door I thought was closed tight. Ever since I'd met him, he'd steadily—without even trying—inched his way in and now stood right there in the big fat middle of me.

I sighed, watching him sleep, and I knew. Candelario Gonzalez—Más Chingon—was going to be a slave to the little artist with the silly backpack.

Chapter Four

IN JUST one night, Carlos swept me into an easy dark tide, and I was lost, drowning in the beauty of him.

Dawn sifted through the blinds, and I studied him in the muted light while he slept. He kicked around under the covers, and the sheet dislodged to reveal the beginning of a morning woody.

Turning onto his stomach, he hugged the pillow. Morning's blue-gray light played on his soft contours, making a seductive shadow between the mounds of his ass and accentuating the tattoo on his hip.

He squirmed, rubbing his erection into the mattress, and made tiny mewling sounds. I wanted to be in the dream that brought such a contented smile to his lips and made him clench the pillow as though it were a lover.

I rolled over to resist the temptation to wake him. I'd dozed for a while, but his stirring had woken me, and I shifted around, meeting his drowsy smile.

"I didn't dream it. I'm really here," he whispered. Digging deeper into the pillow, he brushed over my nude body with a warm, sleepy gaze. "I'm really with you."

"Good morning, chico." I reached to touch his tousled hair, the locks thick and silky between my fingers. "Did you sleep good?" I knew he had. I'd listened to his little snores all night.

“Yeah.” He sighed. “I slept like—” He jerked up onto his elbows and glanced at the clock on the bedside table. “Fuck! It’s already six and I—”

“Relax. You’re taking the day off.”

“But—”

“I’ll square it with Rogelio. He’s scared of me. He wouldn’t dare tell me no.”

Sinking back into the pillow, he bit his bottom lip. “But Rogelio—”

“What *about* him?” I tried to curb a laugh, imagining the hyper Rogelio fuming if Carlos didn’t show up for work.

“I’m sort of on his shit list.” Carlos’ brow wrinkled, then his face eased into a smile. “But you’re right. He *is* afraid of you.”

I traced my thumb over a tiny mole on his temple. “How do you think it feels to have people afraid of me? I mean, Rogelio’s not the only one.”

“Powerful.”

I winced and, sucking in a deep breath, pushed up to lean against the headboard. “Chico, is that why *you’re* here?”

He lifted his head, cocking it to one side, and searched my face. “What do you mean?”

“Are you here just to sleep with—what did you say they call me—Más Chingon? Eh?”

“Why do you say *that*?” Carlos wriggled into a sitting position, his teeth gritted, dark eyes flashing.

Crossing my legs at the ankles, I scrunched down into the pillows, clasping my hands behind my head. “Why?” A

chuckle rumbled through my chest. “Muchacho, most of the men who fuck me only do it because power turns them on. It even turns you on.”

He reclined, rubbing his belly. “I’m not gonna lie. It’s hard *not* to be turned on by that. But—”

“See? *That’s* why I say that.”

At my possibly having to concede that Carlos had only been lured by the thrill of power and money, disappointment slowly bled into me. He’d already shown the telltale signs—arousal about the bulletproof car, calling me Más Chingon at the height of sexual excitement.

“Candy.” Carlos scooted nearer and played with the chain of my crucifix. His butter-soft touch, fumbling on my chest, sent shivers through me.

“Yeah?”

“I’m not gonna lie about getting off to your power, but—” His lips grazed my earlobe, his tongue darting over it with the tiniest amount of pressure.

“You said that already.”

He brushed a finger around my nipple, and ripples of pleasure traveled from my belly to my swelling cock. A helpless groan slipped from my lips.

Gliding his smooth palm over the hair on my chest, he nuzzled his face into the hollow under my arm. “I thought my drawings explained it all to you.”

“Explained what?”

“That I’ve wanted you. For a long time.”

“And I’ve been a powerful man for a long time, chico. But the power seems a curse if no one can see past it.”

Propping himself on one elbow, Carlos leaned to rest a delicate kiss on my lips while his fingertips drew slow circles in the hair around my navel. My stomach muscles contracted under his touch.

“The man in my sketches *isn’t* a powerful man.” He rose to his knees. “He’s just a beautiful man. The most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.” His fingers weaved through my hair, loosening it around my shoulders. “He has the blackest hair that rides his strong shoulders like the mane of a beautiful beast.”

“A poet, you are.” I struggled to be nonchalant under his sensual handling, but the growing want in my body wasn’t casual—it was *muy grande* and beginning to consume me.

A faint smile touched his lips, and he studied my face, his stare seeming to penetrate right through me. He bent to take one of my nipples in his mouth, sucking and licking intermittently. Between short nips with his teeth, he murmured, “His *body* is powerful.” With unbearable featheriness, his moist lips skimmed to the other nipple, and his hand slipped between my legs. With his fingers twining through my pubic hair, so close to my dick, he cooed, sucking my nipple, “Light olive skin covers strong, lean muscle.”

“Fuck.” I moaned, arching to force my nipple harder against his teeth. Mi Dios, every nerve ending in my body sizzled, and I writhed with the sweet pain. “You sound like a fucking sissy.” Although I mocked his poetic talk, it pleased me to hear it and excited me to think I’d crossed paths with another soul as sappy and romantic as my own.

“I *am* a fucking sissy.” He chuckled into the hair on my chest and fondled my dick, his slender fingers teasing the shaft with little fluttery movements. “And you like it, don’t you?”

In silent reply, I bucked into the warm circle of his hand.

He resumed his chanting. “The man in my drawings is so tall, so handsome, with eyes like deepest midnight.” His tongue twirled around the stinging flesh of my nipple. “His lips....” With slow, cat-like grace, he moved to my mouth and covered it with his, sucking gently. “His lips are perfect, chiseled by the finest sculptor.”

I’d never been one to submit to another in sex. I was the fucker, not the fucked. Oddly, I had no trouble floating on a sensual tide with Carlos in complete control, babbling his lyrical talk.

I drifted into a delicious sexual coma, my veins filling with exquisite numbness as though he’d shot me up with some exotic narcotic.

He whispered, coaxing my cock until it leaked, “You told me yourself. You watch me. You want me. You fuck yourself while thinking about me.”

“Yes.” Tremors shook me. I wanted more.

“I *knew* you watched me. I *knew* you wanted me.”

My breathing was shallow, my pulse racing. Trying to focus on his face, which was so close, I only saw a gorgeous blur through the carnal fog in my head. Words wouldn’t form on my lips. I only wanted to cum in his hands.

Carlos sank into the covers beside me again, and I strained to reach his soft mouth, wanting to touch him, be

kissed by him, and lose myself deep in this bliss. I didn't feel so big, so powerful anymore, writhing fitfully, begging without words for him to bring me to orgasm. I wasn't Más Chingon, he was.

He kissed my eyelids, then rose a bit and asked, "Why are you crying?"

I didn't even know I *was* crying. Lifting my hands, I clutched his thick hair to pull him down, to kiss him. Words finally spilled from my lips. "I wanted you from the first time I saw you waiting tables, when you'd sneak looks at me while I ate."

He laughed. "I wanted you so bad. I would look at your big smooth hands and get hard, wanting them to touch me." His fingers tightened around my cock, and he stroked slowly, smearing the slick precum up and down my stiff length. "You would drink wine, and I wanted you to kiss me while your lips were moist with it."

A big laugh shook my body. "And I imagined pouring wine all over your dick and licking it off."

He rested his hand on my chest. "So we're together now in your bed. Why are you crying?"

Because I love you. Because I loved you the first time I saw you. I don't know why, but I did. My heart ached with his beauty. Tender pain filled me because he wasn't shocked or disgusted by my tears, only curious. I smiled. "I don't know."

His gaze explored my face, and he breathed the words, "You're so fucking gorgeous." Fingering my cock gingerly—God knew it needed very little stimulation—he watched my

tossing, listened to my groans of pleasure. He pressed his lips to mine and whispered, “I love you.”

While I moaned—hungry and needy—into his kiss, my seed spewed onto his hand, down my cock and all over my belly.

He melted into me with a satisfied sigh, and I wrapped my arms around him.

Oh, Dios, how right he felt in my arms, against my body. Only after he’d fallen asleep, his lips curved in a peaceful smile, did I remember he’d said *I love you*. I smiled, daring to dance in the light his words poured into my soul.

Easing out of the bed, careful not to wake him, I padded to the bathroom to shower. I studied my unshaven reflection in the mirror. Beautiful, eh? The man looking back at me—the man with the wild, long black hair and tired, sleepy, dark eyes—hardly looked beautiful. I stared at the image, wanting to see what Carlos saw, wondering if he really saw it or if he was simply infatuated with a persona. Either way, it was too late. I already loved him.

WE WALKED into La Abuelita’s, and Mama Sylvia, as always, pinched my cheeks, then reared back to examine Carlos with wide eyes. “Ay-ay!” She rested her hands on her hips. “Candelario, where did you find this little chungo?” Lunging with outstretched arms, she pulled Carlos close and smothered his face with kisses.

He blushed. “Hola, Mama Sylvia.”

She steered us to a table and chuckled, tugging Carlos's ear. "No waiting tables, eh, chiquito? Today you're the customer, I see."

"Sí, Mama Sylvia." He rubbed his reddened ear.

I pulled out the bright yellow and green wooden chair, and it screeched on the rough tile floor. "Carlos is my guest today," I said.

She didn't need to know that the entire morning of sex had worked up our appetites.

Mama Sylvia planted a kiss on my forehead and stood back, rubbing her wrinkled hands together. "We'll fix something special since the chungo is eating here today as well." Snapping her fingers, shouting commands in Spanish, she darted to the kitchen and pushed the door open. Steam rolled from the swinging door, and the aroma of grilled fajitas, peppers, onions, and homemade tortillas filled the small room.

A pretty waitress set bright red plastic tumblers of water on the table. Flashing a flirty glance at us, she leaned unnecessarily low and exposed her generous cleavage while placing silverware beside the water. "Hello, Mr. Gonzalez." Her black lashes fluttered, and nice white teeth sparkled through her full, red lips.

"Hello, Mary. Nice to see you. How are you today, señorita?"

"I'm good." She lowered her eyelids. Turning to Carlos, she chirped, "Carlos. You have the whole day off?"

Carlos shrugged. "Yes."

"No fair." With a wink, she turned on her heel and left.

She retreated to the service area, and her nicely shaped but ample hips swayed, and her ruffled skirt flounced with each step.

As soon as Mary was out of earshot, Carlos leaned forward, his slender fingers following the lines in the bright red-and-yellow tile tabletop. Speaking low, with the Tejano music from the jukebox almost drowning his words, he said, “Do you want to know, Candy, why I....” He stopped.

“Do I want to know what, bebé?”

“Why I love you.”

“Ah.” A wonderful rush shot through me. “And why *do* you love me?”

A fleeting frown knit his brow. He continued, “Because of all the things I’ve heard about you.”

“Things?”

A savvy smile lit his eyes. “Oh, trust me. I’ve heard a boatload of shit about you for a long time.” He took a chunk of ice from the water and popped it into his mouth, crunching it. “For instance, how you own some gambling rackets that are tied to your clubs.”

“Aren’t you the little warehouse of information?” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Like I told you last night, you sure seem to know a lot about me.” Lifting a brow, I added, “Or you seem to *think* you do.” I waved a hand. “Go on. So you’re saying you’re loco for me because I’m a crook?”

Undeterred, he locked gazes with me. “No. Because of the *good* things I’ve heard about you.”

“So in between my criminal activities, I’ve found time to do good things?”

"I know you paid for Mama Sylvia's husband to have open-heart surgery."

"Where the hell would you have heard something like that?" I looked around the room, making sure nobody heard us, then leaned back in the chair. "*If* I did such a thing, I wouldn't have wanted it repeated."

With another cagey grin, he shrugged. "Hard for shit like that not to get around." He swished his finger in the water, and ice clinked in the glass. "And a certain mysterious Santa Claus has paid for lots of neighborhood kids' school supplies. And the same Papa Noel has paid college tuition for some."

I eyed him, wary that he knew so much confidential information but amused at his smugness. "Damn, chico. What? You an investigative reporter or something?"

He took a sip, and his eyes sparkled over the rim of the red tumbler. Setting it down, he propped an elbow on the table and rested his chin on a fist. "And what about the two recreation centers you funded but named the buildings after two local Hispanic World War Two veterans?"

"Well, hell."

It was a good thing Mama Sylvia and Mary, bearing two trays of food, came through the kitchen door right then. I didn't have a response to Carlos's glowing exposé of my community activities.

Proudly, the weathered Mama Sylvia and Mary laid out the plates of steaming dishes.

The old lady waved a hand over the spread. "Didn't I tell you, bebé? Your favorites, right? Pork carnitas, tacos de carne guisada, and my tortillas!"

I took her hand and placed a kiss over her gold wedding band. Her skin, fragile as parchment, was dry and cool to my lips. “Gracias, mamacita. It looks wonderful. As usual.”

She touched the hand to my cheek. “Enjoy, bebé.” Turning to Carlos, she wagged a finger at him. “Candelario, make sure this skinny little chungo eats!”

“I’ll try, mamacita.” I winked at Carlos.

Mama Sylvia scurried back to the kitchen. I pointed to the food and ordered, “You heard the woman, chico. Eat!”

Poking a fork into the pork dish, Carlos gazed at me through the steam from the food. “Don’t try to change the subject.”

“Oh, the *subject*.” I lifted the lid of the warmer and pulled out a hot flour tortilla.

He waved the fork. “You own half the real estate in the area and—”

“Eat, chico.”

“But you’ve sold property for pennies for others to start businesses.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed. “What? You’re either some kind of reporter, or you’re doing a fucking book report on me.” Buttering the tortilla, I rolled it and took a bite.

Finally, he speared a piece of stewed pork but held it midair. “And the local cops worship you because of your contributions to the community. But....” He put the food in his mouth and chewed. “You still pay pretty good money to keep their eyes away from your gambling operations....” Taking another bite, he continued, “Which are pretty large, I hear.”

“Sure you’re not vice?” I narrowed my eyes.

Falling back into the chair, laughing, he tossed the fork onto the plate. “Do I *look* like vice?”

“Vice doesn’t *have* a look, muchacho.”

“Maybe not.” He threw back his head and smirked. “Would a cop have to *fuck* you to find out about you?”

Raising a brow, I returned his direct stare. “They never have before.”

He threw me a self-satisfied smile.

I took another bite of the tortilla, laid it on the plate, and clasped my hands together. “So, Carlos, according to you, I don’t seem like such the Más Chingon after all.”

Carlos picked up his fork, plucking the tines with his finger. “You don’t know why you’re called that?”

“I know if I *was* called that, it would have been because I was Flores’s attorney. Now, though? No. I don’t know.”

“You’re Más Chingon because you walked away from Teirso Flores. And you’re not afraid of him.”

“You’re wrong there. I’d be silly *not* to be afraid of him. He’s very powerful.” I stared at my plate. “It wasn’t *brave* to walk away. I was scared shitless, Carlos. But it was necessary for my conscience.”

“The community loves you because you refused to defend Flores in the murder trial.”

I picked up the tortilla but didn’t take a bite. “A small child was killed in Flores’s fucked-up drug deal. I couldn’t look the kid’s parents in the eyes and defend the man who killed their baby.”

“But Flores didn’t actually kill the kid. Couldn’t you have gotten him off?”

“Maybe his new attorney can clear him.” Finishing the tortilla, I touched the napkin to my lips. “He may not have pulled the trigger or put the kid in the line of fire, but he ordered the shooting. He’s guilty.”

“He’s *always* been guilty. You’ve defended him anyway.”

“And I’ll pay for that one day, Carlos. One day I’ll pay.”

When I left Flores’s services, he threatened to make me pay for abandoning him, promised I’d never be safe from him. I figured I’d pay one way or another—to him for leaving, or to God for the sin of having defended the criminal in the first place.

“To the people, Candy, you’re like some Mexican in fucking shining armor.”

“Didn’t John Wayne play me in a movie?”

“Go ahead. Laugh.”

“This sounds like urban legend, chico. Purely imagination.”

“Yeah? Then why the bulletproof car? The guards and attack dogs? You said that if a man had to protect himself like that, it meant he had too many enemies.”

“Because I *do* have enemies. And I *am* afraid of them.”

He sighed and forked another morsel, holding it near his lips. “All I know is the sight of you sends the lowlifes hiding.”

“Interesting.” I drew a line through the cold mist on the outside of my glass. “Speaking of lowlifes. Who were the cholos messing with you last night?”

Last night. That seemed like so long ago, but it surprised me to realize it had really only been less than twenty-four hours. I felt as though I'd known Carlos intimately forever.

Tilting his head, he lowered his eyelids. How long and dark his lashes were. "They're Flores's huelepedos in the Bluff Terrace area."

I clinched my fists. "What the fuck are his fart smellers doing bothering *you*, Carlos?"

Carlos straightened, his shoulders squared, and glanced around the restaurant. The jukebox had stopped, and the only sounds were the tinkling of silverware and the hissing of the grill in the kitchen. "They're just sniffing."

"Sniffing?"

"I don't know. Maybe they like me?" He shot me a cocky grin.

"Cut the shit." I picked up my water and took a sip.

"I don't know." He rolled his shoulders and twisted one of the rings on his fingers. "They just—"

"The fuck you *don't* know. You were really going at it with them. That was no sniffing match."

He threw up his hands. "They don't trust me, okay?"

"I don't get it. Don't trust you for what?"

Leaning forward, he whispered, "They think I'm dealing to their customers. Taking their business."

A quick surge of heat rushed through me. "Dealing?" I started to slam my fist on the table but stopped. "Do you fucking deal drugs, Carlos?"

"No!" He reared back in his chair. "Hell, no!"

I rested my palms on the table. “Don’t give me any goddamn crap. Are you dealing?”

Funny how I spent so many years of my life in the company of—and legally representing—the biggest drug dealer in the community but couldn’t stomach the thought of Carlos selling. The pedestal I’d perched my new lover on couldn’t withstand his being just like the past I’d tried to escape.

“I’m not dealing.” His unblinking gaze met mine. He seemed sincere.

“Have they tried to hurt you?”

“No.” He tightened his jaw, and after surely seeing the concern in my eyes, he held up his hand. “I know what you’re thinking. I can take care of myself.”

“Maybe you can, but...” The grim image of the Conquistador Apartments sprang to my mind once more, the vision of Carlos alone in the dark with the rats and roaches. “I can’t bear thinking of you staying in that neighborhood anymore. Carlos, I’d like for you to move in with me.”

Chapter Five

I THOUGHT my offer would put a smile on Carlos's face. Instead, he flattened his palms on the table, bit his lip, and squinted with one of those frowns people wear when they want to let you down easy.

He scooted forward in his chair. "I can't... move in with you."

"I can't let you go back to that apartment, Carlos. Not if Teirso's punks are messing with you."

He shoved the plate away and shook his head. "And I can't move in with you." After glancing around the restaurant, he returned his attention to me. "I lived in the apartments before you came along. I was okay."

"Very good point. So you were." I picked the lemon wedge from my iced tea and, forgetting how sour it would be, bit into it. Wincing, I tossed it on my plate.

Carlos slumped in the chair, laughing and clapping his hands. "Your face!"

"Yeah, yeah." I washed the tart taste away with a big gulp of tea, then set the glass on the table. "I'll just come out and say it, Carlos. I want to take care of you."

The moment the words left my lips, I realized how old-fashioned my proposal must have seemed, but I'd been raised in a very old-world atmosphere in which a man protected the one he loved. To me, it only seemed natural.

A bittersweet smile tugged his lips. "But I don't want to be taken care of. I can't let you do that."

"At least let me find you an apartment nearer to me. I'll pay for something nicer for you."

Gritting his teeth, he looked out the window. "No."

I was used to getting my way, and this conversation was *not* going my way. "I want to see you, *mi querido*, and you're so fucking far away in... in the... *barrio*."

"Are you ashamed that I live in the *barrio*?" Indignation blazed in his eyes. "The same *barrio* where *you* came from?"

"No. Not ashamed. But it's dangerous. I worry about you. And, like I said, it's just too far away, Carlos."

He scoped the room again, then leaned in, speaking low. "I don't have to *live* with you to see you."

"What, then? We're going to just date like the king and queen of the fucking prom?"

His brow furrowed, and he spread a green cloth napkin out, starting to roll the edges with his fingers. "It's pretty fucking funny, you know."

"What's funny?"

"Well, you were so afraid that I wanted you because I was turned on by your power."

"Carlos, I—"

"But now look at *you*." He seemed miles away, not hearing me. "You *say* you don't like it because you think men want you for your power, but that's all you're offering *me*. Your power. Your protection."

"That's not true."

"Oh, no?" His shoulders shook with a quiet laugh

“I’m asking you to let me take care of you, bebé. Because I....” I stopped just short of saying *I love you*. The words, as strong as I felt them, were rarely used in my spoken vocabulary.

Raising a brow in anticipation, he tipped his head to the side. “You what?”

“I care about you.”

Mouthing silent words, Carlos stared for a moment at pictures of Selena, Cantinflas, and the pope on the wall, then faced me. “Candy, I appreciate your offer. I really, really do.” His eyes twinkled again, and he touched my hand. “But I just can’t do it.”

I covered his hand with mine. “You told me you loved me.”

“I do.” His fingers twined with mine, and his eyes softened. “And I’d be a fucking idiot not to know what a big deal it is to be cared for by someone like you.”

“It’s... it doesn’t come easy for me, this caring shit.” I slid my hand from his. “In my last relationship, Carlos, the person took my soul but didn’t want my heart. Does that make sense?”

“Fuck him, whoever he was, Candy. Your heart, man, that’s the best part of you. Your heart is so goddamn huge. So beautiful.”

I sighed. “I’m finding out it’s scary, this wanting to give my heart away now, to care so much.”

“All the more reason for me to be proud that you care for *me*.” Drawing away, his finger circling the rim of the glass, he said, “I’ll still be the same Carlos, no matter where I live.”

“Do you know how hard it’ll be for me to let you go to your apartment?”

“I’ll be all right.”

“I can’t let you walk up and down Presidio Avenue to work anymore. Let me at least find a car for you.”

Gratitude filled his slanted brown eyes. “Walking up and down Presidio Avenue was another thing I did before you came along. I’m fine.” Probably seeing the letdown on my face, he smirked. “Word’ll more than likely hit the street that I sleep with you. If I drive around in a car all the sudden? I’ll look like a kept man.”

“What’s wrong with that?” I was only half joking.

“Hey, I have my pride.”

“I don’t.” That time I *wasn’t* joking. “Not where you’re concerned.”

“Really?” Tossing back his head, he shot me a playful sneer. “Then come to my apartment and fuck me *there*.”

“Not for all the damn tea in China.” I had to draw the line somewhere.

“I thought so.” He pursed his full lips and crossed his arms over his chest.

“It has nothing to do with pride, muchacho. I’m scared shitless of those fucking rats.” I pulled a packet of sugar from the little silver basket and kneaded it between my fingers. “Carlos, seriously, I don’t like you being there.”

He held up a finger to shush me.

Resigned, I dropped the sugar packet on the table and studied his face. The soft glow of candles in red and green glass holders illuminated his skin, and I ached,

remembering its silky touch beneath my fingers. Such beauty didn't belong in the Conquistador Apartments.

I pulled my cell phone from the clip on my belt, thinking of the only way to keep a connection to him outside of seeing him occasionally at the carwash or the restaurant. "Do you have a cell?"

"Yes." He stretched in the chair to dig in the deep pockets of his shorts.

"Give me your number." My fingers poised over the pad of my phone.

As he told me the number, I punched it into the memory and made him program mine into his cell. It wasn't much, but I had to be satisfied with this fragile link to him.

Sliding the cell back into his pocket, he sighed. "I guess I need to go home."

It frustrated me that he wanted to leave even though I wasn't ready to part company, but I took my wallet from my pocket and drew out a credit card. "Let's go, then."

He stood at the door and watched the parking lot while I paid the bill.

In the parking lot, he touched my hand to stop me from opening the car door. "Candy, I didn't mean to hurt you...." Digging the toe of his shoe into the gravel, he abstractedly swabbed his palm over his chest. "About not moving in with you. One day, maybe, I'll think about it. Just not yet."

"I understand, Carlos." My logic understood. My heart didn't.

I managed to smile while making small talk during the ride to his neighborhood, but my sadness grew heavier as we neared his apartment

Upon driving into the parking lot of the apartments, my apprehension reached its zenith. Even sunshine didn't improve the derelict Conquistador Apartments. Daylight only made it easier to step around the debris in the filthy courtyard, to actually *see* the shit in the discarded diapers instead of only smelling it.

We climbed the stairs to the second floor, and at his door, he reached to touch his lips to mine. He opened the door and stepped into the dismal apartment, his backpack sliding to the floor. Resting his cheek on the doorframe, Carlos teased with his sleepy smile. "Keep your fingers crossed that I'll still have my job tomorrow."

My gut shouted, *No, you're not going to work again! I'm taking care of you whether you like it or not*, but I nodded. "I don't think Rogelio will be a problem." I started toward the stairs but stopped on the cracked concrete landing. "You're sure about staying here?"

"Sí."

He kissed his palm and held it out to me, then slowly closed the door.

Once in the car, I glanced up to his apartment. I hated the heaviness in my gut, the weight of leaving him behind, knowing the squalid walls now surrounded him. Tears brewed in my eyes. Twice now the chico pequeno had made me cry. I didn't like this weakness, but at the same time I luxuriated in the sweet, intense pain that came from loving someone so strongly.

I started the car and, while the engine idled, flipped open my cell and typed *I already miss you*.

The shabby curtain parted in Carlos's window, and I saw his face. He placed a hand on the glass and said something that I couldn't make out from this distance, but I thought he said *me, too*. And he smiled.

Exhausted, I drove home. I'd hoped Carlos would be returning with me, so stepping into the big empty foyer without him disappointed me.

In my bedroom, Aunt Dahlia had made the bed, and the expensive white comforter was back in place as though Carlos had never been there. A quick survey of the bathroom showed no traces of him either. The huge bathtub where I'd first seen and touched his naked body was just a cold hard cavern in the middle of the room now.

What a pitiful lovesick fool I'd become.

I pulled off my boots, sank onto the bed, and sprawled across the soft cool covers. Resting my arms behind my head, I gazed at the glistening white blades of the ceiling fan, letting their soft noise and gentle breeze lull me to sleep.

Darkness settled in the room by the time I woke, and nightfall made me uneasy with the knowledge that Carlos's apartments would be shrouded in creeping shadows again. I resisted the desire to drive over to check on him, though.

Sliding out of bed, I stripped and dragged myself to the bathroom to shower. I stepped into the tile and glass stall and turned on the water, and soon steam enveloped me, a steady spray of hot water cascading over my body. I pressed

my palms against the damp wall, and my gaze followed the water spiraling around my feet into the drain.

As I watched the tiny whirlpool at my toes, I decided I'd go to a club, do something—anything—to get my mind off Carlos. I needed to get out of the house where everything reminded me of him and every thought turned into poetry in my mind.

MY CLUB, La Banda, was filled with beautiful bodies—male and female—undulating to the pulse of the Cuban techno club mix, the strobe lights dancing over their sweaty forms like licks of lightning. I couldn't help but move my shoulders to the sensual throb of the music.

Jesse had already popped the tab on my diet soda and started pouring the fizzing drink over ice. He stuck a wedge of lime on the rim, plopped a napkin on the bar, and set the drink on it.

"Gracias, Jesse." I picked up the glass, turned to the dance floor, and leaned back against the bar.

A soft, husky voice nudged my attention from the dancers. "Can I buy you something stronger than a soda?"

My gaze motored over the tall slender form of a young man standing beside me, his sleek black hair and gorgeous face. A gold chain around his neck glistened against burnished skin.

"I'm fine." I smiled. "Thank you, though." I returned to my study of the club.

"Aren't you Candy Gonzalez?" He persisted, inching closer. His cologne circled me, very warm, exotic.

I took a sip of my drink, the bubbles hissing under my nose. Judging by the young man's tone and body language—the seductive purr, the way his long frame draped over the bar—I knew it would take very little to encourage him. But I threw him a quick, indifferent smile. “Yes, I am.”

“I’m Jorge.” Apparently very determined. “So you’re not drinking the hard stuff, Candy Gonzalez. I bet I could interest you in something else that wouldn’t even involve alcohol.”

I cut him a stare that made him physically shrink—hoping to get rid of him—and murmured, “Like I said, Jorge. No thank you.”

Digging into his shirt pocket, he pulled out a business card and, with a twist of his lips, grabbed my hand and pressed it into my palm. He jerked away and slithered, a dark, sexy serpent, into the crowd.

My gaze followed his slinky movements, his tight leather-clad ass as he began to gyrate to the music. With one word, one look, I could have had Jorge writhing under me in my bed while I shoved into him and took what he offered. Instead, I’d snubbed a luscious offering of cock as though it were poison. Because my mind, my heart was with Carlos.

Carlos. My beautiful Carlos had condemned me to a miserable sexual purgatory—taking himself just out of reach, yet possessing me completely. I cursed him and yearned for him at the same time. Frustrated, I had half a mind to storm into his rundown apartment, strip him naked, and make love to him, even if the beady-eyed rats *did* watch.

Jorge's gaze locked with mine from the dance floor, and he moved his slim physique with liquid ease, grinding his groin into a stunning young woman's ass. His palms planted on her hips, a ring on his finger glittered as he moved with her shapely body.

"Oh, Jefe, no." Jesse leaned on the counter, propping his chin on his palm. "Not that little fucker."

"Jorge?" I smirked, then tossed Jesse a glance over my shoulder. "He's very hot."

Jesse stepped from behind the bar to stand beside me. "You fuck too much, Candelario."

"Excuse me?" Chuckling, I turned to face him.

The lights played off his short dark hair and danced in his eyes as he watched Jorge's exhibition. He held up his hands, waving them. "It's like you're trying to... what do you call it... cleanse yourself of... your last relationship."

"Maybe I am, Jesse."

"I'm not saying I like this Carlos hombre. I don't. Especially since he made you forget the poker game." He chuckled and cocked a brow. "But that's just it. I've never seen you take to a man so much that you *did* forget poker." With a shrug, he added, "That's a good thing, no? And tonight you seem like... Candelario again."

"Who the fuck *is* Candelario?" I shrugged. "It's been so long, Jesse. I'm glad *somebody* remembers how I used to be."

"I *do* remember, Jefe. As much as I'd like to knock Carlos off his cocky little horse, I'm happy that he makes you smile."

“Yeah, he’s cocky.” A grin touched my lips, my heart, by my thinking about Carlos and his spiky hair, his dazzling smile, his abundant confidence. “But that’s one of the things I like so much about him.” I took a sip of my drink. “He doesn’t suck ass.” Whirling to face Jesse, I added, “Do you know, he won’t move in with me? Or even let me get him an apartment? A car?”

“Good.”

“Good, how? I don’t like it.”

“You should appreciate that he doesn’t use you.”

My cell vibrated against my hip. I pulled it out, flipped it open, and read the text.

Please come get me.

Carlos. Oh, fuck. Like a hand in the dark, a soft voice that shouted even over the blaring music, Carlos reached me, made my heart pound. Should I be excited or afraid? Had he changed his mind, or was something wrong?

I clipped the cell back onto my belt and cast an apologetic smile to Jesse. “I have to go.”

“Let me guess.”

“You guessed it.” I touched his cheek.

Abstract faces flashed past me in my rush to get to the entrance. I couldn’t get to Carlos fast enough.

The Mercedes sliced through the dark, the streetlights flickering on the shiny black hood. I knew I passed the speed limit, but, counting on the fact that the local cops always looked the other way for me, I took my chances and gunned the accelerator even harder.

Once again I came face to face with the chillingly bleak Conquistador Apartments, but this time excitement turned

them into a big black blur. My pressing need blinded me to the trash in the courtyard and the featureless faces that seemed to be permanent fixtures in the darkened windows.

Carlos's cheap-ass door wasn't locked, didn't appear to have an intact latch or deadbolt. I flipped the light switch, but nothing happened. Peering into the shadows, I called, "Carlos?"

For a moment, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dark, all I heard were the tiny clicks of rats' feet scurrying across the floor. I shuddered.

Carlos wasn't there.

I glanced at my watch. After midnight. Where had he sent the message from?

Overcome with urgency, I flipped open the cell, speed-dialed his number, and listened to several rings. No answer. I redialed and immediately got an automated voicemail—so impersonal, so cold—and suddenly the lonely darkness in the shitty apartment closed in on me. But even my loathing of the rats couldn't make me leave until I knew if Carlos came home, until I knew he was safe.

I made a quick trip outside to the car, grabbed my Glock from the glove compartment, and closed myself up in the dark apartment. Scrunching against the wall on the cold mattress, I faced the door that wouldn't lock and laid the gun across my lap. The peeling wallpaper was rough and chilly through my shirt.

Sleep was out of the question with the constant skittering of roaches and the scratching of rats' claws. Carlos's sketches on the wall and his clothes neatly stacked in the fruit crates provided something to focus on—

something to remind me of him—to distract my mind from the crawling nightlife surrounding me.

Repeated calls to his cell phone rendered the same results. Just the voice mail. I texted several times with no response from him.

By the time dawn's purplish light oozed through the curtains, Carlos still hadn't returned. I tried to convince myself that he was just stranded somewhere, out of signal range, just didn't get my calls and messages. But a deep, hollow dread told me something was wrong.

No point hanging around this dump. I rose and stepped into the grungy bathroom to check my hair and clothes in the mirror, only there was no mirror. *Shit.* A scan of the rusty sink and toilet had me wondering how Carlos lived in this squalor. After a night huddled on the dilapidated mattress, a new sadness for him swallowed me, knowing that he *did* live in this nightmare. I had to get out—not so much from disgust at the filth, but because I felt him so strongly in the cramped apartment, and his invisible presence caused me to worry even more.

I planned to go to my house but, once in the car, turned and headed for the carwash instead.

My pulse jogged faster upon driving into the carwash parking lot, and I wondered if I'd see the lithe, pretty Mexican who'd wrapped my heart with unseen but powerful chains. He wasn't among the attendants in his usual area near the curb.

Workers watched me with sideways glances, keeping their heads bent to their business, as I strolled among them. As I'd expected, Rogelio darted outside with his customary obsequious smile and carriage.

“Mr. Gonzalez!” He dug his hands into his pockets and swayed to and fro on his heels. “Good morning!” Eying my car across the parking lot, he squinted. “Surely you’re not ready for another wash?”

“Good morning, Rogelio.” I forced a genial smile, my gaze scouring the attendants. Still no Carlos. “No. No car wash. Just came by to see....” Damn. I knew it would pique Rogelio’s curiosity to ask, but I had to know. “Is Carlos Alvarez here today?”

At first, Rogelio seemed puzzled, then his eyes narrowed, and a feline smile crept to his lips. With a triumphant swelling of the chest, he said, “Carlos Alvarez didn’t show up today, Mr. Gonzalez. But he *did* call in.”

In spite of the inexplicable anxiety that gripped every nerve in my body, I dredged up a casual tone. “He did?”

“Yes, sir. He said he wouldn’t be back. He quit.”

Chapter Six

I NODDED slowly, trying to keep the devastation that welled inside me from coming to the surface. I wrestled to produce a casual smile and shrugged. “Ah. Thanks, Rogelio.”

“You’re welcome.” Rogelio flashed a smile of victory and turned on his heel, heading toward the building. Swinging around once more, he squinted. “Are you sure you don’t want us to wash your car?”

“No. Thank you.”

He strode away, a spring in his gait.

Carlos was gone. I stood dazed in the center of the lot, and the world spun around me, a mad dizzy carousel of shiny cars and sweaty attendants.

So Carlos wasn’t in trouble. He’d simply left. Had I run him off with my pushiness, with my insistence that he move in with me?

With tears stinging my eyes, I sucked in a deep breath, put on my sunglasses, and strode to the car.

Shards of red-hot resentment shot through me, replacing the self-pity, and I almost hated Carlos for the power he had over me. But those sharp pricks were washed over with the heaviest, sweetest, most agonizing tenderness I’d ever felt. As much as I wanted to despise him, I couldn’t.

I slid into the front seat and leaned back on the headrest, my gaze roaming the empty grass lot next door.

Something about the tall green blades rippling in the breeze seemed so lonely, and I wondered where the hell Carlos had gone. Where was there for him to go? Another man? But he'd just texted me last night, asked me to come get him. Had he changed his mind, panicked at the last minute? Was he that wishy-washy? So many questions. No answers.

The vision of his brown eyes when he showed me the sketches—to prove he'd wanted me—flooded my mind. His face shown with genuine affection. Everything he did and said appeared to have been sincere. How could I have read him so poorly?

The sketches. A sudden urge gripped me to drive back to Carlos's apartment and steal those drawings. Even if he came back and found them missing, I didn't care. As stupid as it seemed, I needed a piece of him.

After a dazed trip into the barrio, I found myself once again at the Conquistador Apartments. I slipped into Carlos's unit and headed for the drawings on the wall. I fought a pang of sadness at the sight of the beautiful artwork and carefully removed them from the dirty wallpaper. Bending, I forced my hand into the hole in the mattress, hoping the sketches he'd done of me were still there. They weren't.

I sank onto the battered mattress and stared at the pictures. So sensual, so sensitive. Goddamn, I loved the man who drew these. A panicky sense of the loss of him seized me. Pulling my cell from the clip, I flipped it open. My heart thudded hard, and my fingers trembled over the keypad. I knew it would be useless, that he might never see the message—or worse yet, ignore it—but with a shaky

hand I typed in *I love you* then pushed the send button before I could change my mind.

I flopped onto my back and, out of the corner of my eye, spied one of the oversized rats peering at me from under the tiny stove. Today I didn't fear the fat rodent or his gang. If they hadn't chewed me to death last night, I supposed they wouldn't bother me now.

Tired, I smiled at him, meeting his glittering black eyes. "Hey, muchacho, where is Carlos?"

He met my question with an unblinking stare and a twitch of whiskers.

A MONTH passed with no word from Carlos. No answer to my *I love you* text. Nothing.

In response to his silence, I decided to launch a crusade to screw every tight ass I could get my hands on. Mindless copulating might not erase the feel of Carlos's soft skin under my exploring hands or the ecstasy on his face when he climaxed, but it would satisfy my insulted libido.

Jorge became the first objective on my quest to fill the emptiness, and to wine and dine him, I took him to a restaurant on the San Antonio riverwalk. Strings of bright white lights danced with the breeze in the trees, and mariachi music filled the balmy night air. Decorated dinner boats, decked with smiling faces, cruised quietly past on the river.

Jorge squirmed in his chair. He'd teased me in a month-long campaign to fuck him, but I'd made him wait.

“So.” Leaning back in the chair, I took a sip of beer. “We’re finally together.”

Jorge rested his elbows on the glass tabletop, pressing clasped hands to his chin. “I’d begun to think you weren’t interested.” Winking, he added, “And I tried every trick in the book.”

I set the bottle down. “Things just got in the way.” Holding up my hands, I raked him with an appreciative stare. “But we’re here now.”

“We are.” A nice blush colored his cheeks.

After a titillating meal, watching Jorge fondle every bite as though it were my dick, the time had finally come to go home—to fuck. By this time I was more than ready, especially with his roving hand caressing my crotch in the car.

My cell rang, and I nudged Jorge’s hand away to answer the call. He sighed, rolled his eyes, and threw an irritated stare to the windshield.

In a million years, I’d never expected to hear the husky voice that came to me in the dark on the other end. I’d dreamed of it, hoped for it, but never expected it.

“Candy?” Carlos whispered.

A bolt of shock struck me, so hot and bright it almost made me swerve into oncoming traffic. My mind raced frantically in an effort to assimilate it all and maintain composure under Jorge’s inquisitive stare. I croaked, “Sí?”

“Candy.” Urgency weighted the familiar voice. “I need you.”

My pulse thundered in my ears and my belly clenched.

“You need....” Nearly running a red light in my distraction, I slammed on the brakes. “What’s the matter? Where are you?”

“I’m in the dugout at San Jacinto Ball Park.”

“What the fuck? What are you doing there? Is this a joke?” The idea of Carlos in an abandoned ball park dugout so late at night was too surreal. This had to be a dream.

“No. Please, Candy.” Desperation replaced Carlos’s usually cocky tone.

A panhandler, grinning at me through a parted curtain of ratty hair, hunched on a beat-up plastic chair on the street corner. He fixed a burned-out stare on me, even through the tinted windows, and held up one of those signs that boasted he didn’t really need food, only booze.

I didn’t notice the light had turned green, and impatient drivers honked their horns behind me when I didn’t proceed.

“Okay. Calm down,” I tried to assure Carlos as I glanced at Jorge, who crossed his arms over his chest, a snarl on his pretty face. “I’m busy right now, but I’ll—”

“Please.” Carlos’s teeth chattered, and I knew he must be scared, shaking.

I lowered my voice. “I have someone with me. I’ll....” A sideways look at Jorge revealed daggers in his stare. “I’ll drop them off and come get you. Okay? Can you hang tight until I get there?”

“Sí.”

“I’m on my way, chico. I’m hanging up now, but I’m on my way.”

“Okay.” Carlos sighed and disconnected the call.

Jorge shifted in the seat to face me. “I can go with you.”

“It’s my cousin, Jorge. He’s strung out, I think. I’ll probably end up having to stay with him.”

For all I knew, Carlos *was* high, but nothing could keep me from going to him.

A disappointed frown settled on Jorge’s lips, and he draped over the console, reaching a hand to stroke my crotch again. “I don’t think you want me.”

“Nah, don’t say that.” I tried to sound assuring. “I really wanted to be with you. I can’t help this, baby.”

Poor Jorge. I felt bad for him, but Carlos’s hold on me was still too powerful to ignore.

I followed Jorge to his front door.

He pulled his keys from the snug pocket of his jeans and lent me a wistful smile. “A kiss goodnight at least?”

Jorge eased into my arms and tilted his head back, eyes half closed, his lips parted for a kiss.

I broke the embrace and pulled away from him. “I have to go, Jorge.”

His arms slowly untwined from my neck. “Another time?”

“Another time.”

Before Jorge even closed the door, I’d headed down the sidewalk toward my car.

I started the engine and drove toward the ball park, filled with a tumble of trepidation and giddy pleasure at seeing Carlos again.

Beneath the moon's silver cloak, San Jacinto Ball Park was a barren, sinister canvas like everything else in the neighborhood. I spotted the dark dugout, and a shiver went through me. Carlos was in *there*? I opened the glove compartment and took the Glock from its snug spot next to my teddy bear.

My boots made a trail through the dewy turf of the baseball diamond, and I glanced around, approaching the dugout. At the entrance, I stopped and, when my vision adjusted to the dark, made out a form huddled at the end of the bench. Even in the limited light, I saw the platinum hair, and my heart skipped a beat.

Carlos's voice, almost inaudible, came from the shadows. "Candy."

I rushed across the sod to where he scrunched against the wall and sank to my knees.

With a huge half-groan, half-sigh, Carlos threw himself into my arms and burrowed against me, shivering. I'd never seen him afraid, vulnerable.

No matter how frustrated I'd been—how angry he'd made me—he felt so damn good in my arms I could hardly stand it. My heart, for the moment, blotted out the pain of his disappearance.

Still grasping the pistol, I clutched the coarse hair at the back of his head, pressing his face into my shoulder. "Bebé. What's the matter? Are you all right?"

"I need you." He nuzzled into my embrace.

"I'm here." I kissed his temple, the light sweat salty on my lips.

In the distance, the low rumble of a very slow-moving muscle machine—vibrating with the thrum of rap music from its stereo—echoed in the night, permeating the quiet. Whoever was driving the vehicle cruised the way the cholos do when scouting for trouble.

I tightened my arms around Carlos as if to stave off the heavy dark around us, to shield him from the hostile gloom that seemed chilly even on a hot summer evening. “Chico.” I cupped his cheek, coaxing him to look in my eyes. “Are they looking for you?”

He nodded.

“Shit,” I muttered. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

We stood, and he grabbed his backpack from the bench. Holding Carlos against me, I scanned the area. No sign of the trolling hot rod yet, but I cocked the hammer on my pistol just in case.

We made it safely to the Mercedes, and I locked the doors, allowing myself a relaxed sigh. I returned the pistol to the glove compartment.

“Carlos, what’s happened?” I reached a hand to dab my fingers over his cheek. *Where have you been? Why did you quit your job so suddenly?* A million questions sped through my mind.

“Those dudes started following me. I didn’t know anybody else to call.”

“You could have called the police.”

“I panicked, Candy.” Turning his gaze to the window, he murmured, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have called you.”

“It’s all right.”

“You can let me out if—”

“I said it was all right.” I held up my hand. “The hoods. Who are they?”

“Just local cholos.” His head rested on the window, and he wrapped himself into a tight cocoon around the backpack.

“Well, what were you doing way over here on their turf?”

“I just.... I don’t know... I....” Carlos melted into the seat and faced me, his brow wrinkled. “Please. Just take me home with you. Just for the night, until I figure out where to go.”

I turned the key, and the car purred to life. Doubt crossed my mind as to Carlos’s truthfulness. He seemed too damn sketchy.

“You’re sure you don’t know who the vatos were?”

Closing his eyes, he ran his palms up and down his arms. “No.”

In the dark, my mind running in a million directions, I just shook my head and fixed my gaze on the road. How funny that a month ago I’d felt as though I’d known this man all my life, and now a murky curtain had fallen between us, making him unrecognizable. It seemed a stranger sat beside me in the dark, and the remainder of the trip passed in uncomfortable silence.

Once we reached the house and stood on the porch, Carlos glanced around the property and huddled near the door. So uneasy. I unlocked the door, and he stepped into the foyer ahead of me, clutching the backpack to his chest.

“Do you mind if I get cleaned up?” He met my eyes in the entryway mirror.

“Go ahead.” I jerked my head toward the stairs. “You know where everything is.”

My gaze followed him as he climbed the stairs. The relief to have him back was diluted by disappointment in his odd new edginess. Though he was a ghost of the arrogant, sultry man I’d left behind at the Conquistador Apartments, I still wanted him desperately.

I headed for the kitchen to make coffee. Filling the carafe with water, I stared out the window at an owl perched on the patio railing. What had I heard about owls? Something about their mystical powers? Something about bringing bad things to a household? How could such an exquisite creature be a somber omen?

I turned off the faucet and filled the coffeemaker, and the machine began to gurgle, the potent smell of coffee filling the room. Picking up a magazine from the breakfast bar, I idly scanned the pages and glanced periodically through the window to the owl, which still eyed me from the patio.

A little later, I looked up to see Carlos, fresh from the shower, standing in the doorway, dressed in my white terry robe. It swallowed him, draping around his feet, his toes peeking from the hem.

His wet blond hair bristled in disarray, making his face look even younger than usual. He padded barefoot to my side, and his scent was pleasing—soap, shampoo, citrusy clean, touchable. The robe, open at the neck, exposed his smooth, damp chest. Nodding to a pair of earthenware mugs, he said, “That smells good. Can I have a cup?”

I didn’t answer, just poured hot brew into the mugs.

He picked up his coffee and blew into the steam. Leaning on the counter, he wrapped his fingers around the black mug and took a sip. "Drinking coffee at this hour. You planning on staying up late?"

My irritation grew with his nonchalance, at his walking about as though nothing was wrong.

"I'm not sleepy." I shrugged. *And you standing here so close to me, naked under that robe, isn't helping.*

"You were out with a man tonight, weren't you?" He tried to latch a gaze on me but glanced away when my eyes met his.

My pulse quickened. I was nervous, deciding whether or not to lie, yet aroused at the hint of jealousy in his question. Ripping open a packet of sweetener, I sprinkled the white powder into my coffee. "That's none of your business."

He lifted a brow but still didn't look directly at me. "No. I guess it's not." A hint of the familiar jaunty Carlos flashed in his brown eyes, and he edged closer. "But *were* you?"

I sighed. Dipping a spoon into my coffee, I stirred slowly and locked gazes with him. "Yes. I was."

Carlos clenched his jaw. The sudden sadness in his eyes didn't match his cool smile. "Well, good for you."

"Yeah. Good for me." Everything I said seemed stilted, unnatural. Too much passion and bitterness boiled in me, and my attempt at indifference was pathetic. Turning off the coffeemaker, I picked up my cup and started for the hallway. "I'll take the guest room. You can have my—"

"Candy. Please." As I brushed past him, Carlos touched my arm. "Can't we at least—"

My muscles tensed. “Can’t we at least *what*, Carlos?” I refused to look at him. By the pleading in his voice, I knew I’d see the same desire in his eyes that burned inside me. If I *did* see that need, I’d crumble, and—without my even knowing why he’d left me—he’d own me again.

“Candy, please talk to me.” He wrapped his fingers around my wrist.

I yanked free of his grasp, sloshing coffee onto the floor, and headed for the door. The question *where have you been for a month?* tried to roll off my tongue, but I refused to let him see I cared. “Like I said, you can have my room.”

He began to follow me but halted. “Candy. Look at me. *Please* look at me.”

My name on his lips, so urgent, stirred my belly. “There’s nothing to talk about, Carlos.” I stared down into my coffee, anywhere to keep from looking at him.

In a tone heavy with pitiful defiance, so unlike him, he cried to my back, “I thought you wanted me! I thought you *loved* me, Candy!”

The excruciating heat of longing and anger in me needed very little prompting to combust, and the fact he’d tried to make me feel guilty ignited an explosion in me.

Jerking around to face him, I flung my cup into the sink. It hit the stainless basin with a ringing clatter and shattered into chunky pieces. Coffee rained into the air. I clamped a hand on his arm and dragged him to me, and I saw shock in his brown eyes through the fog of my fury.

His mug fell and broke on the tile, and hot java splashed onto our legs.

“You goddamn fucking little bastard!” I growled, inches from Carlos’s face, eye to eye with his fear. The words of rage felt good coming from my lips, raising the latch on a cage to release an angry, hurting beast. “How *dare* you!”

“Candy, what am I—”

“A month, Carlos! You took off, quit your job with no word!”

Beautiful, hazy defiance simmered in his slanted eyes, and the familiar raw spirit of him threatened to weaken me. His body—pressed to mine—aroused me and sent my wrath plummeting into overwhelming desire. The robe slipped open, draping over his naked shoulder. Warm brown skin, so silky, drove me crazy, and I wanted him so bad I thought the need would kill me.

I yanked the robe apart, baring his body—the pierced nipples, long smooth torso, and the taut belly that curved to a very stiff cock. So the little *chilpayate* was turned on.

True to his feistiness, he threw back his head and lanced me through half-closed lids, grinding his dick against my erection, silently daring me not to take him.

His smug taunt was all I needed. Now I wanted to impale him, fuck him until I couldn’t fuck anymore, until all my confusion and pain was poured deep into him.

Surprise flickered across his pretty face when I twisted his body around and forced him against the counter. He squirmed between me and the sink, titillating me more. I rubbed my cock against his butt and groped in my pocket for one of the condoms I’d planned to use with Jorge.

I jerked the robe down his hips. It fluffed to the floor, and I kicked it aside and tore the foil condom package with

my teeth. With his ass wriggling against my crotch, I couldn't go much longer.

No nice-nice this time. With the ease of a seasoned fucker, I had my pants around my ankles and the condom on my hard dick in record-breaking speed. In a frantic hurry, I tipped over a dispenser on the cabinet, trying to squeeze hand lotion into my palm.

I cupped his ass cheeks, stretching them apart, and Carlos gasped.

"Candy." He made a woozy plea, straining into my touch as my fingers rubbed lotion along the length of his crack and slathered it in and around his hole.

The cool, satiny cheeks closing around my hot dick shoved me so close to orgasm I could think of nothing but plunging deep into his body. With no tender overture, I pushed the fat head of my cock past the resistant flesh and pumped until I was deep into him, my pubic hair nestled against his crack.

In the reflection in the window, ecstasy washed over his face. The sight of his pleasure, the trembling in his voice when he cried my name, the warmth from deep in his body, took me helplessly to the edge. He seemed to crave my violent pummeling, egged it on, groaning as his body rocked with each thrust. I was only vaguely aware as I drove brutally into him—through a swirling mist of my approaching climax—of my anger at his enjoyment.

Interposed with Carlos's image in the glass, I caught the severe gaze of the owl on the patio. It watched, composed, unmoving, its huge yellow eyes never leaving my face. The cold stare frightened me but—unlike the night

when the bird watched through the window of the Mercedes while Carlos fondled my dick—I'd gone too far to stop.

Under the chilly scrutiny of the feathered voyeur, I crashed into my orgasm, crying, "Goddamn you!"

Hard paroxysms of pleasure gripped my groin and washed over my entire body. Spent and breathing hard, I slid out of him.

He fell back against my chest, arching his body, moaning, "Candy, please."

My passion was stronger than the deep bitterness I harbored for him, and I wanted to see him cum, wanted to satisfy him.

Wrapping one arm around his chest to draw him closer, I ran my palm down the elegant slope of his belly and took his erection in my hand. I cooed, "Cum for me, bebé." My fingers enveloped his cock, easing up and down the silky length.

The owl's grave study, still fixed relentlessly on us, observed Carlos—my achingly beautiful Carlos—fall into an orgasm, shuddering in my arms and whispering, "Candy. I love you."

Chapter Seven

AS THOUGH it had been there only to see the release of my fury and passion, the owl broke its gaze with a blink, spread its wide wings, and glided slowly into the dark.

I moved away from Carlos, pulled off the condom, and tossed it into the wastebasket. My libido was temporarily satisfied, but the vengeful fucking hadn't relieved my pain and confusion.

Carlos turned to face me and leaned against the counter, a smile settling on his flushed face. He clearly enjoyed the rough sex, but a pleased glint in his eyes bragged of much more than pleasure. It told me he thought a quick humping over the kitchen counter had been enough to wipe out a month of hurt and bewilderment. I needed to knock his arrogance down a couple of hundred notches.

Zippering my pants, I connected with the expectancy in his eyes for a second, then glanced to the mug and the spilled coffee on the floor. "You need to clean up your mess here, muchacho." I headed for the hallway, unbuttoning my shirt, and added over my shoulder, "See you in the morning."

I didn't see his reaction but heard the clink of broken earthenware as he gathered up the pieces from the floor.

Crushing Carlos, embarrassing him, seemed necessary at the time. He'd toyed with my feelings and deserved to be

cut down, so why did I feel two inches tall for trying to make *him* feel small?

After closing myself in the guest bedroom, I listened to his footsteps padding from the kitchen to the stairs.

What if I'd run him off? Was that really what I wanted? Pain—much darker than the hurt he'd caused me by disappearing—swirled in my stomach at the possibility that he'd leave during the night and I'd never see him again. Goddamn him, he *did* own me, every inch of me. My cock might learn to live without him, but my heart couldn't let him go.

Trying to compose the perfect words in my head, I left the guest room and climbed the stairs but spotted movement in my bedroom.

From the threshold, I watched Carlos. He bent over the bed, pulled a piece of paper from his backpack, and laid it on the comforter. His palms panned over the paper as though it were a priceless document, and I inched closer to see what he handled so lovingly. *Dios*. The nude sketch of me.

I watched his fingers, the silver rings catching the warm light, trace lightly over my likeness.

Sweet, heavy-as-lead tenderness plunked in my chest. The question that had plagued me for a month, even more than where he'd been or what he'd been doing, tumbled from my lips. "Did you get my text?"

Carlos swung around, almost falling back onto the bed. He threw a wide-eyed glance from me to the drawing and cinched the robe tight. As though he hadn't heard my question, he blurted, "I'm getting my shit together. I'll leave tonight. It's not—"

“Carlos.” I took a couple of steps toward him. “Did you get my text?”

He fumbled with the lapel of the robe and squinted, shaking his head. “What text?”

Relief, childish happiness, wanted to wash over me to think he hadn’t ignored my message, that he’d simply never gotten it. But I tiptoed with caution. “I sent you a text when you left.”

“Yes, I got that.” He lowered his gaze to the carpet, a fragile smile struggling to form—or trying *not* to form—on his lips. “You told me you missed me.”

The man had ditched his job, left me without a word, broken my heart, yet the gentle fondness in his voice obliterated all of that from my mind.

Standing before me with the lamp casting a pale wreath of light about his platinum hair, Carlos was so breathtaking that the thoughts rushed from my mouth like a jar of spilled marbles. “No. I.... Well, yes... I *did* say that, but... I....”

“You what?” Tilting his head to the side and wrapping his arms around himself, he scrutinized me through narrowed eyes.

Once more I was forced to weigh my options—tell him I loved him or lose him. No matter what had passed before, the answer was easy to admit but hard to say.

“I texted you the day you quit the carwash.” *There.* Couldn’t he guess the rest to keep me from saying the words that jammed in my throat? The little sentence I’d never said to a lover?

“And?” Tucking his chin, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The tentative smile in his eyes proved he knew exactly what I wanted to say.

Say it. There was no holding back. From deep inside, the geyser of pent-up emotion finally found release. “I love you. I texted you to tell you I loved you.”

“Candy,” he whispered. Tears glimmered in his eyes, and his bottom lip trembled.

Maybe I fooled myself, but I thought I heard genuine relief in his tone, telling me he might have suffered this long month just like I had.

Tenderness—whisper-soft but gigantic enough to knock me to my knees—quickenened in my stomach.

I fought my own tears. “I pushed too hard for you to move in. Maybe you wouldn’t have left if—”

“Candy, no.” Some sort of pain—whether it was for himself or for me, I couldn’t tell—swept over his face, and he crossed the carpet, attempting to hold the robe closed. Stroking my cheek with cool fingers, he babbled, shaking his head vigorously, “It wasn’t you, Candy. It wasn’t. But if I *did* tell you where I was, you’d—”

“Don’t.” I needed for it not to matter right now. My hands rested on his waist, and I drew him a little closer, causing the robe to open. I slipped my hands under it to feel the velvety skin of his hips; then my fingers snaked over the smooth curves to the muscular contours of his ass.

“Candy, listen to me.” Carlos made a feeble protest but allowed me to press our cocks together. He mumbled, “You’d hate me if I—”

“I don’t care,” I lied.

A whisper of fear teased me. *What if he's trying to tell me he's been with another man?* I ignored it. To have him in my arms again was all I wanted to know. To look down into his face, his somnolent eyes, was my world right now, and I didn't want anything to be the pinprick to burst this ethereal bubble.

"But—" He clutched my arm, shaking it.

"Shhh, chico." I bent to suck on his bottom lip, enjoying its familiar fullness, the feel of the diamond stud on my tongue. I straightened, and my fingers made a trail from his chin to the strong pulse at his throat. I asked in a surprisingly timid voice, "Can I stay in here with you?"

He didn't answer, but his heartbeat picked up beneath my touch. Collapsing into me, he burrowed his face into my shoulder.

I chuckled, folding him in a tight embrace. "Is that a yes?"

Pulling back in the circle of my arms, he scrubbed his damp cheeks with the heel of his palm. "It's *your* room." He sniffled, the troubled frown furrowing his brow again. "But, Candy, you need to know where I was. You really do. You might not want me if you know."

"Later, maybe. Not now. Just let me lay with you. Let me sleep with you." I closed my eyes, drinking in the smell of Carlos, the luxurious feel of him. How my cock could begin to harden again after the rigorous workout I'd put it through in the kitchen I didn't know, but it did.

I released him, slipped out of my shirt, and unfastened my pants. As I stepped out of the discarded pile of clothes, his brown gaze fondled my naked body, and I shivered under the candid stare. He appraised me with an artist's

eye, and I felt my own beauty, imagined how he must have seen me when he'd drawn the nude sketch. I loved the man he saw in me.

At my nudging, Carlos returned to the bed and carefully slid the drawing into the backpack. He laid it on the floor, settled on the edge of the mattress, and reached for me.

"Un momento, bebé." I held up a hand and strode to the entertainment center. Taking my favorite disc, *La Paloma*, from its case, I slid it into the CD player.

"What are you doing?" So restless.

"Hold your horses." Wagging a finger, I winked. "Just some music."

I let Carlos think he'd been the one to turn me into a romantic sap, and, to a certain extent, he had. Before him, I'd never let go of my heart to a lover so freely. What he didn't know was that, even as a young kid, I'd dreamed of dancing, making love when I listened to *La Paloma* on the radio. There'd been a time—so faint in my memory—when I'd convinced myself that those fantasies were of women, but the romance remained potent even though I realized I longed for men.

The soft, poignant music filled the room, and I knelt beside the bed, the plush carpet cool and soft as mink against my flesh. Grasping his knees, I gently eased them apart to bare his sex, his beautiful sex, and I moved between his legs.

Carlos's arms wrapped around my neck, drawing me closer, and he tilted his head to the side. "Romantic music?" A brow lifted. "Now look who's the fucking sissy."

“Go figure.” I chuckled and kissed the puckered skin of his nipple, swirling my tongue over the cold, steel nipple ring. “It’ll be just our secret.”

He gasped and tossed back his head, warm, drowsy sex in his eyes. “What if I tell the world that Candy G., Más Chingon, is a big girl?”

The robe gave way to my probing hands, and I cupped his ass cheeks, forcing the warmth of his rigid cock against my chest. I pulled the nipple ring gently with my teeth. “Then Más Chingon would have to punish you.”

His toes brushed my hips with just enough pressure to send streams of heat shooting to my cock. He moaned, “Promises, promises.”

“Oh, yeah?” My fingers slipped under the soft terry lapel, guiding the robe from his shoulders. I wanted to see his body—every dark, graceful, supple line—stretched before me, a magnificent sacrifice to the beast he’d created. “Lay down.”

Reclining, he relaxed his muscles, offering himself to me. His hands gripped mine, and he pulled me to stand over him. In his slanted eyes, I saw something sweet, very deep and clear. I saw his love. Desperation seized me to make sure he knew my love as well—not just to hear it, but to know it with certainty, to *feel* it.

“Look at me, Carlos. Listen to me.” I removed one of my hands from his grasp and touched the side of his face. The thick hair at his temple was still damp.

He opened his mouth to speak, but I placed a lighter-than-air kiss on his lips to stop him. I searched his face, every exquisite feature, every perfect flaw, and whispered, “Mi querido, I love you.”

“Then make love to me.” Pushing up on his elbows, he strained to kiss me.

I placed my palm on his chest and forced him back onto the mattress, holding him there. “Carlos, I want to make love to you so bad I could die.”

“Then—”

“I *love* you, Carlos. But I—”

“Then what’s the problem?” He shook his head.

“I *love* you. I want you like I’ve never wanted any other man. I want you, every bit of you, every breath of you. I want to take care of you, chico. I... I...” I swallowed hard, then forced my gaze to dive deep into his. “I can’t lose you.”

“You’re not going to lose me.” So matter-of-fact, as though it was silly to think it.

My voice trembled, but I couldn’t control it. “But I *did* lose you, Carlos. I *did* lose you. And it nearly killed me.”

He gazed off to the headboard. His chest heaved with a deep, wobbly breath.

Climbing onto the bed, I gathered him in my arms and murmured, “Carlos. What’s wrong, chico?”

He clenched his jaw and refused to look at me.

“Carlos, should I not have told you I loved you?” *Please, Dios, don’t tell me you’re sorry, that you were just shitting me when you said you loved me, that you didn’t mean for me to take it seriously. It’s too late.* My pulse raced, and panic drove me to run at the mouth. “I can’t help it. It just happened. The first time you ever spoke to me, when you smiled at me, I loved you. The first time you ever said my name, I fell even deeper. And Carlos, when you came

home with me, when you came to my bed, I was so crazy for you, there was nothing I could do to stop my love.”

Sobs shook his body, and tears ran in a warm path to my arm. Almost frantic, he rose a bit and scattered kisses all over my chest, and the crying gave way to crazy laughter. “Candy, Candy, Candy,” he gibbered, continuing with the kisses.

“Is that a sad *Candy, Candy, Candy* or a happy one?” I lifted my head to examine his face, trying to read him.

He wriggled deeper into my hold, nestled his face against my neck, and sighed. “Happy. It’s happy, happy, happy.”

I sighed and flopped onto the cover. Rising back up on my elbow, I touched the corner of his mouth. “Really?”

“Yes.” He put his hand over mine and moved it to his chest and draped his leg over my thigh. “Happy that you love me so hard. The first time I saw you walk into La Abuelita’s, so tall, so strong, so beautiful, I knew. And the way Mama Sylvia gushed all over you, I saw the love in her eyes, and I knew what a good man you were. I loved you. I didn’t even know you, but I loved you.”

“Then let me make love to you.”

Arching his body to me, he said in a tiny voice, “*Please* make love to me.”

I kissed him, rose from the bed, and went to the bedside table to get the lube and a condom. Carlos groaned, and the sound of his need started tiny paroxysms rippling through me. I smiled with the anticipation of filling him, making love to him.

That intense artist’s gaze of Carlos’s seduced me again while I stood by the bed and put on the condom. Somehow,

through his appreciative eyes, everything—even putting a condom on my dick—became a thing of erotic beauty.

In Spanish, the singer's voice wafted. *If at your window you see a gentle dove, treat it with care and welcome it there with love.* I kissed the inside of Carlos's thigh and lifted his leg to rest it over my shoulder. He whimpered under his breath and clenched his fists.

"Candy." His eyes closed tight.

I twisted the cap on the lube, and Carlos spread his legs even further.

"What, chico?" With one hand resting on his belly, I spread lube along his crack and gently pressed into his hole.

"Tell me." He took my hand and twined his fingers through mine.

"Tell you what, mi querido?" Slowly moving my finger around inside him, I lowered to kiss his chest.

"That you love me. Tell me you love me again." He wriggled, his muscles closing tight around my finger.

I pressed my lips over his heart, and the strong pulse beat beneath my kiss. "I love you, Carlos."

He opened himself to me, tossing, moaning. My cock eased into him, warmth rolling from my belly to every limb, every nerve in my body. I filled him—oh, so gentle this time—pleasured in his ecstasy, floated on the bliss that washed over me to hear my name on his tongue, to hear him beg me to make him cum.

Just about the time the song pleaded, *Oh my passions so tender oh please surrender your love divine*, Carlos

stiffened, cried out my name once more, and his seed shot onto our bellies and chests.

Seeing his climax—the ecstasy of his face at the height of his passion—aroused me, submerged me in rapture, and plunged me into my own orgasm. His body jerked with the force of my final thrusts, and I came, crying his name, saying I loved him over and over.

MY NEW favorite pastime? Watching Carlos sleep after making love. The soft, sated smile on his face, the dark, feathery lashes resting on his smooth cheeks, his body dissolving into mine with trust. That, to me, was love—to study these things, to be filled to the brim with the gut-wrenching happiness they gave me.

His brown eyes fluttered open, and as if climbing out of a dream, he took a moment to focus on my face. An easy smile parted his lips, and touching the stubble on my chin, he whispered, “Tell me again.”

Embers of desire stirred my flaccid cock, bringing it to life against his thighs. “Tell you what again?”

I knew what he wanted. He’d sleep, then wake, demanding me to tell him I loved him, afraid he’d only dreamed it.

“You know.” He cast a sly smile.

“Tu sonrisa es bonito.” I shrugged.

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, so I have a beautiful smile.”

Scratching my chin, I offered, “Estoy loco por ti.”

“I don’t wanna hear you’re crazy about me.”

I rose and covered his body with mine, my hips grinding into his, our cocks rubbing together. Breathing the words onto his hungry lips, I said the phrase that seemed to arouse him, to make him crazy. “Te amo. I love you.”

“Sí, sí, sí.” He hissed and bucked against me.

“You’ve got me hard again, bebé.” I eased from him to lie on my back. “But I have to rest. My dick hasn’t fucked this much in a long time.”

“Good.” Narrowing his eyes, he smiled and tooled his fingers up and down my thigh. “It’d better get used to it.”

“Sí. It will, it will.” I switched to my side and drew him close, leisurely pumping my cock on his belly. My palm caressed the tattoo on the smooth, tawny skin of his hip. “What does this say, chico?”

His voice was muffled against my chest. “It’s Japanese.”

“I can see that. What does it say?”

“It says Okaasan. It means mother.”

“Ah.”

“When my mother died, I had it tattooed so I’d always have her around.”

“And your father?”

Toying with my gold crucifix, he sighed. “I never knew him.”

“I’m sorry.” I continued to lightly trace the tattoo. “Are... were your parents Japanese?”

“My mother was. My father, wherever he is, is Mexican.”

My eyes, heavy-lidded from lack of sleep, closed, and I nearly dozed, but Carlos's hand on my arm snapped me awake.

"Candy."

"Mmm?" I planted a lazy kiss on his forehead.

"I need to tell you where I was." Dragging himself into a sitting position, he crossed his legs and hunched his shoulders.

So he was determined to confess. I pretended to be unconcerned and shut my eyes again. "I told you I didn't want to hear it, Carlos. Tell a priest or something if it bothers you so bad."

He ignored me, his voice flat. "I was in jail. I was busted for drugs."

That shot my sleepiness to hell. Drugs were the red flag to the angry bull in me. After leaving Teirso Flores's organization, I could not, would not have any association with narcotics.

"Dios, Carlos. Please tell me this is a bad joke." My words eked from a hoarse throat.

"No." Biting his lip, he turned his face from me. Rolling his shoulders, he added, "It was only a little coke."

"Ah. Only a little coke," I mocked.

Disappointment pressed on my chest so heavy, I thought I would suffocate.

Carlos propped his elbows on his knees. "I'd only bought a little bit, but the dude I bought it from happened to be...."

"Undercover." I rolled my eyes.

"Yeah."

My gaze locked on the ceiling. “You told me a while back that Teirso’s gang thought you were a dealer.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Are you?”

“I told you then that I wasn’t. I’m not.” He buried his face in his hands. “I told you. You wouldn’t want me if you knew I’d done coke.”

Dazed, I shook my head. “I want you, Carlos. I love you. Your fuck-ups don’t change that.”

Nothing registered in my brain yet. Drugs. Carlos. Coke. Jail. Why the fuck had I not made it a point to check his records, to see if he had priors? What a love-struck idiot I’d been. But now that I’d been hit with this shock, my heart was still in too deep to let go of him.

“Candy.” He touched my shoulder.

“What?”

“I’ll go.” Slapping his hands on his thighs, he apparently resigned himself to a fate he expected. “You can’t say I deceived you, Candy. I *did* try to tell you.”

“Yes, you did.” I’d been so obsessed with the possibility that he’d been with another man, it had never occurred to me he’d tried to warn me of something much worse. In a warped way of thinking, I rationalized I could help him with drugs and still keep him; but another lover, in my distorted reasoning, would be a much more difficult challenge—a battle I didn’t have the confidence to fight. I took his hand to draw him down next to me. “Come here, bebé.”

Hesitantly, he curled near me, pressing his balled fists to his lips. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He let me bring him closer and said, “I know how you feel about drugs, so I

couldn't stay with you when you asked. I couldn't face you, so I took the chickenshit way out and called Rogelio to tell him I'd quit. I knew he'd tell you. And there was no reason to come back when they let me out. I only called you this time because I panicked. But now that you know, well—"

"So you're saying you still don't want to stay with me?" There was the black disappointment again, the feeling of precious sand oozing through my open fingers.

Gritting his teeth, he thrust his forehead into my chest. "Candy, I—"

"I've made up my mind, Carlos." I sucked in a deep breath. "I'm too possessive to love you so huge and not keep you close. But my love could suffocate you. I would be on you like a hawk on a rabbit. You'll either be my lover, and I will take care of you, work through your problems, or you'll leave."

"I—"

"And if you *do* leave, don't ever call me again. My heart will die, and I won't stop loving you, but I'll never want to see or hear from you. No matter how much trouble you're in."

Carlos nestled into the curve of my body, his muscles going limp. Barely audible, his voice came from the shelter of my arms. "Take care of me, mi amor."

Chapter Eight

CARLOS eventually returned to his old self—the seductive, spirited, streetwise young man I’d fallen for.

Although he’d resigned to let me take care of him, he resisted being a fully fledged kept man, as he called it. He felt it demeaned him.

I admired his insistence on taking care of himself and tried not to force my help on him. Instead of the new sports car I wanted to buy for him, he opted for an old piece of shit economy car. Inwardly I laughed to see he defiantly parked the crap-on-wheels on my side of the driveway, as though daring me to complain. Forcing the Mercedes to the opposite side of the driveway didn’t get a rise out of me, but I *did* cringe at the oil puddles from his clunker on the once-spotless concrete. Still, I didn’t grumble.

He insisted on returning to his job at the carwash. I violently fought this. It was unfair to the other workers to flaunt our relationship, would cause them to resent Carlos. But my fiery little Latino argued if I really loved him, I wouldn’t hide it. As a smug afterthought, he added that it gave him pleasure to return to work—now as my lover—if for nothing more than to rub it in Rogelio’s flustered face. How could I deny Carlos that one guilty indulgence?

On two things, though, there was no compromise—no more drugs, no other lovers. He’d known my stance on

drugs from the beginning, and he knew that I was possessive. Although I didn't stop Carlos from coming and going freely and never followed him, he knew that any illegal activity and any messing with other men would reach my ears.

Carlos became my world. Everything revolved around him, everything I saw and touched *was* him. Clear summer days reminded me of the sun that rose and set in his smile. On stormy days, he filled my mind with yearning—the desire to make love to him, sprawled on the white expanse of my bed with rain pounding on the windows and thunder as our soundtrack. I'd never been in love, and the constant euphoria was a high that, although wobbly and strange, I never wanted to descend from.

Carlos became the single beautiful decoration that made my home where I wanted to be, needed to be, the place I loved.

My Aunt Dahlia took a while to adjust to the intrusion, especially since Carlos loved to cook and often tried to usurp her authority in the kitchen. But she succumbed to his effervescent charm and became putty in his hands, allowing herself to often be relegated to a cook's assistant.

One evening, two weeks into our living arrangement, Carlos and I ambled downstairs after a leisurely session of lovemaking. Aunt Dahlia danced at the stove, waving a wooden spoon in sync to a lively Tejano song that serenaded from the television on the breakfast bar.

"I'm starving!" Leaning to plant a kiss on her cheek, I snooped over her shoulder at the bubbling concoction on the burner.

“Tacos de tripa.” One warm, soft hand cupped my cheek while the other stirred a skillet of sautéing onions.

“Ah. Cool.” Behind her back, I grimaced.

I hated tripe. My disgust for the traditional dish had frustrated my late mother. She said that, if she didn’t know better, she’d have sworn I’d been swapped at birth for some Irish woman’s baby.

For Aunt Dahlia, I’d made the mistake of smiling and struggling through the dish the first time she’d prepared it. The excitement on her rosy face upon placing the steaming platter before me was so proud, so excited, I didn’t have the heart to tell her tripas made me want to puke. My teeth sank into the crunchy, fried cow intestines, and I forced a grin to my face and chewed. Unfortunately, my lie condemned me to the dish as a regular on her monthly menu.

Carlos sniffed, cocking a pleased brow. “Tripas!”

Aunt Dahlia offered him a loving pat and waved him away from the stove.

Gazing out the window, Carlos picked a bit of shredded lettuce from a ceramic bowl on the cabinet. He slipped the lettuce in his mouth and observed, “There’s the owl again.”

My aunt made a quick stir of the boiling tripas, tapped the spoon on the rim of the pan, and whirled around to join Carlos at the sink. “Lechuza,” she murmured, shaking her head.

“Is the damn thing here again?” I rounded the island to stand with them. “It must have a nest on the property.”

“Lechuza is bad luck.” Aunt Dahlia wagged a hand to the feathered sentinel before returning to the stove.

Carlos chuckled. "It's just a bird."

My gaze met the owl's. Every night it settled on the same spot upon the railing and fixed its inflexible stare through the kitchen window. Over my shoulder, I called to Aunt Dahlia, "They *are* bad luck, then?"

Her hushed voice, barely audible over the sizzling onions and the music, held a reverence that troubled me. "To see la lechuza by night is a sign of death to a family member."

Carlos grabbed another piece of lettuce and stalked to the table. "That's bullshit. It's just a dumb bird."

With a glance back to the owl, Aunt Dahlia admonished, "It's foolish to laugh off the powers of the spirits."

Carlos pulled out a chair and sat, fingering the fringe of the woven placemat. His voice was half-irritated, half-troubled. "Animals don't have powers. That's ancient crap that only ancient people believe."

Riotous laughter shook Aunt Dahlia's roly-poly form. "Who are you calling ancient, boy?"

"I'm sorry, Aunt Dahlia." A smile fought through his ire. "I didn't mean you were ancient. I don't like talk of spirits and shit. It's from the Dark Ages."

I kept my gaze on the owl, and its big head burrowed into its chest. "Isn't it true that La Lechuza is the creature with the body of an owl and the head of a witch?"

Aunt Dahlia nodded. "Sí. And if she calls to you and you answer her, you will be marked for death."

"If you two don't quit this stupid talk, I'm leaving," Carlos growled. "All over some damn bird."

“Oh, come on, chico.” I chuckled, then tapped on the window. The owl remained unruffled. “It hasn’t called any of our names. And besides, it doesn’t have the head of a witch.” Carrying on the spooky mood that Aunt Dahlia and I had embraced, I added, “Not right now, anyway.”

“I said stop it.” Carlos brought his palm down on the table.

“You’re right. It *is* just a bird.” I went to the table and wrapped my arms around him from behind, pulling him against me. My childhood had been steeped in the same myths that Aunt Dahlia embraced, and as much as I wanted to reject the ridiculous legends, I found it hard to shake years of ingrained superstition. But the morose talk seemed to upset Carlos, and I didn’t like seeing him so disturbed. “Baby, it’s just dumb talk.”

“You believe this shit. I can tell.” He yanked from my arms and rose, the chair legs screeching on the floor. Crossing to the hallway, he snapped, “I don’t want to hear it anymore!”

My brain failed to acknowledge what just happened, and before I could react to his irrational outburst, the door slammed in the entryway, and I heard his little car start in the driveway. I stood, bewildered, gripping the chair while Aunt Dahlia parked a sympathetic frown on me.

“He’ll be back,” she assured. “Some don’t like talk of death.”

“I’m not sure I do, either, Aunt Dahlia.” I sank into the chair and raked a hand through my hair.

I wanted to get in the car and speed after him to find out what was wrong. But I reasoned he surely couldn’t have

taken my aunt's gloomy superstitions to heart, that the somber death talk must have dredged up sadness for his mother.

Stoically I suffered through the tacos de tripa, fighting the gag reflex in my throat with every bite, and offered fake complimentary smiles to Aunt Dahlia. Surely God would forgive this innocent lie that brought such satisfaction to the old woman.

Carlos still hadn't returned by the time I finished dinner. I pecked Aunt Dahlia on the cheek and climbed the stairs while she loaded the dishwasher.

In my room, I headed straight for the entertainment center, slipped *La Paloma* into the CD player, and undressed. I tossed my clothes across the padded bench at the foot of the bed and stretched out on the mattress without pulling down the covers.

I drifted drowsily with the music. After weaving in and out of a restless sleep, I turned to find an empty space beside me on the mattress, then checked the clock. After midnight. Damn.

Sliding from the bed, I stepped to the window to check the driveway. The little white car was parked next to the Mercedes, and a pleasant spasm clenched my belly. Good. Carlos was safe.

I grabbed my robe, slipped into it, and went downstairs. At the landing, I heard voices over the rattling of dishes and tinkling of silverware in the kitchen. Carlos and Aunt Dahlia. More than likely, she'd heard him coming in late and—in her typical mother hen fashion—insisted he eat since he'd missed dinner.

Confident Carlos was all right, I turned toward the stairs, but snags of their conversation caught my attention, and I stopped. Through the louvered doors, I watched and listened. I suppose I should have been ashamed to eavesdrop, but I ignored my conscience and observed them anyway.

Dahlia set the timer on the microwave, and soon the redolence of the awful tacos de tripa filled the air. She unrolled a placemat and positioned it on the table in front of Carlos.

He leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head, his voice carrying over the microwave's hum. "Aunt Dahlia, should I go or stay?"

Go or stay? Was he thinking of leaving? Icy spears shot up my spine, and my pulse pounded so loud in my ears I was sure they could hear it.

Putting on an oven mitt, Aunt Dahlia opened the microwave and pulled out a steaming platter of tortillas and tripas. "What a silly boy you are." She placed the dish on the placemat, took off the mitt, and waved it at him. "All because of a silly lechuza."

He thrust forward and picked up a fork. "You and Candy were the ones doing all the death talk. Not me."

"We were only having fun." She winked. "How could we know what a silly baby you would be?"

I couldn't see Carlos's face, but he bent his head, dropped the fork as though it weighed a ton, and said in a faraway voice, "It would kill me if anything happened to him." His fingers ruffled through the tousled hair at the back of his head. "All that death-in-your-household shit hit

me like a freight train, made me imagine losing him.” He slammed his palm on the table, making Aunt Dahlia jump. “And I don’t know if I can do this anymore. I love him too much, and—”

“Can you hear yourself? How gloomy you sound?” Aunt Dahlia thumped his head with the oven mitt. “Why must you turn love into a depressing thing?”

Carlos grunted. “Because my being here could be... dangerous.” He picked up the fork and jabbed at the food.

What the fuck? My pulse raced even faster.

“What do you mean?” Cocking her head and crossing her arms over her chest, she queried him through narrowed eyes. “I am a good judge of people. You are not a dangerous man.”

“Oh, no?”

Laying the fork down again, Carlos rose and shifted the chair to face her. I saw his profile now.

“No.” Her chin lifted, her jaw clenched.

“If you say so, Aunt Dahlia.” He waved his hands in the air. His tone seemed full of forced acquiescence, and it was clear—to me, anyway—that he stopped short of spilling facts to support his argument.

Listening to their conversation made me feel intrusive, like reading a private diary, but my feet refused to move from the spot.

Aunt Dahlia’s voice and eyes softened. “Candelario loves you. Whatever this silliness you speak of—”

“I *know* he loves me. And that’s why....” His shoulders rolled with a deep breath. “That’s why I should leave. I may be a magnet that’s going to bring trouble for him.”

Those words shot down any intention I'd had of walking away from their discourse. What could Carlos, my beautiful artist with the sunny smile, do that would bring trouble for *me*?

Aunt Dahlia pulled out a chair and slumped into it, laying the oven mitt on the table. She spread her palms over its quilted surface. Tilting her head to the side, she stared hard at the beige mitt, talking to it. "It would kill Candelario to lose you."

The ache and love in her voice, issuing from her private heart, made me ashamed for listening.

"He'd get over it." Carlos shrugged.

My heart thudded heavily at the path this conversation took. Carlos's talk of bringing trouble for me, of leaving—and the indifference in his voice—pained me.

"He will get over it?" She mimicked him, bunching her shoulders. Indignation bridled in her deep-set eyes. "I am ashamed of your cold words!"

"It's better to hurt him that way than the much bigger hurt I'm going to cause him when I..." His words faded; he patted her hand. "Never mind."

Her hand flew back and snapped over his with lightning speed. "I do not know about this imaginary trouble you speak of. All I know is that Candelario is so happy to have you here. I do not remember ever seeing him so happy. His heart is so huge for you. What a giant break if you left him."

Even though I appreciated it and loved her for it, to have my aunt plead my case embarrassed me, made me feel

small and weak. I put my hand on the door to step in the kitchen, to interrupt them, but stopped.

“That’s just it.” Carlos sank back in the chair, wrapping his arms around himself. “That heart of his. This man, this powerful man, so fucking fearless.” A tiny chuckle. “Sorry for the language.”

She nodded gravely, absolving his stronger-than-usual cursing.

He continued. “And yet nobody would guess what a delicate heart he has.” Sitting forward, he cupped his hands. “And he’s put that heart, that beautiful, fragile heart, in *my* hands. *My* hands.” He twined his fingers together and pressed them to his mouth. “It scares me fucking shitless.” Her disapproving glare stabbed him, and he added, “Sorry.”

Tapping a finger to her lips, Aunt Dahlia closed her eyes, clearly weighing her words. Finally, she squared her shoulders. “You are right that Candelario is a strong man. He is. And you are right that he has a tender heart. The community knows this, he is loved. But—”

“I’m not talking about his kindness to the community. I’m talking about his love for *me*. That’s—”

“Do not interrupt me.” She pursed her lips, and her hand shot up. “His gentle heart and his power are separate. So far, the two have never fought in his soul, but they will if you throw his heart back at him, damaged.” Drawing a finger over the stitches on the mitt, she added, “He has put his heart for safekeeping in your hands. So, rather than falter under the responsibility, should you not stand as strong as he does? He will give his life to protect what he

loves. Can you not at least protect his heart while he protects you?”

He balled his fist and pounded his chest. “Who the hell’s going to protect *him*? From *me*?” Lowering his voice to where I had to strain to hear it, he lamented, “I’m the very thing that he needs protection from.”

My mind scrambled to make sense of Carlos’s words.

“You talk such nonsense.” My aunt’s voice mocked, but her gaze wavered with uncertainty.

“Oh, Aunt Dahlia.” A sad sigh. Too sad, too resigned. “If you only knew.”

She hissed and turned her face from him.

If she only knew what? Part of me wanted to stay, to listen to the rest of the conversation, but my gut, in a flood of sadness and worry, chose to walk away, not to subject myself to further uneasiness. I left my self-assigned post at the door and climbed the stairs, heading for my bedroom. The heaviness in my heart, brought on by the surprising revelation that Carlos thought of leaving me—and the nonchalance in his words—weighed my steps.

None of this made sense. Carlos seemed as deeply in love as me. He constantly said so. If he had reservations, I’d apparently been oblivious to them, blinded by my own fog of passion and affection.

When I reached the room, I marched—almost unconsciously—straight to the entertainment center, opened the CD player, and took La Paloma from its honored position in the machine. I crushed it in my palm, and its sharp edges stung my skin. How stupid I felt, such a weak,

romantic fool. Playing the song for Carlos, making love to him by its words, thinking it was special to him as well.

I had no clue what sort of trouble Carlos felt he would bring to me, but the fact that he seemed so convinced of it roused my curiosity and triggered my inner self-defense alarm. But goddamn, underneath the new anxiety, the fresh hurt, I knew my love wouldn't be affected. If anything, the newborn possibility of really losing him made my love stronger than ever, pumped it with a horrific need to claw—to hold on—to a precipice that I imagined my heart to be falling from.

Surprisingly, I managed to sleep once I climbed in bed, and I didn't know what time Carlos finally slipped under the covers beside me. The warm body I loved nestled against my back, bringing me out of a dreamless slumber, and his arm curled around my waist.

I probably should have pretended not to feel him there, but despite my fear and misgiving, I still wanted him. I needed him. Turning in the circle of his arm, I faced him and searched the brown eyes, touched the hair that seemed a lustrous silver corona in the moonlight.

"Candy." His hand touched my cheek like a whisper, the silver rings cool on my skin. "I love you."

"So you say." Such emotion raged in me. The need to babble my love, to tell him I'd heard his conversation, to beg him to assure me it had only been a dream. But anger—ugly, twisted, and scary—thrashed just beneath the love.

Surprise at my cool reply flashed in his eyes, but he overrode it with a smile. "Do you *know* how goddamn *much*

I love you?" He moved closer, our bellies touching, warm, hardening cocks rubbing together.

I didn't answer right away, just turned onto my back. *Not enough, evidently, if you're planning to leave me.* The words *leave me*, even fluttering silent through my mind, hurt so bad I couldn't breathe.

Lifting on one elbow, Carlos caressed my stomach, his fingers brushing the hair around my navel. He bent to graze his soft lips over my nipple. "Candy, I want to fuck you."

How could he act as though nothing was wrong? I fought the urge to tell him I knew about his intention of leaving, smothered it with a tired smile. "Sure, baby. I'll fuck you." Did my voice sound as mechanical to him as it did to me?

"No. I want to be inside you. I need to be inside you." He shivered.

I hadn't seen that coming. "Carlos, I don't...." *Remember. He's leaving you.* "No."

Insecurity about our relationship wasn't my only concern. To open my body to another had always represented uncomfortable vulnerability, and I'd never trusted a lover enough to make an exception. I thought Carlos would be that lover, but now I wasn't sure.

He continued to kiss my nipple, and his hand found its way between my thighs and made a determined path to the tender spot between my balls and ass. One of his fingers teased my hole, and I gasped and arched into him. Dios, how wonderful it felt, the pressure sending tiny knives of tingling heat straight to my cock. "Stop," I moaned, for no reason now but nervousness.

His finger wriggled inside me, the silver rings cold against my warm flesh. Carlos rose to his knees, bent over me, and slithered his tongue into my navel while pumping my ass with easy, rhythmic thrusts. My muscles closed tight around him, greedy for more, begging for him to go deeper. The intense pleasure drove away my fear of helplessness, even wiped out the anxiety about his leaving.

“Let me fuck you,” he murmured against my stomach, his tongue still digging into my navel. “Let me shove my prick in your ass. Please let me cum inside you.”

The word *yes* froze just short of my lips, but my tossing and whimpering was affirmation that I desperately wanted his cock up my ass. Deep, very deep in my consciousness, I think I even hoped the new level of intimacy—of trust—would maybe serve as some kind of tie to hold him.

He scooted off the bed and went to the table, opened the drawer and pulled out a condom and the lube. Beside myself with the unexpected desire for him to penetrate me, I wrapped my fingers around my dick, stroking the velvety skin over the hard-as-steel shaft. I wanted to be stretched, fucked, but the moment he grasped my legs to rest them on his shoulders, I involuntarily recoiled.

He smiled, calm, sliding the condom onto his cock, then uncapped the lube.

“Dios, chico,” I cried, relaxing beneath his touch—so teasing and soft, slathering the cool, slick lube between my ass cheeks and inside my hole.

My body stiffened at first, resisting the bulbous head of his dick as it nudged between my cheeks. He paused, patient, a gentle smile in his brown eyes, before easing past

my opening. His heat filled me, and pain—so intrusive, so stinging—speared through my body. I could hardly breathe.

“Relax, mi amor.” Carlos nuzzled his cheek on the inside of my leg and plunged deeper with slow deliberation. “Enjoy me.”

Soon the searing pain gave way to waves of pleasure, and his gentle pumping sent delicious spasms to my belly. I allowed my body to rock into his thrusts.

Never had I known anything as earth-shattering as Carlos’s cock buried deep inside me, plunging harder now, striking the core of me until explosions of light filled my vision, and I felt as though my soul left my body. Without even touching my dick, with nothing more than this ungodly pleasure that ripped through me, my seed gushed onto my chest and belly in a climax I thought would never end.

How beautiful Carlos was, lost in his own orgasm, his face so tranquil yet so delirious. When his pummeling stopped, he fell onto me, his sweat mixing with my cum, his body trembling.

Refusing to let confusion overshadow the delicate afterglow of lovemaking, I enveloped him in my arms, holding him tight, and my fingers twined in his sweaty hair.

The pitiful words escaped my lips before I could stop them. “Don’t leave me.”

Chapter Nine

THE moment my words hit the air, I regretted them. Carlos brought out the neediness in me—a neediness I’d never known before he came along. To beg a man not to leave me was, as he would say, something a fucking sissy would do. He used that label affectionately, but where he was concerned, it seemed to fit.

He rose to move from between my legs and scooted onto the bed next to me. With a quizzical smile in his eyes, he searched my face. “Why did you say that?”

“What?”

I stared at the ficus trees that flanked the window, their green leaves fluttering in the breeze from the ceiling fan, and my eyes strained hard to keep from nervous blinking. I wished I had a cigarette, something to hide behind during this uncomfortable moment, a prop like in the movies.

“You asked me not to leave you.” Carlos fingered my nipple. “What... brought that on?”

Right then, with that comment, I heard cautious edginess in his voice that told me he wondered if I’d heard his conversation with my aunt.

I turned and mustered a deceptively cool smile. “I heard you talking to Aunt Dahlia earlier.”

“Oh.” He couldn’t hide the surprise that flashed in his eyes. Biting his lip, he glanced about the room.

I thought, in accordance with his cocky nature, he’d cuss me out, call me a busybody for intruding on his privacy. But he calmly asked, “What did you hear?”

“Plenty.”

His gaze burned into my eyes, and I could practically hear his brain clicking, carefully choosing the right words. “You listened?” Although he seemed to try to hide it, shock and disappointment coated his tone. “What *did* you hear?”

My reaction to upset was always one of three things—I exploded, crumbled, or often steeled myself with deadly calm. Carlos, even in the short time we’d been together, knew this, and his muscles stiffened against me with guarded anticipation.

For once, my soul didn’t know how to react. It just flatlined, heavy and still. Even my voice had no emotion. “That you’re going to leave me.”

He patted my chest and nodded as though plotting a chess move, planning his approach once more. He cupped my cheek with his, and his voice was soothing. “It was just talk.”

“Ah.” Deep inside, I longed to touch the hand that caressed my face, but didn’t. Too much misgiving clouded my love right now. “And I suppose it was just talk, all this....” I made quote signs with my fingers. “*Danger* that you’re bringing to me.”

Carlos flopped onto his back, covering his face with his forearm. “I wish you hadn’t heard that.”

“Too bad. I did.”

Now the irritation I'd expected laced his voice. "I can't believe you listened like that."

"I wish I hadn't." Nudging him aside, I slid from the bed and stood. I didn't like the frost that shrouded my heart. I wanted to be mad. If I could be angry, the ice would melt and the love would take over and understand as it always had. "I'm going to take a shower."

Carlos scrambled from the bed and grabbed my arm. "Wait!"

He tried to force me to face him, but I jerked from his grasp and headed for the bathroom.

He followed. Halfway across the room, he stopped abruptly, grabbing his foot. "Damn! What the...." Confusion crossed his face, and he bent to pick up the crushed CD. His shoulders slumped, a sad frown turning down his lips. "La Paloma."

My effort to sound indifferent only produced a childish petulance. "I... I was—"

He bowed his head and cradled the ruined disc as though it were a cherished belonging. "You were pissed at me."

"It's just a CD." Embarrassed, I shot a glance to the window.

"But it's your La Paloma." He stared at the silver fragments, then lifted his gaze to me, shaking his head. "Why didn't you say something if you heard us?"

I leaned on the doorframe. "What *could* I have said?"

"You could have asked me to explain. I could have explained. I *can* explain." He tossed the CD in the wastebasket and took slow, unsure steps toward me.

I swung around and crossed the tile to the shower. “Your words spoke for themselves, Carlos. There was nothing for me to say.” Starting to open the glass door, I chuckled. “Unless, of course, I should have begged you not to leave.” The sad part? I *did* beg when we finished making love, and deep under the ice in my soul, I *still* wanted to beg. “Is that what you want?”

His hand whipped to the door, stopping me from opening it. “Will you please let me explain?”

Coaxing simulated boredom, I sighed and crossed my arms over my chest. “Of course. Explain.”

“It was just talk, Candy.” His finger outlined the etched glass design on the door. “If you heard, then you know it was just all your talk of the owl and bad luck. And... death.”

“What I heard was how *you’re* the very thing that’s bringing danger to me. How bad you’re going to hurt me.” I snickered and opened the door. “What? You’re going to hurt me some *more*, amigo? Have I not had my quota?”

“How many times do I have to apologize for disappearing?”

That pissed me off. Big time. “How dare you, you little cocksucker!” Stepping closer to him, I slammed the door shut, the glass shuddering in its frame. “I never once asked you to apologize to me!”

“I—” He inched back.

“I took you back! I never asked you to explain!” Indignation boiled in my gut. “In fact, when you tried to explain, I told you I didn’t need to hear it. I wanted you

back so bad, I never demanded an explanation. So how dare you try to lay that shit on me!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sure, I was hurt. It broke my heart. But I figured you had your reasons, and I accepted them.” I thumped a finger on Carlos’s chest. “Never once did I ask for an apology.”

“You’re right. I’m *sorry*, Candy.”

“Good!”

My pulse rushed, heat surging through me. Emotion. Good, it wasn’t dead after all. What it was—anger, love, or hurt—I wasn’t sure, but its return brought me satisfaction.

Carlos edged closer and whispered, “I could never leave you. I can’t.”

Desire—not sex but the familiar, unbearable fear of separation from him—blazed in me, strong as ever. “Like I told you, you *did* leave me.”

“And I told you why.”

“Then why did you tell Aunt Dahlia—”

“I was spooked by all the bad luck talk. And I knew I’d already brought trouble into your home. I was scared by all the omen shit, afraid it was me who was the bad luck for you.”

Instinctively, I reached my arms for him, and he slipped into my embrace.

I persisted. “What’s this mysterious danger you’re bringing to my home?” I suppressed a laugh, again wondering how this little chilpayate could possibly bring bad things into my life. He’d had his drug arrest, but I knew he was clean now, or at least he’d passed the drug screenings necessary for his probation. In my need to

protect myself, I'd even had his records checked for priors, and other than his dabbling in coke, he had no criminal record. He did reek of street kid, but I had no reason to believe he was in bad company.

Resting his forehead on my naked chest, he shook his head. "It was just talk." He pushed back and added, "But maybe I'm not the man you think I am. I wish I was as good as you think."

That dragged a big laugh from me. I held him close. "Who says I think you're a good man, Carlos?"

"Candy, when you guys talked about death in the household, all I could think about was something happening to you. And if—"

"Shh, bebé." Rocking back and forth, holding him tighter, I kissed the top of his head, breathing in the crisp scent of his hair.

Once more, just like that, Carlos caused a huge case of amnesia to wash away my misgivings. With nothing more than the need and tenderness in his eyes, he succeeded in sinking his anchor even deeper in my heart. Maybe I was naïve where he was concerned, too accepting, or maybe just conveniently blind to the fact that he would—or even could—ever really hurt me as much as he thought.

"I've never tried to fool you." His brow knitted.

"I know that." With him still in my arms, I opened the shower door. "Shower with me."

We stepped into the stall, and Carlos huddled in the corner, bracing for the initial gush from the showerhead. I turned on the faucet and stood under the warm stream, and he moved into it, throwing back his head and

massaging the water over his chest. Goddamn, he was so sexy with the gentle flow cascading over his tawny skin, trickling in glistening streams down his taut belly and his platinum hair darkening as it grew wet.

I lathered the soap over my chest, then handed the bar to him.

“Turn around,” he said and, with his hands on my hips, propelled me to face the wall.

He rubbed the soap in languorous circles on my back, his slow, feather-soft touch starting a fire deep in my belly, radiating to my groin. I drew a deep breath, inhaling the scented steam and pressed my palms to the water-beaded tile.

“Candy, do you watch *everything* I do?” Squeezing against me, he slid the soap down my spine and made lazy figures with it on my ass. The tip of his semi-hard cock teased at my butt.

My dick twitched as the slippery soap bar wedged into my crack. Telltale arousal trembled in my voice. “No.”

The soap dropped to the shower floor, and Carlos’s fingers crept between my ass cheeks, slithering toward my hole. He licked at the water on my shoulders and glided his other hand around my body to cup my balls, working them gently with his agile fingers. “You’re so fucking jealous. So suspicious.”

I shivered. Was he seducing or punishing? Or both? Either way, I was turned on. “I warned you how I was, bebé. You know I’m a jealous man.”

He prodded deeper, his finger forcing its way into my entry, his other hand sliding to wrap around my cock. “I’m not complaining.”

“Good.” I moaned. Damn, with his fingers, slick and soapy, fondling with such soft pressure, my balls ached and my cock throbbed. I loved the filling sensation as he pushed inside me, the probing that shot streams of white-hot pleasure through every inch of my body.

Nuzzling closer, his stiff dick poking my ass, he murmured, “I love that you’re jealous.”

“Do you?” Dios, I needed to cum.

“I love that you don’t want me with other men.” His grip tightened around my cock, increasing the intensity of the strokes.

I was so close to orgasm. Oddly, my jealous thoughts—unthinkable visions of Carlos writhing under another man’s hands, some other’s eyes devouring him—drove me nearer to release. “I can’t stand the thought of another man touching you.” A groan. “Of your hands touching another man like this.”

He teased, “You don’t want other hands feeling me? Other men sucking my dick?”

“No.” My legs were weak.

“You want to be the only name I cry when I cum?”

Goddamn. He worked me so well, knew my jealous buttons. To his surprise, I jerked around, pinning him to the tile with my hands on either side of him. “I *will* be the only man to make you cum, mi corazón.”

Through a sultry haze of sex, his gaze consumed me, traveling from my head to my swollen dick to my feet. He

taunted, “What about you? You won’t let other men touch you, either? When you told me that night that you’d been out with another man, it drove me crazy to think of *him* fucking you, *him* bringing you pleasure.”

I leaned into his body, rubbing my cock on the wet, silky skin of his belly, and purred, “Bring me pleasure, chico.”

He shuddered and whispered something under his breath. Kneeling, his brown eyes fixed on mine and an obedient smile on his full lips, he took my cock into his mouth. The moist warmth around my dick, the gentle sucking, the delicate squeezing of my balls, was all I needed to plunge into an orgasm. I pumped into his throat, so wrapped in pleasure I didn’t stop to think if I hurt him. His encouraging moan assured me he enjoyed it as much as I did.

My cum emptied into his mouth, and he worked my cock with his lips and tongue until I’d spent completely. Water continued to stream from my head and down my back as I fell against the wall and Carlos looked up at me, a pleased smile lighting his face.

Leaning back against the tile, he sank to the floor and hugged his legs to his body. I lowered myself and scrunched next to him, drawing him into my arms, and we let the warm water surge over us.

After my pulse returned to normal and my body relaxed, I broke the short, comfortable silence. “We need some sleep. It’s morning.”

“Candy?” He shifted to look in my eyes.

“What?”

Chewing on his lip, he glanced off, then back at me. “Nothing.”

“What, bebé?” I rose and reached my hand to help him stand.

“You’re right. We need to sleep.” Turning off the water, he opened the shower door and stepped onto the bath mat to grab a towel. He tiptoed to drape the towel over my shoulders and tugged its edges, pulling my face close to his. Our lips touched, cool and wet. “Let’s go to bed....” Wriggling, tired and lazy against me, he sighed. “So you can hold me.”

Once we climbed into bed, snug under the sheets, the addictive touch of Carlos—velvet skin, soft and cool after the shower, in contrast with his warm, hard cock—aroused me again. How could one man, one exquisite body, ignite such desire so often? A flame that always flickered inside me, inextinguishable.

He didn’t ask me to make love to him, but need simmered in his half-closed eyes. I bent over his body, and a gentle smile played on his lips.

My lips traced the tattoo that covered the graceful slope of his hip, tasting the delicate essence of soap on his skin, and my fingers massaged his cock. He thrust slowly into my fist. With very little effort on my part, Carlos gritted his teeth, whispering my name, and spilled his seed into my hand.

I loved that Carlos came so easy, so quiet—never anything but soft cries and tiny shudders all over his body. And I loved how he stretched like a small, contented cat after orgasms. I slipped from the bed and hovered over him,

planting dozens of slow kisses on his lips, before going to the bathroom to get a washcloth.

He watched me, his eyes drowsy, as I cleaned him with the warm cloth. His brow furrowed, and he toyed with his nipple ring, his tone pensive. “Candy.”

“What, bebé?” I stood and crossed to the bathroom again, tossing the washcloth into the laundry hamper.

“Before we go to sleep....” He pulled the covers up over himself, hugging them around his chest.

“What?” Sliding next to him, I took him in my arms and snuggled into a comfortable position, straining into his warm, flaccid dick.

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

“Jesu Cristo, Carlos.” I buried my face in the hollow of his shoulder. “You’re determined to put a damper on things. Chico, not now. Please.”

“But—”

“Not now.”

I simply didn’t want to hear anything negative, refused to accept that there could *be* anything negative. In my life, I faced unpleasantness every day and handled it with businesslike practicality, but Carlos was another matter. A matter of the heart—a heart that foolishly tried to avoid anything that might bring darkness to my light.

“*Now*, Candy.” Frustration spiked his voice, and he pumped his fist on my chest. “You won’t listen to me. I—”

“I love you, mi amor. I don’t want to hear it.” Drawing him closer, I put two fingers over his lips. “Do you love me?”

He nodded and mumbled *yes* beneath my fingers.

I continued, “Then you can’t do anything to turn me against you, bebé. No more bad talk. Forget the owl omen. All right?”

“It’s not—”

“Shh.” I tapped my fingers over his mouth. “No.”

Forsaking whatever thought stewed in his gut, he sighed and pressed his face into my chest. His lips caressed the base of my throat, and he murmured, “Whatever I do, Candy. Someday if you end up hating me, just remember. *Es mi vida*. You are my life.”

THE usual Sunday crowd filled El Mercado. Bright sun and vibrant colors danced before my eyes, and the shops brimmed with goods—pottery, stained glass, piñatas, statues and figurines, dolls, puppets, jewelry. Aromas from restaurants and bakeries wafted through the huge market, and red, green, and white streamers formed a festive canopy above the aisles. Merchants and craftsmen—artists, glassblowers, pottery makers, musicians—offered happy smiles to Jesse and me, and many called out our names.

It was a happy day for me, my heartbeat wild with excitement. Digging into my pocket, I pulled out a small black jeweler’s box. I had to look at it once more—a gift for Carlos I’d picked up while in town. Today marked an anniversary—it had been two months since he’d moved in with me. Whether it would be a big deal for him didn’t matter. It was a milestone for me because, in spite of his misgivings, his obvious discomfort and insistence that he

would bring me trouble, we'd made it for two wonderful months of heaven.

"Again?" Jesse drew on the straw of his drink, shaking his head. "Are you expecting it to change in your pocket or something?"

I shrugged and slid off the lid to peek into the box. I sighed. "I like to look at it." Throwing him an unsure sideways glance, I asked, "He'll like it, no?"

Jesse took the box from me. Still sucking on his drink, he raised a brow and scrutinized the custom-made platinum-and-diamond, dove-shaped earring that nestled in the velvet depths. "Sure. He'll like it." He handed the box back to me. "The kid's right about one thing, though, Jefe."

"What?"

"You *are* a fucking sissy." His shoulders heaved with a quiet chuckle, and he tossed his drink into a trashcan.

"Fuck you," I growled, sliding the box with care back into my pocket. "I even wear an earring."

"Yeah, but to give your amor an earring for... what is it... your second month anniversary?" He pursed his lips. "So much the girl."

"Like I said...." Waving him off, I laughed. "Fuck you."

"The kid has turned you into a chiquita."

"It's love, Jesse. Love does that." Punching his arm, I teased, "Come on. Have you never been in love, muchacho?"

"Too much fucking to be had, amigo, to mess it up with love shit." He held up his hands, hunching his shoulders. "I'm just saying. This Carlos—"

"Here we go again." I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t listen, then.”

“I know what you’re going to say. And you can fuck off.”

I picked up my pace, trying to leave him behind in the crowd. Irritation set in my gut now. Jesse took every opportunity, every opening, to warn me of his vibes about Carlos—gut instincts, he said, that my lover wasn’t who he claimed to be, that he was on some mysterious agenda, out to get me.

The density of the shoulder-to-shoulder shoppers didn’t allow me to put much distance between Jesse and me.

At my side once more, he cupped my elbow. “All right, Jefe. Sorry.”

Wrenching free of his grasp, I hissed, “I swear, Jesse, you’re jealous or something.”

“Jealous?” He clapped his hand on his chest. “You’re shitting me, right?”

“*You tell me.*” I swung to face him, to glare at him. People threw disgruntled frowns, maneuvering around us. “You won’t leave it alone about Carlos. What exactly *is* your problem with him?”

Nudging me to walk, he said, “Why won’t you let me check and find out? I don’t know what it is, Jefe, but I’m telling you. Something’s not right about him.”

I stopped again. “As if you haven’t been *already* trying to snoop around about him.”

Jesse didn’t reply, but by the lowering of his eyes, I knew I was right.

“Oh, Jesu Cristo.” I slowly shook my head. “See?” I shoved him. “And what have you found, eh? Nothing!”

His gaze caught mine. “I’m right, Jefe. I’m right.” Glancing to the colorful Mexican flags and banners above us, he sighed. “You’ll see in time. You’ll see.”

“I don’t want to hear any more about it.” I clutched his shoulder. “Comprende?”

“Sí.” He surrendered, walking ahead of me, waving his hands. Pausing, an apologetic smile in his eyes—the look of an old friend who concedes for the sake of his compadres, even when it goes against his gut—Jesse pretended to be interested. “So when are you going to give him this gift, Jefe?”

He merely humored me, and I felt silly now.

“Tonight. We’re going to the riverwalk. I’ve reserved a hotel room.”

Lifting a brow, he cocked his head to one side, once more with feigned interest. “That’ll be nice.”

I’d known Jesse too long to think he would idly protest something unless he sincerely believed it would hurt to me. As a true friend, out of loving loyalty, he did periodically voice his apprehension, but the patience in his eyes told me he also had my back, no matter what, if I ignored him. And this time, he accepted with reluctance the fact that I did choose to discount his concerns.

An elderly merchant waved me to the entrance of her shop, which teemed with colorful handmade ceramics and glass items. “Buenos días, Señor Gonzalez,” she called, her onyx eyes twinkling, wrinkles fanning out over her otherwise smooth cheeks.

I didn't know her, but it didn't strike me as odd that she called me by name. Many people recognized me.

"Buenos días, senora." I nodded and started to pass.

She gingerly picked up a beautiful gold, intricately carved owl figurine and held it out to me. "Brand new, señor, to my shop." Her bony, weathered fingers caressed the shiny bird. "Lechuza. Is it not pretty?"

My heart seemed to stop beating for a moment. I nodded. "Sí. Very pretty."

"Buy for a lover? It will bring good luck," she beckoned, winking.

"No." Grasping Jesse's arm to steer him away with me, I smiled to the vendor. "Thank you, señora. No lechuza today."

I'd finally convinced Carlos of how silly his worry of the lechuza—which continued to haunt my patio nightly—was, and I didn't need a gold idol of the damn creature to stir his trepidation to the surface again.

Not tonight.

Chapter Ten

EVEN amidst the crowded nightlife on the riverwalk, people trained admiring gazes on Carlos. How could they not? Clad—much dressier than usual—in white linen pants and a black silk shirt that highlighted his glistening platinum hair, he was stunning. In a rare act of grudging capitulation, only to make me happy, he'd allowed me to buy the outfit, and I'd chosen well.

His extraordinary appearance combined with the romantic atmosphere—twinkling lights and mariachi music wafting on the gentle evening breeze—brought a swell to my chest, not to mention my cock. I, like the admiring passersby, couldn't take my eyes from him. My Carlos, an elegant, dark panther prowling the San Antonio night scene.

The last time I'd been to the riverwalk had been with Jorge. Remembering that had been the night Carlos returned to my life, the date that marked this anniversary, the thought sparked an inward grin. Maybe Jesse was right. Maybe it was silly to celebrate the occasion. I didn't care. I was happy.

The waiter seated us near the river's edge, and Carlos eased into his chair, carefully placing a Walmart sack he'd been carrying on the table. He stared dreamily into the reflection of hundreds of lights dancing off the gently moving water.

I stared at Carlos.

Sensing he was being watched, he raised his gaze to me. He should have been used to my admiring him, but he blushed anyway. “You’re making me self-conscious. You know I don’t like dressing up.”

My fingers toyed along the thin line of grout between the tabletop tiles. “I’m sorry. You look very good, chico.”

He tugged at the cuff of the shirt. “All dolled up, I feel so—”

“It pleases me.” The sincerity, the pleasure in my voice surprised me. “You’re so beautiful. My heart is happy tonight, bebé.”

Apparently it touched him. A tender smile filled his eyes, and he rested his elbows on the table, propping his chin on clasped hands. “You look pretty fucking good yourself, Candy.”

“Thank you.”

“You draw so much attention wherever you go.” He glanced around the busy sidewalk, the restaurant’s multicolored lights sparkling in his dark eyes. Returning his focus to me, he said, “That makes me proud.”

“If anybody’s looking, it’s at you, mi amor.”

“Sure. Whatever.” He blushed again.

Leaning forward, I murmured, “Can you not see how beautiful you are?” Every detail of his face, his body, which I’d memorized since I’d first seen him, sent wonderful palpitations to my heart and warmth to my groin. “All day, every day, all I can see, whether you’re with me or not, is your face in my mind. And then all I can think of is

touching you, making love to you. Me vuelves loco. You make me crazy.”

The smoldering brown gaze pierced me, roamed every inch of my face. “How crazy?”

Burning up under the intensity of his stare, I pulled back in the chair. “Crazy enough to think about forgetting dinner and... well.... There’s all the time in the world.”

Excitement flashed in his eyes, and he picked up the sack. “I have something for you.” He slid his hand into the bag and pulled out a CD. Holding it to his lips for a moment, he handed it to me, and the happiness in his face, so simple and boyish, melted my heart.

La Paloma. He’d bought a new La Paloma CD. Love swept through me, bringing tears to my eyes.

“Bebé.” My fingers lovingly brushed over the case. “Thank you, mi querido. After my baby-ass tantrum, breaking the other one, I don’t deserve this.”

Tucking his chin, he winked over the rims of his glasses. “No, you don’t.” He paused as the waitress placed menus in our hands.

The very pretty girl, her hands clasped behind her back, rested a genial—though somewhat coy—smile on Carlos and asked what we wanted to drink. I told her two Coronas. Nodding and throwing another bold, appreciative glance at my lover, the young lady thanked us and sauntered away.

Carlos hadn’t seemed to notice the flirty employee. He picked up the conversation where he’d left off. “Like I said, you *don’t* deserve a new CD. But you’re the only man who’s ever played music for me when he fucked me.”

I laughed hard. “Ah, chico, I think you’re *trying* to be romantic. But you make me sound very pathetic.” Funny thing, though. Carlos, in sharp contrast to his streetwise persona, was the most romantic man I’d ever known. His drawings, his poetic talk, just his pure sensuality. Everything about him painted a picture of beauty, idyllic eroticism.

Fire blazed behind his wide eyes, and he lurched to touch my hand. “No. No. I... I love that you play your... song for me.”

“Thank you, then, bebé, for La Paloma.” I laid the CD on the table. “I can play it every night for you now,” I playfully threatened.

His tongue swiped, languorous, seductive, across his bottom lip. “And that means you have to fuck me every night.”

The little tease. The silky touch of his finger sent pleasure coursing through my veins like a powerful opiate. “You think you can stand being fucked every night, chico?”

A brow shot up. “I’d give it my best shot.”

The cute waitress returned to place our beers on the table and take our orders. At the sight of Carlos’s hand on mine, the sex in both our eyes, she cooled considerably as she listened to our selections. When she headed back to the interior of the restaurant, I sucked in a deep breath and pulled the jeweler’s box from my pocket.

“I have something for you, chico.” Reaching across the table, I handed the box to him. How clumsy I felt. Romance ruled my heart but never showed itself very well in my actions. I felt I was too old-world for a contemporary man

such as Carlos. Just as his fingers touched the lid to open it, I blurted, “You’ll probably laugh, Carlos. It’s... it’s.... You might think it’s silly.”

Upon opening the box, his hand shot to his chest, and he swallowed hard. “Candy....”

“It *is* silly, isn’t it?”

“Oh, no, no.” His mouth gaped open, and he brushed a hand through his hair. Shaking his head slowly, he whispered, “It’s... it’s... a dove. It’s the most—”

“Listen, you don’t have to—”

Carlos bounded from his chair and cornered the table so fast I didn’t have time to react. With his arms wrapped around my neck, he pulled me close, and I breathed in his spicy, earthy scent.

“You like it, then?” I wanted to cry, I was so happy that he was pleased.

Pulling back, his arms still circling my neck, he sighed. “I’ve never seen anything so beautiful in my life, Candy.” His voice, so low, caressing, whispered close to my ear, “I love you so fucking much, Candelario Gonzalez. I love you so goddamn much.”

The sidewalk was crowded with customers, and they surely gawked at us, but I didn’t care. Love for Carlos gushed from my heart, and all I wanted to do, needed to do, was hold him, touch his lips. Although the thoughts that swirled in my soul were passionate and lyrical, the words that spilled from my mouth were idiotic. “So I don’t need to take it back? Well, it was custom made, and—”

“I love it, *cariño*.” Oblivious to curious gazes, he pressed his lips, which tasted of salty tears, to mine. “I love

it so much.” He straightened and leaned back against the table.

“Then you’ll wear it for me tonight?” I rested my hand on his waist.

“I’ll wear it for you tonight.” Hunger darkened his eyes, softened his voice. “Let’s eat fast, then, so we can—”

“Nah, chico.”

“No?” He cocked his head to the side.

“Nah. I reserved a room at Mansion Del Rio.”

Excitement sparked in his eyes. “Ah.”

My sexual juices were stirring, my cock swelling, at the vision of making love to Carlos high above the river with the nightlife pulsing below us. “Would you like that?”

Squinting, he eyed me. “Can I order a banana split from room service in the middle of the night?”

How could he turn even the word *banana split* into an aphrodisiac? Dios, how my dick ached.

“You can order anything you want in the middle of the night.”

“Can I order you to fuck me in the middle of the night?”

“You can.” Resisting the urge to pull him onto my lap, I growled, “But by the middle of the night, mi amor, you may be begging me to stop fucking you.”

For a moment our gazes locked, and we said nothing, fucking each other with our gazes. As though coming out of a trance, he lowered to his haunches, resting his hand on the table to steady himself. “Put it in now.”

“Put... what... in now?” My mind lagged behind his, still writhing with him on an imaginary bed.

“The earring.” He reached to remove a silver stud from his earlobe. “I want you to put it on me.” Laying the discarded earring on the table, he snorted. “Sort of like getting engaged.”

“Getting engaged, eh?” I pulled the diamond dove out of the box, removed the back from the post, and bent to insert the earring. Each time I touched Carlos was like the first time, and the light stubble on his cheek, his smooth skin against my fingers, sent shivers through me. “You realize, bebé, in my old-fashioned world, that means I own you.”

As I put the earring on his lobe, he nuzzled into my hand and purred, “You already own me, Más Chingon.” His hand covered mine.

“Good.” I helped him to stand and scoured the restaurant patio. “Where the hell is our food? I’m ready to go.”

Carlos returned to his seat, and I stared, mesmerized, as the new diamond in his ear sparkled in the festive lights.

Cognizant of my gaze, he touched the glittering dove and caressed it. He mouthed the words *thank you*.

I took a tortilla chip from the basket and broke off a piece, putting it in my mouth. There seemed to be nothing to say, no need. All I wanted to do was stare at him, drink in his beauty. I just smiled and murmured, “Te amo, mi amor.”

“Te amo.”

Before I could say another word, my cell vibrated on my belt. I checked the caller ID. *Jesse*. I opened it and answered, “Qué?”

Jesse immediately blurted, “Before I tell you, you need to know that I didn’t go looking for this. It’s just a coincidence.”

Those words told me the call had something to do with Carlos, and my heart pumped hard, causing my throat to constrict. In a rusty voice, I asked, “What is it, Jesse?”

“Elias Rojas came by La Banda last night, and—”

“This is about *Elias Rojas*? You’re calling me about—”

“Shh!” Jesse hissed. “Don’t say his name where Carlos can hear you!”

“I thought for a minute you were going to bring up... well, you know... the subject you obsess over.”

Jesse advanced, cautious. “Jefe, it is about Carlos.”

“I don’t get it.” Whatever it was, I didn’t *want* to get it.

“Rojas is looking for you. He insists you meet with him.”

I brushed my fingers through my hair. “You’re losing me, mi amigo. What does he have to do with—”

“He says, Candelario, that he has some information about your pretty amor Carlos that you will find very interesting.”

Closing my eyes tight, I tried to focus. “Jesse. Wait a minute.” I scrubbed my forehead hard. “What the fuck would he be talking about.... What would he....” The words jumbled in my head, and I tried to discuss this without Carlos hearing. “Why would *he* be discussing... *this* person?”

“It seems, Jefe, that Rojas *knows*... this person... your Carlos.”

Sweat broke out on my forehead. I swallowed hard and steeled my nerves, knowing Rojas might only want to tell me something I already knew—Carlos’s drug arrest, maybe. “Tell him to fuck off.”

“Jefe.”

“No, really, Jesse. Tell him to fuck off. I’m not interested in his petty gossip. The fucking little snitch.” Fingering the saltshaker, I added, “He probably found out about... well....” I stopped in case Carlos heard me. “And he thinks I don’t already know.”

“It isn’t about Carlos’s drug arrest, Candy.”

My pulse raced again. “Then—”

“Candy, he says he knows *who* your... boyfriend is.”

“Bullshit. What does that mean?”

“He says Carlos is a cop.”

My brain short-circuited, going blank. Every inch of my body went numb. Somehow I managed to say, “You’d better be goddamn careful what you say, Jesse. If you’re shooting off your mouth, just repeating....” I had to remind myself Carlos could hear.

“Candelario, do you think I would play around with you like this?” He paused. “You know I wouldn’t.”

He was right. I smiled at Carlos, who watched me, his face a mask of curiosity.

“I’ll call you later, Jesse. I can’t talk right now... too noisy out here.”

“Sí. Call me when Carlos is not around. And Candelario?”

“Yeah?”

“You know Rojas could be full of shit, right?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Don’t worry for now. I’ll keep digging.”

“Yes. Please, Jesse.” I hung up.

When the waitress placed our meals on the table, I studied the steaming platter of enchiladas. I feigned cheerfulness, trying to keep the tension from my voice. “Let’s eat, chico.”

He picked up his silverware and pulled the paper band from the wrapping. Fixing his gaze on his plate, he asked nonchalantly, “Trouble with Jesse?”

“No, chico. Just the usual shit.”

“You just sounded.... Well, you sounded upset.”

“Nah.” I smiled, forking an enchilada, and tried to meet his gaze, which remained locked on the plate. “Nothing for you to worry about. Eh?”

Carlos—my precious corazón—just shrugged. He glanced into my eyes for a moment, and I was sure I saw uneasiness behind his smile.

JUST beyond the balcony, San Antonio glistened like a million jewels against a black velvet backdrop, and music from clubs and street bands wafted on the balmy night air. The city still buzzed, but we were perched far above the activity, observing it from our own private sanctuary.

Trepidation put a strain on my enjoyment, but until I knew whether Jesse's information was true, I refused to let it completely spoil the evening.

Carlos bent over the railing, his black silk robe billowing gently in the breeze at his ankles. The kimono—another gift he reluctantly allowed me to buy for him—draped his body and cascaded over his delectable ass, offering a hint of the ridge between his cheeks.

I stood behind him, my mind trying to shift back into focus, to refrain from seeing the handsome figure on the balcony as a stranger instead of the man I loved. The cocky young man who'd captured my heart, and not a cop.

Carlos sighed and glanced over his shoulder. "Thank you, mi querido. This is beautiful."

I moved closer, circled my arms around his middle, and pulled him against me. Oh, how soft he was all wrapped in sensual silk, how good he smelled. "Are you happy, bebé?" I edged my fingers under the lapels at his neck and tugged the robe away from his shoulders. "*Tell* me you're happy."

He stretched, nuzzling into me. "Sí. I'm happy."

Gently forcing the robe open, I bared him to the teeming city twenty-two floors below. "And you wouldn't lie about that, would you, mi corazón?"

"No, never." Clutching at the lapels, he tried to cover his nakedness.

"No, you wouldn't, would you?" I forced the robe open even more. "I'm glad, bebé."

He stiffened. "People can see us."

“Hmm?” I licked over the small, hard surface of the diamond dove. “Let them see.”

He swallowed hard, resisting me. “It’s... this indecent exposure.” A feeble chuckle escaped him.

“So?” I slipped my fingers around his erection, fondling it, rubbing the thick hair at his base. “I don’t see a cop anywhere. Do *you*?”

I smoothed my hands over his chest, my palms lingering over the nipple rings, and I enjoyed the taut but supple muscles rippling beneath satiny, dark skin. I eased the silk down his arms, letting the robe float silently to the floor at his feet. Now he stood, completely naked, with nothing but my arms to cover his body.

“Oh, God,” he whimpered, pressing into me. “Not out in the open, like... oh, fuck....”

“Relax, chico, nobody can see you,” I cooed, and my hand retuned to its favorite spot—his cock.

“But... what if... somebody has... binoculars or just... really good... vision?” He put up a feeble protest, but judging by his fully erect penis that was hot in my fist, he actually enjoyed the titillation of his body, his sex, being exposed to onlookers.

“Then they’ll just see my hands feeling you up, bebé.” I dug my teeth lightly into the slope of his shoulder. “They’ll see you cum for me.”

“Candy....”

My tongue lapped at the goose bumps on his neck, my gaze scouring the movement far below on the riverwalk. “You want to cum for me, bebé?”

What if inquisitive eyes *could* see from the crowd below? I'd never figured myself a sexual extrovert, so my excitement over possibly being seen surprised but also aroused me immensely.

His slender fingers wrapped around mine. "Harder," he begged.

I thrust from behind while I fisted him and watched his body undulating with my movements. Precum leaked, and knowing how close he was drove me crazy. "Let it go, cariño. Cum for me."

"Please," he cried, almost under his breath, his hips pumping, fucking my hand. He groped my arms, and his fingernails dug into my flesh.

He shuddered into his orgasm, and I gently fisted until he was spent, then turned him to face me and enveloped him in my robe.

Sated, he gazed up at me, serenity glowing soft in his brown eyes. He scrunched closer to me and laughed. "You turned me into a pervert."

"Mmm." I rested my chin on his mussed hair. "I love my little pervert."

Squinting, he smirked. "You were getting off to it, too."

"So I was." My arms bundled him tighter. "But it wasn't as bad as it seemed. You came very quickly. So it only *seemed* like forever."

"I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for, bebé?"

"For coming... so...." Dark lashes lowered over his eyes.

"Listen to me, Carlos." I touched a finger under his chin, coaxing his gaze to mine. "Oh, bebé, I love how you

cum.” I kissed his forehead. “I love how quiet and soft you get off. It turns me on, makes me crazy for you.”

“I never came this fast, Candy, for other men.” He clamped his teeth down on his bottom lip. “It’s just that you....” Glancing off to a chair in the corner of the patio, he murmured, “It’s just that you get to me.” He returned his gaze to mine. “Do you realize that you can even look at me sometimes, and I nearly shoot off in my fucking pants?”

“Really? I didn’t realize I had such powers.”

He nodded. “From the first time I saw you.” His attention swung to the chair again. “Fuck. Your eyes, so strong but so sweet, and... damn... your body. And when you first looked at me....” Stopping, he just shook his head.

“I’ve told you a million times, chico, that I wanted you the second I *did* lay eyes on you. And it’s only gotten stronger.”

“Let me make love to you.” He squirmed deeper into my embrace.

“Nah.” Rocking him in my arms, I said, “You know what? I just want to hold you, look at you.”

“But your—”

“Yeah, my prick is hard as a rock.”

“So—” He shrugged.

“So my hard-on can wait a little. Besides, you wanted to order a banana split from room service.”

Did those words come from *my* mouth? I needed him, and my dick *was* rigid, but oddly, I desperately wanted to bury myself in his beauty, not his ass, right then. The night was so good, so right, but the anxiety over Jesse’s information brought out the need to hold Carlos, as though

somehow embracing him would make all the doubt go away.

I didn't have a problem with Carlos being a police officer. I even figured, if he'd lied about it, maybe he had a good reason for keeping it from me, and we'd sort it out and deal with it. The issue that *did* bother me, though, was the fact that he worked two part-time jobs, which happened to be places I frequented. And since he spent so much time at these jobs, he could hardly be a beat cop. He was more than likely undercover. *That* bothered me, and my mind trekked back to how much information he'd seemed to know about me before we slept together. At the time, his in-depth knowledge only amused me. Now I wondered.

We stood on the balcony for a little while, swaying in each other's arms, letting the mild night air cloak us, the city noises serenade us. Finally, we stepped into the suite, shutting the rest of the world out. I lounged on the ivy-patterned bedspread, relishing the cool fabric through the thin silk of my robe, while Carlos called room service. He ordered his banana split and a beer for me.

I sipped the beer from a much-too-elegant crystal glass and enjoyed Carlos's boyish enjoyment of his ice cream. Every move he made, every cute grin added to the huge pile of reasons why I loved him but also compiled the list of things that would kill me to lose.

When Carlos finished the dessert, he climbed into the bed, pressed next to me, and soon fell asleep. I toiled my fingers over the planes of his hip and thigh through the black silk, then guided the edge of the robe away to expose his nude body. Even at the sight of the bronzed form, I still only wanted to savor the comeliness of him—the artistry of

his lines, brown nipples with the silver rings through them, perfectly shaped feet and hands, the dark thatch of hair at his crotch, so inviting, and the beautiful cock that rested against his thigh. *Dios, I could never bear to lose him.*

While he dozed, I finished the beer. A tingle raced through me—that edgy feeling of being almost too happy, too in love, as though bliss teetered just out of reach on the edge of an abyss, threatening to vanish.

Too wired to sleep, I remained awake, propped on the pillows until the first hint of muted dawn bled through the window. The air conditioning had chilled the room during the night, and I’d covered Carlos, who snored quietly next to me.

I figured I’d try to sleep for a bit and burrowed into the pillows, snuggling close to Carlos. No sooner had my eyes closed than my cell vibrated on the bedside table. Damn.

Grabbing it, I flipped it open. “Sí, Jesse?”

“Are you near Carlos?”

“Yes.” I struggled to a sitting position and slid my legs over the side of the bed. “Hold on. Let me go to the patio.” Tightening my robe, I stepped out onto the patio, then closed the sliding glass door. “Anything new, Jesse?”

“It’s coming in bits and pieces. What I’ve found out so far is this. Carlos *is* a cop.”

“For sure?”

“Sí. For sure.”

“He must be undercover, Jesse.”

Gradually the city woke, and lights began to sparkle across the sleepy horizon. Humidity already settled in the early morning air.

“He is.” Jesse cleared his throat. “I’m waiting to hear exactly what he’s working on, but I *do* know he’s been brought down here from El Paso. And his name—”

“Oh, fuck. What do you *mean*, his *name*?” Slight nausea swept over me, and I bent to lean on the metal railing. “Carlos Alvarez isn’t even his fucking name?”

A brief silence came from the other end. “His real name is Ruben Vargas.”

“Jesse, I *can* handle him being a cop.”

“Okay.”

“I’m not making any judgments. Depending on what he’s working on, he might not be *able* to reveal his identity.”

“Okay.” Too patronizing.

“I’ll be home this afternoon.”

“Okay. I’ll call you, Candelario, when I hear more.”

“I love him, Jesse.”

“I know.”

Without even thinking, I disconnected the call. I returned to the room and laid the cell on the table, then looked at Carlos. He still slept peacefully, hunched under the covers. Beautiful, so beautiful and tranquil. The diamond glistened on his earlobe.

I sank onto the bed and turned on my side, studying him. My hand trembled, touching his cheek. *Bebé, what am I going to find out about you?* For the first time in memory, I wanted to pray, to beg God not to take this happiness away from me.

Chapter Eleven

DOWNSTAIRS, I tended to the bill, and Carlos waited in the sun that filtered through the lobby windows. The hotel's atmosphere was a romantic siren, beckoning us to stay. Afternoon light glistened on the river, reflecting ribbons of color that danced on the luxurious brick-and-whitewashed walls and the dark hardwood floor. If I hadn't had so much business waiting at home, I'd have booked one more night, just to bask a little longer in the city's strange, beautiful mixture of serenity and festive frenzy.

The desk clerk slid a copy of the receipt across the polished marble surface and flashed a cultured beauty-pageant smile. Her sleek, easy blondness matched her slow-cooked Texas drawl. "We're glad you enjoyed your stay, Mr. Gonzalez, and hope you'll come back soon."

"With *this* pretty scenery...." Bowing my head slightly and lifting a brow, I dispensed my very best old-world lothario charm. "I'm sure I *will* be back."

My grandfather told me, before I was even old enough to think of flirting, that nothing caused hearts to flutter like old-fashioned Latin cordiality spiced with flattery. He was right. The clerk—Jerri, her nametag proclaimed—tucked her chin and blushed. I often wondered what Grandfather would have thought, though, if I'd told him that this ancient art of Latino bewitchery worked on men as well.

Just as I tossed Jerri a parting smile and slid the folded receipt in my pocket, my cell phone vibrated. I glanced at the caller ID. Jesse again.

I flipped the cell open. “Si?”

Silence followed by a deep sigh on the other end. Jesse’s tone was heavy. “Candelario.”

“I’m headed home. I’ll be there in—”

“Are you in the car? Is your amor bonito right there?”

“No, he’s....” I scanned the lobby. Carlos remained by the windows, out of earshot, but I lowered my voice anyway. “I’m checking out of the hotel. He can’t hear me. Have you found out more?”

“I found out what Carlos is working on.”

My gut wrenched, and I glanced toward the windows where my lover stood. I could only whisper, hoarse, “What?”

Riding on a huge sigh, Jesse’s words finally strained through the cell. “Jefe, he’s investigating Teirso Flores.”

Although my legs threatened to give out under me, I made it to the lobby entrance and beckoned to Carlos from the door. “Chico, I’m going out here to take this call.”

He nodded, smiling, from across the elegant hardwood floor, and doubt washed over me—massive, aching uncertainty—wondering who the hell his beautiful face really belonged to. I returned his smile and stepped out to the sidewalk that bustled with uniformed valets and porters.

Sinking onto a bench, I sucked in a deep breath and coaxed my mind into focus. “Now, Jesse. Say that again.”

He'd obviously taken a moment to steel himself. The edginess had left his voice. "Carlos is investigating Teirso Flores."

I stared out to the parking lot, seeing nothing. Over the magnified rumble of idling cars in the circled drive and the pulse pounding in my ears, I struggled to make my voice audible. "This all seems impossible. I mean... well...." My brain scavenged for reasoning. "Fuck, Jesse, he was busted for cocaine. I checked it out myself. It was real. If he—"

"A fake arrest. A plant. To get in good with some crap-ass vatos in jail to get the shit on Flores."

"Rojas. The sneaky little snitch." The temperature seemed to have climbed hundreds of degrees in these few minutes. I swiped sweat from my forehead. "You've paid Rojas well, Jesse, not to squeal to Flores?"

"Of course."

"But *Carlos*, Jesse. *Carlos*. Could it be a mistake?"

"I'm still checking." To placate me, surely, he added gently, "You never know."

"I'm not going to say anything to him until we get home. I've got to think." I stood and headed for the lobby. "If it's true, I'll know by his reaction."

"Unless, Jefe, he's a very good actor."

"We'll see." Upon opening the door, the crisp, cool air from the lobby brushed my face. "I'm inside now, amigo. I'll talk to you later." I flipped the cell shut and clipped it to my belt. Dragging in a deep lungful of air, I started toward Carlos.

"Ready, chico?" I called to his back, unable to shake the feeling of approaching an alien.

He turned, and his face brightened, full of love. “Yes.”

I felt as though I shared the trip home with a hitchhiker, a total stranger. As I cruised along the interstate, smiling billboards drifted past me, advertising booze, soft drinks, the lottery, car dealerships—signs that proved life around me hadn’t changed but that chaos reigned in mine.

Carlos leaned back against the headrest, snoring quietly. A tiny smile touched the corners of his parted lips. Love pulsed hard in my heart.

My mind replayed the night in the shower, Carlos attempting to tell me something about himself. I had refused to listen. He must have been trying to tell me he was a cop.

Maybe if I hadn’t been so obsessed with him, I’d have questioned his daily activities. It never occurred to me to wonder what he did during the day, other than his work at the carwash and the restaurant—who he spoke to, what he did on his way to and from work.

I ruminated over his erratic behavior—especially the night he turned up out of nowhere at the ball park after a month’s absence. He’d admitted the drug bust—which, as it turns out, was fake. But why had he waited a month to return, and then only when he supposedly was being chased and afraid?

I glanced at him, and a chill darted up my back. *Ruben Vargas*. Who the fuck *are* you?

AFTER we returned home, Carlos showered and napped, and I paced the kitchen, a caged, nervous tiger.

The moment the cell rang, I snatched it from the counter. “Jesse?”

“Candelario....” Jesse’s voice quavered. In all the years I’d known him, in all the situations we’d weathered together, I’d never heard such uneasiness in his tone.

A chill streaked up my spine.

“Jesse?” I forced calm into my words. “Take it easy, amigo.” Scrubbing the tingle at the back of my neck, I prompted, “What have you found out?”

“Candy, I should come over, tell you in person, no?” He let out a jerky chuckle.

“Jesse. It’s not like you, amigo, to be so girlie. Just spit it out.”

I really didn’t want him to just spit it out. I knew, my soul knew, by his shakiness and hesitation that Jesse was about to tell me something that would hurt me. But I was a “just cut the fucking bullet out” type, and my heart pounded too hard to take much more suspense.

“Carlos is undercover to pump *you* for information about Flores.”

“You goddamn cocksucker. You’re lying.”

Jesse said nothing. His silence—his sympathetic way of letting me absorb the news—shouted the truth of his words. I loved him for his loyalty and hated him at the same time for shattering my world. An argument gurgled to my throat but died. I knew Jesse *wouldn’t* lie to me, but there was the possibility that his sources might have fed him a line.

“Jesse, if this is true... and I say *if* this is true, why *me?*”

“*This*, Candelario, is the part that Rojas was so anxious to tell you.”

Control, sparked by self-preservation, returned to my mind. “Go ahead. Tell me.”

“They seem to think that, since you left Flores, you’ll run at the mouth and feed information to them.”

Emotions rolled through me like a freakish roulette wheel—fury, betrayal, ungodly hurt, and stubborn love that desperately tried to override it all. To my surprise, though, I laughed. “This is a joke, yes?”

“No joke.”

My blood turned to ice water, gushing through my veins and freezing my heart. I tried to speak, but my lips were numb.

“Candelario?” Jesse called, his voice millions of miles away, growing more distant through a thick fog.

“I’ll handle it, Jesse.” I disconnected the call.

My world, my heart, crumbled. Leaning on the kitchen counter, I closed my eyes tight and pressed my hands to my temples as though to somehow hold in my anger, but I was too far gone.

Finally, I relaxed a little and opened my eyes. I hadn’t noticed a cake sitting on the counter. One of Aunt Dahlia’s cakes, a big fancy thing, one with gobs of whipped cream on the top and piles of strawberries. No store-bought sweets for Aunt Dahlia. No. Everything by hand.

Why was I thinking about a goddamn cake when my life was in such upheaval?

I shivered with fury at the thought of Carlos being in my home, under my trusting roof, with the intention of digging me about my association with Teirso Flores.

Carlos had seemed sincere, confiding to me that he knew my stance on Flores and drugs. And the whole time, while smiling and speaking to me of love and respect, he'd been spying on me, gathering information for the cops.

Now, looking back, I felt foolish for my fawning, childish happiness. I'd lost my pride where Carlos was concerned, and I did feel foolish, but I didn't regret it. Swimming in his beauty had been wonderful, had filled me to the brim with a joy I'd never known. To walk away from this utopia would be the most difficult thing I'd ever done, but I had no choice.

I smelled Carlos's aftershave before he even entered in the kitchen, and it took every iota of willpower in me not to look up. If I *did* look in his brown eyes, I'd see Ruben Vargas, not my Carlos. But, involuntarily, I turned to face him anyway.

His smile lit the kitchen. Oblivious to the impending storm, he seemed so happy. He glanced at the cake, and his shoulders slumped. "I meant for Aunt Dahlia to put the cake away. It was supposed to be a surprise for when we got home. Our anniversary." As usual, he brightened again. "Do you like it?" Tightening the sash of his robe, he crossed the floor, his bare feet padding quietly on the tile, and stood beside me. He touched my arm. "What's wrong?"

My muscles tightened under his hand, and I turned my back to him.

He pulled away.

Trying to stay calm, I clenched my jaw so hard my head hurt. As softly as I could, but still firm, I managed to say without a quiver of fury in my voice, “You have to leave.” The words nearly brought tears to my eyes. Saying them hurt like sticking my hand in boiling oil.

“What?” Oh, Dios, the surprise in his tone.

Without even looking, I knew his face had gone white.

“You heard me. You have to go.” I thought my heart would burst out of my chest.

“I—”

Glancing sideways at him, I whispered, “*Officer Vargas.*”

Looking into his face was a mistake. The shock in his eyes nearly killed me—it verified the horrible truth I fought so helplessly not to believe.

His lips formed the word *Candy*, but no sound came out. Clutching the hair at his temples, he finally stammered, “I can explain, Candy, it’s not how—”

That did it. Not that goddamn *it’s not how it looks* shit. I swung around.

The way he stepped back, his eyes wide, you’d have thought fire shot from my eyes. Maybe it did. I was that mad. Crazy mad.

Words came easier now, flowing hot and fast with rage. “How could you, you lying little sack of goddamn shit? How *could* you?” Grabbing a handful of silk at the neck of his robe, I pulled him close, got right in his scared face. “I love you. I trusted you. I brought you into my fucking home! You *asked* to come to my home!” I couldn’t breathe.

Everything went white around me like a horrible, blinding snowstorm. “You used me.”

“No, Candy, I—” Tears swam in his eyes.

Normally, his crying got to me. Not now. “No, no, no!” My voice was so loud, it seemed to ring off the pots and pans that hung above the island. “Don’t say anything! You don’t talk! There’s not a fucking thing you can say!”

“Please.” His warm hands touched my face.

“No.” I let go of the robe and pushed him away. He stumbled for a second but got his balance.

Tears ran down his cheeks now. “Candy, I swear, it’s not what you think.”

I shut him out. “You... have... to... go.”

“Please don’t make me go. Please.” Sobbing like a little kid, shoulders shaking hard, he pressed his hands to his face. “I love you.”

Dios, how my heart wanted to say I loved him, but I couldn’t. The words choked me. In fact, his betrayal stirred bitterness deep in my belly, and it writhed to obliterate all the love inside me.

He touched my arm again, and I yanked away.

To my surprise, he shouted, frantic, “No! I can’t leave you! I can’t! You can’t make me!”

Out of my mind, confused and filled with hurting love, I reached for Aunt Dahlia’s pretty cake and shoved it across the counter. I didn’t mean for it to hit Carlos, but he lunged for it, letting out a pitiful, piercing cry, and tried to catch it.

The plate shattered to smithereens on the floor, shards of glass flying across the tile, bouncing off the cabinets.

Carlos sank onto the tile, right in the middle of the mess. His slender body heaved with huge sobs, and he ridiculously tried to put the cake back together. He mumbled, “It was for our anniversary.” He broke off, burying his face in his hands, whipped cream and cake all over him now.

The way he worried over the fancy cake, all ruined on the floor, tried to rip my heart in two, but I reminded myself how he’d deceived me, and I couldn’t turn back.

He touched my leg, and cake got on my pants.

“Our anniversary,” I hissed. “What a fucking joke. The anniversary of what, you little shit? Two months of being lied to? Two months of spying?”

“No, you—”

“To think you smiled and made love to me, a regular little kitten, all the while poised to strike like a fucking deadly viper.”

“That’s not true, Candy.” His crying intensified, snot running from his nose, mingling in the icing.

“Well, you sneaky son of a bitch, you didn’t find anything, did you? I guess it was time to wrap up soon anyway, wasn’t it?” Grasping the damp hair at the nape of his neck, I yanked his head back, forcing him to look into my wrath. “Was it worth it, Carlos? Was it worth it, forcing yourself to fuck me? Eh?”

For a fleeting moment, sincere denial sparked in his eyes. “Oh, my God, Candy, I didn’t.... I wanted... I *want* you, I—”

A flitter of stupid gladness touched me, believing he really did want me, believing he hadn’t fucked me as part of

the job. But he'd still deceived me, and nothing else mattered. "Well, I was good for that, anyway, right?"

"Please, Candy, don't make me leave you," he pleaded, his voice so small.

"Get up." I released my grip on his hair.

"Please."

"I said get up." To see him groveling might have softened me yesterday, but today it only sent my frustration to a higher level. "Get your shit together and leave, Carlos. Ruben. Whatever the fuck your name really is."

"Candy." He buried his face in his hands, spreading cake and icing over his cheeks.

"I'm going upstairs." An unfamiliar paralysis oozed through my brain, and I found it easy to be indifferent to his beautiful, tear-stained face. "Be gone by the time I'm finished with my shower."

"God, Candy, please. Let me explain. You don't know what you're doing. You're wrong!"

Maybe God blessed me with this convenient numbness, a heavenly narcotic to make this bearable. Surprisingly calm, I smiled and said, "There's nothing to explain, mi amigo. It's over." I turned to leave the kitchen, to leave my beautiful Carlos behind.

I felt nothing as I climbed the stairs and felt even less as I turned on the power to the CD player to start *La Paloma*. Stretching out on the bed—the vast bed where Carlos and I had shared our love—I lay still and listened to the music, waiting for tears that I knew would inevitably come.

Not long after—or maybe it was an eternity—I heard his car start in the driveway. Maybe I shouldn't have gotten up, maybe I should have spared myself the pain, but I rose and crossed hesitantly to the window.

The little white car backed out of the drive, its headlights dancing off the shrubs, and Carlos glanced up to my window. I didn't know if he saw me. Sorrow, so horrible and heavy, brought spasms to my chest as the little piece-of-shit car sputtered in the street and carried my Carlos, my life, away into the night.

Sinking to the floor, I huddled against the wall, and the tears came.

Chapter Twelve

WHO can figure the way a heart works? Certainly not me. If anyone had told me that I would still love Carlos so much even after knowing he'd deceived me, I'd have called them loco. But I *did* still love him. I missed him.

A week had passed since his little Honda had vanished into the night, and although I believed he was gone for good, I refused to drag my heart on the ground. I dove headfirst into business, pushing myself from sunup to sundown until I was too exhausted to miss him. My bed was a lonely place, but I managed to stay so tired that the empty space didn't keep me awake.

The first Sunday after Carlos's departure, Jesse urged me to accompany him into town. I declined at first, but he insisted, and I had to admit I enjoyed getting away from work, relaxing in the quiet laziness of the day.

We drove to a tiny taquería hidden amidst a string of storefronts and found a little wrought-iron table on the cozy, shady patio. I closed my eyes and enjoyed a gentle breeze that slipped through the ivy trellis, sending a colorful array of overhead piñatas and streamers dancing. Lively music filled the air, the beer was cold, and the homemade tacos were fantastic. It was a good day. My spirits began to lift, and I felt happy for the first time since Carlos had left, which put a smile on Jesse's lips.

A huge, toothy grin spread across his face, and he lifted his bottle, clinking it to mine. “Saludo, mi mejor amigo! My good friend has returned.”

“Saludo.”

He rose and wrapped his arms around my neck in a quick, tight embrace, then sank back into the chair. Nodding, he rested a gaze on me, and a silent declaration of our bond passed between us.

The wind ruffled Jesse’s close-cropped jet black hair, and his Adam’s apple bobbed as he took a long swig of beer. With a pleased sigh, he set the bottle on the table and shifted in the chair to face me.

“Candelario.” He touched a finger to his lips, his dark eyes narrowing under a crinkled brow.

“I don’t like that look.” I chuckled. “I know it well. What’s the matter?”

“I’ve got to show you something.”

Leaning back in the chair, I eyed him, quizzical. “Something bad?”

He shrugged. “Depends.”

I pursed my lips. “Okay. So....”

He slid an envelope from his breast pocket and pressed it to his chest. “This came in the mail. Usually I open your shit, but this one I didn’t touch.”

I reached for the envelope, but he placed a hand on my wrist.

“What’s the big deal?” I rolled my eyes. “And since when did you *not* open the mail?”

“Since it was *this*.” Cocking a brow, he handed the small envelope to me.

I took one more sip of beer, set the bottle down, and grabbed the envelope. It was addressed, in sloppy handwriting, to my attention at the office, with a return address that simply said *Carlos*. My pulse galloped.

“Jesse....” The sight of Carlos’s name scrawled on the front triggered a wild quickening in my belly and brought perspiration to my forehead. “When... when did this come?”

“Yesterday’s mail, Jefe. I found it this morning.” Holding up his hands, he quickly added, “Please don’t be pissed at me for not giving it to you sooner. I wanted to get you away from work.”

“No, no, I’m not pissed, *mi amigo*.”

Happy music crooned quietly over the intercom, and the lush green leaves on the trellis seemed to frolic with the lively beat, so removed from the confusion in my head. I chugged back the rest of the beer, then slid my finger along the seal of the envelope.

The letter was handwritten on notebook paper with the holes ragged but still intact. I took a deep breath and started to read.

Mi Querido,

I don’t know if you’ll ever get this but I’m going to write it anyway. I started to tell you not to try to find me—hahaha—but then it hit me that’s the last thing you want to do anyway. And I don’t blame you. I’ve done a terrible thing to you. Well not terrible like you think but I guess lying is bad no matter how you look at it. But do you remember that I tried to tell

you about myself? And that you wouldn't listen? I guess I didn't push it because I knew you'd kick my ass out if I did tell you. Either way I was going to be gone and I guess I just tried to hold on as long as I could.

Candy, I can't change what I've done but I kept thinking about it and knew I had to tell you the truth because it wasn't at all like you think. What you don't know is why I left you the first time and went back to my apartment. I knew I loved you way too much by then and it was better to leave than to love you and use you in my investigation at the same time.

The good thing is—the more I knew you the more I knew you really were a good man, you had a good soul. Of course I still had to zero in on Flores and work at bringing him in, but I just couldn't do it by seducing you to get information.

This is the most important thing—all along Candy I really really wanted you. I never faked that. I STILL want you. No matter what I've done one thing is true. I love you so much I could die. I really really love you, Candy. I love you so much that sometimes I wish I'd never met you because to lose you hurts worse than anything I've ever known. I think about you 24/7, no letting up. I just hope it eases up someday. The love I mean.

I don't know why I'm writing this. It won't make any difference.

I love you. I want to touch you so bad. It's so lonely at night without you.

Love, Carlos (do you mind if I still call myself Carlos?)

My throat ached from trying not to cry. Jesse studied me, a ready-to-hold-you-up smile in his eyes. I laid the letter on the table, and the edges of the wrinkled paper fluttered in the wind.

“What did he have to say, Jefe?” Jesse’s voice warmed me like a tender hug.

I didn’t answer, just pushed the letter toward him.

“You sure you want me to read this?” He tilted his head to the side.

“Sí. Read it.” Picking up the empty bottle, I waved it to order two more beers.

Jesse read the letter, his eyes widening intermittently with interest. When he finished, he folded it carefully, slipped it back into the envelope, and laid it on the table. “Well, Candelario. You’re going to try to find him, no?” Stretching his legs out, he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Nah.” I traced a finger over Carlos’s name on the envelope and examined his boyish handwriting. A vision of him penning the letter formed in my mind, and I wondered where he’d written it. In another dingy, rat-infested apartment? Dios, a horrible urge to hunt him down, to find him, to take him in my arms, engulfed me.

Jesse must have observed the distraction in my eyes, my brain immediately shifting into renewed fervor to find my lover. His shoulders shook with a quiet chuckle. “Where should we start looking, Jefe?”

Oh, my Jesse. How well he knew me. I fell back into the chair, running my fingers through my hair. “It would be silly to look for him, eh? I mean, what for, Jesse?”

“What for? *You tell me.*”

As though trying to convince myself, not Jesse, I asked, “He’s telling the truth, no? I mean....” The waitress set fresh beers on the table, and I straightened. “I believe him. Don’t you?”

Jesse rolled his shoulders and dabbled his finger in the frost on the bottle. “Truly? Yes, I do, Candelario.” Shaking his head, he smacked his lips. “Goddamn, man, sometimes I don’t recognize you.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

His gaze swept the patio, and he combed a hand through his hair. “I don’t know. You’re like... possessed by him or something, Candelario.” He steeped his fingers together, pressing them to his chin. “It’s like you’re two men. One is this tough cabrón, but the other....”

“The other?”

“A lovesick *pequeña.*”

My laughter rolled over the cheerful music, and I ruffled Jesse’s hair. “You insult me, *mi querido amigo.* But I love you.”

“I only put up with you because I know you love this little chavo.” Clutching my arm, he turned serious. “And we’ll find him.”

“But he was going to pump *me* for information. Damn.”

“And he told you that he left because he *couldn’t* pump you.”

“Dios. He *did* try to tell me who he was. I wouldn’t listen to him.” I stared off to the flea market across the street and circled my finger absently around the mouth of the bottle. “Besides, if he came clean with me about

himself, I'd have had to tell him things about *myself*. Things I'm not proud of."

Jesse snapped his fingers to snag my attention back to him. "And you walked away from those things that you're ashamed of, Candelario." He raised the beer to his lips. "But think about this. Flores is still around. Would it maybe be dangerous to hook up with your amante again if he's still working on the case?"

"I'm not afraid of Flores."

"No, you're not, that's true." A sly grin worked its way to his lips. "And oh, how Señor Flores hates you for that."

"My concern would be for Carlos—his safety, not mine." I tucked the letter into my pocket. "Flores's issue with me is just hate. But Carlos is a cop. He's a big threat to the vato and his organization."

"Exactly. Carlos *is* a cop, Candelario. It seems he's been on the streets for some time now. He toughed it out in El Paso, for Christ's sake. And, hey, if the little hombre can survive in the Conquistador Apartments, he is one righteous little motherfucker."

"True." My thoughts rambled back to the first time I'd seen Carlos, how cocky and confident he was, how tough. Beautiful and delicate on the surface but steely and unafraid inside.

Jesse leaned forward to clutch my shoulder. "We'll find him, mi amigo. We'll find him."

Yes, we'll find him. I have to find him.

Jesse forbade me to go back to work for the rest of the day. We wandered about town, shot a few games of pool, and drove to El Mercado to stroll. The odd little merchant

peddled her golden lechuza again, but this time I bought it. I was happy with Carlos's letter close to my heart. I didn't have him back yet, but I felt the tie hadn't truly been destroyed, and I was determined the damn owl would be a good luck charm, not an omen.

Tired but content, we called it a day, and I talked Jesse into coming to the house to hang out and have dinner with me. I'd called ahead to let Aunt Dahlia know, and the moment we stepped into the foyer, the soothing aroma of her cooking met our noses. Just as I tossed my keys on the entryway table, my glance caught a small package sitting beside the handcrafted pottery. I picked it up, scanning for a name, but there was no writing on the plain paper wrapping.

My fingers ripped at the secured corner, but Jesse laughed and stopped me. "Hey, Jefe, it's plain paper wrapping. Could be a bomb."

I nudged him and chuckled, continuing to open the package. "What the hell is this?"

The discarded paper drifted to the floor, and I held an ordinary white box—the small kind that jewelry from department stores comes in. For some reason, I was afraid to open the box, and an odd, cold finger of uneasiness walked up my spine. Maybe I'd seen too many movies where badasses severed body parts and sent them to people as threats. Shaking off the ridiculous trepidation, I guardedly lifted the lid from the box.

Nestled in a clump of gauzy cotton was Carlos's dove earring. My first thought was that he'd returned the earring as a way to tell me it was officially over between us. At that unbearable idea, awful heat sped through my veins and

pounded in my ears. “Jesse....” I just stared at the glistening diamond.

“Jefe, is that not your amante’s earring?” Jesse bent to pick up the brown paper on the floor and spread it out, scanning both sides. “Is there a card in the box? There’s nothing on the wrapping.”

“No card.”

How foolish I felt. Just because Carlos had written that he still loved me hadn’t meant a relationship was possible, and the sparkling earring in the box was proof that it indeed wasn’t to be.

I returned the lid to the box and reached to dump it into the wastebasket, but Jesse’s hand snapped over my wrist. He tugged the little package from my fingers.

“No. Don’t throw it away.” As though he’d rescued an endangered little bird, he held the box away from me.

“What? Save it for another man?” I spat.

“Not another man, Candelario.” His gaze, mysterious and dreamy, locked with mine, and he laid the box on the table. “For Carlos.”

Waving him off, I headed for the kitchen. “Let’s eat.”

He followed me. “I have a feeling.”

“One thing I do not need, muchacho, is your romantic false hope shit.” I draped my arm over his shoulders, pulling him close. “It’s best for me to put Carlos behind me. Starting now.”

Deep down, I nurtured the silly hope that Jesse was right, that Carlos really wasn’t gone. That I’d misread his gesture.

The lechuza, whose presence I'd grown accustomed to, inspected us as Aunt Dahlia filled our plates with sizzling beef fajitas, guacamole, pico de gallo, and tortillas. I smiled at the curious, winged monitor. It did not return my smile.

No sooner had I spooned the meat and vegetable mixture onto a tortilla than my cell vibrated and danced in a circle on the table. I laid down the fork, grabbed the phone, and checked the caller ID. *Carlos*. Despite my tough talk about putting Carlos behind me, my pulse rushed with excitement. *Wait, you fool. What if he's only calling to make sure you got the earring, thinking he's making it easier if he lets you down himself?* My finger trembled over the *Talk* button.

"Candelario?" Jesse searched my face. "What is it?"

Ignoring him, I answered the phone. "Carlos?" I tried to sound nonchalant.

"Good evening, Más Chingon." A very familiar, very unwelcome voice breezed softly to me from the other end.

It wasn't Carlos. It was Teirso Flores. My mind careened into a horrible, dark, cold void, not able to process *his* voice on *this* phone, and icy fear knifed my belly—fear for Carlos.

Words, halted by confusion and horror, refused to pass my lips.

Flores took this speechless opportunity to continue. I heard the sinister smile in his silky voice. "Candelario. Did you get my present? My men say you're home. You've surely seen it." With a voice a combination of a growl and a snicker, he teased, "Does it belong to someone you know?"

I lurched forward in the chair, pressing the phone harder to my ear as though to bring Flores closer, to strangle him.

He'd taken Carlos hostage. I knew it, felt it as sure as I breathed. And if they had busted Carlos's cover, they would kill him. My lover might already have been killed and—with my knowledge of Flores's sadistic nature—it would have been an agonizing ordeal.

A blend of blinding panic, fury, and horror tensed my muscles. I sucked in a deep breath, alerted Jesse with my eyes, and mouthed the word *Flores*. As if in a bizarre dream, the sound of Aunt Dahlia's television novella wafted to my ears—the actors rattling in Spanish—in surreal contrast to the torturous electricity in the air.

Jesse rose and moved to the chair beside me, his narrowed eyes examining my expressions intently, his jaw clenched.

It took every ounce of steel in my soul to remain collected. "I did receive it, Flores."

Flores's deep, gentle laugh met my reply. I could practically see his full lips stretching in a tight smile, his black eyes flickering like a languorous snake. "Your lover is... visiting me at the moment." I imagined his grin falling to a frown as his voice grew hushed. "I'm having a nice chat with him. In case you thought I was bluffing, I sent you his lovely earring to show you I'm not." He let out a deep sigh. "Your little bebé is so pretty."

I gripped the side of the table. I knew Flores well, and knew not to poke at him, to rile the tightly coiled snake; so, in spite of the violent churning in my gut—in spite of the frightening images of Carlos being tortured—my voice

maintained its coolness. “You know I don’t want him harmed, Flores. What do you want me to do?”

“I fired my attorney. He’s not doing as well as you did.”

Envisioning Flores in a panic would have normally brought a smile to my lips, but not while Carlos was his prisoner. “I know. What does that have to do with me?”

Flores roared, “You know exactly what I want you to do, you fucking two-bit hijo de puta! Very simply, I want you to return to work for me. If you don’t, I’ll kill your lover, and I’ll kill you, too.”

I recognized my former boss’s candid timbre, the coldblooded flatness to his threat, and knew he wasn’t bluffing. His warning of my death didn’t scare me, but the thought of rendering Carlos’s life to such a fate—even if I never saw him again, never made love to him again—was unendurable. All that mattered was to get him out.

“Where can we meet?” I sighed.

I was sure he could hear my fear, but I didn’t care. Flores had always been a hand grenade without a pin, waiting to explode with the slightest provocation, and I knew his monstrous ego needed to sense trepidation and respect or he would kill Carlos.

“Ah.” A satisfied purr, which was surely accompanied by a swelling of his chest. “My beautiful boy. I knew you’d understand. I’ll wait for you at my tobacco vending warehouse on Matamoras Avenue. Si?”

“Si.”

“You won’t make me wait long?” A deadly order camouflaged as a polite request.

“No. I’m leaving now.”

“Oh... if the police happen to show up, I won’t allow myself to be arrested. So I’m sure I’d do something silly and you and your pretty boy would die with me.”

“Comprende. No police.”

“Gracias, Candelario.”

A dizzying shot of adrenaline blasted through me. I snapped the cell shut, clipped it to my belt, and barked to Jesse, “He has Carlos. I’m going to get him.”

“Not without me, you’re not.”

Jesse sprang from the chair, and we barreled through the door.

There was no point in discouraging him, nor enough time. Nothing, regardless of the danger, could stop my friend from standing by my side.

Aunt Dahlia, who’d been engrossed in her television program, called after us, “What’s wrong? Your dinner!”

We headed to the foyer, and whatever other words she bellowed faded at our backs.

Jesse’s long legs kept up with my fast pace to the car. As soon as the doors were unlocked, he slid into the seat, buckling his seatbelt.

The engine roared to life, the car jerking when I slammed it into reverse, and the tires screeched on the pavement as I backed along the winding drive. I eased through the residential streets, cautious of late-night walkers and joggers, but once I entered the highway, the black Mercedes carved through traffic like a shark gliding in the midst of a school of slower-moving fish.

Tense silence rode between Jesse and me on the way to Flores’s warehouse. My life as Flores’s attorney had brought

me face to face with danger many times, and Jesse and I had never tossed around meaningless words of support that would soften our minds to the situation. By his occasional troubled sideways glances, though, I knew my friend sensed the horror in my heart. Even if he didn't particularly like Carlos, Jesse would still face death with me to protect the man I loved.

He steeled his eyes on the hood ornament, and his hushed voice splintered the quiet. "Candelario, was Carlos's cover blown?"

I hadn't realized how tightly wound I was until I heaved a deep breath, and my chest ached. "He didn't mention it." My fingers tapped a nervous beat on the steering wheel. How could I break the news to my friend? "Jesse, it's a trade-off."

Twisting in the seat to face me, Jesse shook his head. "I don't get it. A trade-off for...." He touched a hand to his chest. "No. Please. Tell me, Candelario, you're making a goddamn joke."

I nodded slowly, and he let out a pained groan.

My pulsed throbbed hard in my neck at the sight of the exit to Matamoras Avenue. Navigating under the bright streetlights of the warehouse district, I slowed upon spotting the TF'S Tobacco Vending sign. I eased into a narrow alleyway opening into a vast parking lot and stopped in front of the loading dock.

Flores's men, a sentry of impeccably dressed goliaths, surveyed us from the massive warehouse doors. Upon seeing the familiar legion lining the entrance, the sobering reality dawned on me that the only way I would ever leave this place alive would be to submit to returning to Flores's

organization. And since a relationship between a drug lord's attorney and a cop would never be possible—not for Carlos, anyway—I knew to return would spare his life but would take him from me forever.

I turned off the engine and, sliding the keys into my pocket, shifted in the seat to face Jesse. My lips parted to speak, but he read my mind and speedily silenced my unspoken thought.

“No way, mi Jefe. I’m going in with you,” he murmured, shaking his head.

We climbed out of the car, nodded a wordless greeting to the goons, and climbed the stairs to the dock, our clanging steps echoing off the rows of buildings. One of the guards jerked his head, motioning us into a huge warehouse filled with boxes and crates of cigarettes and cigars. The rolling doors slowly closed behind us, hitting the floor with a boom, closing us up in the snake’s pit and shutting the safety of the world out.

More silent nods directed us toward a set of metal stairs to the shipping office and, before I even opened the door, I spotted Carlos through the open blinds of the glass window. Sitting in a chair with his hands bound behind him, he raised his head at the click of the doorknob, and his fierce gaze met mine. My heart wanted to burst to see my lover, my spirited Carlos, whose eyes reflected strength, not fear.

I opened the door.

Chapter Thirteen

THE moment I crossed the threshold into the office, Carlos strained against the handcuffs, clanging them on the chair.

“What the fuck are you doing here? How did you...?” His words faded, his mind clearly calculating, and he closed his eyes tight. “He called you, didn’t he?”

So he didn’t know Flores had called me.

Before I could reply, the honeyed voice of Teirso Flores, the voice I’d hoped never to hear again, the voice that sent ice up my spine, cooed from the corner of the office, “Candelario knew not to turn down my special invitation, a very lovely....” He paused, then purred, “Expensive diamond earring. He’s a smart man, Carlos.”

From behind an elegant desk, conspicuously out of place in the small, bare area, Flores sank deep into the palm of the chair and rested his chin on his fist. A glint of wicked contentment danced in his black eyes, and the caramel leather sighed as he rocked slowly back and forth.

I crossed the office, ignoring Flores, and sank to my haunches in front of Carlos. “Are you all right, Carlos?”

I took a quick inventory of his condition. Dried blood formed a path from his earlobe to down his neck, apparently when the earring had been yanked from his ear.

"I'm okay." The corner of his lip turned up. "That explains the earring. I thought he just did it for pain." A sad frown softened his spirited brown eyes. "You shouldn't have come."

My fingers caressed the dark stubble of his cheek. "You'd have done the same thing, chico."

Nodding, he pressed into my palm.

"I think I'm going to cry," Flores sang, wiping imaginary tears from his eyes. "Watching the two lovebirds. Better than a Julia Roberts movie."

My former client was not a good-looking man, but he was beautiful in a primitive, feral way. Short, sleek black hair, slightly receding, and a smooth, open face contrasted sharply with intense onyx eyes and a thick, full mustache. His charming demeanor belied a rapacious, soulless predator.

Jesse stood in the doorway.

Flores waved a finger, and the ruby in his pinkie ring sparkled in the stark lighting. "Just your jefe, Jesse. Close the door."

Jesse bristled and advanced a step, ready to defy the order, but I threw him a warning glance and he retreated, closing the door.

I rose and faced Flores.

He pointed to a vacant chair. "Sit, Candelario."

"No, thank you." Crossing my arms over my chest, I moved to the door and leaned against it. "Let's just get this over with."

"Si." He shrugged, his full lips pursing. "Let's take care of our business." Sitting forward in the chair, he clasped his hands and placed them on the ink blotter. "And what, since you're in such a hurry, would you like to tell me?" Thumbing toward Carlos, he added, "For your lovely amante to hear?"

I felt my soul dying as the answer surfaced to my lips, and my insides trembled riotously. How difficult it was to sell my soul to the devil while Carlos watched. “You know.”

Flores’s eyes narrowed to slits. “But I want to *hear* it, mi corazón.”

At the seductive tone of Flores’s endearment, I sensed Carlos’s stare fixed on me.

“Say it,” Flores growled. His gaze, fiery and savage, consumed me.

I pushed away from the door and bent over the desk. My palms on the glossy mahogany surface, I surrendered the words that would banish the only man I’d ever loved from my life. “I’ll come back to work for you.”

Carlos groaned, “Candy, no!” The chair legs screeched on the tile floor with his frantic movements.

Feeling his confusion and shock, so tangible it nearly smothered me, I cringed inwardly at Carlos’s cry, but I couldn’t discern if his tone reflected disappointment or anger, or both.

Flores erupted into quiet, amused laughter at my lover’s dramatic reaction, and Carlos fell silent once more, surely more from pride than fear.

I straightened, keeping my stare planted on Flores. “I told you I’d come back. Now let him go.”

Carlos hissed, “You’re fucking out of your mind, Candy! Don’t do this!”

Over my shoulder, I threw Carlos a glance that said I’d made up my mind.

“Candy! Don’t fucking do this!” His tone melted to frustration. “*Please.*”

I repeated to Flores, “Let him go.”

Humming under his breath and tapping a finger to his chin, Flores scrutinized me, not acknowledging my demand. He nodded in Carlos's direction and cupped his hands together, holding them out. "Your lives are in my hands right now, Candelario." Without warning, he slammed fists on the desk, and his voice boomed, "You don't fucking *command* me to do *anything!*" Then, just as quickly, he relaxed, and his timbre became subdued, but I knew him well enough to recognize the restrained rage beneath the serene exterior. "If your young man's life means anything to you, you'll ask me *nice*."

Carlos considered me a strong man—I *was* a strong man—so I was embarrassed for him to see me reduced to a puppet dancing on Flores's strings. I knew Carlos wouldn't want me to weaken on his behalf, but at this moment his life meant more to me than his respect.

I forced the words to my lips, and my face burned with humiliation. "*Please* let him go."

"Ah. That was nice, bebé." Delight danced in Flores's black eyes, and he melted back into the chair, clasping his hands behind his head. Crossing his legs, he threw his glance to a key on the desk, and saccharine laced his tone. "Go ahead and let him go, Candelario."

I picked up the key, strode across the floor to Carlos, and knelt behind him. The moment my hands touched him, he clutched at my fingers. A bolt of longing shot through me, mingled with the hurt of knowing he was soon to walk out of my life—only this time with a disgust for me that would take him away forever.

Over his shoulder, he pleaded, "Candy, please. Don't do this. Don't do this to *yourself*. Let the fucker do what he wants to me."

I didn't reply.

The handcuffs fell open, and I slid them from his wrists. Before I stood, I allowed myself a moment to smell his familiar scent—so spicy, so natural, so... Carlos.

The moment he was free, Carlos shoved from the chair and, in a storm of fury, lunged for Flores across the desk. Papers ruffled to the floor, and pencils spilled from an overturned cup. My hands clamped his arms, pulling him back against me. Even in such a flurry of confusion, his well-toned form writhing into mine sent a flash to my memory of just how exquisite his body was.

Flores didn't flinch or even blink but cocked his head to one side and lifted a brow, and a half-laugh, half-growl rumbled deep in his chest.

When Carlos stopped fighting, I let go of my grip. He yanked away from me, flexing his fists, veins bulging in his forearms. He glared at Flores and snarled, "You ought to go ahead and kill me, you fucking bastard. I'll turn you in for kidnapping."

Flores nailed a frosty stare on Carlos through half-closed lids. "Try, you goddamn little culero." Tilting his head to the other side, he brandished a manicured hand. "Candelario's never lost a case for me." As though he'd just noticed it, he picked up a cell phone from the desk and caressed it. Carlos's phone. "Kind of a flimsy case, muchacho, with Candelario defending me—no matter what you report to the cops—it'll be our word against yours." An indignant snort. "Besides, kidnap you for *what*, eh? You tell them I used you to get my attorney back, and Candelario calls you a liar, what have you got?"

"Fucking bastard." Carlos's shoulders braced defiantly; then he turned to me, his gaze searching my face. "Let me go,

then, C—” He stopped short of my name as though it choked him. “This ojete loco will kill you if you don’t kiss his ass.” Resigned, he stretched out his hands, and sadness welled in his eyes. “I can’t respect you if you go back to him, but....” He touched my chest. “I love you, and I’d hate it even worse for you to be a fucking corpse at the bottom of the river.”

Words failed me, but I needed him to see the love in my heart, to take that out the door with him, so I didn’t try to suppress the tears stinging my eyes. I nodded and reached for the doorknob.

Just as I touched it, Flores called out, “Carlos, mi bonito amigo.”

Carlos faced him.

To my horror, Flores queried gently, “Would it make it easier to leave your beautiful Candelario if I told you about him and me?” Ignoring my pleading frown, he continued, “Did he ever tell you he was much more than just my attorney?”

Curiosity and disdain battled in Carlos’s eyes as he glanced from Flores to me. By the narrowing of his eyes, it was clear he knew what he was about to hear and that he listened reluctantly.

Flores lifted his brows with relish, a storyteller about to shock his audience. Thrusting a finger at me, he murmured, “A good lover there, our Candelario.”

Carlos’s eyes closed, his jaw tightened, and his fists clenched, but he remained silent.

To me, it no longer mattered. Carlos was lost to me regardless. But the biggest shame of my life—submitting my body for so many years to Teirso Flores, this monster—had been the one stain in my past I’d never wanted Carlos to know.

The irony was that I'd reacted so violently to Carlos's lies when my own deceit was just as great, if not much worse.

Incognizant of—or disregarding with great pleasure—the awkward tension between Carlos and me, Flores continued, “I was pretty fucking upset when he took up with you, Carlos. And I tolerated it, letting him think he was free of me. But damn, when my new attorney began to fuck up my case, the fact that *your* pretty little cock was in Candelario's bed gave me exactly what I needed to get him back. My poor bebé is so stricken with you, all I had to do was... get you here.”

Flores's revelation—flowing from his lips with such glee—stripped any remaining shreds of my dignity, ending my tiny grasp of a life free of him. But my life without Carlos would be dark and empty anyway, so I supposed it was just as well.

I could only stand, hearing bits and pieces of crude commentary from Flores about my lovemaking skills through the thick mist of agony smothering me.

Flores shrugged. “Let your little friend go now, Candelario.”

I opened the door, signaled to Jesse, and dug my car keys from my pocket. Grasping his hand, I laid them in his palm, then stood aside and motioned for Carlos to leave. “Jesse, take Carlos to....” It occurred to me I didn't know where Carlos lived. “To wherever he tells you.”

Carlos stormed past me without meeting my eyes and stood with his back to me, hugging himself. His shoulders heaved. I knew he was crying.

Oh, mi querido, my Carlos. I shut the door, knowing my last glimpse of him would be just his back, uncommonly bent

and fragile. My only consolation was that he couldn't possibly be any more disappointed in me than I was in myself.

Flores rose and rounded the desk to stand in front of me. His elegant hands slid to my waist, his fingers caressing through the fabric of my shirt. "Candelario—"

"Are you happy?" Bitterness saturated my voice.

Flippantly, he chuckled. "Yes, Candelario, I am. Quite a bit, in fact."

"I know that the minute I stop fucking you, you'll go after Carlos."

Flores was a beautiful, sensual man with a hypnotic aura. The beauty of sex with him had always been the dangerous sense of being devoured by a deadly beast that made you beg for his pain. His attraction to me had been my power, my seeming invincibility, all wrapped in—as he said—a god's body that made him cum in his pants when he first saw me. No matter how much I despised him, my body had always recognized his touch and responded to it. "But I'll tell you this. I'll hate you. With everything in me, I *will* hate you."

Nudging into me, our dicks touching, he glanced at my crotch. "Ah. But you'll *want* me, mi corazón. *That* you can't hide. And you'll defend me. You'll defend me and you'll *win*."

"And I'll disappear mysteriously if I don't."

"Hmm." His nose nuzzled the side of my neck. "It'd be a waste to feed this beautiful body to the fish, but...." He sighed onto my skin. "Yes. You might go missing."

His mouth touched mine, and I breathed the words onto his parted lips. "As long as Carlos is unharmed. If he's...." I faded as the full lips brushed my mouth. "If he's harmed, I'll

kill you.” The thought of killing Flores, choking the life from him, watching him die, aroused me. I let him kiss me.

Flores hissed and withdrew when my cell vibrated between our bodies.

Pulling it from my waist, I flipped it open and answered. “Jesse. Are you safely off the premises?”

“Sí. But, Jefe....” He fell silent.

The words *what’s the matter* perched on my tongue, but I couldn’t show any distress in front of Flores. I stayed silent, waiting for Jesse to continue.

He said, “The cops are coming for Flores.”

Prickly heat stung the back of my neck. I swallowed hard and fought to keep my voice detached. “I see.”

I frantically clawed to figure how, when, or if Carlos had alerted the police.

As though reading my mind, Jesse offered, “Carlos had a second iPhone, or whatever the hell it’s called, sewn into a fake hem on the inside leg of his shorts. He sweet-talked the goons into letting him take a piss right before we got there. He called the fucking police from the can. He didn’t know Flores had called you.”

“Oh.”

“The worst part, Candelario?”

I glanced at Flores, who’d returned to the desk and eyed me with suspicion. Lending him a calming smile, I said into the phone, “Sí?”

“Flores is going down for sure, mi amigo. Kidnapping a fucking cop.”

“No proof.”

“Yes, Candelario. He *has* proof. That fucking phone of his recorded just enough. It’s just what the cops need to finally get their hands on him.” His voice quivered. “*You* can’t even save his ass with this much evidence.”

Tearing my attention from the call, Flores growled, “Candelario, what the fuck is going on? Tell your Jesse you’ll see him later.”

I held up a hand. “Un momento.” In the background, Carlos demanded to speak to me. Returning to Jesse, I managed a calm request. “Let me talk to him, Jesse.”

“Candy?” Carlos spoke, frantic, from the other end.

I heard the love in his voice, I knew I did. I drew an unsteady breath. “Sí, chico?”

“Candy, I didn’t know you were coming. I didn’t. When they grabbed me, I just thought he’d busted my cover. I didn’t even know he’d called you. He never even *mentioned* you. He must have made the call out in the warehouse. Oh, Candy—”

“It’s okay, bebé. It’s okay.” *You did what you had to do.*

“I didn’t know he’d involve you.”

“It’s all right.”

“Listen to me. *Listen to me.* I’ll tell my team you were there because of me. Nothing will happen to you. I *promise.*”

“No worries.”

“Candy?”

“Sí?”

“I don’t give a fuck about you and him. I mean, what you did before.”

Though he couldn’t see me, I gave him a tender smile. “I’m glad.” Relief pulsed through my body.

“Candy?”

“What, chico?”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, mi cariño.” I closed the phone.

Flores stood and, once again, strode to stand before me. “You can love your amante all you want, Candelario. But you go near him, and....” Pressing his palms together, he rolled his shoulders. “Well, I don’t need to tell you.”

I nodded, nervous tension tingling my skin. How much time did we have before the police arrived?

No sooner had the question entered my mind than I heard sirens at the loading dock. Flores cocked his head to the side, straining to hear. Reality registered, and his black eyes widened.

He lifted his hands, touching his fingertips to my cheeks, his gaze casting about my face. “Mi lindo corazón. You double-crossed me.” Slowly drawing his hands away, he pressed his knuckles to his lips. “Why?”

“You did this to yourself, Teirso. Carlos is a police officer.”

Genuine astonishment, quickly followed by panic, washed over his face. Biting his knuckles now, he glanced out the office window and whispered, “No, no, no.”

Flores’s men apparently attempted to close the dock door, and its rattling echoed through the warehouse. I supposed they’d left themselves unprotected by opening the doors for Carlos and Jesse to leave and were in a panic to shut themselves in now. The sound of a gunshot ricocheted off the walls.

Clutching my shirt, Flores pleaded, “Candelario. Don’t let this happen to me. I can’t go to prison.”

“Teirso, not even *I* can help you. He has evidence.” I pried his hands loose. “He’s a *cop*. You fucking took a *cop* hostage!”

“I *won’t* go to prison.”

Our heads jerked to the sound of police shouting at Flores’s men just beyond the office. Very close.

I returned my gaze to Flores. “Any second, Teirso, and they’ll—”

Flores lunged, pinning me to the wall. I thought he was afraid and, taken off guard by his sudden fear, I hesitantly wrapped my arm around him. Maybe Carlos was right, maybe there was *some* good in me, to be able to feel pity for my client while his world crumbled on top of him.

I didn’t expect the excruciating, searing heat that pierced me, and it took a moment to realize that Flores had shoved a knife in my abdomen.

“Mi bebé, mi bebé,” he cried, burying his face in the hollow of my shoulder. With his fist still wrapped around the handle, he pressed harder into me, the force of his body plunging the blade even deeper.

Teirso Flores had always been volatile, inches from mentally exploding, but I never dreamed I’d see the day—although he’d threatened—he’d actually come unhinged enough to hurt me.

I sucked for air, but it was as though my torso had become a huge burning hollow. I managed to gasp, “You crazy fool.”

My knees buckled, and I grabbed his shoulders to hold myself up, and he let my body ease against his to the floor.

The tile’s chill seeped through my clothes, and I thought to myself—laughed to myself, actually, in a fast-spreading, welcome delirium—that dying really was like the movies

portrayed it. Cold. Unlike the films, though, the room didn't grow dark around me but fell into a pleasing brightness, that wonderful, off-balance sensation of soaring in the midst of clouds. I no longer felt the white-hot pain, only awful pressure in my belly.

A voice plowed through the foggy abyss, a shout muffled by the thick gauze in my brain. "Put the gun down!"

The crack of gunfire pierced the dense haze, and a heavy thud nearby shook the floor beneath me. Too weak to move, I couldn't turn my head to see who had fallen, but without even looking, I knew it was Flores. Deep, deep inside, too far to drag it to the surface, pain gripped me to think he might be dead. Even though I'd relished the idea of extinguishing him myself, the fact that he really had been killed inexplicably saddened me.

The clump of shoes on the tile accompanied by more voices surrounded me. A strong, unfamiliar hand pressed against my throat, fingers bearing on my pulse. I blinked up into the face of a female police officer, her blue eyes cool yet kind. She called over her shoulder, "Pulse is weak." Returning her attention to me, she tapped my cheek hard. "You need to hang on for me, Mr. Gonzalez."

Pulse weak, hang on. Am I dying? Has that madman killed me? Hang on to what? Dios, give me something to hold on to, don't let me go. Because she ordered me to hang on, I strained hard to focus on her lovely aquamarine eyes. I had no strength to talk, to beg her not to let me die, but she seemed to read my unspoken thought and took my hand—which I just then noticed was bloody—and held it.

Someone knelt on my other side, and a warm hand cupped my cheek. I knew the touch by heart and leaned into its softness. *Carlos.*

“I’m here, Candy.” His platinum hair, against the backdrop of the bright overhead lights, glistened in my silky vision like a halo around his head. “An ambulance is on the way, *mi querido.*”

I tried to nod. The cool silver of his rings brushed my hot skin, so soothing, and I attempted to form the words *I love you.*

My eyes wanted to close, but I didn’t want them to because I felt unconsciousness washing me further into the white tide that—although beautiful and comfortable—frightened me. In case this pale, painless feeling was death, my soul tried to crawl back to life where the colors were vivid.

Beside Carlos in the light, Jesse’s dark figure appeared. Even this colorless screen that blurred my vision couldn’t dim the warmth of his familiar smile. I moved my lips to say his name, so happy to see him.

“Nah, Jefe, don’t talk.” He smoothed his thumb across my forehead. “You’re going to be okay, *mi comrade.*”

I felt I could let go now, that everything was going to be all right.

Chapter Fourteen

“BE CAREFUL with my baby.” Aunt Dahlia’s hands hovered over me, supervising the operation of getting me into the bed. “Easy, easy,” she snapped at Jesse.

“Sí, sí, Aunt Dahlia.” Jesse rolled his eyes and then winked at me, his arms around my waist. “What a sissy you turn him into, old woman.”

“*Both* of you are turning me into a sissy.” Easing down into the pillows, I waved them off and sighed.

After two weeks in the hospital, I was finally home. How good it felt to be in my own house, my own bed, being pampered by my best friend and my overindulgent aunt. To be *alive*.

In the hospital, I’d been fussed over by nurses, some pretty, some not so pretty, and some male nurses who were very pleasing to the eye, but all very attentive and compassionate. I’d enjoyed the attention, but now I was anxious to take care of myself. My body wasn’t so ready yet.

And the flowers. Jesse told me he’d never seen so many, except for dignitaries’ funerals. Floral arrangements, plants, and balloons filled my room and the nurse’s stations, and I instructed them to be distributed to patients and employees.

As grateful—and humbled—as I was to have survived the ordeal, my heart weighed heavy with the death of Teirso Flores. Our peculiar relationship had been a huge part of my life, and

as strange as it may have seemed, in a way only I understood. I cared for him. The cold-blooded man was dangerous, fearless in dealing and terrorizing, but he became disoriented easily when his world shifted on its filthy axis, and clung to me like a child. He'd always had me to get him out of trouble, to make the obstacles in his path disappear. And I'd been very good at it. This time, however, no one was able to fix Teirso. Not even me.

Cooing like a mother dove, Aunt Dahlia smoothed the covers around me. "There, nene." She gathered an armful of magazines and placed them beside me, then scanned the bedside table. "Should I give you a pain pill, mi bebé?"

I winced, holding up my hand. "No, Aunt Dahlia. I'm not taking those things."

She rested a hand on her hip and bit her lip as she glanced around the room, clearly searching for other items she thought I'd need during my enforced bedbound incarceration. Her hands clapped together—ah, she'd thought of something—and she scurried to the entertainment center, grabbed the television remote, and laid it carefully atop the magazines.

Jesse grinned and reached to get my cell phone from the table. Just as he handed it to me, my aunt scowled and tried to snatch it from him.

"Candelario does not need to work until he recovers!" She shot daggers at Jesse.

He waved the phone above her, taunting and grinning. "Ah, tia, his cell phone, he needs."

She tiptoed, cursing in Spanish and swiping at the phone, but Jesse was too tall.

I sighed, amused at their well-concealed affection for each other. “Aunt Dahlia, I really *do* need the phone.” When she threw me an unsure frown, I crossed my hand over my heart. “I promise. No business. *Si?*” I blew her a kiss. “*Por favor?*”

A smug smile lit Jesse’s face, and he handed the cell to me. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t make any business calls, Aunt Dahlia.”

Nodding, pasting a wary sideways gaze on Jesse, Aunt Dahlia tugged at the waistband of her apron and huffed. “I’ll fix you boys something to eat.”

Mischief sparked in Jesse’s eyes. “Oh, tia, how about tacos tripas?” He tucked his chin. “Candelario so loves tripas.”

Halfway to the door, she whirled to face us, a pleased smile creasing her face. “Bebé, you want tripas?”

I patted my belly over the bandages. “Ah, no, thank you. I’m not so hungry right now.”

“Then some nice soup.” Tossing her head as though she walked into the bullring to face El Toro, she left the room.

Jesse climbed onto the bed, rearranged the magazines, and flopped on his back beside me. “I’ll tell you this one thing, Candelario.”

“What’s that?”

“You need to get well. And soon. I think I can’t lie around all fucking day to keep you company.”

“Don’t you love your Candelario, Jesse?” I chuckled and punched his arm.

“*Sí*. I do. But don’t I need to be working or something?”

“Nah. I need company.”

Jesse snarled, “Oh, *sí*, unless *Carlos* calls. Then it’s....” He waved his hands. “*Shoosh. Be gone with you, Jesse.*” His eyelashes fluttered, “*Carlos is on the phone, Jesse. Get lost, Jesse.*”

I tried to turn to face him, but the twisting shot a warning pain through my abdomen, and I settled back into the pillows. Staring at the ceiling, my mind wandering to Carlos, I groaned, “I miss him so fucking bad, Jesse.”

Always the optimist, Jesse crossed his arms under his head and narrowed his eyes, making another one of his predictions. “You’ll find a way to be together. I *feel* it.”

“You’re always *feeling* things.” I picked up the remote and pointed it at the television. My fingers flicked the buttons, and I stared abstractedly at the parade of stations. “If I could just get back on my feet, I’d fly to El Paso.”

“Be patient, Candelario. You’ll be together. I *told* you. I *feel* it.”

“Not soon enough.” I tossed the remote on the comforter and fixed a bored gaze on the Food Network, pleased that the host of the show was a dark-skinned young man with spiky platinum hair and brown eyes—in my lonely mind, a husky Carlos. “Jesse, that cooking hombre looks like Carlos, no? Only... well... bigger?”

Jesse rose to one elbow and shook his head. “Jesu Cristo, Jefe. You *do* miss Carlos, don’t you? If that’s what you remember him looking like, it’s been *too* fucking long.” Sighing, he threw himself onto his back once more.

Carlos had returned to the police department in El Paso. He’d originally been transplanted to work undercover on Flores’s case, since my former client and his personnel were

familiar with every cop in the San Antonio area. The department needed an unknown face to blend in with the cholos. Now that Flores was gone and the case had been made against his organization, Carlos had been reassigned to his job in El Paso.

My lover might have been Ruben Vargas to the El Paso police department, but he was still Carlos to me. I'd never see him as anyone but my Carlos, and he was content to let that be his name.

My cell buzzed on the stack of magazines, and I glanced at the clock on the bedside table. A little after two o'clock, the end of Carlos's shift. I grabbed the phone, flipped it open, and signaled to Jesse to take a hike.

He ruffled my hair and scooted off the bed. Heading for the door, he patted his heart and mouthed the words *Carlos, oh, Carlos*. I shot him the finger and motioned for him to close the door.

"Sí?" I answered, my pulse quickening.

"Miss me?" Carlos purred. Always the same greeting, his voice so low and silky.

My cock responded by swelling before I had a chance to reply. "I miss you so fucking much, bebé."

An image of Carlos—dark, smooth, naked, and tossing beneath me—filled my imagination. I closed my eyes while my palm massaged the length of my dick through the covers.

"I'm still working on the transfer to San Antonio. I know I can get on there. They know me. It'll just take a little time." He paused. "Candy?"

"What, chico?"

"I want to fuck you. Goddamn, I want to fuck you."

Delicate spasms gripped my stomach, rippling to my groin, straight to my feet. "It's been too long."

"Say something. You know...."

"You mean... something like... I want to shove my prick up your tight ass, where you're so warm and soft, as deep as I can go, then make you jack off until you cum all over yourself while I'm fucking you? And that I want to look at my cock while it's in your beautiful ass because it makes me cum to see that?"

His voice trembled. "God...."

"And I want to slide in and out slow, and watch you while I fuck you, watch you squirm with my cock inside you?"

"Yes." Barely audible.

"And I want to suck on those fucking nipple rings and that stud on your lip, and lick your cock, up and down, and make you hard? Make you beg me to let you cum in my mouth?"

"Uh-huh." Even more hushed, shaky. "Fuck."

"So how was your day, chico?" Was I throwing cold water on my own hard-on or his?

"Why, you fucking—"

I laughed hard but quickly cursed when the wound in my belly strained. "Damn," I moaned.

He joined my laughter. "I hope that hurt your damn ass."

"Oh, sí, it did!"

"Serves you right."

"Ah, but mi cariño, I'd bust every stitch if I could just fuck you."

"Goddamn, I want you so bad, Candy." His timbre softened to serious, tender. "Soon. I promise."

TWO weeks passed, and the doctors cautiously released me back into my normal life. They assured me I'd healed much faster than most stabbing victims, that the saints had smiled on me, that I must be a very blessed man. I didn't know about that. I only knew I was a very determined man who wanted to be with his lover. That desire in itself, I felt sure, had a miraculous impact on my recovery.

This particular Saturday morning, Jesse and I soaked up the community atmosphere from the window of the coffee shop. Who knew one could see Heaven in the sight of vatos trolling the street, the thunder of their stereos rumbling over their car engines, women pushing baby strollers, kids on bikes gliding along the sidewalk, and little mobile ice cream vendors with their horns squawking? I did. I'd returned to my world.

The waitress placed cups on the table, then filled them with coffee. She pulled an order pad and pencil from her apron and asked if we were ready to order, and Jesse quickly told her we only wanted coffee, that we weren't ordering breakfast.

"Jesse." I held up my hand to stop the girl from walking away. "I'm hungry."

"Gracias, señorita." Jesse sported his charming Don Juan smile and winked at her. "We're saving ourselves for lunch."

Blushing under his rakish stare, the waitress stuffed the pencil back into her pocket. "I'll be by to freshen your coffee, then."

His gaze rode her slender derriere down the aisle, then he turned his attention to me. "I thought we could go to La Abuelita's for lunch. You haven't been there since you were injured, and I know Mama Sylvia misses you."

"I'd like to see her, too." I ripped open a package of sweetener and poured it into the coffee. "It's just that Carlos and I used to go there before I... kicked him out. It was sort of our place."

"Like I told you, Candelario. You're going to see your Carlos again. And you'll be looking across the table at him at La Abuelita's again before you know it."

"You know, Jesse, I hope you're right."

We visited over our coffee, and after Jesse successfully flirted the waitress's phone number from her, we drove to a local flea market and strolled among the booths to pass time. Uncharacteristically for him, he constantly checked his watch.

"Chill out, Jesse." I glanced up from a display of Tejano music CDs. "You're making me nervous. I want to enjoy the day."

"Sí, sí." He smiled, nodding, and toyed with the brim of a huge straw sombrero. "I guess we ought to go ahead to La Abuelita's. My belly's telling me it's time to eat."

"Okay." I draped my arm over his shoulder. "Maybe that'll calm you down, muchacho. Let's go."

On the way to the restaurant, Jesse still seemed fidgety, strumming his fingers on his knees and staring too hard at the passing scenery.

La Abuelita's had evidently gotten very popular since I'd been away. For the first time ever, the parking lot was full. "What the fuck?" I rolled down my window, taking in the cars. "Are they having a special today? Live music or something?"

"I don't know, Jefe."

After I eased into one of the only vacant spaces, Jesse and I climbed out of the car and onto the gravel lot, then weaved

through the tightly packed cars to make our way to the entrance. What a crowd it was. I hated crowds, and suddenly La Abuelita's didn't seem like such a good place to eat.

"Jesse, let's go someplace else." I squinted against the bright sun to scope the lot.

"No, Candelario. We haven't been here in a long time. A crowd, this once, you can put up with, eh?"

Upon stepping through the door, the music of a live mariachi band met us. *Live music. That explains the crowd.*

Silence suddenly fell over the place; even the band ceased playing. The swishing sound of people—lots of people—turning in their chairs to face the door wafted to my ears. I became disoriented, as though I'd entered a strange room by mistake.

I thought I would piss my pants when, all at once, the entire restaurant erupted into cheers and clapping, every face beaming. Through my haze of confusion, I spotted Mama Sylvia standing by the cash register, her hands clasped to her chest and tears in her eyes.

A huge banner spread across the far wall read, in bold black letters, *Welcome back, Más Chingon!*

I began to adjust to the scene around me and spotted Aunt Dahlia headed toward me, her arms outstretched. "Mi bebé!" She looped her arm through mine, huddling close. "See all your friends, nene, who've come to honor you."

Planting a kiss on top of her head, I sucked in a deep gulp of air. "This is wonderful."

Aunt Dahlia and Jesse urged me forward, and chairs screeched on the tile as customers scooted them to make room for me. Hands reached to touch me, patted my back, grasped my fingers.

“Sí, they’re here for you, Candelario.” Jesse’s strong hand, an anchor in the sea of smiling faces, propelled me between the uncommonly narrow aisles.

Before I could recover from the initial surprise, Mama Sylvia silenced the noise with a clang of a spoon on a large copper pot.

A hush fell over the room once more, all eyes focused on her little frame.

“Señors, señoras, y señoritas!” Her tiny voice miraculously carried over the area. She kissed her palm and waved to me. “Welcome back, the son of our community, our Candelario.” Then, with a remarkably huge shout for such a diminutive figure, she added, banging on the pot again, “Más Chingon!”

The crowd roared, and hands clapped again, this time even louder. The gesture overwhelmed me, humbled me.

Jesse cupped my elbow and proceeded to steer me further into the room. Stopping, he nudged me. “Look, Candelario. I see someone you know.”

Then, like a clearing in dark, swarming clouds, I saw him. Sitting alone at a table, a brilliant smile on his beautiful face, was my Carlos.

Carlos. The word came to my tongue, but, overcome with joy, love, surprise, I could only coax a whisper. “Mi querido.”

He rose and stepped out into the aisle to worm his way toward me. Dressed in a loose white peasant shirt and pants, the dove earring glittering in his ear, he was more exquisite than I’d ever seen him. I could hardly breathe, the happiness was so strong in my heart.

So boyish, so excited, he shrugged. “I’m here.”

My throat ached from suppressing tears. “You’re here.”

The crowd, in perfect cue to our awkward meeting, began to cheer again, and the mariachis started into a lively melody.

I wrapped him in a tight embrace and swayed back and forth, holding onto him for dear life. Oh, Dios, how wonderful to smell his scent again, to rest my chin on his tousled hair, to feel his body against mine.

Oblivious to the merriment around us, I said into his ear, “You should never have come here, chico.”

He jerked way, alarm in his slanted eyes. “Why? I thought—”

I drew him back. “Because now that you’re here, I’ll never let you leave again.”

The sun shone in his smile. “Come sit down, Candy.”

Was he going to agree? For once, was he really going to let me tell him what to do? Surely not, but I could only hope that this one wish of mine would come true.

We sat and reached our hands across the tile top to touch. I hated the distance of the table between us.

“Look around, Candy. Don’t you notice anything unusual?”

I tore my gaze from him to observe the room. The usual colorful decorations were missing, and in their place hung what seemed to be hundreds of white paper doves fluttering in the breeze from the air conditioner. Weaving between the various-sized birds were white streamers and balloons.

“Doves. That was your idea?” Turning to Carlos, I took his hand once more. “Thank you, bebé. They’re beautiful.”

His fingers tightened around mine. Through lowered lashes, his gaze sought mine. “Yes, but they’re for a wedding. They’re having a wedding today.”

“Ah, that’s nice.” I nodded. “You’re *here*, Carlos. Who wants to talk about other people?” Leaning closer, I placed my other hand over his. “Let’s go home. No. Not yet. I want to look at you. You’re *here*. You’re really *here*.” My babbling was uncontrollable.

“Candy.” His shoulders shook with laughter; then he latched a serious gaze on me. “Candy, this *isn’t* other people. It’s us.”

“Damn straight, bebé.” I wriggled in the chair, straining to be closer to him. “Fuck everybody else. My Carlos is here.” The words *Carlos is here* ran in my mind, over and over, the most wonderful words in the world.

“Listen to me!” He squeezed my hand.

Nothing, absolutely nothing could bring me down from this fabulous high. I met his gaze and tried to calm down. “What, mi cariño? I’m sorry. I’m just so happy.” I couldn’t erase the goofy smile from my lips. “I’m listening.”

He glanced over the tabletop and bit his lip. “Remember when you gave me the earring, and we said it was like getting engaged?”

“Sí.”

His gaze locked with mine, his brow lifting, but he said nothing.

My heart soared with the white doves above me. Oh, Dios. “Are you saying.... I mean, bebé....”

“Yes.”

“You—”

“You’re going to fucking marry me.”

The room swam around me, paper birds, balloons, and all. “Chico, it’s not legal here. It’s—”

“It is for *us*.”

“No. This is Texas. It’s not. I know. I’m a lawyer.”

How stupid I sounded, but my brain had left long ago, the moment I’d seen Carlos at the table. And why the hell was I arguing? The man I loved had just made the commitment I’d longed for, giving himself to me—all of himself.

“Shut the fuck up, Candy,” he growled.

That got my attention.

He continued, “I made the transfer to the force here. And I did it for you. And you’re going to fucking marry me.”

“Bebé! You made the transfer! You—”

“Yes.” Squirming in his chair, light dancing in his eyes, he shook his head vigorously. His eyes darkened, and he pressed a hand to his chest. “I nearly lost you.”

“But you didn’t.”

“It was too close, Candy. Breaking up would have been bad enough, but to see you lying there in the hospital, so close to death—”

“I didn’t die. I’m all right.”

“I would have died, too.”

“I *didn’t* die, Carlos. *I’m* here. *You’re* here.”

“Well, it was too close. I’m here to stay. And the first thing I’m going to do is marry Más Chingon.”

“Oh, mi querido. This is the happiest day of my life. And I want you to live with me, and I’m never letting you go again. We just can’t... well... marry, but—”

“Oh, yes we can. Father Mike said he would perform a ceremony for us. Who cares if there’s no license? It’s just you and me and—”

“And....” I scanned the room, mentally counting heads. “The whole fucking city of San Antonio.”

He just smiled, so trusting, so hopeful. So loving.

That was all I needed, his love. I’d be damned if we’d be separated again. Fake ceremony or not, if my lover wanted to marry me, then who was I to refuse him?

I, Candelario Gonzalez, took Carlos Ruben Vargas Alvarez to be my—what the hell was he? My husband? My wife? I’d worry about that later, I figured. I married him, there at La Abuelita’s, with hundreds of white palomas dancing above our heads.

When it came time to leave, I knew something remained undone, something that had plagued me since the stabbing—the fact that I’d never acknowledged Carlos had been the fly in Teirso Flores’s soup, the force that actually made the powerful dealer lose his grip and get sloppy. The community had given me the credit. Sure, I’d walked into the path of the monster’s terror train. But it had been Carlos’s work, Carlos who’d risked his life to call to the police that had ended the nightmare and saved my life. I had to acknowledge him before these people.

I rose and waved over all the drunken customers, signaling for Mama Sylvia to quiet the room again with her pot and spoon.

When she had captured the attention of the restaurant, I took my wine glass and held it up.

Pregnant silence reigned, and I said, “I want to make a toast.”

Heads turned, all eyes on me.

Holding my glass toward Carlos, I said with such pride I thought my chest would burst, “I want to make a toast to the man I love, the man I married today.”

Carlos lifted his glass, his face a painting of such beauty and happiness.

With my drink poised near his, I met his gaze, and somehow, in spite of the beautiful bells ringing so loud, so deafening, in my heart, I said, “To Carlos Alvarez. To you, *my* Más Chingon.”

C. ZAMPA's earliest stories were not written words, but drawings. Adventures, romances—all drawn in comic book style, complete with dialogue bubbles. Countless hours were spent in her room with her Mead Academie sketch pad and pencils. While the stereo headphones piped the classics into her ears, she feverishly sketched the wonderful characters who lived in her head, creating little vignettes for them.

Even her early drawings reflected romance as she felt it—erotic, sensual, natural, uninhibited.

In her pseudo-hippie days of high school, she began to write. Her teachers encouraged her to take her writing seriously, but to her it was strictly for pleasure. Once entering the working world, she left writing behind; but, a few years ago, overwhelmed by a need to create, she opened a blank document and began to write again and has not stopped since.

Visit C. Zampa at <http://www.authorczampa.blogspot.com>, or at her web site, <http://www.czampa.com/>. You can contact her at czampa1953@gmail.com.



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Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Cover Design by Catt Ford

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Released in the United States of America
March 2011

eBook Edition
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-826-6