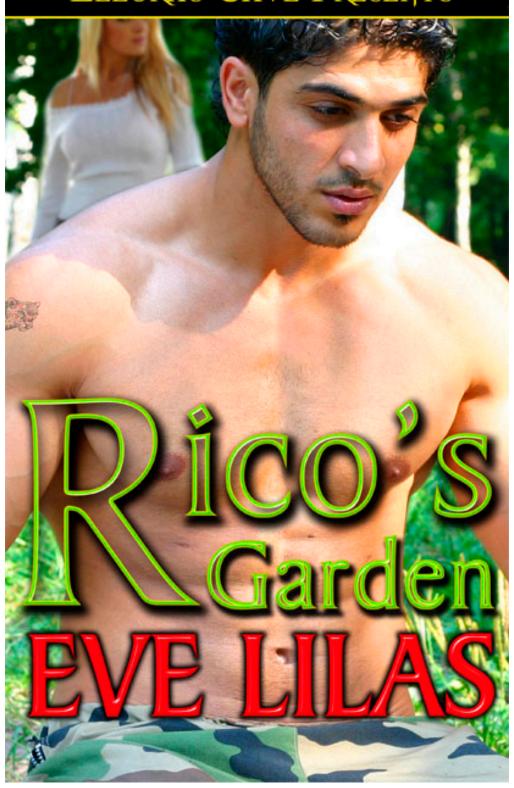
Ellora's Cave Presents



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Rico's Garden

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RICO'S GARDEN

Eve Lilas

Dedication

To my late Uncle Charlie, a writer, and a prince among men; thank you for your guidance, support and enthusiasm, and mostly for your steadfast belief in me.

To my family of choice, and of origin, no matter if we are close or distant. The experiences of my life have shaped me as a writer, and as a woman, and I am grateful for them all.

Special Thanks to Rhonda J. Foster, Esq. for assisting me in understanding sentencing guidelines, and her unfailingly positive attitude.

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Chapter One

At eighty-eight years old, James Farley could barely manage to recognize the details of his face in the mirror, let alone judge the quality of the bounty spread before him on the high wooden table. He had adapted though and he was quite skilled at calling on the other senses he possessed. Some seemed not to have changed from the days of his youth. His hearing was still sharp, his sense of smell keen, but most remarkable was his sense of touch. If anything, it had heightened over the past few years even as his eyesight had failed him. The responsiveness of his four remaining senses had become sharply honed and he now focused them on the table in front of him.

His thin fingers, misshapen from arthritis, covered the two perfect globes and lifted them to judge their weight. Hefting the left, then the right, back and forth, he tried to decide which was the heaviest. He slowly slid the pad of his thumb over the smooth surface of each, his touch gentle to keep from bruising the flesh under the thin layer of pearlescent skin. Both were equally heavy and felt incredibly full, but there was one test left to judge the most perfect of the pair. Leaning down, he breathed in their fragrance and found it heady and floral. Their scent made his mouth water and as the saliva pooled in the pouches of his cheeks he worked hard to swallow it. Like a lover at a banquet of beautiful women, the promise of impending pleasure stirred him deeply.

"Do you want to taste one?" Eden asked him. "They're sweeter than sugar." Her soft voice disturbed his keen concentration on the treasures he held.

She smiled at Mr. Farley as he tipped his head back, his clouded eyes searching for hers. Despite his advanced age he was still taller than her five-foot-eight-inch frame. He was still vital and strong-minded, and as he stood to his full height, she could imagine how formidable a negotiator he must have been in the boardroom before he retired. His bearing left no doubt that he was still a powerful man.

"I'm not sure they're ripe," he said, his own smile beginning to form at the corners of his mouth.

"I'll tell you what," Eden teased back. "I'll give you a sample, if you like it, you buy both."

Well," he thoughtfully considered the deal for a moment. "I buy both melons, and you become my next wife... if I like the sample."

Eden laughed out loud. "You buy both honeydews and I'll *give you* a cantaloupe for an extra three dollars." Eden reached for the cutting board and her knife. After choosing a pale cream-colored melon from the basket on the vegetable stand, she halved the fruit and began to remove the slippery seeds with the back of the blade. The rich, sweet smell surrounded her as the moist sounds of her knife sliding in and out of the wet cavity

vibrated in the air. She put the seeds aside for her chickens and began to slice the ripe fruit.

Mr. Farley continued to tease her. "Eight dollars for all three, *if* I like the sample," he offered. "And you at least have a torrid affair with me."

Eden waved her open palm at her chest and feigned shock. "You sir, are no gentleman." She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "Nine dollars and I won't tell your daughter about the other offer you just made me." Eden laughed again and winked at him.

"I did offer to make an honest woman out of you first," he said, as he reached for the plate stacked high with lime green slices and chose a shimmering half-moon. The piece was warm from the late summer sun and slick with juice. Its heavenly fragrance claimed his attention.

Here was a man who loved food Eden thought as she watched him savor the first bite. He closed his eyes to block out the distractions and turned his face up to the sun, then bit into the slice of honeydew, rolling the ripe fruit around in his mouth like it was a rare vintage wine. A tiny droplet of clear fruit nectar seeped from the corner of his mouth and meandered down the side of his chin and he swiped at it once with the back of his hand before taking another bite off the slice.

Eden smiled at Mr. Farley though he certainly couldn't see her through his closed eyes. He was so engrossed in the flavor and texture of the fruit she doubted he was even aware of his surroundings at all. It would be wonderful if all her customers enjoyed the harvest of her labor as much as he obviously did.

"Well, I see you've put my father in a trance again," Susan Farley's crisp reply came from a few feet away. Not far enough for Eden's comfort. In all her twenty-eight years she'd never met a proverbial acorn that had fallen so far from the family tree.

James' daughter was stunningly beautiful, and as always, perfectly coifed. She had been born with her father's bearing and aristocratic features, but absolutely none of his good humor and warmth. Her every attempt to get along with the *little people* was stilted and unnatural, and the resentment at having to try was visible on her airbrushed face. She looked at the trampled earth around the vegetable laden tables and grimaced. "One would expect country air to smell cleaner."

Eden worked to hide her smile of satisfaction. She was pleased to see the woman's discomfort at the sights and odors of a working farm. "Nice to see you Susan, would you like to try the honeydew?" Eden held the plate out for the stiff woman who simply waved her hand in the air, a gesture that clearly explained that she couldn't be bothered, "Let's go Dad, I'll be late for my manicure."

James handed Eden a new twenty dollar bill and beamed another smile. "I'll take four, keep the change, but promise you'll at least consider my offer." He winked, and turned to head back to his daughter's silver Mercedes, his arms hugging the four fruits to his chest. As she watched the car pull out of her driveway she wondered if the man was lonely.

Aunt Sarah had said that James Farley was a powerful businessman in his day, and a wealthy one at that. Eden hadn't been surprised to hear he was also quite a charmer. What had surprised Eden was how much Sarah seemed to know about the man, yet when Eden tried to ask why, her beloved aunt closed up tighter than a quahog clam. Maybe Sarah had hidden feelings for him. Eden didn't know, and now, sadly, she never would.

Mr. Farley probably had a cook and a housekeeper or two. So why did he make the trip to the outskirts of Glen Ellen to buy produce from her every week?

Her fondness for the man went beyond his patronage of her small farm stand. He radiated warmth and a neighborly friendliness that was only outshined by his positive and upbeat sense of humor. The man was a treasure. His visits to the stand helped to stave off some of the social loneliness that Eden had felt since moving to Glen Ellen. For all his outrageous words, Eden knew it was all in jest, and she enjoyed their affable banter. Still there were many produce stores in the Sonoma Valley—so why her farm?

Well it wasn't really her farm. The local bank owned more of the property than she did. Even with harvest season almost at its peak she still had to scrimp and save to be able to pay the mortgage each month.

Maybe the old man had harbored feeling for Sarah too. She felt a pang of regret for them both if it was true. Could it be that he also needed the easy camaraderie their exchanges offered? Certainly a man of his social status had many, many friends, but she offered friendship without strings, and from what Eden had experienced in the upper social classes everything came with strings attached.

Eden was a city girl born and bred, and a couple of years ago she never would have pictured herself living and working on a farm. Even if her imagination had stretched that far, she never would have thought it would be in California. She had planned to live her entire life combing the beaches of her beloved Newport, Rhode Island. There she'd had a small private practice. She hadn't found it at all surprising that the wealthy along Ocean Drive would need so much psychotherapy—theirs was old wealth. With old money came the acceptance of excess as ordinary. Few of the privileged Eden counseled understood that while the world may seem their oyster, those that inhabited this planet weren't mollusks waiting to be plucked, shucked and sucked down with little more company than a champagne chaser. Relationships needed nurturing, warmth and trust, and those precious commodities almost unheard of in the society that inhabited the upscale tourist town.

Money had never been important to Eden, so she worked a few hours a day and spent the rest of her time lugging her oil paints up and down the pristine beaches that surrounded Aquidneck Island or along the forested trails and open fields of the Norman Bird Sanctuary. She'd lost entire afternoons, applying swirls of color to her rough textured canvas as she sat on rocky outcroppings, her eyes dazzled by the deep blue-green of the Atlantic or by the flashes of shorebirds as they rode the sun-warmed thermals of the ocean breezes. The landscapes were so beautiful that she could even now recall the sights, sounds and smells by closing her eyes and letting her mind

wander back home. She could feel the surf—the heartbeat of the island—thrumming through her body. She knew that New England life would always own a part of her soul.

Glen Ellen was beautiful too. Dark, rich soil and a moderate climate meant that almost anything would grow here in the lush Sonoma Valley, it was wine country after all, but Eden hadn't come for the beauty.

She well remembered the evening she received the call from her aunt's attorney. Sarah was dying he'd told her calmly. Eden remembered how she had struggled to keep herself from crying during their conversation. His calmness had seemed eerie to her at first, but she later realized that he was doing his best to help her remain in control long enough to begin to make some important decisions. She still felt grateful for his support during that difficult conversation.

Sarah had been diagnosed with breast cancer a few years earlier, but she had continued to visit Eden every summer in Newport, and she continued to run her family-style farm and produce stand in Glen Ellen. She always seemed so strong and independent—Eden had convinced herself that Sarah would beat the terrible diagnosis, but she had been wrong. When Eden had flown out to help Sarah while she healed from her second surgery, she had been stunned by how frail and compromised Sarah had become.

Her aunt was Eden's only remaining relative and she adored the woman. It was Sarah who helped Eden's widowed mother, young and alone, take care of her small child, sending money when times were at their leanest. It was Sarah who paid Eden's way through college and graduate school, and Sarah who helped Eden make the plans for her mother's funeral after the tragic car accident that took her from her college-aged daughter. There was no way Eden would let Sarah down.

Eden had packed up her small cottage by the beach and moved to California. Her aunt's cancer advanced quickly and Eden became more and more responsible for the farm.

After Sarah's death, it seemed that Eden had inherited more than the farmhouse, fields, gardens and animals—she'd inherited a new family too.

Hector Gonzales, his wife Maria, and their teenage son Mateo worked the farm. As part of their compensation for the work they received a salary, the free rent of a single family house a quarter of a mile away at the edge of the property, and a share of the meat, eggs, produce and other goods the farm produced. Eden didn't just feel responsible for them all, she owed them. Their love and support of Sarah and herself through the dark days leading up to her aunt's death had been remarkable and the four had developed a deep and lasting friendship.

Hector and Mateo took care of the larger livestock. The chickens provided fresh eggs for the table and to sell at the stand. The sheep and goats provided milk, meat and wool. Maria made fresh cheeses from their milk and produced gorgeous woven rugs and other items from the wool she spun and dyed herself. Both helped to keep the

business running through the seasons before and after harvest time. They all worked in the fields tilling, planting, pruning and harvesting—everyone pitched in.

Though the life of a farmer wasn't what Eden had planned, she found solace in the rhythm of the work and security in the heartiness of the land.

If her life was lacking it could only be said it was in the arena of love. She'd had no shortage of dates while living in Newport. It was a town built on social engagements—from the seaside restaurants to the small, back alley eateries, from the maze of art galleries to the exclusive clubs—it was amazing anyone living there found the time to sleep or work at all.

Living in Glen Ellen wasn't all that different for some, after all the Sonoma Valley encompassed more than just wine. It also meant beautiful scenery, great food, plenty of art and seasonal tourist crowds—it was a more relaxed social atmosphere, but there were opportunities. Still the heavy workload of the farm prevented Eden from straying off to taste the social offerings of the upscale towns that surrounded her. The closest she'd come to someone making a pass at her was old Mr. Farley.

She briefly wondered if life in Glen Ellen would mean a lifetime of being alone.

Eden loved the barn and even her early morning chores. She was still more asleep than awake when she stumbled over the entry into the cool, dark space. The swallows greeted her arrival by swirling over her head and berating her for entering their family's nursery. The sweet smell of hay and molasses-coated grain always seemed comforting and that morning was no exception.

Her small flock of sheep and goats began calling to her as she approached their large pen. Pressing up against the welded wire fence, they crowded close to nuzzle Eden in their never-ending search for treats. She had to hold the shallow feed bucket over her head as she unlatched the gate with one hand and entered their pen to avoid getting mowed down in all the excitement. Chunks of apples, carrots, sweet potatoes and melons filled her bucket and the animals knew the routine well. It was no Little Bo-Peep moment, her lusty flock could smell the treasures in her bucket and they pushed, prodded and crowded against Eden in an attempt to get to the snacks first. Her sugary offerings probably didn't sweeten their milk as the old wives tale suggested, but it sure did sweeten their already sappy dispositions. Eden laughed out loud at their antics even as she felt her toes growing numb from the stampede of hooves on her own clog-shod feet.

"You spoil them," Mateo said, his amused voice piercing her sleep-fogged brain. "It wouldn't be so hard for you to cull the flock each fall if you stopped mothering them." The pant legs of his faded jeans were flecked with sawdust, testament to his work ethic at such an early hour. He twirled the wooden handle of the manure rake in the palm of one large hand as he grinned at her from where he leaned against the side of the open stall door across the aisle.

"I just can't help it, they're all so darn cute," she replied, gazing into the warm brown eyes of one of her favorite goats. It bleated in response to her individualized attention and she handed over a large chunk of bright orange potato to reward the creature's loyalty. "I'm going into town to make a run to the bank. We need more change for the stand. Do you guys need anything while I'm there?"

"Ya tenemos todo que necesitamos," Mateo replied in Spanish.

Eden smiled at him. "We already have everything that we need." Eden spoke the words out loud as she mulled them over in her still sleepy brain.

"Your Spanish is improving," Mateo complimented her. "You're a fast learner."

"You're a good teacher." She replied back but she was too distracted by his words to carry the conversation further. Eden knew there was something missing from her life. She knew there was more that she needed. What, she whispered to herself? Romance, her brain whispered back, the love of a strong man. She worked to shake off the reminder of needs she had no way of meeting at this time in her life and turned her attention back to the young man before her.

At seventeen, Mateo was always content, in fact she couldn't ever remember the boy complaining about anything. His mother and father shared his same sunny disposition, a fact she was eternally grateful for. "I'd better get going if I want to be back by the time the stand opens."

He nodded as he pushed the wheelbarrow closer to the pen and picked up the stall rake to muck out the enclosure—just another one of his morning chores before leaving for school.

The Gonzales family immigrated to California when Mateo was a boy, but he had been old enough to remember now how hard his whole family had worked in his native Mexico, and how little they received in return for that labor. His gratefulness for the life he and his parents had now was apparent in his work ethic and his schoolwork. Eden had no doubt that he would be graduating at the top of his class next summer.

With her handbag and a light sweater already in the pickup truck, and her keys in the ignition, Eden remembered that she needed to pick up another watering station for the chicken house while she was in town. She needed to get the make and model of the water system first or risk buying the wrong part, so with a sigh, she dug around in her bag for a piece of scrap paper and a pen and headed down the path behind the barn to the chicken house.

Seventy-five hens produced about five hundred eggs a week, forty-two dozen eggs to sell at the stand. Any that didn't sell Eden and the farmhands shared. The four hundred or so dollars in sales a month wasn't going to pay the mortgage but it was mostly profit. Thank heavens chicken feed was inexpensive, and supplementing their feed with the produce that was past it's prime and kitchen scraps also helped to lower their feed bill. Eden had to look at all the alternatives to make this work for everyone and some months were more of a challenge than others, but they all worked together to make ends meet.

Most of the hens were out in the fenced pens enjoying the warmth of the early morning sun and scratching at the cracked corn Maria had scattered on the ground. It was an old, but useful trick to get the chickens to leave their nests and make gathering eggs easier. Four ornery roosters ensured the eggs were fertile and that the next generation of chicks could be raised without buying new stock. They strutted around and squawked at each other to get the attention of the flock, but for all their flash the hens seemed unimpressed. Spreading their wings and puffing up their chests like men at a roadside bar, they danced and displayed their lovely plumage in a vain attempt to impress the ladies. Noisy skirmishes were taking place as the hens all tried to get dibs on any insects that happened to be unlucky enough to take a shortcut through the pen. Chickens are like people, Eden thought, there is always a firmly established pecking order and the same individuals always seem to land near the bottom of the pile. Still these were lucky birds, Eden remembered touring a commercial eggery once as a schoolgirl and shuddered at the memory of all those birds in tiny cages and squalid conditions. Maria kept these feathered egg-laying machines well fed and in a meticulously clean environment. Happy, healthy hens produced healthy food and happy customers - Eden had high standards for the products they sold and it kept her business growing.

Eden was relieved to step through the open door of the chicken house into its cool, quiet interior, but what she heard brought her up short. The gasping breaths of lovers deeply involved with each other pulsated through the air. She stood statue-still as she waited for her eyes to adjust to the shadows within, and as her sight focused the pair came sharply into view. Against the far wall Hector and Maria were clasped together, illuminated by a bright shaft of light streaming in through the wire-covered window. His dark head was bent low as he suckled at his wife's bare breasts, first one side, then the other as his work-worn hands cupped both heavy globes from underneath to position each one for his individualized attention. From across the room Eden could see the glistening wetness his mouth left on her areolas and nipples as his mouth moved back and forth.

Eden could feel her own body reacting to the eroticism of their movements and the sounds of their pleasure. Their seductive pairing brought heat and an electric sizzle to the small nub of her clitoris. She could feel the dampness seeping into her own panties as moist heat radiated from between her legs. She knew she should quietly leave her friends to their private moments but her own need surged upward keeping her feet pinned to the floor and her eyes glued to the unfolding scene.

As Eden watched, frozen in the shadows, Hector's hand traced the indentation of Maria's small waist and slid down to pull up the hem of her skirt. His insistent fingers traveled over the softly curving mound of her pubis and peeled the crotch of her serviceable white panties to one side to gain access to her most sensitive places. She threw back her head and begged him not to stop touching her. Bending one sleek leg she tried to spread herself to give him greater access to her body and Hector's free arm went around her hips to steady her as her control continued to slip away.

Eden almost whimpered in need as she watched Hector's steely hard forearm pump his hand up and down over his wife's spread pussy. Maria's breathing was rough and halting and soon, too soon, her high keening moans filled the room as she came against her husband's hand.

For long minutes Hector continued to gently finger Maria's slit as she regained her breath.

Eden stood in the shadows trying to quiet her ragged breathing. She continued to watch with erotic curiosity as Maria turned her attention to her husband. Her hands worked at the hard bulge in the front of Hector's jeans quickly freeing his cock. His newly released member bounced upward in the sure hands of his wife and she dropped to her knees and took him fully into her mouth. Her long dark hair fell softly around her shoulders and back. Her dark eyes searched her husband's while she deep-throated his turgid flesh. Sliding slowly out to the tip, nipping and sucking the bulbous end then moving her deep rosy mouth back again to its base picking up speed as she stroked his taut rod with her full lips and tongue. Hector's panting breaths turned to masculine sounds of pure male need.

Hector moaned low in his throat and grasped his wife's head firmly with both hands as he began to push harder and faster into her mouth. He glided in and out with such abandon that Eden wondered how the woman was able to breathe between his rapid thrusts. She imagined that it was her mouth receiving the silky shaft of her own lover, and she knew that getting air would be the last thing on her lists of concerns in such a sensual moment too.

Hector pulled his rigid cock from his wife's mouth and pushed Maria's dark skirt hem up around her narrow waist. Her shapely caramel-toned legs wrapped tightly around Hector's middle as he lifted her with his wiry arms and penetrated her welcoming crevice. The dust motes danced around their joined bodies as they worked together. Eden could see the muscles of his naked buttocks from where his jeans had slipped downward with his efforts. Pale cream-colored skin encased the well-shaped half-moons and darkened mysteriously near the center cleft. The bunched muscles tensed and relaxed as he rhythmically pushed up and into his wife again and again. Maria moaned loudly and mumbled to him in Spanish as he grunted his encouragement into the soft flesh where her shoulder met her neck. Her small hands clawed at Hector's back as her passion climbed higher. Maria's toes pointed and her legs tensed as she neared orgasm again. She was using the strength of her thighs and calves to pull her husband closer and deeper with each thrust. Maria's moans signaled more urgency.

Eden couldn't remember ever sharing such raw passion during lovemaking—a fact that both intrigued her and stung her pride. As Maria's voice began to ascend to the a high keening moan again Eden stepped back out the door feeling both embarrassed and a little guilty at her own state of arousal over seeing the intimate moments of her friends. She hurried to her pickup and drove out of the driveway toward town.

Chapter Two

After pulling out onto the main road she began to feel her embarrassment ebb. She told herself that they hadn't seen her watching, so she had nothing to feel uncomfortable about. As she relived the scene again in her mind her arousal began to build in earnest. It had been so long since she felt the warmth of a man's arms around her.

She'd had her share of encounters in college and a few short-lived relationships since, but none of them touched the deep places in her heart and none met her expectations for longevity. Looking back now she didn't believe that she had ever, truly, been in love.

Most of the men she'd known either wanted a facsimile of their own mother or someone to direct through life—or worse, they wanted a trophy to decorate their arm. Eden wanted to be needed, but as an equal, she wanted to feel supported but not dependent and she wanted to know that the man she loved would cherish her even as the years erased the beauty of her youth. She couldn't settle for less.

It's too bad she wasn't living in the Wild West and she wasn't a cowboy just in from the range, heading into town for a little booty call. Eden chuckled as she pictured herself in western garb.

The sun would be setting just behind her, giving her the surreal glow of a spaghetti western hero. She saw herself dusty from the road, a dirty pink bandana wound around her neck and a six-shooter hanging low on each hip.

First she'd pay a whole dollar for a bath. Sitting naked in the tiny hip tub she'd wait patiently as scantily clad, well-used, young men poured steaming hot water over her hair and shoulders as she soaked off the dirt and stench of a body too long in the wilds of the newly discovered territories. As they scrubbed her tanned neck and back she'd keep them enthralled with her stories, the tales becoming longer and taller with each retelling. She'd pay two extra bits for a shave, her pussy and legs of course, and a splash of some overly sweet cologne then she'd be ready.

She'd push her way through the swinging saloon doors, and strike a pose. Naturally she was bowlegged, and had a confident swagger that would rival any famous gunslinger. In her imagination she bellied up to the long wooden bar and ordered a tall one. It would come in the form of a gorgeous light blond bar-stallion, dressed in garish silks. He'd sidle up to her and ask if she wanted to buy him a drink. Tipping her hat back she would slowly look the man up and down, as a slow smile would spread across her face. He would be tall and lean, with a chiseled six-pack obvious on his naked upper body, and he'd have snapping blue eyes. She'd look down and the hard ridge of his huge cock would be clearly outlined by the tight fabric of his

pants. He'd smile as he draped himself over one of her well-toned forearms and motion with his eyes that they should take their drinks upstairs—and she'd already know what happened upstairs. Oh how she *needed* to go up those stairs!

Eden laughed at the fantasy playing out in her creative mind. Still, her ability to find her own thoughts amusing did nothing to deaden her now soaring desire for release. She rocked herself forward on her hips, sandwiching the throbbing button of her small-erection between the weight of her body and the vinyl seat cushion. She wriggled her hips against the bulging panels of stuffing on the bench seat only to find mounting frustration her only reward.

She felt warm all over. One of her hands had strayed off the steering wheel and she was rubbing her awakened body through the crotch of her pants, but it wasn't enough. She reached up and unbuttoned the top of her loose cut jeans and unzipped them a little. Sliding her hand down the front of her pants, she found she still couldn't reach enough of her body to ease the ache that was building between her legs. She kept her eyes on the road, but her mind was elsewhere. *Thank heaven for automatic trucks*! She chuckled out loud as she shifted her hips to rock them forward again and brought her left foot up onto the seat, spreading her legs a little more. Eden's breathing felt ragged as she worked her fingers back down the waistband of her jeans, past the elastic edge of her plain cotton panties, then further down into her damp blonde curls. The heady smell of her sex filled the cab of the truck as she pressed her fingers inward to part the moist lips of her pussy. It seemed both nasty and decadent to slip her cunt-lubed fingers deep into her slit and enjoy the silken pleasures of her own body as she traveled fast on a public roadway. Eden had never come this close to a public sexual experience before.

Her hand and arm worked to rub the rough pad of her middle finger up and down on her swollen clit. Rhythmically tightening and releasing the muscles of her abdomen she rocked her hips harder against her hand. Her delving fingers felt slick as they probed, and rubbed, and slid over her achingly aroused flesh. She felt restless and impatient to reach her peak and perspiration began to bead on her forehead as she worked her body faster, moaning loudly as the stinging pleasure intensified between her legs. Her breathing became harsh as the green of the countryside rushed past her windows. She was aware of the road, and the oncoming traffic, and she tried to school her expression to avoid revealing her efforts to those in the passing cars. She saw them glance at her as they whizzed by, and she tingled with the excitement of what she was doing as people, *strangers*, looked on at her as she had watched Hector and Maria earlier. It was her fantasy, and it was her nightmare, rolled into one.

Eden wanted to hold herself back, she wanted it to go on forever, but in the flash of an intensely sensual moment her pleasure became so consuming that she no longer cared what those in the other cars saw. She leaned back against the head rest, panting and moaning in pleasure at the burning friction of her work-roughened fingers on the tender swollen bud of her clitoris—she was close, very close, and her eyes began to close with the incredible pressure building between her legs. She moaned loudly as she reached for her shattering climax. Tensing she gasped out her cadence begging for

relief. "Oh God! Oh yes!" She was ready to spill over into the sparkling light infused world of pure pleasure—then the screech of tires on pavement and the blaring of a car horn brought Eden's attention back to the road.

She had swerved a few feet into the lane of the oncoming traffic, and a smart black Jaguar veered into the breakdown lane in order to avoid getting hit by her vehicle. The sports car's agility was amazing as it shot around her and back onto the road, she quickly maneuvered to get the beast she was driving back into her lane, but in her panic she overcompensated. The truck's tires crossed back over to her lane, and then the breakdown lane, and before Eden realized it she was airborne.

Time slowed as her truck sailed through the early morning air. Eden felt so aware of everything around her that the seconds seems to drag by in slow motion. It felt like her stomach dropped clear to her toes, she covered her face instinctively as the tall grass and thickets of the embankment seemed to be rising up to meet her.

Her truck landed hard in the grassy slope of ground below the shoulder of the road and as it skidded forward another several dozen yards Eden reached forward and fought for control of the steering wheel to keep herself from hitting the trees. Another space of long moments seemed to pass before the old truck finally responded to Eden's foot slamming down hard on the brake. The truck stopped just short of the tree line.

She covered her face with her shaking hands for a minute or two and tried to slow her breathing. Then she reached down and pulled up the zipper of her pants, noting and then pointedly ignoring, the tingling of her body that reminded her that her job wasn't yet finished.

She laid her head back against the headrest and closed her eyes. At least the sports car had made it around her all right and there weren't any other cars involved. *Shit!* She could have killed someone, including herself. *Idiot!*

Eden jumped as her truck door was suddenly pulled open. "Are you hurt?" The words came out in rough, clipped tones that showcased his anger perfectly.

She was almost afraid to say *no* for fear that this angry man would hurt her in spite of her survival of the accident. She barely had time to shake her head or get her eyes open fully before he hauled her out the door by her upper arm and pushed her hard against the side of the truck bed.

Eden reached up and pushed back her heavy blonde hair so she could see the face of the man who had arrived to either save her, or throttle her, she still wasn't sure which. What she saw left her momentarily speechless.

He was the man in the Jaguar. Even if the gleaming black car hadn't been parked on the dusty shoulder of the road above her, she would have guessed accurately by the quality of his clothes. A finely tailored white shirt molded to impossibly wide shoulders and tucked into the waistband of slim fitting designer jeans—even his belt looked expensive. His tanned complexion set off eyes so dark they looked flint black, and they were currently shooting sparks of fury in her direction. His black hair was short on the sides, and just long enough on top to give him a sexy tousled look. A few unruly

strands fell forward to tease at the fringes of his equally dark eyebrows. His ancestry was stamped on his features, and it looked like he had inherited the very best genes from generations past. He was tall, maybe a little over six feet, and carried himself with all the confidence and commanding presence of a Latin dictator, and Eden could see he was ready to dictate to her now.

"If you're finished looking," he ground out, his hard deep tones a reflection of the chiseled planes of his face. "What the fuck's wrong with you? Are you drunk, or just stupid?"

Eden's own temper bristled at his attack, but she tried to remember her years of training, "I was distracted, I'm so sorry sir. At least no one was hurt—"

"Distracted huh?" He cut her off and looked pointedly at the open button on the waistband of her jeans and then into her eyes. "Next time you need a cheap thrill lady, try getting off *before* you get in your car!"

"How dare you talk to me like that," her voice began to rise. "You have no right—"

"Cranky are we? Did you need a little more time?" He reached down and held up her hand and looked at it nonchalantly, "How inconsiderate of your lover to leave you unsatisfied."

"Bastard!" Eden jerked her hand out of his grasp and swung hard at his face. He caught her forearm before the blow landed, his black eyes blazing furiously as they bore into her for a fleeting moment, and then he let go of her like her skin was on fire. Stepping out of her reach, he freed his cell phone from the leather holder on his belt and walked away to make a call.

Eden stayed where she was. Shaking from the contempt she saw in his eyes, her thoughts reeled from her reaction to his words. She tried to gather her emotions around her, but knew it would be a fragile veil of protection from him. Her embarrassment and own anger seemed pale in the face of her sudden desire to do the man harm. She had never tried to hit another person in her entire adult life and she wasn't proud of her attempt to do so now, but really, how could such a handsome man be so damn vile?

She watched his movements from the corner of her eye. His fluid, confident grace spoke volumes about his opinion of himself. She wondered if he would be selfish in bed or if his pride would make him a lover intent on satisfying his bedmate just to prove himself masterful.

Well, on second thought, she had no doubt about his ability to be sexually satisfying—just looking at him made her feel hot and moist all over. Her active mind flashed with a glimpse of him hovering over her, beads of sweat dripping from is forehead onto her face as he worked to drive his hard, smooth cock deep into her wet and aching center. She could hear both their halting and ragged breathing as together they climbed higher and higher—their pleasure becoming taut like the over-tightened strings of violin, they strained to snap the wires and pitch themselves forward into profound pleasure...

His low voice brought her out of her mirage and as he came back toward her Eden noticed how he stayed just out of reach. "I've called a tow truck for you." His dark eyes glittered with scorn and annoyance as he spoke. "I hope that meets with your satisfaction." He emphasized the word satisfaction as he stood before her, his voice daring her to deny what he knew was true.

Eden glared back, too angry to reply, she was still shaking from their argument, and feeling embarrassed about his comments. How could he know?

He turned to leave, then paused a few feet away and looked back at her. Dropping his obsidian gaze to the unbuttoned waistband of her jeans again he reminded her wordlessly that he knew her secret. One more irritated look into her eyes and he headed to his car and drove away.

"Un-fucking-believable!" Rico Alvarez exclaimed to his reflection in the rearview mirror. He shifted the Jag and pulled out onto the narrow, two-lane country road heading south toward home. Not only had he spent precious hours looking for a business that turned out to be impossible to find, he narrowly missed being in a serious car accident too. For a moment he wondered if Farley had sent him on a wild goose chase as some sort of initiation joke. If so he wasn't laughing, and he felt sure the old man wouldn't be either after he expressed his anger at having had his morning wasted this way.

Mostly though, Rico was furious with himself.

It had been a long time since he'd had such a visceral reaction to a woman. The minute he pulled open the door of her truck he had been enveloped in the scent of her sex as it rushed at him on the outflow of air. His cock had immediately hardened in response to the combination of her sweet womanly essence and the tang of her pussy. It angered him that he would react so quickly to a stranger. He hated to feel as if someone else had control over his body, no matter how minimal—it scared him, and when Rico got scared, he got angry.

The damned woman was dazzling too. Her slender, healthy body curved in all the right places and her full, generous breasts were more bountiful than even his large hands could contain.

He'd known many beautiful women and her looks didn't impress him in the way it would other men he reassured himself. Beautiful women were hopelessly flawed creatures, so used to getting what they wanted that they never considered the needs of others. He knew her type—long on looks and short on substance.

She was the perfect height for him. He growled out loud in frustration at the direction his mind was insisting on going. It was true. She was just tall enough to wrap her long legs around his hips so he could press her up against the side panel of her truck and fuck her hard. He could imagine the soft thumping sound her ass would make as he banged her – pale flesh against hollow metal. Or maybe he would have done her on her

knees on the long bench seat of her dilapidated old truck, he'd hold a fistful of that long blonde hair to remind her that she was there for his pleasure and not her own. Her moans would be mixed with frustration as he kept her waiting for her release. She had risked his life along with her own today and he would have made her milk him dry in repayment of that debt.

Rico shook his head in an attempt to clear his mind of the erotic vision. He turned on the car radio and increased the volume until the sound pushed the speakers to their limit. He concentrated on the feeling of the music as it throbbed through his body vibrating his flesh all the way to his bones.

He needed to get back to Glen Ellen, he had kitchen staff to train. Most were greener than the new grapes in the vineyard and the greenest of all were his two souschefs. They were both straight out of school. They had talent to spare—if only he could give them the confidence that comes with experience. They weren't yet a team. He had to remind himself to be patient, it wasn't all that long ago that he was green too.

He took a deep breath and wrestled with the anger he harbored toward another woman—one who had so scarred his young heart, that even now at the age of thirty-two, he still felt the stabbing pain of her betrayal.

Rico made a good show of having gotten over Celine. He'd had many partners between then and now, but never one who touched anything closer than the outside of him. The inside was totally off limits. He never intended to let another woman close enough to hurt him again and he supposed his contempt for all women helped to justify that plan. It didn't matter, really. Women were for personal pleasure, warm and wet, they satisfied a need, nothing more.

His full scholarship to The French Culinary Institute had been the gift of a lifetime. He'd originally applied with no real hope of acceptance and was stunned when he got in. Apparently some wealthy philanthropist thought him worthy despite his past, and Rico was grateful for the chance to change his life.

He loved the spectacle of New York City, and it was there that he met Celine. She'd swept him off his feet. What he believed was true love, for her had been just another, in a long list of ploys, to shock her parents. She brought her poor, unrefined, Latino boyfriend home to the Hamptons and sat back to see the scene unfold. Rico shook his head as he remembered how uncomfortable it had all been. Still, he was in love with her and the cold, unrelenting disapproval of her parents only pushed his pride and disrespectful attitude closer to the surface. He played up his bad-boy image to Celine's parents and she was delighted. Their relationship was a match made in hell, but he didn't care as long as she was his.

Then it was over.

He still felt nauseated when he recalled walking in and finding her naked and straddling the body of a stranger. His anger, her laughter, he still remembered everything about that moment. She had stood before him completely nude, her small breasts jiggling from her rapid breathing, as she belittled Rico. His accent, his roots, his poverty, everything about him, it seemed, was suddenly repulsive to her silver spoon mentality. Her new lover hadn't even bothered to get out of their bed.

He'd wanted to kill her and the piece of shit she was fucking—right there and then—get it over with and just walk away smiling, but his anger quickly turned inward, where it constantly seemed to live. He'd always known that Celine was out of his reach, he'd always known in his heart it was a temporary layover, so instead of acting on his first impulse he just packed his few miserable belongings and silently left. He had made a bad choice and he would have to live with the consequences.

Celine had seen him as nothing more than a puppet and she the holder of the strings. She thought she knew him so well. Rico laughed harshly in hindsight, she hadn't known all his secrets. The self-centered bitch never asked about his missing years—the awful chunk of time that Rico continuously tried to bury from his memory. He'd given Celine everything in his heart, but no information about the lowest point in his life. He was still grateful for that fact. Celine was nothing if not vindictive. If she had known his secret, he had no doubt she would have buried him with it.

After the blur of dissolving their life together, Rico had thrown himself into his training. He worked hard to perfect his distinctive Latin twist on traditional cuisine and he had accomplished the task in record time. The premier chefs of the world traveled in private circles and now he was known in all of them. He was one of the rising stars of culinary arts and he cultivated his position carefully—once again in his life reputation proved to be everything.

That's when James Farley approached him with an offer he just couldn't refuse—his own restaurant in the posh Sonoma Valley. It was as if he'd stumbled on a rainbow and the pot of gold lay in California's wine country.

Farley promised to be a silent investor, he would supply money and Rico would supply sweat, management and talent. After six years as head chef in kitchens of fine eateries in more than one country, he had finally earned his own place in this world. His restaurant would be a success, it had to be, because nothing else was acceptable.

Rico had earned a king's ransom for his efforts since he became a chef, he surrounded himself with all the comforts he wanted, but still he had no one to share his personal life with. He didn't welcome the reminder of the needs he'd buried long ago, especially when that reminder came packaged as a leggy blonde with snapping green eyes, a body made for a man's pleasure that was perfumed with the most intoxicating and natural scent imaginable—ripe sex.

He tried hard to force their encounter out of his mind. He didn't have the time to spare to either wallow in the past, or mourn the present. He was exactly where he wanted to be. He was alone.

"Finally!" Eden spoke out loud to no one in particular as she climbed back into the cab of her truck. It had taken two hours to get her pickup back onto the roadway again and she was eager to be on her way to town to get the change she needed and get back

to the farm stand. The engine started smoothly, she put the vehicle into drive and pulled out into the southbound lane. She noted the slight pull to the right as she directed her truck down the pavement of the road. Eden sighed to herself. She'd need a front-end alignment now too, one more expense to come out of the farm's meager income and this one completely due to her own stupidity. It could have been worse she supposed—she could have killed herself or someone else, like the irritating man in the black Jaguar.

She had done her best to avoid thinking about her morning encounter as she waited to have her truck pulled up the side of the embankment, but now it came rushing back into her consciousness.

Oh God! Eden thought, rolling her eyes upward, someone had caught her masturbating! She could feel the heat rising to her face. Never had she embarrassed herself so completely. She avoided looking into her rearview mirror, knowing that her face would be flushed with her current emotions.

Caught! She teetered on the brink between full-out laughter and the desire to go home and hide under her blankets for the rest of her life. To make her situation worse she had to be caught with her hands in her pants by the sexiest man she'd ever seen. The laughter bubbled up and spilled over. Sexy and vile, what a combination! She laughed louder but was a little disturbed by the hysterical edge to the sound. Yeah, if he was so vile in her estimation than why were her panties growing damp in remembrance of his dark eyes and wide shoulders. She shook her head at the direction of her thoughts.

She took a few steadying breaths and called on her experience as a therapist. What would she tell one of her patients in a moment like this? Well she'd tell them to think about the positive side of the event to get through the immediate stress of dealing with everything and evaluate the negative possibilities later, when they felt more able to deal with that side of the equation.

Eden attempted to outline the positive side. The only saving grace she could find was that the angry man was most likely a seasonal visitor to the Sonoma Valley, and even if he wasn't, he was obviously a wealthy man. Eden had no chance of running into him in her own social circle—she was, after all, *just* a farmer.

Chapter Three

Rico yawned as he reached into the sandstone tiled shower stall and turned on the faucet. What a night! It had been their busiest yet and he couldn't begin to recall the number of fish servings he'd plated. His sea bass with spicy mango and black currant salsa had been a hit. It seemed that the residents of Glen Ellen had more sophisticated taste buds than he'd expected. Farley was right when he'd said the area needed an establishment that entwined traditional recipes with healthier practices and more complex flavors. The restaurant, his restaurant, Miami West, had been open for exactly three weeks tonight and it was already a hit.

His restaurant, man oh man that sounded good, just thinking the words made him want to shout them out loud.

As he waited for the water to warm he evaluated his progress in finding just the right businesses and staff to help him meet his goals. Farley had been a great help in securing contracts with suppliers and service organizations so far, and together they had generated a list of potential candidates to fill the remaining positions. Thank heaven for Farley's contacts both locally and abroad. Rico looked forward to the day when most of his energy could be spent creating menus that would surprise and intrigue his patrons, instead of being in the kitchen working over the stove. He loved the preparation and plating too, but from a business standpoint his time would be better spent meeting and greeting his patrons and working on new signature combinations to keep his reputation and customer list growing.

Stripping off his white jacket and pants, he let them fall to the bathroom floor. He reached up for the stereo and soft samba music filled the space. The seductive beat bounced off the stone tiled bathroom walls and reverberated around the room carrying away most of the stress of his hectic day. Rico peeled off his boxers and his damp socks and tossed them into the pile of other discarded dirty laundry. The bathroom filled with steam as he opened the glass door and stepped inside the large enclosure. Pellets of hot water nipped at his skin from the twelve powerful spray heads set around him at different heights on the walls. He turned the jets up until he could feel the full sting of the fast moving droplets. Rico's weary muscles began to relax and he closed his eyes as the water washed away the cooking smells and greasy sweat that came with kitchen work.

God he was tired.

Without warning the vision of a tall blonde woman filled his mind. Her long hair was tousled from the wind as she stood proudly in front of him. He looked deeply into sea-green eyes and saw no traces of the anger or embarrassment he had seen when he made it clear he had caught her masturbating. In his mind Rico looked down and saw

that the top of her waistband was unbuttoned, he could again smell the tangy, sweet womanly essence of her sex as he stepped closer to kiss her full plush lips. She yielded to him instantly, leaning against his body she pushed the soft mounds of her breasts into his chest and her long thin fingers reached down to cup and squeeze his naked buttocks. She kneaded the flesh there as she rubbed her long body against his. He could feel his erection pushing against the flat plane of her lower abdomen and he bent his knees to press lower still, grinding his stiffening cock into the apex of her thighs. In his mind he felt the rough fabric of her jeans and the cool metal bite of the zipper teeth against his naked shaft and the friction brought him to rock-hard arousal instantly.

Rico pumped shower gel into his hands from the dispenser on the wall and lathered his arms and chest. He imagined it was her hands softly stroking his body with the slippery soap, leaving a trail of frothy bubbles and soothing fragrance in their wake. Swirling the soap over his chest and the finely detailed muscles of his abdomen he continued with his fantasy. He plucked at his pebble-like nipples as his hands moved slowly, firmly, lower on his body. Sweeping past his stomach, then lower down, his touch caused his muscles to jump reflexively as his sliding hands reached the mass of black curls surrounding his now painfully erect cock. He soaped his shaft and balls. It felt heavenly as he pretended it was her mouth, on him. His hand covered his taut erection and began to move up and down as he pictured her soft blonde hair flowing around them in the gentle breeze. He saw her in his mind's eye as she worked her magic from her knees in front of him. Her scent surrounded him, he wanted so badly to taste the flavor of her body too. He stepped closer to the water jet at the level of his hands and allowed the stinging water spray to pulsate on the tip of his cock as he continued to stroke faster and harder. The almost painful tingle left him breathless with pleasure and he squeezed his buttocks together in an effort to hold back his need to come. His body trembled with the strain of waiting. It felt so good, so intense, his control evaporated quickly, though he fought hard to control his reaction, he knew that only by losing this fight would he truly win the battle.

His deep guttural moan filled the enclosed space of the shower stall when he came and it echoed off the hard tiled surfaces as his cock erupted with its load of thick creamy cum up and onto his body. He rubbed it around on his chest in an attempt to savor the sexual moment even as the jets of water washed it away from him, but it didn't wash away the vision of her. He well remembered the flash of her angry green eyes and they snapped her disapproval at him now from his memory for his use of her likeness for his own relief.

Eden tossed and turned in her sleep. She felt hot and restless with frustration at not being able to control the direction of her dreams. A door suddenly loomed in her view and no matter how she tried she was unable to ignore the vision. Eden knocked on the bright red portal. She didn't recognize it, but she knew she had to gain entrance to what was inside – it was important. The red was meant to warn her away, but she wouldn't falter in her effort – she couldn't. She knocked again louder and waited.

Looking around she noticed that a field of strawberries surrounded her. She could see the ripe red fruit and small white flowers covering the vines. She must be in her garden, but why was there a door here?

Looking down she saw her dress was covered in the same white flowers. The small white flowers were herself, she was as lush as a harvest garden, and her dream lover the ripe red fruit. She knocked again, this time her pounding reflected the anxiety that was beginning to build in her heart. Each time her fist connected with the door her heart pumped a heavy beat. Still the door remained unanswered.

She could feel her tears beginning to flow and she started to turn to walk away, but stopped as she heard the chain scrape free from the other side. She waited, feeling her panic begin to ebb as the door slowly began to open.

He was there.

Tall and dark as sin, he looked at her with smoldering eyes and unfathomable needs and she knew she should feel afraid, but she wasn't – not yet. He stepped back just enough to allow her to duck under his arm and enter the sparsely furnished room. Eden shivered when she heard the door click shut behind her.

Then his breath was there, hot and moist on the shell of her ear, as he whispered, "Take everything off."

She obeyed. Her skin looked as pale and luminous as an ocean pearl as she peeled off the layers of her clothing and dropped them onto the rough wood planks of the floor. As he demanded she stripped herself bare, she was without protection from him and completely at his mercy. Eden wondered briefly if he knew the meaning of the word. She could see her breath in the chill of the large room and felt her nipples elongate and harden from the cold.

Why was she here? What did she think she would find in this barren room?

Warm, strong fingers encircled her upper arm like a metal band and pulled her toward a low red chair in the center of the space. He turned her around and pushed her down onto the soft seat.

"Slide out to the edge," he told her, his deep baritone voice seemed to enter her through the pores in her skin and the vibrations rippled around inside her. "Good. Now bend your knees and put your feet up on the edge too." He pushed the tops of her knees apart as she obeyed his command and she felt the cold air rush into the warm space of her now gaping crotch.

Her eyes searched his, probing, questioning, but not finding answers. The confusion swirled around in her head. Then he was gone from her view.

Time ticked by slowly and she lost track of where he was in the room, but she knew he was there somewhere, and that he was looking at her. She felt vulnerable and a little afraid now. Why would he humiliate her? Didn't he know how much she wanted him?

She could feel the fabric of the chair growing damp under her. It absorbed her juices as they seeped out of her exposed opening. Eden began to sob. Her need was so great and still he waited. "Please, please," she begged softly.

Suddenly she could feel the heat from his body radiating from just behind her. The weight of his big hand felt reassuring as he stroked her hair and gently moved it aside to nip and kiss the nape of her neck.

Long minutes passed as his strong fingers swept up and down the length of her neck on one side as her lover nibbled and licked the shell of the ear opposite. Eden was caught in a silken web of desire and growing need as he played her emotions and her body. He was the lightning bolt, and she the conductor made of soft and shimmering metal. She couldn't imagine moving away from the searing heat even though she sensed that it surged hot enough to burn her very soul.

His muscular arms moved around her and cupped her generous breasts as his thumbs rubbed her erect nipples. She arched her back and thrust her breasts forward, her body now begging for what her words already had – she needed him…she needed more.

Large palms slid down the rolling, mobile skin of her abdomen and pulled back the fleshy lips of her pussy to expose her swollen clitoris. She nuzzled his neck as he leaned over her chair and the weight of his chest pushed against the back of her shoulders. Eden felt encircled in the warmth of his big body and her skin tingled with desire. Every nerve, every fiber of her being, thrummed with life and sizzled with need – she could smell his sweat and her own and reveled in the knowledge that he wanted her too. That she'd have him after all, her patience would be well rewarded when he was slamming his body into her own and bringing her to high, clear peaks of pure ecstasy.

Electric pleasure shot through her body at the first gentle touch of the pad of his finger on her exposure-dry clitoris. Slowly he slid his arm forward to dip into the well of wetness at her opening and back up to moisten her nub again and again. The lazy trips down and up, down and up again, over and over, had Eden sobbing louder in frustration and pleasure. She tried to rock her hips against his hand to seek relief from the torment of her body but was unable to move because of the weight of his chest bearing down on her shoulders. He continued his slow, sweet torture, as his now soaking fingers circled around the thin skin of her labial folds, nearing, but not touching, her most sensitive spot. She wanted to scream in frustration, she wanted to free her arms from under the weight of his and claw at him until he gave her the release she so badly needed.

"It's only sex," he whispered into her ear. "It's all I am, and it's all you can have here." He abruptly stood and moved away from the intimate circle of her body. Eden, breasts heaving from desire and resentment, launched herself from the chair and spun around to swing her fist at the face of the Devil, but it wasn't Hades who stood there, it was the face of the stranger, a man who drives a black Jaguar.

She screamed her frustration and anger into his face even as it blurred into the background and the room faded from her view, leaving her naked and burning with need in the silent empty space of time.

Slowly she became aware of the pressing weight of cat paws on her chest as the strains of some old Beatle's tune filtered into her dream along with the hearty purring of her favorite feline. She reached out and pushed the snooze button before she bothered to open her eyes—a nine-minute reprieve from facing the new day.

The big orange tabby moved to settle its weight high on Eden's chest and began kneading the skin at her collarbone – *so much for her nine minutes*!

Eden mulled over her dream as she tried to rouse herself. It wasn't the first time she'd had dreams of sexual frustration but it was the first time her dream world had

been filled with so many glaring warning signs. She tried to shake off the uneasy feeling the dream had provoked. It didn't seem surprising that the stranger from yesterday was there though. He had been beyond sexy and was definitely out of her reach. With his dark good looks and overbearing confidence, she felt sure he had been the star in many a woman's dreams. What was it about angry men that made them such a turn-on to women? Well, if she ever figured that out she'd be able to retire on the fortune she'd make, but for now she needed to get out of this bed and start shoveling manure.

"Take a left here," James Farley said. "It's just up ahead, you'll see the sign."

"Fine," Rico replied. His tone was more annoyed than friendly. If last night's crowd was any indication of the work he would face tonight, he should be home sleeping, not driving down this country lane at seven o'clock in the morning.

The restaurant was booming and he felt gratified by its growing popularity. It wasn't lost on him that most people would see his need for success as ego driven, but Rico knew that it wasn't true. Success brought a sense of relief for him. After a life with too many misspent moments this forward momentum was a sweet victory that meant he had it together, and that he'd left *the life* far behind. At least he hoped he had. Sure the ghosts, and his scars, still followed him everywhere, but they were mostly visible only in his own memories.

He groped between the seats for his travel mug. Coffee—he *needed* coffee. He was in such a hurry this morning that he didn't have time to look for the lid to the large stainless steel mug, but it wasn't a problem, the Jag had a ride that was as smooth as satin sheets. His car was one of those sweet rewards that he never dreamed he'd be able to afford. For years the only items of value in his possession hadn't belonged to him, now everything about his life screamed quality. Rico wasn't an extravagant man but when he made purchases he bought the best for himself, and he took excellent care of the things that were important to him.

He took his eyes off the road briefly to locate the steaming cup and leaned forward a little to take a sip. He was distracted by the smile on Farley's wrinkled face. "Am I missing something?" he asked. The words barely tripped off his tongue when he felt the front wheels of his Jaguar dip into a pothole in the road. The low sleek body of the car banged hard on the tar surface at the lip of the hole, jarring its occupants and sending hot, black coffee up and over the rim of the cup. Rico reacted reflexively and reared back to avoid burning his face, giving the steaming liquid a straight path to land in a puddle on the crotch of his pants. "Son of a bitch!" he hissed in anger and pain.

Farley chuckled. "Well you certainly didn't miss your lap." Extending a long, thin arm he pointed off to the side of the road ahead. "Look, is that the sign?"

Eden's forearms itched from rubbing against the stiff, white fuzz that covered every vine of the tall tomato plants. Bending from the waist she reached down to pull her

harvest basket along the neat row to the next green-leafed giant searching for the ripest fruit to sell at the stand. The early morning sun felt wonderful on her back. The warmth seeped through her thin, sleeveless shirt and spread throughout her body, making her stomach muscles contract and relax in rhythmic response. She ignored the small raised areas of irritation on her arms and plucked another blood-red globe from the vine, pausing to hold the fruit to her nose she inhaled deeply. The acrid, green and earthy smell was intoxicating—nothing stirred up memories of late summer moments like the heady fragrance of a ripe tomato.

She brought the fruit to her mouth and savored the snap of tension as her teeth pierced the outer layer of skin and met the soft, salty meat of the flesh. Rich, sunwarmed flavor burst in her mouth, the tang of the fruit danced on her tongue awaking her taste buds. The thin tomato juice carried a few tiny seeds as it dripped down her chin and fell in small splatters onto the top of one of her neon-yellow garden clogs. Eden sucked at the juices, swallowing rapidly to avoid wearing more of the red nectar.

The rich taste of the fruit, the fragrance of the tomato vines and the feel of deep, fertile soil under her feet, fused in her mind to define one of the most prefect moments of her life. More than a slice of bliss, it was a moment of pure peacefulness. She owed Sarah a debt of gratitude for the gift of the life she now lived. She looked up into the vivid blue sky and imagined Sarah's warm and gentle smile beaming down on her from heaven and Eden smiled back in gratitude.

Finished with her tomato breakfast she scooped up the heavy basket and headed for the back of the barn to wash the produce before offering it for sale to her early morning customers.

She could see why Sarah had so loved this life. Yes there were struggles to overcome and uncertainty for every season of the year, but the work of a farmer was filled with hope and many rewards too.

Eden stopped short as she turned the corner at the back of the barn when she spotted the man of her dreams. She was faced with his broad shouldered back and his hands were out of sight at the front of his pants. The sounds of splashing made his activity obvious—the Devil was relieving himself against the cedar siding.

"I know we're out in the country and all," she drawled sarcastically, "but we *do* have indoor plumbing."

"What?" Engrossed in the job of washing the coffee out of his handkerchief Rico didn't understand the words at first and turned in the direction of the feminine voice. "I'm sorry, what did..." the meaning of her words hit him at the same instant he recognized the leggy blonde from the morning before and his wet dreams last night. She balanced a large wicker basket full of produce on one hip as she attempted to shade her eyes from the early morning sun with her free hand. Dressed simply in short denim cutoffs and a faded tank top, her Daisy-Duke clothing highlighted her sexy curves perfectly. Fuck! This just wasn't his day!

"I wasn't urinating on your barn." His reply defensive, his stance as belligerent as the look on his handsome face, Eden could almost see his self-protective shield rise, but years of experience as a therapist allowed her to easily see the chink in his formidable armor too.

Eden looked pointedly at the large wet area on the front of what appeared to be expensive pin-striped trousers and raised her eyebrows. "Looks like you need to work on improving your aim, but do us all a favor and practice elsewhere." Hugging her basket tighter she headed for a different faucet at the side of the barn. She was very aware of the angry sputtering coming from the man dogging her steps.

Shit! Seeing the man who haunted her dreams just a couple of hours ago wasn't one of the things she expected to have to deal with today! She wondered briefly what kind of women shared his dreams, but pushed the thought away. Surely she'd need all her wits about her to deal with this man.

Eden refused to be embarrassed at having been caught masturbating the day before. It was her own body after all and she seriously doubted the practice was foreign to the man himself. Just the thought of him naked and touching his own body stirred hers dramatically and she could feel the rush of color flaming her cheeks. She wondered if it was possible to hold a conversation with another person while keeping your back to them. Inwardly she squirmed at her predicament, but the humor of her situation wasn't lost on her.

When he had first turned around to face her she had felt a moment of panic, and then she saw, first the confusion, and then the embarrassment, in the flush of his tanned cheeks when he realize what she'd said. She didn't feel called to suppress her mischievous side after the way he treated her yesterday. She had to work to conceal the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth and she moved forward with purpose to keep from laughing out loud.

Tall, dark and handsome really weren't the words to define this man, *beyond* sensuous was more fitting. He did remind her of the Devil himself. No wonder he had a starring role in her nighttime thoughts.

"Just a minute woman," he growled from a few paces behind her, "I was simply trying to clean up some coffee I spilled in the car."

Eden's breezy reply floated back to him, "Of course you were." Her tone left no doubt that she didn't believe a word of it.

Rico ground his teeth together and followed along after the blonde cupcake. She rounded the side of the barn and put her basket of tomatoes down next to another faucet. Then she knelt on the grass and began to carefully empty it of its contents.

He stopped a few feet from her and watched. Her long, shapely legs were mostly bare. Her garish yellow clogs covered her toes but the backs of her narrow heels were visible and molded into lightly tanned calves that disappeared into the hidden folds of her knees. Her short-shorts didn't obscure his view until his eyes probed high up to the apex of her thighs. Perfectly shaped round buttocks flared out under the blue canvas

covering them and then narrowed again at her trim waist. Feminine shoulders and the long line of her smooth neck melded into the blonde hair at her nape. The shimmering strands were pulled back into a long ponytail that brushed over the thin material of her tank top as she moved. She was as lovely as he first thought, and he wondered what it would be like to be her lover, to move up and take her from behind, there in the cool grass. He wondered if she was quiet when she made love. He wanted...

"You better not be standing there looking at my ass," Eden said, her voice tinged with unmistakable humor. "Either get down here and help me rinse these, or go pee on someone else's barn."

Uttering a low growl of frustration, Rico bent to the task. Farley was right, this woman grew perfect produce...well...beautiful tomatoes anyway. Without realizing it Rico spoke the word out loud, "Beautiful."

"My ass or the tomatoes?" she quipped. Her smile bloomed as her large green eyes connected with his briefly and slid away again. Rico felt his stomach do a backflip.

"Both." He felt himself smiling back.

So, Eden thought, the Devil does have a sense of humor after all, and pride, she could see that now too. It was stamped all over him. He held it like a shield, and probably resorted to anger if it was even slightly dented. Her anger melted away. She didn't feel magnanimous enough to let him completely off the hook for his behavior from the day before but she wasn't going to let anger be her shield either.

Together they rinsed the tomatoes and packed them carefully back into the produce basket to drain. Their eyes met briefly a second time as they completed their task.

"So, you work here?" He asked.

"Everyone who's here *works*," Eden replied as she lifted the basket to her hip and stood. "Even you do." She smiled at him again and spared a quick glance at the bounty in her basket. Rico felt his stomach do another small flip in response. "Why? Are you with the census bureau? No?" she shook her head thoughtfully, "The IRS?"

Rico shook his head in reply and chuckled. The deep timber of his laugh caught Eden by surprise. He sounded a bit rusty – the guy probably needed more practice.

"I'm Rico Alvarez." He held out one broad, tanned hand.

Eden's small hand disappeared from view during their brief handshake, "The Rico Alvarez?" She asked. Her mischievous smile flashed in good-natured warning. She dropped his hand and started to move off in the direction of the produce stand in front of the huge barn.

"You've heard of me?" He sounded flattered and a little perplexed.

"Not that I can recall."

She heard him laugh again as he quickly caught up with her. "And you are?"

"You mean besides the woman who ran you off the road yesterday?" Eden paused for effect, scrutinizing his expression. There was no way to get around the way they

met, and certainly getting it out in the open could only help diminished the size of the elephant that stalked them in the shadows of the big barn.

She thought she was prepared for any comment he might make, but she wasn't for the obvious heat she saw flicker in the depths of his dark eyes.

"I remember," he said softly. His deep voice reached out to caress her. "I'm afraid I let my temper get out of hand."

"Yeah, me too. I've never tried to hit another person before in my life, no mater how detestable their behavior." Eden raised her eyebrows when Rico's eyes flared with anger at her challenging words.

Then he transformed.

He looked away and at the ground, shaking his head as if to clear it. He sighed deeply and looking up again he offered her his most sensual smile, then he said, "Let's try this again okay? I'm Rico and you're?"

Eden knew she was being charmed, and for a smile like that she'd go along with anything. "Sorry, I assumed you knew that from the sign. I'm *the* gardener." She smiled at his confusion. "The gardener? This is Eden's garden?"

"You're Eden?" He sounded surprised. "I guess I expected an older woman after what Farley told me."

"I'm getting older every day, Rico, but then so are you." She gifted him with another teasing smile as they came around the front of the barn to face laden tables and a small crowd of early shoppers.

Several customers greeted Eden with smiles and kind words, but most also paused to look at the wet front of Rico's pants. It was all she could do not to laugh out loud at his predicament. *Just desserts*, she thought, *just desserts*.

Still the state of his clothing did nothing to subdue the virility of the man. He had an air of potency that surrounded him like a cloak. Not one woman in the crowd would mistake the wetness on the crotch of his pants for urine and with Eden's sweaty brow and work-tousled hair they might well think she also held some responsibility for the sodden fabric.

While Maria waited on customers, Hector stood a few yards away talking with Mr. Farley as the older man leaned casually against Rico's car. Eden lifted the heavy basket and set it down on top of one of the high wooden tables before walking over to say hello to her favorite customer.

As he always did, James Farley greeted her warmly. He reached out to take both of Eden's small hands in his and drew her close for a quick hug. "Rico wasn't trying to win you away from me was he?" Mr. Farley teased.

"He lacks your charm and wit," she replied. Eden leaned in close and added, "And he doesn't seem to be able to hold his water."

Mr. Farley laughed so loud he drew the attention of the entire crown of shoppers. They all gawked in curiosity at the outburst. Hector looked down at the front on Rico's

pants and quickly covered his mouth with the flat of his palm and looked away to hide his smile.

"Nice," Rico muttered sarcastically under his breath. "Very nice."

Chapter Four

The dust motes danced around her as the second crackled and yellowing shade snapped up on its roller with a resounding clatter. Sunlight filled the crowded attic space and Eden looked around in wonder at the collection of furniture, boxes, trunks and other miscellaneous piles of Sarah's treasures.

Sarah had been a collector. Every corner of the large attic was filled with the items that defined the woman's life. Eden had been unable to part with anything immediately after her aunt's death, but it was time now. Eying the crowded, dusty space brought confusion—just where did she start to disassemble the life of someone she loved? At the beginning she decided, in the box at her feet, and one box at a time after that until the job was complete. She had light, she just needed some fresh air and free space so she could get to work.

Eden struggled with the old-fashioned lock on the first weighted window frame. Rust and thick layers of chipping paint suggested that it had been years since the windows had been opened, but their prolonged laziness couldn't win out over Eden's determination. Squealing, grinding and shuddering the frame of the window finally responded to the unrelenting pressure of Eden's well-toned arms. Eden nodded confidently at the surrendering window frame before moving across the attic to the other. Another perk of being a farmer, there was no need for working out—working outside provided her all the exercise she needed to stay fit and toned. She'd never been in better physical shape. When she wiggled, nothing jiggled, and she was proud of that fact.

After removing the clutter from the center aisle she cleared an area to stack the items that would be saved, then a larger one for the belongings that would be donated to local charitable organizations. The idea of donating Sarah's items to others who would use them lightened Eden's heart a little. Her aunt was a generous woman in life, and continuing that generosity after her passing seemed like a fitting tribute.

Eden knelt near the first overflowing box and began her search for treasures. Under layers of tissue paper and bubble wrap she discovered a nearly complete set of Carnival Glass berry dishes. The gorgeous little bowls were Depression Era pieces. She was no antiques aficionado, but her mother had a collection of similar glassware when Eden was a young girl. They used to hunt yard sales and flea markets together in search of just such gems. She removed the wrappings on the iridescent ruffled edged bowls and set them on the floor next to the faded cardboard container. She marveled at the way the pale blue glass came alive with an oil-slick of beautiful colors in the bright light. They were natural sun-catchers and sent tiny rainbows bouncing all around the attic. Eden couldn't help but smile, it was as if Sarah was sending her a sign from above.

These were destined for her own kitchen. Eden was an ice cream fanatic, it was her after dinner splurge almost every night, and she knew the charming dishes would bring her joy each time she used them.

The next box contained a pasta machine, an old-fashioned stovetop coffee percolator, a well-used dish strainer and a half a dozen plastic ice cube trays. Into the donation pile they went. Two boxes down, dozens and dozens more to go, each one a tiny time capsule that told her something more about Sarah's life.

It was a bittersweet journey for Eden. Each box brought something new—joy filled memories of her time with her aunt, and insight into her aunt's personality and interests, but some boxes brought waves of stabbing sorrow too.

She ached to have Sarah here with her so that she could share the news of things both ordinary and extraordinary. She wanted to tell Sarah about the great bargain she got on the new wheelbarrows for the farm and show her the adorable twin lambs that her favorite ewe, Lulu, had given birth to this past spring. She wanted to tell her about the new contract to provide fresh produce to Miami West that Rico and Mr. Farley had offered her and dish with her about the handsome head chef...Eden could feel her eyes mist over with unshed tears. There were so many highs and lows to experience in the loss of someone special and she knew from experience that the roller-coaster ride of grief would continue for a long while. Eden wasn't ungrateful for the ride. She could bear the sorrow to have the memories of her beloved aunt, memories that would warm her heart for the rest of her life.

The new contract with Miami West was a welcome surprise. The offer had been made shortly after her teasing remarks about Rico's inability to hold his water the day before. Eden still felt the urge to laugh whenever she thought about his expression when he'd realized what she'd said. Thank heavens she'd been momentarily stunned into silence by the alarm bells in her head at the thought of being in a working relationship with the sexy chef, otherwise she may have refused before getting the whole story. She was happy to hear that Rico's business partner was none other than James Farley. Once she heard that *any* reluctance she might have had over working with the combustible Chef Alvarez vanished. Mr. Farley was the perfect buffer. Reasonable, cool headed, with a reliable sense of humor, and she knew he was already fond of her. She felt secure that he would guide her fairly, and hopefully help her to keep her thoughts off his enigmatic partner and on her business venture. She may have struck a deal with the Devil, but she would have a guardian angel there for protection, and if necessary, redirection.

Three hours later Eden had to work to swallow, her throat felt parched and her eyes gritty from the dusty attic air and she was more than ready for a break. She was going to sort through one more container she told herself, and then it would be lunchtime.

She scooted herself over in front of an ornate shipping trunk that had been revealed when she moved a large box of stored clothing a few minutes before. Its dark wood surface was deeply etched with hand carved flowers, exotic birds and what appeared to be fruit. Two thick and well-oiled leather straps wrapped around the body of the largesized trunk and secured at the front with flamboyant brass buckles. The fittings had a burnished patina that clearly spoke of their age. It was a beautiful piece and another one of Sarah's treasures that Eden would find room for among her own belongs downstairs, but first she needed to empty it out and sort through the secrets that it held.

The rich, acrid fragrance of camphor wood reached out to her as she opened the heavy lid and leaned it back on its concealed hinges. Running her fingers gently around the edges of the deep toned wood, Eden contemplated the contents of the trunk. It appeared to contain personal mementos. There were stacks of cards and letters tied in lovely silk ribbons, sachets of what smelled like lavender and bee balm, and a square of sheer organza fabric tied around a dried nosegay of faded blooms. The more Eden removed from the trunk the more there seemed to be left inside. The top to a box of Valentine chocolates, a small stuffed toy of two peas in a fuzzy cloth peapod, an empty jewelry gift box lined in red satin, an ink doodle of a pair of full lips surrounded by streamers and rockets and hearts, ticket stubs to a local movie theater, a music CD of romantic theme songs, a book of matches to a restaurant that Eden had never heard of, and in the very bottom of the trunk a white box containing an exquisite cream silk peignoir set. It looked like the sort of lingerie a bride would wear on her wedding day. The champagne colored sequins sparkled in the sunlight as Eden reverently removed the delicate personal wear from the box and let the soft, cool fabric sift through her hands as she contemplated the meaning of the contents of the trunk. Clearly these were the keepsakes of a woman in love, but who had been Sarah's lover? No matter how she tried she couldn't remember Sarah ever expressing feeling of lasting love for any man. Eden had always assumed that Sarah was too busy to be bothered with the complications of a love relationship. It struck her how little she really knew about her beloved aunt.

They shared summer vacations together, long phone calls and Christmas cards, but obviously that didn't even scratch the surface of who Sarah was as a woman, as a lover and as a friend. What did Eden *really* know about Sarah's daily life and more importantly about her dreams? From the contents of her trunk, she knew very little indeed.

Eden pulled a stack of letters from the haphazard pile of mementos on the attic floor near her knees and toyed with the wide, violet-blue ribbon. The sheen of the silk and the lovely bow suggested the importance of the folded papers caught within its grasp. Eden wrestled with her consciousness. Would reading through Sarah's letters be stepping over the boundaries that had existed between them, would it be an invasion of Sarah's privacy even though she was now gone forever from her? Eden examined her reasons for wanting to read the pages in her hands and knew it wasn't for some momentary thrill, or new gossip material to share with others who had known Sarah. It was to round out her own vision of who her aunt was, because knowing Sarah better helped Eden to understand herself too.

She reverently pulled the tails of the bow and sat back on her heels to read.

Dearest Sarah,

It has only been an hour since you left my side and already I miss you more than words can fully tell. Our time together always feels so short and it's difficult to show you all I feel with one eye to the clock and another toward the door. It is my sincerest hope that one day soon we will find ourselves together, not for just an evening or afternoon, but for the remainder of our lives. Until then I will hold you in my heart and soul when I cannot hold you in my arms.

With sincerest love, Jay

Questions clamored for thinking space in Eden's brain. Who was this Jay she wondered and why couldn't they be together?

An hour later she knew.

The answers were all there in the letters now read and stacked neatly next to her on the floor. Sarah had been having an affair with a married man. A man so locked into his social status and position in life that he felt he had no alternative but to remain where he was until his young daughter was old enough to care for herself. A man that Eden already knew, James Farley had been Sarah's lover.

Briefly she wondered if she should ask him about his relationship with Sarah, but she discarded that idea almost immediately. It wasn't her place. The letters gave her all the information she needed anyway. She knew that Sarah loved him and that he loved her too. Eden now knew why Mr. Farley drove all the way out to her produce stand just to buy a few melons almost every week and why he would have such a fondness for her. The circumstances of their relationship didn't matter to Eden, knowing that her aunt was so loved by such a caring and generous man did and it was enough.

Eden twirled around in the full-length mirror to check her appearance and smiled at what she saw. Every woman needed a little red dress to stop the show, and hers defined her body perfectly. The deep, rose petal red fabric set off the shimmer of her pale blonde hair that was pulled up high on her crown, and soft tendrils hung to her shoulders in loose, silken spirals. The thin, spaghetti straps widened to a plunging V-neck that offered no apologies for the fullness of her breasts. The ruched empire waist accentuated her small midriff and rounded hips, ending in an ethereal full skirt that draped in gently swaying folds to just above her knee. She clipped on a pair of silver and diamond earrings that had belonged to Sarah. Even though Eden's ears had been pierced since childhood, wearing Sarah's jewelry brought comfort and a gentle reminder of all the love and support her aunt had so graciously given her all her life. The earrings had been Sarah's favorite pair and so to Eden they were priceless. Strappy wine red sandals and a small silver bag completed her outfit. It had been a long time

since she'd had the chance to feel feminine and Eden planned on taking full advantage of the opportunity.

The thought of having dinner in the hottest restaurant in town to celebrate her new business arrangement and being in the warm and flattering company of Mr. Farley was just what this lonely farm girl needed. But the idea of seeing the sexy chef of Miami West again caused a storm of butterflies to swirl around in her stomach. Their silken wings fluttered against the inside of her abdomen as she wondered if Rico would be able to join them while they dined.

She reached for the tiny crystal decanter on her vanity and daubed a few glistening droplets of her favorite perfume on the inside of her wrists and the back of her neck. It was her signature scent—top notes of rich, warm vanilla blended with a clean heart of jasmine and boasted a subtle finish of myrrh, it was as sophisticated and as feminine as any fragrance Eden had ever sampled. She had the perfume made specifically for her when she lived in Newport, but since the cost was so extravagant she now only used it on rare occasions. Tonight it was the icing on the cake and a confidence booster to boot.

She definitely needed that boost. Despite her cavalier behavior with Rico a few days ago, she knew instinctively that he was a dangerous man. There was a raw masculinity about him, and he had the bearing of someone who had found and dealt with trouble more than once in his lifetime. She had no doubt he was competent with such tasks.

Eden wasn't sure why she had had taken that condescending attitude and tone with him. Maybe she wanted to see *him* squirm too, as she had the morning her truck went off the road. Maybe it was some childish way to take back a little of her lost dignity, but she knew it shouldn't have been at the expense of his.

He had been patient with her behavior despite the fact that it obviously irritated him. That was a surprise to Eden. He didn't seem the patient type. It could be that his business sense had won out over his temper—he wanted to buy produce from her garden for his restaurant after all, maybe he was willing to take what she dished out to accomplish that goal.

It didn't matter what his motives had been, she decided. She was responsible for her own behavior and taking him down a notch or two wasn't her job.

The therapist in her told her there was much more to this man than what was visible on the surface, and as she reached for her evening wrap, she wondered how well he protected his secrets.

Eden drove herself to the restaurant in her farm truck. It was the only vehicle that was available to her, but the irony of being dressed for the ball and arriving on the back of a sway-backed mule wasn't lost on her either. She parked and walked the last block herself to avoid the need to use the valet service at the restaurant. When she wanted to leave she would know exactly where the car was and she could avoid waiting to have her truck brought around. Eden smiled to herself. She had always been an independent creature and she knew the trait had served her well throughout her life.

She brushed her hand along the wall of Miami West as she neared the door and found the rough stucco exterior pleasing. While every other building in that part of town featured a classical stone and brick facing, Rico's restaurant had individuality stamped all over it. Though charming would never be a word she'd use to describe its owner, the term really did fit her first impression of the upscale eatery.

It took a minute for Eden's eyes to register all the colors and movement inside the packed restaurant. She was surprised to find the restaurant bustling at such a late hour. Apparently many Sonoman's preferred to eat dinner at eight-thirty at night. At first glance it seemed like chaos reigned. There was one big, main dining room straight ahead and at least four smaller dining areas all branching off of the main entryway. Every room was painted in a different color and all reminded her of a palette taken straight off a piece of colorful pottery—robin's egg blue on one wall, deep coral on another, a rusty-mustard yellow to her left and a rich, sage green to her right. The feast of colors and textures added sizzle and a festive flair to the restaurant, but somehow the mélange of color didn't feel the least bit gaudy. It was an eclectic mixture of sophisticated contemporary and Old World charm that worked to bring vibrant personality to each room.

She stood just inside the door and closed her eyes briefly to give them a moment to refocus. The rhythmic strains of a samba floated out to her from one of the side dining rooms and she could feel her body beginning to sway to the beat. The energy of the crowd was palpable and she could feel her excitement rising already.

"Excuse me ma'am, do you need assistance?"

Eden opened her eyes to the soft male voice and found the concerned expression of the hovering waiter endearing. "No, I'm fine." She smiled at him reassuringly. "It's just that there's so much color and activity, my eyes were having a bit of trouble taking it all in."

She was rewarded with his return smile. He was young, maybe all of twenty and smartly dressed in a crisp white shirt and black trousers, as were all the other employees. Eden could see many other wait staff moving from table to table in the same quiet and unobtrusive manner as the young man before her. "My name is Roberto and I'll be happy to assist you. Will you be meeting someone or do you have a single reservation?" He said in that same quiet tone.

"I'm meeting someone," Eden replied. "Mr. James Farley. Would you know if he's arrived?"

The young man's face lit with recognition. "You must be Ms. Stuart, Chef Alvarez's guest."

At Eden's quick nod he explained further, "Mr. Farley sends his regrets but he is unable to meet you tonight. He has had a minor ankle injury and his doctor has given him orders to keep his foot elevated." Roberto gestured toward the dining room. "I've set up a table for you ma'am right this way."

Eden followed the soft-spoken man into the main dining area, she was aware of the heads that turned to watch her walk by. Her deep red dress made her stand out in sharp contrast to the bright blue walls and knowing that she would be dining alone made her feel a little more self conscious.

The dining room didn't seem so overwhelming when she was actually in the space. The gleaming dark wooden tables and chairs topped a mellow, terracotta tiled floor felt soothing and lively at the same time. Again she marveled that the complexities of the decor and atmosphere of the eatery.

Roberto led her to the back of the dining room and stopped at a small table in an intimate setting. Eden was both delighted and amazed to see that her table, though surround on two sides by lovely large potted plants, faced an entire wall of windows with a startling vista—they gave diners full view of the kitchen. It provided interesting entertainment and a sure lesson on the controlled chaos that takes place behind the scenes in a busy restaurant.

"Is this table all right?" Roberto asked in his soft, practiced voice. "Chef Alvarez thought you might enjoy seeing how the kitchen staff worked as your meal is prepared. Of course if it isn't to your liking I can reseat you?"

Eden looked at the beautifully set table and the bright orange vase filled with hot pink Gerbera daisies in the center and smiled back at Roberto, "This is lovely, thank you." Her ever-polished waiter expertly pushed in her chair and set her napkin onto her lap with a small flourish.

"Chef Alvarez has asked that I convey his welcome and has several suggestions for your pleasure."

Eden worked to cover her instant reaction to his innocent words. As sure as she was that Roberto meant nothing untoward by the comment, she felt equally positive that Rico could indeed suggest several activities that she would find most pleasurable. After all, he did more than merely suggest them every night in her dreams.

She dreamt about him so often now that she was beginning to feel like she knew him on an intimate level. Of course that was ridiculous she reminded herself, but the things they did together in her dreams...

She suddenly found herself looking through the kitchen window searching for the celebrated, attractive head chef expecting to find him working hard over the preparation of the meals his patrons had ordered, but instead she found him standing stock-still staring back directly into her eyes. His intense expression seemed to burn into her and Eden had to remind herself to breathe.

Chapter Five

The background sounds of the kitchen all faded away the moment he saw her. She was a siren in deep red chiffon. Her beautiful blonde hair was piled high on her head and he felt restless with the urge to pull the pins from the glorious mass and let it fall loose around her shoulders. Next he'd slide those thin, straining straps from the narrow collarbones that moored them and let the lush bounty of her full, ripe breasts fall freely into the palms of his ready hands. His palms itched to test the weight of such a precious cargo.

As he watched, stared really, he saw her smile gently at Roberto and was struck by the kindness he saw there. Even when she teased him he could see the warmth of the woman behind her desire to exact a small amount of revenge for his maltreatment of her the day before. Rico didn't want to believe that she was any different from all the other women he'd known in his life. He didn't want to believe she deserved a different kind of consideration, but heaven help him somewhere inside he hoped it was true.

At that exact moment their eyes met.

Startled cool green met his and he saw the passion he felt reflected back. Brief. Fleeting, but nonetheless the passion was there. It was then that he knew the truth, she wanted him too.

"Whew! I'd like a piece of that for dessert."

Rico broke eye contact with Eden to turn his glare to the hapless waiter standing beside him. "Do you work here or are you just passing through?" he replied in a low, anger-tinged voice.

Eden caught the sudden change in Rico's expression soon after their eyes met. His intense gaze turned to a hard look of displeasure and anger, and she felt stung when he turned away abruptly to talk with a waiter. Did he disapprove of her attire? She halted her impulse to reach down and smooth her skirts, or to pull her wrap, that lay draped artfully at her elbows, up and tighter around her shoulders to cover the tops of her breasts. Her dignity settled to the top of the bowl of emotional soup that swirled within her at his seeming disapproval. She was an adult and could chose to dress in whatever way that pleased her. She unconsciously raised her chin in defiance and turned her attention back to Roberto.

"We have some very nice specials tonight if you'd prefer to make your own selections instead? Would you like to hear about those or can I bring you a menu and wine list?" Roberto prompted.

"Did you say that Rico had some suggestions?" She asked.

"Yes ma'am."

"I'm sure whatever he suggested will be fine." She forced a smile at the waiter. If she wanted to know more about Rico seeing what he would prepare for her might give her some new clues. If his expression a moment ago was any indication though, she might just be eating sawdust for dinner.

"Excellent. I'll be back with your tapas in a few moments."

Eden's eyes wandered back to the window and rested on Rico's profile. She watched him as he instructed one of his kitchen staff in arranging prepared food on plates lined up on the gleaming stainless steel countertop. His strong hands moved gracefully around each plate as he set the servings in place.

This was the first moment that Eden had been able to really look at Rico and what she saw confirmed all her short impressions from their previous two encounters. He was a man in control, but there was a raw vitality about him that both attracted her and warned her off at the same time. He was as potent as 160 proof bourbon, and she could bet a few moments in his arms would be just as intoxicating.

He was dressed all in white. Eden had expected a chef's hat, but in place of wearing the hat of honor, Rico wore a dark blue bandana that covered his hair and was pulled around and over his forehead and tied in the back. Had he been in his mid-teens he would have looked like any other street-savvy kid.

His clothing was spotless and had the crisp-new appearance of garments straight off the store shelf, yet he wore them comfortably like he was born into the role he now played. His clean-shaven face highlighted his chiseled jawline and sensuously full lips.

He had a body made for sex. His broad shoulders tapered down into narrow hips and tight, muscular buttocks that made her mouth feel suddenly dry. Even his thighs were powerful and their bulk stretched the fabric of his pants as he moved about his tasks. Tall, sculptured, confident and virile—he was a Latino god and she wondered what it would be like to hold him between her legs.

Eden reached for the glass of ice water and took a sip. When she looked up again she saw Roberto talking to Rico from the other side of the long steel counter and Rico turn to look at Eden through the glass. His dark eyes met hers and he nodded briefly, his expression unreadable, before turning back to his conversation with her waiter.

Eden turned her attention to the other patrons in the restaurant in an attempt to distract herself from the magnetic pull of the restaurant's head chef.

She had never felt truly comfortable dining alone and needed some safe diversion to keep from fidgeting while she waited.

The tables were filled with other colorfully dressed patrons. At the table to her left a matronly women in her forties was doing a bang-up job of embarrassing her haggard husband. She nagged at the poor man in an almost abusive fashion for some perceived flaw as he continued to shovel food around on his plate. The only sign of his discomfort was the bulging and sinking of the small muscle at his jawline as he ground his teeth together—at this rate he'd be toothless within the hour.

Somewhere in the distance she heard the bright laughter of a young woman who sounded surprised and flustered at the same time. The strains of seductive ethnic music throbbed against the walls from the party in the next room, as did short bursts of clapping, and all around her the sounds of glassware being well used tinkled in the air like tiny silver bells. Miami West was a lively place and a perfect spot to people watch.

Eden was surprised by the speed in which she was served. It seemed that Roberto was back in record time with a platter filled with tapas, small savory appetizers that looked more like a meal than a snack. Her eyes rounded at the amount of food he brought as he sat the big serving tray on a metal frame and began to fill the spot on the table in front of her.

A large white platter held a variety of colorful bowls. Lean rounds of Colombian sausage and leeks were nestled in one glazed pottery dish. Fried chicken breast strips with garlic mayonnaise in another. Corn and shrimp *croquetas* topped with green onions in another colorful vessel, and still another small bowl of black and green olives also competed for space on the burdened platter. Roberto chuckled softly at her response as he smoothly slid a basket full of sliced rustic bread beside the fare.

Next he placed a small pitcher of fragrant wine in the center of the table. Roberto told her it was the house's own blended Sangria. "I should probably warn you to save room for the rest of the meal," he said as he placed a bowl full of lemon, lime and orange wedges next to the wine. "There's still soup and the main dishes as well as dessert."

"Would it be possible to use smaller plates?" Eden teased him back.

He shook his head, and Eden heard him chuckle again as he gathered up the serving tray and moved away.

The aromatic food looked as good as it smelled and Eden's mouth began to water in anticipation. Now if only she could decide where to start? Using the tines of her fork she broke off a small bite of one of the golden *croquetas* and tasted it. The subtle flavors of shrimp and toasted corn filled her mouth and she rolled her eyes heavenward in sublime pleasure. Her eyes were again drawn to the kitchen window only to be caught and held by Rico's deep, intense gaze. Eden saw the slow sensual smile spread across his face and knew he'd witnessed her response to his creation. She smiled back and winked flirtatiously.

Rico told himself to stop staring at her. He'd already had to backtrack on two orders he'd plated incorrectly, but he was transfixed by the way her emotions played so blatantly across her beautiful face. Eden would be a terrible poker player he decided, but she certainly was relishing his cooking.

He wouldn't let himself examine why it felt important to him that she liked his cuisine, but it was, and her obvious enjoyment went straight to his head and made him feel like grinning from ear to ear. When she'd winked at him, well, that went straight to his groin. He'd had a hard-on since he first noticed her at the table and each time he

looked at her the tension in his pants ratcheted up a little more. At this rate he'd be unable to walk the few steps between the stove and counter before long. He winked back at Eden and enjoyed her answering smile as he contemplated what to serve her next.

Eden ate lightly despite the delicious fare. She lingered over each bite, chewing slowly and thoughtfully. She wanted to experience everything this night had to offer.

Roberto arrived with a steaming bowl of Cuban Black Bean soup. It was flavored with lime, garlic and cilantro. The deep smoky flavor of the thick soup fit the persona of its creator—silky, sexy and complex. She looked up, searching for and finding Rico's dark eyes. She felt herself flushing and took another sip from her wineglass. The warmth continued to creep up her chest and it stained her cheeks. His eyes riveted on her mouth when her tongue slid out and caught an errant drop of cool wine and Eden felt her panties growing damp with her own desire.

The soup was followed by full servings of roasted pork and mashed sweet plantains with mangos, and shredded beef and rice surrounded artfully by thumb sized grilled baby zucchini squash and red peppers. The warm spicy scents and flavors of the meal added more color to Eden's already flushed cheeks.

She and Rico continued to trade flirtatious smiles and subtle gestures through the glass window throughout the rest of her meal and it began to feel like they were the only two people in the restaurant. The tension between then snapped back and forth like sparks on electrical wire. Eden resisted her need to squirm on the cushioned seat to relieve some of the sexual pressure building between her legs. She looked at him unabashedly now and her breath stilled when he stepped back toward the stove and she saw the unmistakable reaction her flirting had instigated.

Rico was also a man in need, and he had the erection to prove it.

"Are you ready for dessert?" Roberto's gentle voice brought her back to her surroundings and Eden fanned her heated face with her napkin.

"If it's all right, I'd like to get a little fresh air first," Eden told him with a laugh. "I need a few minutes to find some room in my stomach."

Roberto smiled in understanding. "Certainly Ms. Stuart." He reached over and placed a small blue and orange wooden block on the table with the blue side up. "When you're ready just turn the block up so the orange side is at the top and I'll know you're ready for dessert. I promise you it isn't to be missed." With that comment he left her side.

Eden searched for Rico behind the glass and found him watching her still. Try as she might she wasn't able to keep from dropping her gaze to the long ridge of his erection that strained the front of his pants. She felt a little startled by what she saw.

They had been flirting all evening, but she hadn't been sure what was behind Rico's friendly behavior and she had been afraid to read too much into it, until now. There was no mistaking it. He wanted her too.

Rico felt the sexual tension build higher as Eden looked unflinchingly at his state of arousal and he knew he should turn away. He was standing in a display window for heaven's sake! Anyone of his patrons could easily notice his lack of self-control, but the electric current between himself and Eden was so strong he didn't care who saw the proof of his desire for her.

As he watched she unconsciously moistened her lips and then met his gaze. Christ, he'd give just about anything to know what she was thinking right now, better yet, for the chance to show her what *he* was thinking.

As he looked into her eyes her expression seemed to turn more in the direction of bewildered than wanton, so Rico did his best to control his reaction. Without breaking eye contact, or turning his body away, he reached over and pulled an apron off the shelf and tied it low on his hips to provide cover and preserve at least a small amount of her dignity—at this point he cared little for his own.

Eden smiled shyly in response and slid her seat out so she could stand. Rico watched her walk over to the glass doors leading to the patio and step gracefully outside, as much as he wanted to follow her, a stack of last minute dessert orders landed on the counter in front of him making it impossible.

The cool late night air caressed Eden's heated skin, but it did nothing to lessen the pounding need between her legs. She wandered toward the balcony railing and in her distraction walked right into a waiter just turning from a nearby table. The side of her head connected with his shoulder just firmly enough to startle her, and with no harm done to either of them, and after apologies were exchanged, they both moved on in their own directions.

Eden slowly made her way over to the edge of the tiled patio and leaned her back against the smooth stone railing. The large flat surface sported several tables with large sun umbrellas that were all closed at this late hour. The area was devoid of patrons and Eden noted that the dinning room crowd inside was also dwindling, but there were still several tables full of people who seemed in no hurry at all to leave.

The chill of the evening air cooled her heated skin and its dew moist heaviness provided a tether to bring her feet back to Earth. She was behaving like a schoolgirl with her first crush and she needed to stop before things got out of hand. As sure as she was now that Rico wanted her too, she was equally sure he was interested in little more than a blazing moment in time. He didn't seem like a man who would ever find commitment easy.

Eden felt torn. It was easy for her to understand her attraction for the man. He was beyond sexy on many levels, physically of course, but his confidence, practiced sensuality and bad-boy temperament drew her to him as well. She didn't want to

hazard a guess at how many before her had also been drawn to the same flame, and it seemed a safe assumption that they were all burnt to a crisp.

Her intuition told her though that there was more to his story than was apparent. For someone who seemed to believe he was above the emotional fray of mere mortals, he seemed very emotional. His quick temper, his searing passion, his intense need to be in control of his surroundings and himself, his shielded pride—he was protecting himself, but from whom or what?

Her desire for him was more acute than she had ever experienced before, but as much as she wanted to know what it would be like to take him home to her bed she also knew that she needed this business arrangement to work out. The welfare of not only the farm, but of the Gonzales family, depended on her keeping her head and doing the right thing. She'd never been one to seek out one-night stands either. Though this man called to her to let go of herself and explore her desire for him, she couldn't put her practical self aside even for a little while, at least not without knowing if there was any substance behind the gorgeous façade. Or could she? She needed to be careful and responsible, if not for herself than for those she loved.

With less than solid resolve Eden headed back to the dining room and her table.

Dessert turned out to be a slice of heaven on a plate. Roberto brought her a large portion of deep, dark, Cuban coffeecake and a scoop of coconut milk ice cream. The dense, moist chocolate confection was more like a slice of chocolate mousse than cake. Eden couldn't remember ever tasting anything as rich and decadent in her life.

She wondered if an encounter with the sexy chef of Miami West would be just as decadent. Her heart promised her it would.

Now it was Rico who felt confused. Ever since Eden had returned from her short visit to the patio she had stoically refused to make eye contact with him again and he found it irritating that he couldn't keep himself from looking at her frequently as she savored her dessert.

The change in her behavior perplexed him. Eden was a woman made for loving, she was lush and bountiful like a summer garden ready to be harvested, and there was no way she was so innocent that she didn't realize what their flirting was leading to. She had certainly played her part all along.

As much as Rico hated games he could usually figure them out fast enough to keep up, but this was new to him. Was she just playing with him, or had she suddenly realized that she was getting in over her head?

"Are you sure?" Eden asked Roberto again. He patiently repeated that she was a guest of Chef Alvarez so there was no bill and smiled kindly at her, "Should I have the valet bring your car around for you?"

Eden thanked Roberto for his excellent service and told him she had parked her car close by and could make her way back on her own. After he left her she slipped a generous tip under her wineglass in gratitude and stood to gather her belongings. She purposefully avoided looking in the window during dessert, but she did now and found Rico watching her with a guarded expression. She smiled and silently mouthed the words "thank you" to him and with his nod she headed home alone.

Chapter Six

Eden had hoped the twenty-minute ride back to the farm would help to quiet the clamoring emotions inside of her head. She wasn't that lucky. As she prepared to undress for bed she relived the moments of sexual tension that occurred during her meal for what seemed like the twentieth time. She felt drained and vulnerable, and disappointed too. Her responsibilities helped to shape her life—they were a part of who she was—but if ever she wanted to be able to be free from those pressures it was tonight. Just the thought of Rico warm and willing in her bed was enough to make her body tingle and her heart race. She knew there would be false safety in his arms, it would only last as long as their night together did, and fade just after the encounter. There would certainly be explosive passion and pleasure, and for one night those things may have been enough.

As she reached up to unzip her dress she paused in the mirror, horrified by what she saw — one of her earrings, Sarah's earrings, was gone!

Eden searched her clothing and wrap, the bedroom floor and the hall, she even searched the cab of the truck but the jewel was nowhere to be found. Then she remembered her accidental collision with the waiter on the patio. That *had* to be it. She had to go back for the earring, she just couldn't risk losing it. A quick check of her watch assured her that Rico would most likely be home in bed and if the restaurant was still open she would only have to contend with the cleaning crew.

His kitchen was in order and it was time to go home. Rico had turned the restaurant lights off a good half an hour ago when the last of his staff left, so why was he still sitting here in the dark at Eden's table? He held his brandy snifter lightly in the palm of his hand as he swirled the fragrant liquid around the bottom of the glass and brought it up to his face to breathe in the heady bouquet. It was an easy answer really. He stayed because the essence of her having been there remained, and it felt somehow comforting. About halfway through her meal Rico knew he'd be going home with her. The understanding of the inevitable made him hard with anticipation and eager to strip off the clothing of a chef and slide naked between the cool, soft sheets on her mattress.

But that was before her trip to the patio. Somehow the crisp evening air had cooled her ardor.

He didn't want to believe she'd been playing him all along. He wanted...no he *needed* to believe Eden was above that kind of manipulation. Besides, there really wasn't anything to manipulate him over. She'd won his favor with her ability to grow amazing produce and her agreement to deliver enough of it to satisfy the needs of his patrons here at the restaurant. He was paying her—there wasn't anything else he had to

offer...but sex. The words crept unbidden into his conscious thought. That's all he wanted from her—sex, and she probably knew it—it would be all she'd get from him because it was all he had to give. That was his pattern with women after all. He was the one who played people. She was probably right to run the other way. So why did he still feel so restless and irritated that she had done just that?

As much as he hated to admit it there was just *something* about the woman. He'd felt it the moment he'd pulled her out of her truck and he'd been unable to stop thinking about her since. If he put aside her obvious beauty, and his desire to bed her, what was left? Everything, his mind whispered back. She was lush, ripe and bountiful physically, but she seemed to be in every other sense too. She was like a garden, she promised sustenance and relief from the gnawing hunger that always seemed to be in his heart. Recognition of his feelings didn't comfort him though. He found it irritating to feel so raw and he wrestled with the emotions for a few minutes before swallowing them down with a large gulp from his brandy tumbler.

She had to remind her self to slow down several times on the way back to Miami West. It wouldn't do to be stopped and ticketed—it would only make her later.

The twenty-minute drive seemed to take forever and she pulled up to the front of the building disheartened because all outside lights were off.

A quick look at her watch told her it was almost one o'clock in the morning. Surely the restaurant would be closed by now but she had to take the chance that some of the cleaning staff would still be inside. She hurried over and began ringing the door buzzer repeatedly. She waited a minute or two and began pressing the buzzer again until she saw the shadow of a tall man coming across the dark entryway within. Then she began to knock on the glass front of the door too to express her urgency.

She heard the key grind inside the lock, and as the door opened to admit her she recognized Rico.

He could see the near panic etched on her lovely face and his feelings of irritation quickly changed to concern. "Eden? What's happened? Are you all right?"

"No...I mean yes I'm ok, but I've lost an earring. Please can I come inside and look for it?"

"An earring?" Rico stood motionless as he studied her expression wondering if this was a ploy to get is attention. Perhaps she had decided that she wanted to share his bed and regretted her earlier change of heart. He wasn't sure. Even though he had just told himself that Eden was incapable of such behavior, his experience reminded him that all women were.

"Rico? Please I have to find it." Eden wasn't surprised that Rico still wore the same guarded expression as he had when she left the restaurant earlier in the evening, but for a few moments she actually thought he might refuse her. "It's important, please." She asked again.

When he reached up to push the door open for her she ducked under his raised arm and hurried inside and toward the patio off the main dinning room. Eden didn't want to give him time to change his mind. Rico followed a little behind turning on the lights as he went.

On the way past the table where she had dinner she noted the open bottle of brandy and an almost empty glass, and Eden wondered briefly why he would be sitting in that spot, drinking in the dark, but she kept moving through the room—she needed to find Sarah's earring.

The cool early morning air on the patio helped to calm her. She had made it back to the restaurant before it was locked up for the night and she just knew the precious earring was there somewhere—she just had to look until she found it. She began to search in earnest as she explained how the piece must have been knocked loose to begin with. She pulled off the second earring and pressed it into Rico's palm so he could see just what its mate looked like.

They both searched the patio tiles but after fifteen minutes the earring remained elusive and Eden lost hope of finding it again. "I guess it isn't here," she said. The defeat in her softly spoken words tugged at Rico's heart. She stood like a statue with her eyes downcast.

"You could probably have another made to match it," He suggested hopefully.

She looked at him then, and he could see the shimmer of tears in her eyes and he stepped closer to offer her some support.

"It's not replaceable," she told him. "The pair belonged to my aunt who passed away a few months ago." Eden tried to explain to Rico how much she loved her Aunt Sarah, but it was a love that defied explanation.

Rico stood silently and listened to more than just the words that Eden shared. Her love for her elderly aunt was obvious, as was the catharsis of telling someone about her own painful experiences throughout the older woman's illness. He could see that Eden had tried to remain strong for the small community of loved ones that Sarah had gathered around her in her final days.

It felt like someone had punched him in the gut when he realized that there hadn't been anyone to be strong for Eden when she had needed comfort too.

She maintained her composure throughout the retelling of her story until she told Rico about the moments leading up to Sarah's death. Then she began to cry. As the trail of small tears traveled down her cheeks Rico clenched and unclenched his hands in frustration with his own need to offer her comfort, but he didn't move until she was finished.

"Let me hold you." He whispered the words cautiously. He didn't want her to realize how much of herself she had revealed and send her retreating from him.

Eden wiped at her teary eyes with the backs of her hands and gave a small, embarrassed laugh. "You must think me a ninny..." she began, but Rico cut her off.

"I *think* that I want to hold you," he said again, his low voice more a demand than a request.

Eden's shimmering eyes widened slightly at the forcefulness behind his tone, but she smiled shyly and nodded her consent as she stepped forward into his arms.

Rico felt solid and warm against the length of her body and he smelled of male musk and cooking spices. For the first time, in a really long time, Eden felt protected and safe from the weight of the responsibilities she carried. She rested her head on his broad shoulder as close to the base of his neck as she could and sighed deeply. "I'm sorry about the way I acted tonight. I know the impression I gave you was different than the way our evening ended," she said against his flesh.

He could feel her relaxing against him as his hands traveled slowly up and down the small of her back. Her soft feminine perfume blended with her womanly scent and Rico found the combination intoxicating. "Our evening isn't over yet," he said, "but nothing says it has to end that way Eden. I won't bother denying how much I want you in my bed...I think my body already made that clear earlier," Rico laughed softly, "but I'm not so self-centered that I can't see that comfort is what you need right now."

Eden burrowed her face deeper into the side of his neck and reveled in the warmth and security of being in his arms. Until, after long moments, he gently pushed her away from his chest.

His dark eyes looked deeply into hers as he reached up and began removing the pins from her hair. He smiled sensuously at her questioning look. "Humor me." He said. One by one he pulled out the small pins and dropped them into the pocket of his uniform shirt until they were stripped from her and her long blonde hair encircled her shoulders and draped down the length of her long back. "Beautiful," he said as he reached up to twirl a long silken strand around his finger. "Your hair is so pale it looks like silver in the moonlight." He brought the curl to his face and slid the bundle along his cheek. As Eden's tongue slid out to moisten her suddenly dry lips his gaze shifted to her mouth and lingered on them before returning to her eyes. Rico pulled her close again and trailed butterfly-soft kisses along her temple as he took in deep breaths laced with the fragrance of her hair. He could feel his body growing rigid but he tried to tamp down his need. Though sex was certainly what he wanted, he wouldn't let it become his goal. Not with Eden, his heart told him that she deserved better from him than that.

Rico eased her back away from his body again and stepped around her to reach down and pick up a spoon that was lying in the seat cushion of a metal patio chair. He placed the spoon on the table and turned back toward Eden. When he approached her he held out his fist and dropped the earring Eden had given him back into her outstretched palm.

"Will you keep an eye out for the other?" She asked.

Rico surprised her by shaking his head no, and smiling as he held out his other hand. There nestled in his big palm lay the other earring. "I saw it glimmer in the moonlight...just like your hair."

Rico walked Eden back to her truck and was happy that she lingered in the open doorway of the cab for a few more moments. He felt so alive in her company—he just didn't want her to go home.

"Thank you," she said quietly as she reached out and touched his forearm in a uniquely feminine gesture.

"No problem." Rico looked down at the pair of sliver and diamond earrings nestled in Eden's other small hand. "I'm glad you found your mate."

"Yes." Eden's moist eyes met and searched his, and for a moment he wondered if she was also talking about the earrings. She squeezed her hand into a fist to protect its precious contents and smiled at him. "They are important to me, but..." Her eyes darted away and back again. "Thank you for the comfort too. It's been so long since I've felt...well, since someone has taken the time to..." Her voice had dropped to a whisper and she looked away again unable to define all the emotions swirling around inside of her.

Rico reached up and gently cupped her chin and she again looked into his eyes. His dark searching gaze held hers. Slowly, so slowly, he moved closer to her mouth to kiss her. Eden stopped breathing, and her sight became blurry as she tried to focus on his handsome face. She leaned forward herself in anticipation of the contact of his lips.

His warm firm mouth melded gently with her lips, but Eden could feel a sense of urgency building in her as the perfect moment passed into the next. She pressed her mouth firmly against his showing him the desire and tension she had endured with wanting him through the endless dreams and waking hours since the moment he had pulled her out of her truck.

He kissed her back, molding her lips with his. His tongue lightly traced the corners of her mouth as his hands moved about her back and sides pressing her closer to his body.

Rico thought she tasted like heaven, sweet and vibrant with life and need. His own body answered hers as he deepened the kiss and held her closer reducing the gap between them. He felt like he was about to fall forward into a vortex of emotion that he wouldn't be able to pull back from. Her urgency was dragging him in, and he didn't want to care if he was lost in the swirling wind but he did care. He told himself that he couldn't afford to lose control of this situation.

Eden felt suddenly bereft as Rico pulled away from her and stood to his full height. Her legs were shaking and she felt lightheaded when he ended the kiss. She would have fallen if she hadn't been standing in the circle of his arms.

She watched mesmerized as again a slow sensual smile spread across his face and he turned her toward the open door of the truck. He leaned in and whispered into the rim of the ivory and pink shell of her ear," I think you should go home now Eden while I'm still able to send you there." Rico gave her a little nudge forward in encouragement.

Eden obeyed him, but home alone was the very last place she wanted to go.

What a night it had been. Rico splashed cold water on his heated face and grabbed a fresh towel to dry it off. He turned his face side to side in the bathroom mirror and rubbed here and there with the towel to remove the last traces of shaving cream. It was seven a.m., four hours of restless, dream-filled sleep and he was on his feet again. The small pile of white hairpins he'd left on the corner of the sink claimed his attention and carried his mind back to the kiss he'd shared with Eden when they parted last night. It was a sweet kiss.

He needed to buy the produce for the restaurant and that meant seeing Eden. He paused when he caught sight of his reflection in the bathroom mirror again—he looked hopeful for Christ's sake!

He scowled back at himself. He was getting in further than he should with this woman already. Eden deserved a man with a future, not a man with a checkered past. He laughed derisively. Checkered was an understatement. If she knew the things he'd done in his life she'd run in the opposite direction—fast!

He knew that it could never be *just sex* for Eden, and he wasn't about to make himself available to her for anything else. He wanted her, so why shouldn't he have her. They were both adults and she obviously wanted him too—who was he to make her choices for her?

Rico stared hard at his reflection, "You're a bastard," he said to the face in the mirror. He nodded back at himself.

He told himself that this wasn't any different than any of the others that came to his bed before her. He hadn't made any promises to them either. But Eden was different, he could feel it deep within his soul and he reached up and rubbed the flat palm of his hand over his heart in a feeble attempt to soothe the ache that had settled there. He struggled with his jumbled feelings. He knew it would be best if he listened to his head, and not to his rapidly warming heart. Getting involved with her would mean hurt for them both when he walked away—and he would walk away eventually—he'd have to.

Eden's pocketknife sliced easily through the thick, black plastic covering the strawberry bed. She reached for another runner and positioned the tender, young plant into the dirt beneath the opening she'd made, firming the soil around the roots and then topping it off with a soaking spray from her nearby watering can—that was four new plants for next year's harvest. She continued down the row planting four offshoots for every mother plant and severing the additional shoots and tossing them into the wheelbarrow. She'd been hard at work for a couple of hours and she still had a dozen rows to go. Strawberries were always a favorite of her customers and this particular strain would ensure her stand had an abundance to sell.

No matter how hard she tried to concentrate on the task at hand, her mind kept slipping back to last night. The feel of Rico's firm mouth moving over her own, the smell of him, the warmth and strength of his body. Just the thought of him made her body feel alive and vibrant and needy—almost desperately needy.

"What do you have to offer me today?" Rico's baritone voice cut through her thoughts like a warm knife through butter. He stood just a few feet away looking relaxed and confident with his thumbs stuck into the pockets of his snug fitting jeans.

"What do you want?" Eden asked, her voice and manner direct. She felt rewarded by Rico's quick flush. Obviously they both wanted the same thing, and it would only be found in her garden if they were both naked and rolling in the dirt.

"Well..." he hedged, "What do you have to inspire decadence?" Rico smiled. Now this was a sport he not only understood, but enjoyed. Sexually charged verbal sparring—he'd always been good at this game.

Eden unfolded her long limbs and dusted the dark earth from her knees. Her cool, green eyes assessed him and a slow smile spread across her face. The gauntlet was thrown down and the challenge had been accepted.

She stepped over several long rows of new sprouts and Rico admired the way the large muscles in her thighs and buttocks flexed and expanded as he followed her along. He knew years of experience allowed him to appear outwardly calm, but inside he worked to control both his physical desire for Eden and the insistent voice telling him to let his heart reach out for hers. She stopped beside a row with lush, green, mature plants. They were covered with a combination of small, white flowers with sunny yellow centers, and deep red strawberries.

Rico was surprised by the abundance of the fruit he saw. "How is it that you have such perfect strawberries this late in the season?"

"These are ever-bearing plants," she explained, "Once they get started they don't stop until they become too exhausted to continue." Her teasing smile and expressive eyes made it impossible for Rico to miss her meaning. "They always leave the gardener satisfied."

"Lucky strawberries," Rico answered softly, his dark eyes roaming over her slender frame, pausing on her breasts for a long moment then returning to meet her eyes.

Eden felt like she'd just been touched. Her tingling nipples pushed outward into the soft fabric of her bra in response. She felt breathless and a little dizzy with his nearness, and she secretly wondered if he would kiss her again. She certainly hoped so. If there was one thing she was sure of after last night's encounter, there was a place of steadiness and warmth under the surface of his simmering sexuality and she wanted to find her way to that very spot.

As he watched, Eden bent from the waist offering him a delectable view down the curving neckline of her tank top. The creamy flesh of her breasts hung like heavy fruit suspended from the trunk of her body. He could see the rounded tops of each exquisite package, but the beauty of them didn't stir him as much as the plain cotton bra she wore. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate a display of delicate lingerie, but the glimpse of everyday underwear was somehow more intimate to him—it was never meant to be

seen. He watched the two beauties swing with her efforts to pick a handful of ripe berries and his mouth felt parched for a taste of her fruit.

As if she'd read his mind Eden stood to her full height and held a large, fragrant berry up to his lips. "You have to try them to know how perfect they are."

Rico's eyes were still pinned to her big breasts. They strained the fabric of her shirt as the two firm mounds shifted back into place against her now upright ribcage. "Perfect," he said softly and looked up again into her eyes. He could see his own passion reflected back from their green depths.

The sweet, loamy fragrance of the berry pulled his attention to the hovering morsel she held for him. He bit halfway into the strawberry and the tangy flavor exploded in his mouth. Both ambrosial and sharp his sense of taste was almost overwhelmed with the intensity of it. He rolled the bite of fruit around on his tongue and sampled the wonderful satin and seedy texture before taking the berry from Eden's hand and offering her the other half. He watched as she savored the juicy bite, feeling his groin tightening. When she reached up to catch a fat drop of strawberry juice that had leaked out of the corner of her mouth, Rico beat her to the task. He slid one tan finger up her cheek and captured the errant drop on the tip. Holding her gaze he painted the red liquor onto her full lips.

Eden held her breath as Rico held his finger to her mouth. She met his eyes and tentatively reached for the crimson remains with her tongue.

It was a mere moment of time. Her tongue darted out and cleaned up the strawberry juice in less than a second, yet he felt like he'd had the wind knocked out of him. His breath stilled and his surroundings dimmed as he followed the pale pink tip when it drew back and brushed her top lip before returning to the moist recesses of her mouth. Raising his hands to her shoulders, he leaned in to follow it.

She closed her eyes and tipped her head up, the berries in her hand forgotten in anticipation of their kiss, but it was a lost moment. Her eyes snapped open as he pulled back away from her again and her expression questioned him silently. Rico dipped his chin and glanced over her shoulder at Mateo who stood uncomfortably at the end of the row waiting to speak to Eden.

Rico gave a short, frustrated laugh. "Go on, I'll leave my order with Hector at the stand." Then almost as an afterthought, he said, "If you've got a few spare hours tomorrow afternoon I'm going out to a local vineyard to do some business. They've got a great pool—one sound okay?"

At Eden's nod he smiled that sensual smile that made her feel dizzy and turned to leave.

Chapter Seven

The Adriano Family Estate Winery was nestled on one hundred acres of fertile volcanic soil on the gently sloping side of Sonoma Mountain. At nearly eight hundred feet above sea level the property boasted the perfect climate for growing wine grapes. Warm, sunny days were followed by cool, short nights and ensured the Adriano's had the perfect raw materials to produce world-class Cabernet Sauvignon and other classic Bordeaux varieties including Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petit Verdot. The large estate also included guest suites that provided accommodations for visitors, a breathtaking panoramic view of the surrounding countryside and a visitors building offering wine tasting tours to seasonal guests.

The lush countryside flew past their windows as Rico continued to bring Eden up to date on their destination during the short twenty minute ride out to the estate. Sal Adriano, it turned out, was also Rico's best friend.

Eden had never known him to be so talkative. She was glad he kept the information flowing—it enabled her to look at him almost constantly under the guise of being polite and she was thankful he couldn't read her mind. She was fascinated anew each time he reached between their legs to shift the Jag. Watching the muscles under his short sleeved polo bunch and stretch with each movement kept her body humming with short fantasies and the clean, musky, masculine scent of him kept her panties damp. He talked about the nuances of flavors in the varietal wines produced by the master winemaker the estate employed, and she wondered what nuances of flavor she'd find if she explored his body with her tongue. Eden watched his long, tan fingers slide over the ball of the stick shift as he palmed it again She imagined those tapered digits caressing her knees before moving gently up the soft inside of her bare thighs to finger her now throbbing clitoris. She resisted the urge to clamp her knees together to test the increased swelling of the tender bud between her labial folds, but she couldn't restrain the soft moan that escaped her lips.

"It's so beautiful out here," she said quickly in an attempt to cover her unexpected outburst.

Rico looked over at Eden and smiled as he nodded in agreement, "It is." He was no fool. As the object of her undivided attention for the last almost twenty minutes he had noted her growing sexual need. Her increasing respiration, her flushed face and neck, and the way she kept moistening her full pink lips as she listened to him talk—she was a passion-seeking woman and she had the glazed eyes to prove it.

Her need for him echoed his for her. His cock continued to stiffen as each mile ticked by and he was grateful for his decision to take casual dressing to its utmost. He'd left the hem of his polo shirt free from the confines of that waistband of his pants, and

now it was all that stood between him and the obviousness of his now-saluting member.

He pressed his foot down harder on the accelerator. He was eager to arrive at their destination before his ability to resist pulling over and having at it in the grassy roadside melted away from the heat being generated in the passenger side of the car.

Rico pulled off the main road onto the estate property a few minutes later and for a moment Eden thought she had been dropped smack in the middle of Tuscany. Neat rows of trellised grapevines moved off in parallel succession from the dirt roadway in perfect symmetry. Their orderly ranks gave the grounds a polished and serene quality, the field stone buildings and dark stained wood imparted a rich European feel. Now *this* was a garden!

They pulled up in front of the main building and made their way across the wide, quiet veranda to the arched double doorway of the home. Riotous mounds of dazzling pale pink roses flanked the porch. Everything around her spoke of old world craftsmanship and modern day consideration. The smell of antique wood and rich soil blended with a green and sweet landscape perfume that charmed her right down to her open-toed sandals.

Salvatore Adriano was the sunshine to Rico's shadow. Tall and corn-silk blond, his snapping blue eyes were set off by the deep tan of someone who has spent a lifetime out of doors. His broad chest and thick neck echoed the impression of a man who understood the value of physical work. He was handsome in a charming and boyish way that didn't quite cover the steel that Eden sensed under his smiling exterior. He was a businessman for sure but his affection for Rico was obvious.

He greeted his guests warmly and ushered them in to a private wine tasting that looked more like a full meal than a snack. Not only were there several delicious wines to sample, there where platters of salted meats and creamy cheeses, ripe fruit, and crusty bread dipped in estate bottled olive oil to cleanse their vintage infused palates. By the time the event was over Eden felt warm and relaxed and was more than ready to nap on an overstuffed lounge chair near the pool while Rico and Salvatore discussed business.

Eden smiled to herself in pleasure as her stomach muscles continued to contract and relax in rhythmic response to the deep heat of the early afternoon sun. It seeped into her body in hot pulsating waves that were at once too much, and too wonderful, to bear. The cloth cover of the poolside furniture had dried since her swim and felt soft and cool under her, but the unrelenting force of the sun continued to bake her skin from above. With her blonde hair and fair complexion Eden knew she was playing with a ball of fire—literally—at this rate she'd be an unflattering shade of cranberry red by the time Rico arrived at the pool. Well he's such a hot-blooded man, she thought humorously, maybe red is his favorite color.

Her tiny bikini didn't cover anything but the necessities, it certainly wasn't anyone's idea of modest, and she almost didn't care. She hoped Rico would approve of her exposure. She'd been more careful in her life than anyone had a right to be, and when she saw this little number in a catalog recently she'd decided it was time to stop playing her life totally safe. She never guessed she'd have an occasion to use it so soon, maybe it was fate.

She wouldn't risk the farm or the livelihood of her workers, but she could risk a little of herself, in fact she'd concluded that she *should*. Her life was too static, it needed a little shake-up. She wondered though if she was playing things too risky with Rico. No matter how she tried to lie to herself, she knew she felt more than just sexual attraction for the man and she was never one to give up what her heart wanted easily. *Okay, so some habits die hard, but small steps forward were better than no steps forward at all!* So she'd keep stepping forward, and maybe she'd learn to do so with less caution, or with less of her heart.

Nearly two hours ago Rico had left Eden in their guest suite to change into her bathing suit and spend time catching some poolside sun. For nearly two hours he'd had to fight the urge to make his way back to the pool to have a peek at her sunbathing. In the cool space of their room he planned to quickly pulled on his own suit and a T-shirt and grab a thick towel from the stack provided on his way out to see her, but his feet felt rooted to the carpeted floor. The essence of her was there in the closed room. Unobserved and unguarded, Rico stood in the center of the bedroom and inhaled the sweet perfume that was Eden and felt the sexual tension rise. There on the bed lay the sundress she'd worn in the car and he picked it up and brought it to his face. He slid the cool, slippery fabric across his cheek in remembrance, but his fantasy was brought up short by what he found beneath it. Folded in a neat stack were her undergarments.

He lifted the lacy white bra. She had folded the cups into each other and he opened them fully. The stiff form of the underwire seemed a harsh and cruel way to treat such a lovely cargo and crude to the formality of the sheer lace cups. Thin straps attached the top of the lace to the back of the garment and seemed too delicate to hold her large, lovely twin-set without straining them to their breaking point. He rubbed his thumbs on the inside of the cups where her nipples would have pressed the fabric earlier and his already stiff cock jumped and became harder still. He refolded the bra and placed it back on the bedspread.

Standing to his full height he looked at the other garment on the bed and told himself to walk away. He brushed his hands through his thick hair and pulled at its roots in an attempt to hold himself back from the sensual pull of the neatly folded underwear before him. He stared at it, his mouth dry, his body shaking. He paced around the room but ended up back in front of the bed within reach of the small treasure.

His restraint didn't last.

With trembling fingers he lifted the delicate panties off the bed and spread them open in his palms. The lace pattern and color matched the bra perfectly and he smiled gently at the idea of Eden wearing matching underwear. It seemed to fit her orderly personality.

The light fabric felt cool and dainty, and his fingers quickly found just what he expected—the cotton-lined crotch was still damp with her juices. He brought the moist center up to his nose and inhaled the deeply erotic musk of her pussy. He breathed it in with his mouth slightly open as one samples the essence of an expensive wine to experience all the nuances and subtleties of her aroma. He groaned aloud as his need for her pounded through his body. He reached one hand down and rubbed is aching cock through the rough fabric of his blue jeans as he pressed the fabric closer to his mouth and nose and took in great gulps of pussy-scented air. He stood like that for long minutes, paralyzed with desire and throbbing need until a soft gasp jolted him from his sex-induced stupor.

Eden stood frozen in silent shock at the scene in front of her. The Devil of her dreams stood near the end of the bed holding her panties to his mouth and nose. With his eyes closed he sensuously rubbed his cock and balls, his hips undulating into his awaiting palm. She knew he wanted her, but until this moment she didn't know how much. No one had ever wanted her as much. No one had ever had such need, such passion for her, and the knowledge of being the object of such wanting ignited her own greed to taste him, to hold him, to feel him thundering fast between her thighs. Her nipples felt like they were burning a hole through the front of her bathing suit top and her pelvis felt heavy with her own desire. Her gasp of surprise at the intensity of her own feelings brought him out of his sexual fog and spinning around to face her.

"Fuck," Rico said under his breath. He crushed the delicate fabric into a ball in his large fist and blushed all the way up to his hairline. "Eden..." he started, shaking his head.

She held up one trembling hand to stop his flow of words. The last thing she wanted to hear was an explanation. He looked too delicious for words. Disheveled, embarrassed, tense in all the right places—she could see him resisting his desire to squirm under the direct scrutiny of her stare.

Fuck! Rico berated himself again. He felt like he was being strangled. She stood just inside the entrance to the room wearing the smallest bikini that he had ever seen. Her hair was loose and flowing around her narrow shoulders and her skin was a heart-throbbing shade of sun-brightened pink. As he looked at her his need continued to increase until his superheated blood pounded through his veins.

His desire for her mingled with his shame. She'd caught him with his face in the crotch of her panties—what must she think of him now? He watched the rapid rise and fall of her scantily clad breasts and waited for her to speak her mind. He expected to

hear all the words Celine had used so long ago. He expected to hear her belittle him, his roots, his accent and his desire for her. It didn't matter how far he'd come, he was just another boy from the hood and he wanted Eden so badly he wasn't sure he could take the emotional beating her disdain would bring.

She never broke eye contact with him as she slowly made her way to where he stood. Her eyes were wild and glazed and at first Rico wasn't sure if it was anger, or passion, he saw reflected back.

Reaching down with one hand she freed the bruised pair of panties from his tight fist and brought the cotton-lined crotch back up to his face. She rubbed the fabric over the hard planes of his jawline and chin before bringing it back to his mouth and nose. He moaned deep within his chest and buried his face into the fabric that she held for him and once again became adrift in a wild ocean of desire. His strong hands moved up her arms to her shoulders as he pulled her closer to his body to grind his taut cock into the softness of her belly.

Eden ran the tip of one tapered fingernail over his bottom lip from behind the fabric she held before rolling the moist fleshy border of it down. As he opened his mouth to her she pushed the fabric inside.

Rico was stunned by her actions and the raw sensuality he now saw simmering in the green depths of her eyes. He suckled at her cloth-encased fingertip, totally and completely lost to the depth of both their needs.

After long minutes of indulging in the flavor and aroma of her panties Rico pulled them from her grasp and tossed them back onto the bed before moving on to nip and kiss her lips and face and ears. Pressing his tongue into the soft, pink shell of her delicate ear he was rewarded with her first throaty response—a deep low moan. It pushed up and out of her and spurred him onward. He sampled her neck and shoulders before moving lower still. Rico released the ties on her bikini top and let the flimsy garment fall to the floor as he filled his palms with the her full ripe breasts. He pulled back a little and admired the way they overflowed his large hands. He tested their weight before bending low to breathe in the fragrance of her sun-warmed skin. Her hands flew over his back and neck as he sucked in one large nipple and pulled hard with his teeth. Eden's hands grabbed his head to hold him fast to her heavy breasts. He worked each nipple alternately, her moaning and heavy breathing pushing him to the very edge of his breaking point.

He stopped her hands as she tried to undress him too, he felt impatient and too hot to wait quietly while his clothing was removed. He had to taste her body *now*! Bending to one knee he pushed her legs apart and peeled the crotch of her soaking wet bikini bottoms to one side to expose her beautiful pussy. He pushed back the tender lips and brought his tongue to her swollen clit even as he slid on long finger deep inside of her wet core. She gasped and writhed on the end of his finger like a puppet on at string as Rico continued to push her further.

"More! Rico I need more!" she told him, her words broken with emotion. She was on fire and she knew that soon she'd be consumed. His wicked tongue and mouth moved over her inflamed labial lips and clitoris firmly as he added another finger, then another into the well of her body. She felt stretched and full and gloriously immodest. She held tight to his wide shoulders to keep from falling as he pumped his hand in and out of her body faster and faster, harder and harder. Her hands slid up to cup her own breasts and pull and twist her own nipples as she continued to sob out his name, "Please baby, please baby, oh God Rico please."

Their eyes connected as she looked down at him from above. Glazed green ones collided with the eyes of the Devil, made deep and almost unearthly with the same need for release that she now begged for.

She could feel his fingers unfurl inside of her and she rocked her hips and pounded back against them until it felt as if he reached for her very soul. Gasping, screaming in pleasure, she came hard against his mouth and hand.

His free arm had snaked around her like a steel band it was all that stood between her and totally collapsing to the floor. Rico eased her down now onto the carpet and pulled off her sodden bathing suit as he kissed her pussy lips gently.

Kneeling, he removed his jeans before parting her legs and moving between them.

She could only stare in awe at the length and thickness of his cock. She licked her lips in anticipation and spread her legs wider for him, offering her body for his pleasure and her own.

"I need you so much baby, I need you so much," he whispered as he leaned in close to kiss her mouth. The flavors of her own body mixed with the salty clean taste of him and she felt drugged by the passion she felt for this man—by the richness and decadence of their pairing.

She could feel the throbbing firmness of his cock as he applied pressure to her swollen clit again and again and she wiggled against him trying to pull him into her dripping pussy. Eden slapped her palms against the thick muscles of his back in frustration and was rewarded with his deep chuckle.

"Easy honey, easy, I want this to last." He held his weight off of her small frame with one muscular arm. His moist, sensuous mouth moved over her breasts and sucked hard at her nipples as his free hand roamed her curves and worked it's way back down to her sopping wet pussy again.

Despite his resistance Eden reached up and pulled his shirt over his head. She wanted to be closer to him. She would have crawled inside the very core of his chest if it had been possible.

He entered her slowly and then moved up onto his knees and pulled her hands to her own crotch. "Touch yourself Eden," his voice a harsh whisper, "I want to watch you come while I'm inside of you."

At first she felt shy about masturbating for him but amazingly his desire for her seemed to continue to expand as she did. She felt powerful, and sensual, and so feminine at the same time.

He began to move rhythmically inside her as she rubbed her aching clit matching his pace. She watched Rico fuck her as he watched her fuck herself and it was glorious. Their moans became so entwined it wasn't possible to separate his voice from hers. Both signaled the building urgency and pleasure they gave to and received from each other. They spiraled upward, to a soaring height neither had ever reached before. They held their breath together, as wave upon wave of pure divine ecstasy overtook their bodies, minds and souls. The beauty and sheer perfection of their shared moments brought them both to tears.

When he had finally found his way back to Earth Rico rolled onto his back and still inside of Eden's warm wet body he brought her with him.

She lay nestled against his broad chest listening to the slowing beat of his steady heart as she worked to gain the courage to look into his eyes again. When she did she saw that her fantasy was true. The mist of tears remained in their black depths. His tears, the ones that she had seen through her own blurry eyes, had been real.

Rico smoothed the long strands of moonlight silver hair back from Eden's temple and smiled gently at her when she softly kissed his palm. He pressed her head back down to his chest and slowly traced the length of her back until they both fell peacefully asleep.

Chapter Eight

Eden slowly traced the large, colorful tattoo on Rico's right deltoid. The snarling leopard's head covered almost the entire surface of the thick muscle that capped his shoulder and the upper one-third of his arm. It seemed odd to her that he would have such a large and detailed tattoo so high as to be hidden under his clothing most of the time. He rolled to his side away from Eden and she was faced with his broad, tanned back and many more tattoos. In the late afternoon light she was able to distinguish the shapes but not the meaning of the work. The tattoos on his back were a crude amalgamation of pictures and swirls blended together to cover the entire breadth of his shoulders. They dipped low down below his waistline stopping just short of the firm twin globes of his spectacular ass. Most were black line drawings with fuzzy edges. In the center the large letters of his name were drawn out in Old English script. Below that, a brick wall, each brick had a number inscribed into it, eight bricks in all. Above his name to one side there was a crown with five points and several teardrops and on the other side the smile now, cry later masks popularly associated with the theater. At the very base of the back of his neck was another word in Old English, "Southport".

An unexplained shiver shimmied up her bare spine as she continued to trace his body art with her fingertips. It must have been a painful experience to have all that ink scratched into his skin, and the drawings were specific symbols—surely they must hold great meaning for Rico to have endured the pain for the sake of wearing them.

Rico became aware of his surroundings slowly. He had slept soundly for the first time in what seemed like a very long time, and he smiled at the memory of making love to Eden. She hadn't held anything back from him as they worked together to reach shattering twin peaks of ecstasy. He could feel his cock hardening again at the recollection of her panty-clad finger probing his mouth and the sweet and sharp flavor of her body juices—then he realized she was tracing his ink.

His protective door slammed shut, quickly insulating him from his feelings of tenderness as he rolled to his stomach and moved from the floor to the edge of the bed. Eden looked so beautiful lying naked and satisfied on the carpet at his feet. His need for her tugged at his heartstrings but he steeled his resolve.

He loved her, he knew that now, and he would give his life to protect her from harm. He would have to give his own soul to protect her from himself, and he knew that it would cost him at least that much.

"Rico? What's wrong?" Her soft voice still held the crushed-velvet sound of seduction and Rico hurried to pull on his discarded clothing to maintain his physical and emotional distance.

"Get dressed, it's after seven o'clock, we need to get back," he said as he stood to zip up the fly of his jeans.

Eden sat up and reached for her clothing as her eyes roamed his handsome, yet shuttered face from where it loomed above her. She looked again at the tattoo as he pulled on his polo shirt. The bared teeth and intense eyes of the leopard seem to warn her to stay away as much as the grim expression on its owner's face. She felt vulnerable and exposed as she gathered up her bikini top and bottom and her discarded clothing, and walked naked to the bathroom to wash up before getting dressed. Her mind spun with confusion as she tried to pin down anything that she might have done to make him feel suddenly threatened.

They didn't speak as climbed into the car to head back to Glen Ellen. Rico sat tense and unyielding behind the wheel and despite several starts Eden never seemed to be able to get the words she wanted to say all the way out of her mouth. Maybe he just realized how much of himself he had revealed to her when they made love. Maybe he felt it was a mistake to have done so at all. Then another thought hit her, after all how well did she really know this man?

"Is there someone else in your life Rico? Is that what's wrong—there's someone else?"

"No," he said, with a quick turn of the key the Jag's powerful motor roared to life before settling into a soft purr as it pulled out of the driveway.

"Have I done something wrong?"

"No. It's not you Eden," he said impatiently, but that was a lie he told himself—it was Eden. It was her genuine warmth, her loving nature and trusting heart, it was the fact that she was too good for him and she just didn't see it yet, and he didn't want to be around when she did. That would be the worst kind of hell.

Rico pulled the car off the estate's dirt road and onto the pavement only moments before the flashing lights of the three police cars caught his attention. One car pulled in front of them, one beside him and one boxed them in from behind. There was nowhere for him to run.

"What's going on?" Eden asked, her voice sounding confused and more than a little worried.

Rico didn't answer her as he pulled to the side of the road. He pressed the automatic window button and as the glass slid soundlessly down into the doorframe he reached across Eden's knees for the glove box.

"Don't do it!" A ruddy-faced young cop screamed as he thrust his gun in through the open window and positioned it inches from the side of Rico's head. "Get your fucking hands where I can see them! Now! Right now!"

Rico calmly held his empty hands palms up as he looked at her. "Just do what they tell you honey, everything will be okay," he said gently. The look on his face didn't leave her feeling reassured.

She felt her own door pulled open and there was another cop at her side telling her to unbuckle her seat belt and get out of the car. She glanced again at Rico and she did as she was told. Rico looked angry and defeated. What the Christ was going on!

The burly policeman pulled her along to the cruiser parked behind Rico's Jag and pushed her head down toward the hood of the car as he kicked her ankles further apart. His big hands moved roughly over her body looking for weapons.

"Do you have any weapons on you?" He questioned her. Pausing at her breasts he gave them both an extra squeeze as he leaned in to lick at her ear, "Well these certainly could be considered weapons." He laughed, his garlic-laced breath nauseating her. He continued to grope his way down her body pressing his erection into her ass as he tried to use the cover of the side of the cruiser to slink his hands up under her dress and between her legs. He roughly rubbed her pussy. "Anything down here I should know about." He breathed into her ear again and laughed.

Eden remained silent, resisting the urge to drive the point of her elbow into the fat middle of the disgusting man who held her. She strained to see what was happening up ahead. Rico was lying facedown on the pavement. One cop perched with a knee between Rico's broad shoulders as he leaned forward to press his captive's face into the ground with one hand. The other cop, the screamer, leaned over Rico's body and shouted out his list of rights as he handcuffed him.

Eden was pulled to a standing position again and pressed with her back to the car as the slimy boy-in-blue leaned in close and began to ask her questions. She answered each question truthfully. What was her name? How long has she been with Rico today? Where had they gone? Could her story be corroborated?

Up ahead the cops pulled Rico to his feet and put him into one of the other cruisers.

"Where are you taking him? What's going on?" She demanded of the quiet cop when he approached several minutes later carrying her handbag.

He looked at her for a moment. Eden could see he was trying to judge her emotional state. "We arrested him for the murder of James Farley," he said flatly.

Eden was incredulous. "What? Mr. Farley's dead? What happened? Why on Earth would you think Rico would be responsible for that? That's ridiculous!"

"Obviously you don't know your boyfriend very well, miss." The quiet cop nodded over her head and gestured to the newly arriving tow truck. "We're going to be towing the car. Officer Stanley will give you a ride home." He handed her back her handbag.

"I'd rather crawl on broken glass," Eden replied tersely.

"Suit yourself," the fat cop replied with a small smirk and turned away.

"Wait!" Eden called out as they were leaving. "What did you mean about my not knowing Rico very well?"

She couldn't miss the small measure of sympathy in the quiet cop's eyes when he replied. "This isn't the first time he's killed someone."

By the time Eden walked back to the Adriano family home it was completely dark outside and the soles of her feet ached nearly as much as her heart did. She wrapped her arms around her body in an attempt to control her shivering as she waited for someone to answer the door. The cop's words echoed in her head over and over, "This isn't the first time he's killed someone." She found that hard to believe. Surely they must have Rico confused with someone else!

The time between when Salvatore opened the portal, ushered her into his home, and urged her to drink from a crystal tumbler of burning whiskey as she told him her story, to the present, passed in a blurry haze. It felt so good to tell someone whom she knew also cared for Rico. Sal's warm, calm and confident demeanor helped Eden to feel less frantic too.

He pushed her down onto the buttery-soft cushions of an overstuffed leather couch and pulled her feet up, removing her thin sandals. "Rest," he told her. "I'm going to make some phone calls. I'll get my lawyer over to see Rico straight off and I'm going to see what else I can find out." He pointed a beefy finger in Eden's direction and smiling said. "You are not to move. I'll make sure Rico knows you're safe."

"Sal?" Her voice faltered. "The police said that Rico had killed someone else."

He nodded, quietly acknowledging that he had heard her words, as he covered her legs with finely woven plaid blanket. "Rest," he repeated firmly, and then he was gone.

Eden chewed at her bottom lip as she thought about how roughly the cops had treated Rico. How could they believe he had anything to do with the death of Mr. Farley?

Alone and safe now Eden felt the warm splash of tears as they slid from the corners of her eyes and dropped as small, wet explosions onto the backs of her hands where they lay nestled in her lap. Why would anyone harm Mr. Farley? He was one of the nicest people she'd ever known and it seemed impossible to believe he was dead. She didn't believe, no *she wouldn't* believe that Rico had anything to do with his demise! She eased down into the soft leather as the whiskey began to take a hold of her frazzled emotions. The warmth of her surroundings, the comforting help of Salvatore Adriano and the potent drink all helped to slide her into the world of sleep, but it was far from peaceful.

Rico rested his head on one folded arm on the tabletop in front of him. His other was handcuffed to a heavy metal bar bolted to the side of the same table. His eyes were closed but he wasn't sleeping. He could still smell Eden's essence, it surrounded him like a velvet cloak and the taste of her lingered in his mouth. It seemed that the worst that *could* happen had now happened, he'd fallen for her, she was soon going to know all about his past and worst of all his past was about touch her life. He hated himself because no matter what, now, it would touch her.

He played the events of a few hours ago over and over in his mind as he had since he was arrested. Each time he did he saw Eden's pale, frightened face as the fat-fuck of a cop frisked her suggestively. His attempt to go to her aid had landed him facedown on the pavement and a charge of resisting arrest added to his current charge of murder. Murder — well at least that charge felt familiar. The last time he'd heard that he *had* been responsible for another man's death, but he had no idea why these gumshoes would think he'd had anything to do with Farley's.

He couldn't believe that Farley was dead. He'd just spoken to the man this morning. He was his usual chipper self when Rico dropped off the software samples so he could have a hand in deciding which program would best work to keep the restaurant's inventory. Rico had a gift for cooking, but Farley had a gift for business management and Rico relied on his experience and advice as he himself learned the ropes. He owed Farley more than a debt of gratitude—shit he owed the old man everything!

Rico yanked hard on the handcuffs in frustration causing searing pain to flash up from his wrist to his shoulder. He felt like an angry bear with his foot caught in a trap. He grimaced at the thought of chewing off his arm just to be able to pace around the locked room.

Eden, his arms ached to hold her, to know that she was safe and cared for. The fucking cops had brought him into this room after processing him and he'd been sitting here for at least a couple of hours. He'd been through this before, the waiting was the hardest part, but he could take it if he knew Eden was home safe.

He tensed momentarily at the sound of keys scraping in the door lock. Then he felt the calm, insolent veneer he had mastered through a lifetime of hard knocks fall around him as a protective shield. He waited to see what the cops were dragging in.

It wasn't a cop, it was a suit.

"Mr. Alvarez?" The suit held out his hand in greeting. Rico ignored the gesture, and looked the man up and down from under his hooded eyes, but the suit wasn't intimidated. His designer pinstripes looked personally tailored for the guy's small frame and as the smell of well-tanned leather eased off the hide cover of his briefcase and reached out it convinced Rico that this was no court appointed attorney. Since he'd not yet had a phone call he wondered who sent this legal eagle.

The suit held his unanswered hand in the air as he looked back into Rico's eyes. He was sizing him up as well. Rico smiled in response. "I'm Phillip Davis, your lawyer. Mr. Adriano sent me."

"Sal?" Rico tried to reach up with his right hand to shake that of the man in front of him but his effort was halted by the handcuffs.

"Well, I see the first thing we can get taken care of right away." He smiled back at Rico. The suit was a small man, with a soft, almost baby face, but Rico could see the metal beneath the first impression of youth. The man was made of titanium.

When the handcuffs were removed and the cop left them alone again, Davis leaned in and said, "Before we begin, Salvatore asked that I tell you that Eden is at his house, and that she's a little shaken, but she's fine."

With those words Rico felt much of his tension drain away.

"Now let's get to work on what the police think they have on you." Davis smiled a confident, almost feral grin. Rico was pleased to see that this was a man who loved a fight, probably as much as he himself did.

Rico eased backwards on the hard, thin mattress of the prison cot until he felt the cold concrete wall at his back. He refused to wince despite the searing pain in his rib cage, he probably had at least one cracked rib, maybe two, but he couldn't show any weakness—he wouldn't—because the guard was still there at the barred doorway watching him, waiting for it. The introductory punches from the guards while he was being strip-searched and processed into the jail system weren't unexpected, little more could be forthcoming when young, inexperienced men were thrown into an environment that dehumanized those in their custodial care.

Rico had kept quiet, kept his eyes straight ahead and devoid of emotion, and had done exactly as they instructed, but the moment they saw his tattoos his fate at their hands was sealed. He knew they'd establish their dominance like roosters at a cock fight. He'd taken the beating silently. They were efficient, they made sure none of the bruising would be visible anywhere obvious, and that was fine with him. He'd be really sore tomorrow but it wouldn't be anything he couldn't deal with. He almost welcomed the event and the pain—he deserved it after the way he pulled Eden into the complications of his life—and it helped him to put his jailbird game face back on again. He could feel his hard, cold attitude resurfacing from where it lay buried in the deep places in his soul. It served him well in his past and it would again.

Rico held his breath and stared straight ahead at the opposing gray wall as beads of sweat dripped down his temples, he was concentrating on ignoring the pain to prevent himself from reacting at all, it was hard work. After a few minutes he caught the soft sticky sound of the soles of the guard's shoes as the man walked away leaving Rico alone in the dimly lit cell. He sat frozen and barely breathing for another full minute before he finally let his breath out in a long sigh that ended with a groan of discomfort. He wiped his sweaty palms on the tops of his orange twill-covered thighs and tried to adjust himself on the mattress before resting his head back against the wall—there was no way he was going to lie down and sleep where hundreds of convicts had slept before him. He didn't belong here, it wasn't his house, and this wasn't his life, not anymore.

Davis promised him he'd be out on bail after the morning arraignment and he was banking on that. He'd had plenty of time to think since the police arrested him earlier. The first thing he was going to do was get Eden out of this mess he'd dragged her into and send her back to her normal, respectable life. Then he was going to leave her alone, the sharp stab of regret barely flashed in his hardening heart before he mentally trampled it. Swallowing several times he worked to push his need for her down deep

inside of his soul. It would be safe there, he could take it out and caress it with his mind when he felt stronger, but for now he needed to put away, he needed to shut down his emotions to get through the ordeal of the coming days.

He didn't kill James, but with his history he doubted that would matter much to a jury. If the cops couldn't prove it was someone else then they'd find a way to prove it was him.

The overhead lights clicked off and Rico was left alone in the dark. He wanted to pretend he was back in the guest room of Adriano's Winery rolling around in ecstasy on the carpeted floor with Eden in his arms. He wanted to dwell on the feeling of his cock buried deep inside if her lithe, welcoming body, their connection to each other complete and lasting. The chill of the jail cell and the stench of old urine kept him firmly held in realities grasp, reminding of him where he was and he couldn't bring his memories of her beauty and lushness into such a stark and empty place, not even to keep his heart warm.

The hard marble of the courthouse steps fell away under the soft soles of Eden's shoes as she told herself to keep walking forward. Each step increased her anxiety, but she knew they took her closer to Rico too. Sal told her that Rico didn't want her to come today, but she couldn't be persuaded to stay away. She had to be present in the courtroom at his arraignment this morning to show him that she believed he was innocent.

Everyone had a past, and the tattoos on Rico's back proved his was probably harder than most, they were the markings of his past gang affiliation. She knew that now. Sal had called in a few favors and was able to find out a little about Rico's life. She understood a few things better now thanks to his contacts. The eight bricks symbolized the eight years Rico had spent in Southport Maximum Security Prison in upstate New York for the barroom brawl that resulted in the death of a drunken man who had challenged him. Rico had been all of seventeen when a patron of the bar decided he didn't like the color of his Latino skin and provoked him. One well-placed punch and the man hit his head on the bar as he fell backwards to the floor. He died, and Rico was charged with murder. The charge was changed to manslaughter when a few regular bar patrons were compelled, under oath, to tell the truth and admit that Rico was just defending himself. Rico had been a gang member throughout his childhood though, and had been in and out of trouble with the law, so the judge wasn't about to offer any leniency. The rest of his life was still a mystery but it mattered little. Eden wouldn't abandon him when he needed her support.

The courthouse was a busy place but for all the people milling around it seemed deathly quiet and morose. She found the right room and slipped in through double doors just as the prisoners were being escorted in and directed to sit in a row of seats to the right of the judge's bench. The garish orange jumpsuits made it impossible to miss them in the crowd. Rico was there. He looked tired and angry, but otherwise okay. He looked up at her, gesturing toward the door with his dark eyes.

Son of a Bitch! He had asked Davis to pass on a message specifically telling Eden not to come today. The last thing he wanted was to see her caught up in the media frenzy that was sure to come when the press got a hold of the story. She looked pale and drawn. He wanted to hold her so badly his chest ached from more than the beating he took last night. Hell it seemed like his heart always ached these days, but he had made his decision and he had to do what was best for Eden. He stared at her and when she paused to look at him he glanced from her to the door and back again. His message was clear. Go home! She flashed him a small, discreet smile and took a seat.

Rico stood silently as the junior lawyer from the District Attorney's office and his own lawyer bantered back and forth trying to convince the judge that there was, or wasn't, enough evidence to support the charge of murder.

The late James Farley had been strangled from behind. Yes, Rico had visited with him earlier in the day, Farley's maid had let him into the house on her way out to do the shopping. When she'd returned almost two hours later Mr. Farley was dead. Yes, his prior record of violent behavior was admissible...it went on and on. As the ugly facts of his life were paraded in front of the judge one at a time Rico felt the heaviness in his chest increasing. He resisted taking a look back at Eden to judge her reaction. He could well imagine her expression of disappointment—he didn't need to actually see it on her lovely face to know it was there. He doubted he'd feel any more exposed if he'd been standing naked on a table in the mahogany paneled courtroom while the prosecuting attorney mapped out the flaws of his genitals with a laser pointer.

It was going to be a high-profile case, capital crimes always were, but Farley's wealthy status increased the stakes even more. Rico could already imagine the preening going on in the District Attorney's office as they anticipated their upcoming moments of fame in all the local and national newspapers. He watched the judge carefully and was a little relieved to note that he seemed a fair-minded man who didn't see enough obvious evidence in front of him to remand Rico until the trial date. After entering a plea of not guilty Rico's bail was set at an outrageously high sum that came with the stipulation of him surrendering his passport too. Finally he'd be allowed to go home to prepare for his defense—a defense that would have to be good enough to save his very life.

Eden paced as she waited for Rico to be released. The small room was crowded with stackable chrome and plastic chairs in a variety of colors that were probably meant to lend cheer to those who used them, but they fell miserably short. The stale air and dingy yellow walls of the waiting room were a fitting commentary to the torn and diminished lives of those family members who waited here for the release of their loved ones. Eden couldn't imagine how many people had waited before her in rooms like this one all over the world, but she knew their fears and frustrations now, and she had empathy for them.

Loved ones. The thought echoed in her head. There was no question she loved Rico. The thought both comforted and frightened her. She knew so little about him and apparently most of that was based on what she wanted to see and not on who he really was. She had to know more about him—she had to. She looked up to see the only person who could really tell her coming toward her.

Chapter Nine

Eden looked pale and tired and more than a little concerned. Despite having promised himself that he would send her straight home and tell her to stay far away from him to keep her safe, he pulled her into his arms. She felt like heaven. She yielded to his embrace and curved her delectable body into the angles of his own. Rico rubbed his face into the silken mass of her fragrant hair and whispered comforting words to her as he kissed her forehead.

They stood holding each other for long minutes before Rico sighed and pulled away again. "Don't do that," Eden said softly. "You always seem to be pulling away from me."

The sheen of tears he saw in her eyes yanked on his heartstrings. "Phillip is going to take you home, and I want you to stay far away from me. I'm going to have one of my employees place the produce orders too." When she started to protest he cut her off quickly, "I mean it Eden. Stay away from me. This thing is going to generate a lot of press and I don't want you in the fray when it all gets ugly."

Eden was shaking her head. "I know you didn't do this Rico, I'm not going to—"

"Fuck!" he said softly, his fatigue evident in his voice. "You can't know that, you don't know anything about me." He never raised his voice but the anger behind his words was palpable. "I've done things that would make you run from me."

"I know you were in prison," she said in a rush, "I know you were a gang member too. Sal called in some favors and found out, he told me about the man who died."

Rico's expression turned to stone as he stood looking into her eyes. "You mean the man I killed?" Dark obsidian irises probed her deep, cool green ones and saw love and warmth and loyalty. It brought his temper to the top of the heap of emotions swirling inside of him, and then they erupted from within. The dangerous glint in his eyes made Eden take a step backwards.

Eden tried again to tell him that she believed him incapable of killing Mr. Farley. "I know you—"

"You don't know anything little girl." His words came in clipped, quiet tones that did nothing to curb the menace of them. "In your small, sheltered life you've never known anyone like me. You see the clothes of a successful man and are foolish enough to believe that the heart of a lamb beats underneath them." He worked hard to ignore the tears that streamed silently down her cheeks. He shook his dark head and waved his hands toward the door. "Go home to your garden and your friends, I have no use for a naïve woman."

Eden stood her ground, her chin rising in defiance. "You don't need to protect me from all of this. I can take care of myself."

Rico stepped toward her and brought his face very close to hers. "And who's going to protect you from me?"

"I'm not afraid of you," she said flatly.

"Well that just makes you stupid. Sex is all I have to offer you Eden, it's all you'll ever get from me, and if you thought there was more here than that you were mistaken. Now stay away from me." With that he turned and walked out the door.

Her mind whirled with confusion as she tried to figure out what had just happened. She had moved from the safety of his arms to being bullied by him in a matter of a few short minutes. She trembled in anger and frustration with his behavior as his words rang in her head, "Sex is all I have to offer you Eden, it's all you'll ever get from me, and if you thought there was more than you were mistaken." She remembered them from her dream of a couple of nights ago. The vision of a red door flashed in her mind again and the same feelings of panic began to overwhelm her.

Phillip Davis stepped up to the plate. It was his job to help fit the pieces of the puzzle of his clients' lives back together. He knew that Alvarez loved her, he saw that last night as plainly as he could see her love for Rico now. The man must have many ghosts hiding in his closet to shoulder the pain of heartbreak rather than share himself and his love with this woman. All Phillip could offer her was support, but for now that might be just enough. He grasped her elbow gently. "Come Ms. Stuart. I'm going to see you home."

Rico pushed his way through the reporters on the courthouse steps and kept walking. He ignored their questions and waved off the microphones that were pushed in front of his face. To some he looked remorseful, pale and sad. Some believed it was guilt written on his face. Only Rico knew it to be the despair that comes with true loss.

As soon as his feet hit the sidewalk below the stairs he took off at a dead run. He ran hard and fast for as long as he was physically able, and then he ran some more. By the time he was home his lungs and his muscles burned as much as his battered ribs, but he couldn't stop moving. He was afraid if he stopped the pain in his heart would bring him to his knees. Once inside, he paced around his living room dripping with sweat and drunken with fatigue. He continued to rage, breaking things as he moved around the room. After fifteen minutes he ran out of things to destroy. There was broken glass and splintered wood everywhere and still he wanted to scream in rage. He pulled a bottle of bourbon from the toppled liquor cabinet and tossed the stopper on to the floor. He sat on a discarded leather couch cushion and leaned back against the wall as he tipped the bottle up. The fiery liquid burned a path straight down to his stomach and he welcomed the pain and the heat it brought.

He couldn't remember ever being this angry, but it wasn't with Eden. He was angry with himself. He had hurt her to drive her away before she knew enough about him to

walk away on her own. His life had been a series of wasted potential and dangerous moments, but nothing he'd ever done seemed as low and cowardly as that.

He was a coward and he grasped his bottle of liquid courage as tightly as any lifeline. Rico continued to take big gulps from the bottle at regular intervals. As soon as the most recent swallow burned its way down and the fiery heat melted away he took another, then another. Ten minutes later most of the bottle was gone. He played another dangerous game. At 160 proof, an entire bottle of bourbon might do more than deaden the pain in his heart—it might just kill him. He tossed the remains of the bottle away and it landed on the carpet halfway across the room. He wanted his heart to die not his body.

As the bourbon slowly anesthetized him his mind drifted back to sift through his memories.

The gang was the only family he had ever been able to depend on.

He had no idea who fathered him, and the woman who bore him spent all of her time either in run-down crack houses getting high, or in street side alleys giving blowjobs to townies so she could buy more hits. He couldn't ever remember having a home before the gang took him in.

The Latino gang of his mean-streets neighborhood had initiated him into the family when he turned the ripe old age of eleven. That was twenty-one years ago, and he still recalled the mind-numbing pain of the battering he'd taken. Five of the gang's lieutenants had beaten him senseless, but unlike the other two young boys, who were initiated before him, Rico hadn't uttered a sound. That had earned him instant respect, and later, his "take no prisoners" attitude garnered him plenty of new opportunities to gain even greater respect throughout his early gang years.

He was in his mid-teens when he'd heard that his mother had died of an overdose, and he gave the news all the consideration he felt it deserved—none at all.

He'd been in and out of juvenile detention throughout his teens but by the grace of heaven—a grace he knew he didn't deserve—he had never been caught committing anything very serious.

Not being caught didn't make him any less guilty though.

Each time his sentence had been served, and when he was released each time he was placed in foster care, and each time he went back home, to his only real family—the gang.

As his experience and natural leadership skills grew he moved up the dangerous ladder of succession quickly. As other gangmates died off in street battles with rival gangs, landed in jail or worse—were ostracized from the gang family for showing weakness or fear—his ruthlessness and boldness brought him to the top rung. He was a king by the age of seventeen. He had ruled his neighborhood with an iron fist and no one dared to challenge him. Well, no one who wanted to live anyway.

Rico swallowed hard and tried to fight the tears that were so close to the surface. He knew he was drunk, and there was safety for him in being alone, but he fought against the release of them because he knew he didn't deserve to feel cleansed.

The best thing he'd ever done in his life was to kill a man in a bar fight, because it was the start of his journey to find and save his own soul. It was too high a price to pay though, he was still an unworthy man.

He remembered it had been his birthday. He'd stopped in a neighborhood bar for a drink. It didn't matter that he was seventeen, he was the king. He had no doubt he'd be served. What he didn't count on was a drunk at the bar who didn't recognize his sovereignty.

When he'd walked up to the bar to order his drink the already inebriated man dished out a racial slur, he was apparently too drunk to realize he was in a bar full of Latinos. Rico had verbally fired back, it was his birthday after all so he felt more benevolent than usual, but as he turned to go back to his table the drunken fool took a swing at him. Young, sober and battle-hardened, Rico was able to dodge the blow and land one of his own at the same time. One was all it took. The drunken man had dropped backwards like a stone, hitting his head on the edge of the bar as he fell. Normally Rico would have just walked away, but as luck would have it the cops had been on the prowl for that very same drunk who had eluded them earlier that night. Four cops walked in just as Rico let his fist fly. Four cops who all knew exactly who Rico was and were willing to testify, under oath, to anything the District Attorney told them to. A handful of the bar patrons were convinced by Rico's gang-family to testify to his self-defense. He wasn't convicted of murder, but he was of manslaughter, and that got him eight years in the adult population.

Eight years of eating shit on a shingle for three meals a day and he swore he'd never eat anything less than gourmet again. Eight years of boredom, only broken up by the daily stabbings and rapes and the prisoner beatings dished out by power-hungry guards, but it didn't matter. None of it mattered, because it took place on the inside, and nothing that happened there meant anything at all out here, except for his tattoos he silently reminded himself.

Tattoos from the inside were crude and stinging affairs, but Rico had relished the pain as his skin was etched—it helped him to remember that he was still alive. Now it was a different story. Gang members and ex-convicts recognized them, cops and hospital workers did too, so Rico never took his shirt off in public.

A few months ago he started having full color work done directly over his gang tats. The Leopard was the first to be completed, but he had a long way to go.

Something had snapped him back from fantasy to cold reality when he felt Eden's pale fingers tracing his ink. She was touching evil and he was the Devil himself.

He felt around for the discarded bourbon then remembered he'd tossed it away to stop himself from drinking any more. His thoughts were becoming scattered and his limbs heavy. He deserved more than a life sentence—in fact he deserved more than several of them. He deserved to die for the life he'd lived, and Rico knew that if the prosecutor had his way, he would.

He felt his body list to one side and though he reached out to prop himself up he landed hard on the floor anyway, he didn't try to get up. In his misery he thought of Eden and how she deserved so much more than an ex-con who could cook, he smiled when he remembered her teasing him when he introduced himself to her a couple days ago—"The Rico Alvarez"—she'd said the words like he was a movie star when she really had no idea who he was at all. Now she knew. He wondered how she'd say his name in a few days as more of his life story was splashed across the pages of the local newspaper and on the local news reports.

He heard himself moan out loud in frustration, it sounded distant and disconnected. God he needed her so much. She was a garden, she was *his* garden, and he knew he'd never be good enough for her, no matter what she herself thought. Rico tried to picture her smiling face, he wanted to hold her in his mind that way, but instead he saw her sad and pale with silent tears running down her cheeks as she was in the waiting room a little while ago and before he slipped out of consciousness he apologized for who he was.

Rico was dreaming about food... no coffee. He smelled coffee and something sharp. Vomit. He groaned out loud at the hammering in his head and the uneasy rolling of his stomach. He turned over as he tried to open his eyes and fell on to the floor.

"Fuck!" He exclaimed loudly when his knees hit the hardwood planks. He immediately regretted the outburst when his head pounded painfully. He managed to make it up onto all fours and he was busy taking long, deep breaths to keep from vomiting when he heard the warm, familiar chuckle of Sal Adriano coming from somewhere near the bedroom door.

"Good morning sunshine," Sal called out in his most chipper voice.

"Fuck you, asshole," Rico replied. Sal's answering chuckle irritated him further. "Well are you going to come over here and help me find the fucking toilet or should I just go ahead and puke right where I've landed?"

"Oh no you don't!" Sal laughed again as he hurried over to help Rico stand. "I've been cleaning up after you all night and if you puke on the floor one more time I think our friendship will have to end here and now."

Rico's head was swimming and it was all he could do to hold back his rising gorge until he made it to the bathroom. It didn't matter how much his stomach clenched trying to relieve his body of the poisonous amount of alcohol in his system, he didn't feel any better. He lay draped over the toilet bowl feeling lightheaded and clammy with perspiration.

He heard the shower and felt Sal's big arms helping him to his feet again. "Only a good friend would ever dare to say this to your face Rico, but Christ man you smell worse than you look."

Rico tried to muster the strength to laugh but he just couldn't do it. He briefly wondered if it would have come out sounding hysterical anyway.

"If you think I'm bathing you buddy think again." Sal continued to tease him. "You either take a shower or I'll be forced to call the fire department and have you hosed off. I'll make breakfast while you decontaminate."

"No!" Rico said alarmed. "No breakfast, Oh! God." He groaned before returning to the toilet bowl yet again.

Twenty minutes later, and several more trips to the porcelain bowl, Rico managed to shower and get dressed. There couldn't possibly be anything left in his stomach to vomit up, at least he felt hopeful of that anyway.

He paused at the door to the living room when he saw the condition of the furnishings. His memories of his anger and pain came flooding back to him. Sal looked up from the frying pan but said nothing as Rico made his way to the tall kitchen bar and sat down on an armchair stool. Sal slid a steaming mug of strong black coffee into his shaking hands as he continued to watch him. Rico tried to ignore the smell of scrambled eggs.

"Say something." Rico spoke softly to his friend. He wasn't sure what he wanted Sal to say, but he needed something, anything to help him find his way back to feeling normal about his current life.

"Eden loves you," Sal said.

That wasn't what Rico had in mind.

"And you love her just as much."

"She deserves better," Rico replied quietly. "She doesn't know what kind of man I really am." Rico worked to control the flood of emotions his words provoked. He had to pause to swallow several times.

"I think it's you who doesn't know what kind of man you really are." Sal shrugged his massive shoulders. "It's her choice to make Rico. She doesn't seem to care who you were, she cares who you are now." Sal watched Rico as he unconsciously rubbed the heel of his palm in small circles against his chest. He smiled gently at his friend. Rico was a stubborn man, he hoped for his buddy's sake that Eden was a little more so.

Sal's demeanor changed to a more serious and businesslike manner as he continued, "There's something else you need to know. I received a cell call from Davis a little while ago. He's been given a copy of James Farley's will. It's something the prosecutor is planning to use against you in court."

Rico chuckled softly, "Tell me, does Davis work for me or you?"

"For me, but he's on loan to you." Sal laughed at his own joke and Rico tried not to wince at the pain it caused in his head. "Farley left you the restaurant and half of his other assets. They are to be split between you and your half sister Susan."

"What?" Rico searched Sal's face for a hint of laughter. Certainly this was another of his infamous pranks.

"According to Farley's lawyer, James was your father."

Rico took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then another and another to calm his roiling stomach, as he worked the words over in his still foggy brain. He looked at Sal and shook his head. "Surely that's some sort of mistake?" he said.

Sal shook his head slowly, "Davis doesn't make mistakes. If he believes it, then it's true."

"Excuse me." Rico stood on wobbly legs and turned to hurry back to the bathroom again.

Three hours later Rico found himself sitting in the posh offices of his lawyer grinding slowly through the process of building his defense with little more than a wing and a prayer. He waited stoically while Davis organized his stack of papers and wished he were still home in bed.

The two hours of dream-filled sleep he caught before coming in had helped to quiet his rolling insides, but it also delivered stabbing blows to his tortured heart too—visions of Eden had filled his slumber. In his dreams he made love to her in every way he knew how, and still, she'd slipped away from him.

"You didn't know that Farley was your father?" Davis asked him from the opposite side of the highly polished table in the practice's conference room. He pushed Rico's birth certificate over to him along with the copy of Farley's will and the letter from James lawyer.

Rico shook his head as he reached for the documents and read through them. How did Farley know? Only his mother's name was listed on his birth certificate.

"As you can see it was Farley who paid for your tuition to The French Culinary Institute too. Apparently he had a private investigator search for you and when he found you, you were already incarcerated. He followed you from then on."

Rico still felt a bit dazed by the information. He couldn't react. He wanted to be angry with Farley, to curse him for abandoning him and his mother and for never offering the two of them support, but all he felt was confused. "He knew for at least ten years and never told me? Why in Christ's name didn't he tell me?" Rico looked at Davis and knew that he didn't have the answers to his questions either. Maybe he'd never know the answers.

"Well," Davis went on, "this recent change of his will gives you a strong motive for murder and I'm sure the prosecutor will exploit that for all it's worth. He'll try to make the jury believe you knew about Farley all along. With your past record and no alibi we need to find another angle. Are you sure there isn't anyone who can say they saw you while you were out for your morning run?"

Rico shook his pounding head again and shrugged. He never took the same route twice when he went out for a run, and that morning he had been too preoccupied with thoughts of picking up Eden to remember anyone who might have noticed him. He never would have guessed that he'd need the information.

"The District Attorney's office will take the death penalty off the table if you confess to the murder."

"I didn't do this," Rico said quietly.

"I know that," Davis replied," and I'm not recommending you take that deal, but I'm obligated to tell you what your options are." Davis reached forward and poured Rico a glass of water. "I've got my staff checking the backgrounds of the house staff and Sal is looking into Susan Farley's background. He has connections that may prove more helpful than mine. Stay positive, something will break."

Chapter Ten

Eden was sick of getting her news from the newspaper. She dreaded getting out of bed to read the headlines each morning but she couldn't seem to help herself. Each one sounded more ominous than the last. It was with stubborn resolve that she pulled her old truck off the paved roadway and on to the dirt lane leading up to the Adriano home.

Despite the clear, sunny skies and the late afternoon quiet, Eden spared little attention to her beautiful surroundings. She was a woman on a mission.

A diminutive housekeeper led Eden into Sal's study while she went in search of her boss. The dark, masculine furnishings and the smell of leather brought her mind back to the night Rico was arrested, making her feel even more anxious for information about him, but doubt filled her too. Sal and Rico were friends, maybe Sal wouldn't tell her anything about the man she loved. Still she had to ask. The idea of Rico getting the death penalty frightened her to her very center. She just couldn't live in a world knowing he wasn't in it too.

Eden didn't have to wait for long.

Sal's warm greeting and quick embrace put her ease, but she still felt nervous asking him about Rico. She was afraid of what he might tell her. She paced the room for a few minutes while he patiently waited for her to speak. She randomly picked up objects and replaced them on countertops and tables without having ever looked at what was in her hands.

"How is he?" she finally asked, her voice hushed and engraved with pain.

"Feeling as miserable as you are."

"I doubt our reasons are the same." Eden's brittle laugh didn't hide the fact that she was fighting the tears that always seemed so near the surface. She hoped Sal wouldn't notice, but he did.

"Then you'd be wrong Eden," he said gently. Sal wrapped an arm companionably around one of her shoulders and walked her out onto the veranda at the back of the house. It was cool and the view was amazing. They stood together in silence as Sal gave her the time she needed to gather her emotions.

"I've been reading the paper. I can't believe that James was his father."

"Neither can Rico." Sal's voice was tinged with humor, but Eden could tell he wasn't truly amused. "I don't think he knows how to feel about the news especially since it looks like Farley knew for a really long time."

"What will this mean for his trial?"

"It means that the District Attorney now believes he has a motive to prove that Rico had reasons to kill Farley."

Sal led her onto the small garden path just beyond the veranda. They walked along in the quiet afternoon sun and Eden listened to birds and insects trying to believe that Rico would be safe and that her life would be all right again in time. "Didn't the security camera show anything that could help Rico?"

He never missed a step but she saw him bring himself to attention quickly, "What do you mean? What camera?"

"A few months ago Mr. Farley and I talked about security cameras. I've been thinking about getting a couple to enable me to check in on the livestock in the barn at night, especially during spring lambing. He seemed to know a lot about them. I just assumed it was from his personal experience." Eden thoughtfully chewed on the side of one tapered fingernail. "A man with his wealth...well he must have some kind of security, right?"

"The police didn't find anything like that from what I've been told."

"Well, that just can't be right," Eden said, "he gave me the name of a company so I could have an estimate done. I haven't called them yet, but I'm sure the card is at home, um...Global Watch? Global Supply, maybe? I'll call you when I get home and give you the name of the company and the salesman he recommended. He'd know if Mr. Farley had one."

"I hope you're right Eden. If there's a camera the police didn't find it may provide the break Rico needs."

Distracted by the possibility of helping Rico, she missed her step when her foot slipped on a loose stone. As she tried to regain her balance she twisted her ankle sharply. Luckily Sal caught her arm before she hit the ground, but the pain in her ankle throbbed when she tried to put her weight on her foot again. He helped her to a nearby bench and kneeled in front of her as he examined her injury. "Well a little ice to keep the swelling down and something for the pain is definitely in order." He smiled at her with brotherly affection. "It's all going to work out Eden, and he'll come around in time, I'm sure of it."

Eden could feel the tears pressing from behind her eyes again, it happened every time she thought about how Rico had alienated her, but Sal's words brought hope, and right now she'd grasp for any thread that she could find. She leaned in and rubbed her forehead on Sal's nodding in agreement. "Thank you," She said simply. "I'm so glad he has you on his side too." It would all work out she told herself—it had to.

He scooped her up in his arms, "God, you're heavy for such a small woman." Eden laughed in embarrassment at is words, she also groaned in aggravation and discomfort as her ankle continued to protest her earlier maltreatment of it. Sal carried her back onto the veranda and into his study laughing with her.

Rico came around to the back gate just in time to see the woman he loved leaning forward from a small garden bench with her forehead pressed up against the pale blonde head of his best friend. The sensuality of the moment stopped him in his tracks, and as he watched Sal scooped a laughing Eden up into his arms and carried her into the house.

The intimacy of their setting and their laughter seared his heart like a flame on his flesh. He felt stunned. Why would Sal do this to him? He knew how much Rico loved Eden. Still, he was hurt most by Eden's quick change of heart. It was true he had pushed her away to protect her from the violence and criminality of his past, and it was true that he had thought her too good for him, but now he wondered, maybe she wasn't good enough.

He heard Eden shriek and laugh from inside the room. "Oh Sal, no! That's really cold!"

Rico could hear Sal's deep voice offering her encouragement for whatever game they played together and it took all of his willpower to keep from following them inside and confronting their duplicity.

He truly loved only two people in this world, and they were even now betraying him together. Hurt that bordered on hatred hit him full force and stoked the doubt in his heart. He had been right all along. Eden wanted him when she thought him a promising prospect, but now with his life circling the drain she'd moved on to greener pastures. Why not move on? Adriano had everything a woman wanted, wealth, power, celebrity and generosity. Everything but the one thing Rico had counted on having for himself, Eden's love, now it seemed that maybe he'd have that too. He didn't have to worry about her breaking his heart again—his heart felt dead and he welcomed the relief.

Rico made his way back to his car. Women were all the same, and he knew exactly how to deal with a woman like Eden—take what he wanted for himself and move on. Whatever was left in his wake was of no concern to him.

Once again Eden found herself racing down the back roads of Glen Ellen. The last time it was to get back to Miami West to find Sarah's precious earring and this time it was to get home to find a business card that may offer Rico a chance at freedom, and them a chance to find their way back to each other.

She had to concentrate to drive. Her right ankle was useless. The swelling and accompanying stiffness were just enough to make pressing on the brake and gas pedals difficult—so she used her left foot. No matter, at least she had both hands on the wheel. Eden laughed at the little reminder of how she and Rico had met. It felt good to be hopeful that everything was again moving in a positive direction.

It amazed her that she could feel so in love with him in such a short time. She was no starry-eyed lover though. She knew there were obstacles to overcome. Besides the shadows from Rico's past there were important issues of trust to conquer too. She felt confident that they would be able to make it past the hurdles together, but first he had to be free of the pending charges.

Rico watched Eden from the shadows of the barn. She'd pulled into the driveway fast and slammed the old truck's breaks hard enough to make the tin bucket screech in protest. Someone really ought to teach that woman to drive.

Someone else that is, taking care of Eden wasn't his concern anymore he reminded himself.

As she hopped down from the tall bench seat and pivoted on one leg toward the front of the cab Rico shrank back into the darkness to avoid being seen. He waited until he heard the screen door bang shut before emerging.

Well the wench must be in some hurry. Eden was in such a heated rush that she hadn't even bothered to close the door of the truck. Rico leaned it closed and pushed it until the latch clicked. It was in his best interest if the light in the cab didn't call her back outside just now.

As he silently made his way onto the front porch he felt and then dismissed a small pang of guilt for what he was doing. Hell he wasn't even sure he *knew* what he was doing! He had racked his brain all afternoon trying to decide how to handle the knowledge of her encounter with Adriano. He would walk away from his relationship with either of them anyway, but he wanted to give Eden the chance to tell him the truth. He was probably foolish to believe she cared enough about him to do so, but a glimmer of hope, that she at least cared a little, lived in his heart.

He made his way to the front door and almost laughed out loud at her carelessness. Eden had left the door ajar too and he easily slipped right in. He could hear her opening and closing a drawer a few rooms ahead and he crept quietly down the hall to carefully peer into the room from the fringes of the dark hallway. This must be her farm office. Her desktop was scattered with piles of papers, writing implements, the other paraphernalia of a work from home woman. Rico found it odd that the rooms of her house that he could see were otherwise spotless, but her office looked like a cyclone had gone through just minutes ago.

Eden dialed the phone and he heard the smile in her voice as she gave Adriano some information from a small business card. "Can we tell Rico yet? Don't you think he'd want to know what we're up to? Well tell me when, okay? I can't wait to get this out in the open."

Rico felt his chest tighten as he listened. She was facing the far wall but he could still see the profile of her beautiful face and her mischievous smile. It played on her lips as she practiced her flirtations on Adriano.

"Yes, I'm feeling much better now thanks to you. You fixed me up. Maybe we should call you Doctor Sal instead?" It must have been working on the other end of the line judging by her throaty laugh. "We'll have to stop meeting like that Sal, I'm going to have trouble walking for at least a week."

Eden laughed into the receiver.

Rico felt like his blood was boiling.

She was enjoying her moment. Let her have it—it wouldn't last. A cold stillness washed over him and as she said her goodbyes to her new lover he stepped into the shadows of her living room and waited in the dark.

Eden couldn't wait to get into bed. She was tired and sure that after her visit with Sal today she would be able to get at least a couple hours of real sleep—it had eluded her for days now.

As she hobbled around her bathroom getting ready for bed she felt optimistic for the first time in what felt like forever. Sal had managed to give her at least a little bit of hope that she and Rico would be able to close the gap that had widened between them in time. She would wait if she had to. She was sure that she loved him that much.

Eden stepped out of the shower and dried off quickly before pulling on fresh panties and a thin cami top. Her plump pillows and cool sheets were calling to her. She braced her hip against the sink so she could take the weight off her still throbbing ankle and brushed her teeth and tongue. After using facial toner she leaned in to splash cool water on her tingling face and neck. Pulling the towel off the holder she dried off and looked at her reflection in the mirror. She gasped when it was Rico's image that was reflected back from directly behind hers.

"You country folk ought to learn to lock your doors," he drawled sarcastically and smiled his most sensual to her reflection. He moved up behind her and wrapped his strong arms around her middle pressing the length of his full erection into the softness of her bottom as he leaned in to nibble at the side of her neck. "You smell like heaven."

Eden didn't move—she wasn't even sure she was breathing. She stood stiff and unyielding as his hands played on her skin. His smile and demeanor were warm and inviting, but there was no mistaking the emptiness in his eyes. He looked pale and haggard, and dangerous.

"Rico, what's happened?" She asked in tremulous tones. "Why are you here?"

He continued to nuzzle her as he answered. "I've missed you," he said against the dewy skin of her neck. His full lips played back and forth between her earlobe and the tender skin beneath it, drugging her senses. "Haven't you missed me?"

"Yes," she whispered back, her heart aching with the pain of just how much she had.

"Little liar." He slid his hands suggestively down her abdomen and over the soft womanly mound of her pubis." Who's been sleeping in my bed Eden?" His laugh sounded bitter.

"What do you mean? No one's been—"

"Is that why you bathed? Have you been a dirty girl?" His playful tone belied the steel beneath the thin veneer or friendliness, but he cut her off before she could question his meaning again.

"Well, I'm here now Eden. Show me how much you've missed me." His hands worked their way up to her breasts under the thin fabric of her top, kneading the full firm mounds before tugging lightly on her hardened nipples.

Rico felt rewarded when she arched against him as he played his sensual game. He'd have everything he wanted from her and more before he was through. Then he'd walk away without looking back. He rolled the buds of her nipples firmly between his fingers and ground his cock into the panty-clad cheeks of her ass.

The thought of Sal touching her in the same way flashed in his mind and he pushed it away quickly before he lost his tenuous control over his anger and jealousy. *How could he have been so wrong about Eden?*

God he was exhausted, but he couldn't sleep, not until he finished what was between them for good. He would leave her feeling just as used as he now felt.

Eden probed the reflection of his hard eyes with her own. Something was wrong. The alarm bells chimed a warning in her head, but her heart ached to comfort him, to offer him her love and support, to help chase away the demons in his soul.

Eden turned around in his arms and offered him all she could of herself. Maybe, just maybe she could love him enough to convince him that she only cared about the man he was now. She arched into his broad chest, rubbing her breasts against him before leaning in to kiss him.

Rico groaned and took the kiss deeper. He needed to have this for a lifetime, but he'd only have these last few moments. He pulled her to him, molding her soft body to fit the contours of his own hard frame. He lifted her so that she was sitting on the edge of the sink top and moved closer pressing himself in between her legs as he crushed her upper body into his. He kissed and nipped at her face and neck as his fingers sought and found the moist crotch of her panties. He rubbed her pussy through the damp fabric and was rewarded with her deep moan of pleasure as she spread her creamy thighs further apart for him. Her hands pulled at his back and head trying to get him closer. The flames built quickly scorching them both with their sensual heat.

After long minutes Rico pushed aside the sopping cloth and entered her with his fingers. With the first two in her pussy, his cum-lubed pinky into her anus, and he used the rough pad of his thumb to tap on the swollen bud of her clitoris. He pumped his hand in and out of her body hard and fast as he watched the emotions play on her face. Her head had fallen back and her eyes were closed. Her long wet hair draped down her back and curled around his arm where it supported her position on the sink top—she was glorious. At that moment he loved her more than he had ever loved anyone in his life, more than he had ever imagined it was possible to love. "I'm crazy for the smell of you Eden. That's how I knew you were masturbating in your truck the day you went off the road. I could smell your cunt when I opened the door. You almost killed me that

day. I almost wish you had," he finished in a whisper. She was nearing her climax fast, faster than he intended. He slowed the pace of his hand and finally stopped.

"No! God, No, Rico don't stop!" Eden protested vainly as Rico picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. Her body throbbed and ached for release. What did he mean he'd wished he had died? She opened her mouth to ask him but he cut her words off with his own.

"You like to be carried don't you?" He said. He placed her on her feet when he reached the side of her bed. He noted her grimace of discomfort in passing, but didn't give it much thought as he pushed her down to her knees. "I want your mouth on me, like mine feasted on you in our room at the winery," he said in that same quiet, steeledged tone that she knew should frighten her. It was the same tone he used with her at the courthouse a few days ago.

She watched from her position on the floor as Rico freed his turgid member from the restriction of his pants and when he reached for her head she was already moving forward to take his cock into her mouth.

His salty flavor danced on her tongue as she lapped at the dripping tip of him. He smelled of soap and a spicy musk and a deeper more exotic scent that was all male, all Rico. She felt starved for his love and willing to prove her feelings for him to help bridge the distance between them. Bobbing and slurping she brought him higher, reawakening her own voracious desire for climax. She reached down to touch her own body, she was so close, so desperate for relief from the burning need that he'd built between her legs.

"No Eden, "He hoarse voice commanded, "Touch me, not you." He had given her everything the first time they made love, and now he wanted some part of himself back.

He smiled again, that wicked sexy smile of his, as she groaned in frustration at having to wait. He watched her pale head slide back and forth with each stroke of his taut flesh and tried to block out his rising emotions. Rico tried to measure out his breathing to concentrate on something other than the pain and pleasure of loving her.

Eden continued to watch him warily as she deep-throated his erection. She could feel how tense he was, how much he needed this, but his emotional distance pulled at her. This was clearly not lovemaking to the man who stood before her—it was sex. His words echoed in her head, "Sex is all I have to offer you Eden, it's all you'll ever get from me, and if you thought there was more here than that you were mistaken." She started to pull herself away from him.

She had to figure out what was wrong before it was too late.

The moist, slurping sounds and view of his thick cock sliding in and out of her luscious, wet mouth nearly pushed him over the top. Mercifully she stopped before he lost his load on her lovely face.

Reaching down he pulled her up and onto her knees on the bed. Pulling her hips to him he pushed her panties aside and entered her swiftly, harshly, from behind and began to pump into her fast and hard. When Eden protested his rough treatment and

tried to pull away he buried his fist in her hair and held her back against his pounding hips. "No so fast little girl. I'll let you go when I'm finished with you."

"Rico please!"

He heard the bewilderment and emotional anguish in her voice and he ignored it, and pushed her head down to the mattress so he could thrust deeper. He was hitting her cervix, he could feel the return pressure each time he slammed into her warm recesses, and he knew he must be hurting her—the knowledge of that tore at his heart but he didn't stop, she never asked him to stop.

He pumped into her for long moments before pulling out and rolling her onto her back. He wanted to see her face. He wanted to know what this cost her. He already knew what it was costing himself.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked. Her voice drenched with grief and confusion. She reached up to him crying and tried to gather him into her arms as he took her roughly without caring about her discomfort or pleasure. He reared back and she was only able to capture his face in her hands. Green eyes implored him silently to think about what he was doing to her, to them—he ignored their plea.

"I love you so much." Her whispered words sounded loud in the quiet room.

Once, twice, three more hard thrusts and he climaxed silently inside of her, pumping his hot semen deep into the waiting vessel of her body. He wanted to weep, but he didn't, he closed off the warmth in his heart to the woman he loved. The woman who had betrayed him just a few hours ago and now welcomed him back to share her body. What kind of a cold calculating bitch would do something like that to someone she professed to love?

Eden pulled away from Rico and scrambled to the other side of the bed as he moved off of her. She was openly crying as she curled herself into a ball at the head of the bed and glared at him from across the expanse of mattress. Rico saw shock and terrible pain in her eyes and he smiled his most sensual smile at her as he zipped up his pants, noting but not reacting to the thin staining of blood that covered the bulbous end of his cock. He pulled a roll of cash from his front pocket and peeled off several hundred dollar bills one by one and tossed them onto the bed.

"Tell Sal I said thanks for the loan, it wasn't the best fuck I've ever had but it scratched my itch."

Eden launched herself from the bed and came at him. He knew she was going to hit him, he could have stopped her if he wanted to, but he never even tried. He welcomed her anger and the stinging pain. It would be a sharp reminder that he was human, though nothing could have felt further from the truth at that moment.

She slapped him hard across the face and stepped back raising her chin defiantly. Rico swiped his hand at the thin trickle of blood that oozed from his torn lip and smiled at her again. "I hate you too honey," he said and he turned and walked out the door.

Eden stood her ground listening for the sounds of his car leaving. *Hurry Rico*, she thought to herself. *Hurry!* She couldn't hold back the sobs that were building in her chest for much longer. As soon as the purr of the Jaguar's powerful engine began to fade off in the distance she crumpled to the floor in a sobbing, shaking heap.

Chapter Eleven

It seemed fitting that it was raining the morning of Mr. Farley's funeral. Eden struggled to pull herself up off the hard floor where she had spent the night either crying or rocking in an emotional daze. Her whole body felt heavy and hurt, like her heart. She ached from the tips of her fingernails to the very core of her womb.

She didn't want to believe that she'd been wrong about Rico all along, but the facts were obvious—he'd hurt her intentionally. He made it clear that he was extracting his revenge for some perceived insult, but she just couldn't imagine what he thought she had done to him. No matter what he believed his behavior was unforgivable. Nothing could have warranted his humiliation of her, she told herself. Nothing she could have done would have hurt him that much.

Her ankle was still quite swollen and now it sported a deep red and purple hue as well. Eden sighed and hoped she'd be able to find a pair of shoes in her closet that she'd be able to get on her edematous foot. Hobbling to the bathroom she forced herself to shower and get dressed.

She waited in her car until the church service was over. She wasn't a relative or a friend socially so she wasn't sure that she'd be welcomed inside the upscale place of worship. Still her heart ached for the loss of Mr. Farley's warmth and friendliness. She knew that he and Sarah had been good friends and she told herself she was there on Sarah's behalf too.

She missed Sarah so much. It seemed at that moment that almost everyone she loved had been pulled away from her without warning. She loved the Gonzales family too, but they were part of a closed circle that she would always view from the outside. Her loneliness felt overwhelming and she reached up to brush away the tears that silently fell from her eyes.

When the arched doors opened and the building began to empty Eden started her truck and waited for the cars to fill in preparation for the drive to the Farley's family plot. Susan Farley came out of the church flanked, but not supported, on two sides by tall urbane-looking men. She was as regal in mourning as she was every other day of the year. Her elegant black clothing looked tailor-made. If it weren't for the color of them and the setting she could have been dressed for an evening of dinner and dancing at the local country club. Her face still wore the typical pinched and unsatisfied expression it always did. Acutely reminding Eden of the sunny disposition of her late sire, and of how much she'd miss their banter at the fruit stand.

Her heart lurched in her chest the moment she saw Rico. He exited the vestibule and stood on the top landing. He waited there while the casket was moved down the steep flight of marble stairs to the nearby hearse. His expensive clothing fit in with that of the other wealthy mourners but that's where the similarity ended. His black suit and overcoat highlighted his devilish good looks and confident bearing. His virility, height and boldness prevented him from blending in. He was scanning the crowd while he waited in the drizzling rain. His gaze landed on her truck, and then on her, and she felt the electric sizzle of his anger from across the distance. "I hate you too, honey," his words reverberated in her mind. What could she have done to make him so angry with her that he would feel hatred? Eden tipped her chin outward in defiance and shifted her eyes to watch the loading of the casket. Fuck him. She had every right to be there and she wouldn't let him browbeat her into leaving. Invited or not she would stand in prayer for her friend at his graveside in repayment of his reliable kindness.

"Tell Sal I said thanks for the loan, it wasn't the best fuck I've ever had but it scratched my itch." He had said the words with a chilling coldness that still tore at Eden's soul. Her head felt foggy with fatigue and grief. What did Sal have to do with Rico's terrible behavior toward her? Certainly he couldn't believe she was having an affair with Sal? She could feel the tears pressing from behind her eyes and she blinked several times to keep them at bay. She couldn't think about all this now. She had to get through the next hour, and then she could go home and cry in the privacy of Sarah's house.

She followed the procession to the burial site, but kept her truck back away from the line of sleek black sedans. Once again Eden felt as unrefined as a country girl at the Queen's ball and ensconced in her dented old farm truck she felt sure she looked the part too.

Rico watched Eden as she approached the grave from behind his hooded gaze. She was limping and her right foot was obviously swollen and bruised where it puffed over the top of her sensible shoes. She looked pale and tired, and very vulnerable. Her hair was pulled back in a severe bun and her dark clothing hung on her as lifeless and listless as their wearer. There was no makeup on her drawn face—nothing to cover up her red and swollen eyes. She was as ethereal and untouchable as a ghost, and he steeled himself to remain expressionless in the face of such obvious misery. Once again someone she cared about was lost to her, and once again she had to stand alone in her grief.

He resisted the urge to reach up and rub the center of his chest to relieve the ache that seemed to have permanently settled there, so he balled his hands into fists at his side instead. He wondered briefly if she was wearing the same mourning clothes that she had worn for her Aunt Sarah's funeral.

She stopped at the edge of the group of mourners with her eyes downcast. It was then that he realized she was trying not to look at him. The two single roses in her hands shivered in the misty rain, as did the slender frame of their bearer—across the space between them he could see that she was trembling.

Fucking Adriano! Where was he now when Eden needed someone to comfort her? He felt the hard wall of his anger with Eden crack a little as he watched her lips move

silently in prayer, and he hurried to mentally shore up his fortress but the effort was useless. He reminded himself of her betrayal with his best friend. He told himself that he didn't care how she was faring today in the aftermath of his late night visit to her bedroom, but it was just a lie.

He cared.

All around him he could hear the sniffing and soft sobbing of mourners. It seemed that James was well loved by friends and relatives alike. Those relatives watched Rico now with barely veiled hostility. It was obvious there would be no fatted calf slaughtered for the homecoming of this prodigal son.

The minister began to talk about family, but Rico wasn't really listening to the man's monosyllabic homily because Eden had finally looked at him. Her eyes met his only briefly across the grassy space between them before looking away, but he caught his breath at what was lurking in their depths. Rico had seen a lot of despair in his thirty-two years but never had he witness such gut-wrenching hopelessness.

Then all hell broke loose.

Susan took exception to the minister's nod to Rico in acknowledgment of his newly divulged status as Farley's only son and she became hysterical. She screamed to Rico and the crowd of mourners that he wasn't any relation to her at all, that he was in fact a murderer, and that he would pay for killing her father. Rico stood silently while the woman raged, his insolent façade dropping neatly into place as always.

Susan's screeching tirade lasted several minutes before she yielded to the insistent pressure of her escorts and stomped off to her car, her entourage in her wake. The rest of the crowd took their cue and hastily left the casket and the service to the minister and Rico.

The graveside service was a shortened affair. Rico stood staring at the single red rose lying on the edge of the casket and mourned the loss of his heart as the minister hurried to finish and escape the awkward situation.

The unwanted picture of Eden's blood painting the tip of his spent cock flashed in his mind and with it the cold tentacles of electric pain spread outward from deep within his chest to the outermost layers of his skin. He'd hurt her physically as well as emotionally last night. His inner eyesight was filled with the vision of her crying face. Even as he used her body in the most callous of ways she had reached up to hold him, offering comfort and solace when he deserved them the least. His heart squeezed painfully in his chest at the memory of her unselfishness even when confronted with his brutality. She hadn't railed at him, or fought to escape, she hadn't even asked him to stop as he went on, determined to hurt her. She had held his face and told him how much she loved him. He couldn't forgive her unfaithfulness no matter how much he loved her, but he'd never be able to forgive himself for what he'd done to her in anger either. Rico resisted the urge to wrap his arms around himself. He felt lost in his own grief and shame.

Eden knelt on the cold rain-drenched earth next to Sarah's headstone and placed the rose she carried on to the bottom plate of the pale pink granite. The heavy sodden fabric of her skirt clung to her legs and chilled her to the point of shivering, but Eden's grief had carried her beyond concern. She reached out and traced the letters of Sarah's name with trembling fingers and wept for her loss of the one person who always loved her unconditionally. Sarah was the *only* one who'd never abandoned her when she was most in need and Eden was desperate for the warmth of her embrace now.

She missed her aunt more than words or thoughts could ever express.

Deep wrenching sobs erupted up and out of her like a freezing geyser. Her body shaking with the release of so much restrained despair and loneliness. Wrapping her arms around her middle she rocked back and forth several times on the fulcrum of her knees before curling over and laying her forehead on bottom of the smooth wet headstone.

The cold hardness of the granite echoed the hardness of Rico's heart. He had crushed her soft welcoming one as easily as a blossom under his booted heel. Her body still bled from his sexual assault and throbbed in pain. He punished her for reasons known only to himself. He pushed her away from him under the guise of protecting her from his past, when it was the man he was now that caused her the greatest harm.

She hated him for his brutal behavior, hated him for not loving her the way she loved him, and most of all she hated him for his unwarranted mistrust.

The chill of the wet earth settled into her as she lay in a heap on top of Sarah's grave in soaking clothes. She tangled her fingers into the grass and sobbed out her hurt and pain and anger. She just couldn't hold it in another second.

Then he was there.

Strong male hands lifted her from her crouched position on the cold ground and helped her to stand. Eden could feel the solid warmth of his chest as he held her back against him and spoke softly into her ear.

"Come on Eden," Rico told her, "I'm going to take you home now, honey."

She pulled away sharply shoving at his body like a wild thing until he released her "Don't touch me!" She screamed the words into his handsome face with every last bit of strength she possessed. "Don't you *ever* touch me again!" She spun on her heel and cried out in pain when she wrenched her injured ankle while moving away from him.

Rico took a step toward her wanting to go to her aid, but stopped when he saw her warning glare. Her wide green eyes met his directly and the agony he saw in their depths stabbed at his resolve to hold his own heart away from her. She was nearing the point of hysteria and he knew that his unwelcome touch would send her over the edge. "Eden—" he began, deliberately keeping his voice low and soothing.

"No!" She cut him off pointing her shaking finger at his broad chest. "You claim to want to protect me from the man you were," she told him in a hoarse and shrilly voice, "but it's the man you *are* that I need protection from. The old Rico couldn't be nearly as hateful as you are! You have hurt me in ways that I didn't even know were possible, in

ways I never imagined that anyone could." Her final words came out in low whisper. Rico had to lean forward slightly to hear them through the misty rain that shrouded them in the now deserted graveyard. "Did you love me even a little Rico? When we made love that first time was it *really love* that I saw in your eyes?"

Her words washed over him and penetrated the last of his defenses. He stood as hard and unmoving as the granite statues surrounding them in the mist. His stiff knees were locked to keep him from falling to the ground at her feet, his large hands were balled into fists to keep them from reaching out for her, and his jaw and eyes clenched tightly closed to keep his own tears at bay. Did he love her just a little? God how he wished it was only a little – if it had been he'd be able to breathe just then.

He nodded silently.

"Love without trust is meaningless and nothing more than personal vanity." Eden turned and hobbled off toward her old farm truck. She never looked back.

Rico stepped out of the District Attorney's office a free man. The local gumshoes had received a tip about a security system Farley had recently installed in his home. Complete with small well-hidden cameras, it had copied its logs directly to a compact disc for long term storage. The murderer had been caught. In their haste to apologize for originally missing their presence they agreed to drop the resisting arrest charges too.

His half sister Susan would be spending the rest of her life in jail. Apparently she had flown into a rage when her father told her about Rico and she had strangled her elderly parent from behind while he sat in his chair. Her full confession was already signed and delivered to the court. It would spare her the death penalty and the rest of James' relatives the brunt of the media circus.

Still, there were so many unanswered questions left. Rico knew that most would probably never be cleared up. As his eyes adjusted to the brightness of the hallway he made a mental note to pay a visit to his father's attorney to see if the man could help to fill in any of the remaining blanks. It was time to get on with his life.

Farley had left him more than enough money to live out the rest of his days in luxury even if he never worked another minute. He knew that money didn't buy anything even remotely close to happiness, but he didn't want happiness anymore. He just wanted peace—and it felt hard to believe he'd ever find it again.

Rico's self-reflection was interrupted by the bone-jarring backslap of Salvatore Adriano. "Shit man I thought they were going to keep you in there all fucking day! I'm starved, know of any good restaurants nearby?" Sal winked outrageously at Rico as he wrapped his big arm around his friend's shoulder. His surprise was evident when Rico suddenly pulled away. "What? Don't tell me they exchanged your passport for your sense of humor?" Sal tried to lighten the mood but it was a futile attempt. Rico ignored him.

Rico and Phillip Davis exchanged parting words and handshakes. Rico watched his lawyer head off to a meeting... *Sal's lawyer* he corrected himself silently. It seemed that Sal had a piece of everything important in his life—everything except the restaurant.

Rico turned on his heel and headed for the door too.

"Rico wait!" Sal jogged to catch up as Rico plowed through the double glass doors and into the parking lot, fishing the Jaguar's key out of his pocket as he went. "Wait!" Sal repeated, grabbing Rico's arm just as the reached the low black car. "What the fuck's wrong with you—"

Rico punched him in the face.

The punch wasn't hard enough to do much damage and Sal shook his head and taunted Rico dangerously. "You must be getting weak in your old age Rico. Didn't the last guy you punched in the face die?" Rico glared at Sal. "Come on don't you have anything more than that pitiful little tap on the cheek?"

Rico turned his back to Sal and worked to unlock the driver's side door. When he reached down to pull open the door Sal quickly pushed it shut again and pinned Rico's body up against the car. Rico struggled against him, but the mass of his bulky friend was impossible to move. As soon as he stopped swearing and stilled Sal's quiet serious voice floated to him from close behind. "I'm not going to let you get in your car and drive off until you tell me what the fuck is wrong with you buddy."

"You're what's fucking wrong with me, *buddy*." Rico's sarcastic reply was pitched menacingly low, "I know what you and Eden have been up to behind my back."

Sal released him and Rico turned and stepped in close to Sal's face in a show of aggression.

"If you know what we have been up to," Sal warned, "then it seems to me that you owe us both a debt of gratitude, not a bitch-slap in the face."

Rico's expression went from incredulous to fury filled within the blink of an eye, but he never raised his steely soft voice. "Let's see if I've got this straight. You want me to thank you for fucking the woman I love?"

"What the Christ are you talking about?" Sal stared at Rico in undisguised disbelief. "Eden loves you. There's isn't anything between us but a friendship based on our loyalty to you."

Rico laughed out loud. "Loyalty? I saw you...in the garden. I saw you carrying her into the house and I heard her on the phone with you later when she got home." The words rushed out of Rico through his clenched teeth. There were few things that angered him more than being lied to, but Sal truly looked confused.

Recognition dawned in Sal's quick blue eyes. "You asshole, what you saw was me carrying Eden into the house after she injured her ankle. She lost her footing in her excitement over the possibility of having information that could win your freedom—which it has by the way. It was Eden who knew about Farley's security cameras. She called me on the phone to tell me the name of the company he used to have them installed. I didn't want to tell you about it until after we knew for sure if it would help

your case. If it wasn't for Eden, you shithead, you'd still be waiting for the date of your lethal injection."

"There was nothing going on between you two?" Rico stumbled through the words of his question like a drunken fool. While memories of Eden limping the night he'd used her and the next day at the gravesite, then a picture of her swollen and purple ankle flooded his mind.

"How could you think that?" Sal questioned him softly. "You're like a brother to me and Eden doesn't have any room in her heart for any other man."

Rico felt like he'd been sucker-punched in the gut, he bent from the waist and worked to keep himself standing. Recollections of Eden crying and telling him she loved him as he slammed his body into hers punishing her brutally for a betrayal that never happened—it all seemed as fresh as a moment ago. Why are you doing this she'd asked him. Please Rico, she'd begged as he humiliated her to exact revenge for her nonexistent crime. He suddenly felt weak all over and so tired.

"You all right? You're white as a sheet," Sal said.

Rico gave up trying to stand and leaned back, sliding down to sit on the concrete of the parking lot beside the unyielding metal skin of his car. His knees drawn up, his arms resting there, he hung his head and tried to breathe through the emotional pain as memory after memory came flooding back to him. Eden's eyes haunted him, frightened yet hopeful, then angry and full of pain, him throwing hundred dollar bills on her bed. *I hate you too*, he'd told her.

Sal squatted down next to his friend, his words and expression filled with concern, "Rico, what's happened? Tell me what's happened?"

"Oh God, I've hurt her so much," Rico whispered. The softly spoken words were saturated with his grief and shame. "She was right. It wasn't the man I was she needed protection from, it's the man I am now."

Chapter Twelve

Eden swirled her knife through the deep, navy blue oil paint and then into the puddle of white and began to blend the colors on her palate.

It was a warm and sunny day and Easton's Beach was crowded with visitors.

Newport Rhode Island had been a seasonal tourist playground for the wealthy for decades, but these days even middle-class travelers could afford to stake out a sandy spot for a few days of fun.

The sun worshipers were as bright and colorful as the horses on the nearby vintage carousel and just as noisy. Small children ran back and forth in the foamy surf as sleepy parents watched after them, and hungry teens gobbled up icy lemonade, steamed hot dogs, ice cream and cotton candy as they flirted with their peers all along the boardwalk. Beach umbrellas, vibrant towels and bobbing heads all combined to remind Eden of a tan carpet littered with a layer of plump coconut scented jelly beans, but her canvas held none of the cheery promise of their summer colors.

She blended the blue and white into a steely gray and cut the paint onto the toothy canvas with bold sharp strokes. In her mind, and in her painting, dark clouds gathered over the icy surf and frozen sand of a New England winter's day at the beach.

Cutting into the crimson red and black she loaded her knife again with a long thin roll of paint and scraped out the lines of an abandoned dinghy left lost and forgotten at the edge of the violent surf. Dipping into the paint again, she could almost feel the frigid winds and falling sleet as she highlighted the fragile mooring rope and the rim of the vessel's body with white.

Using her fan brush she blurred the edges of every new addition. It gave the painting a more realistic blustery feel. The work was bleak and austere, but not a true reflection of what she felt inside herself. The raging storm in her painting was pale in comparison to the tempest roiling in her own heart. Two weeks just wasn't enough time to soothe the ache in her breast or lessen the heavy feeling of loss that weighed her down like a large rusty anchor.

When she'd left Rico standing alone in the rain near Sarah's grave she had rushed straight home to pack enough of her belongings for an extended stay here on Aquidneck Island. She was long past admitting that she'd run away—she had. She hadn't thought, she'd just stowed away in her little cottage near the ocean and wallowed in her hurt and self-pity. Her heart still felt battered and bruised, and she had to fight against the emotional waves of tears pressing from behind her eyes throughout every single day. Maybe if she hadn't asked if he'd ever loved her the agony of being without him would have been lessened. Eden wasn't sure. It both helped and hurt her to know he had.

Her curiosity tore at her heart with the desire to know if anything had come of the possibility of a security camera offering evidence to help in Rico's defense. She prayed it had. Getting on with her own life wasn't going to be easy, but she hoped for the best possible outcome for his. In the past couple of weeks she'd come to a realization about what brought her here to begin with. This wasn't a permanent hiding spot for her and it shouldn't, it couldn't, become a place of sanctuary from the turmoil of life. She had come to Newport to regain a sense of herself and to remember her emotional roots, but she had also come for another reason—to sell her cottage and ship the rest of her belongings back to the farm. Glen Ellen, and the people who lived there were her future, Newport was her past. It was time to make Sarah's home her own.

More than vegetables and flowers grew at Eden's Garden. Love and belonging grew there too, with memories both happy and sad. She could only become fully invested in where her life was in the present by leaving where she used to be in the past. She wasn't oblivious to the parallel between Rico's internal struggle and her own. She hoped for his sake that he would be able to see that his future also depended on letting go of what was behind him—even if that meant letting go of her.

Selling the property had been a snap. A retired couple had viewed it in the same afternoon it had gone on the market, and a bidding war had ensued between them and an out-of-state party who wanted it sight unseen. All property on the island sold at a premium, but beachfront property commanded a king's ransom and was an investment that would only increase in value over time. Eden's realtor had been ecstatic over the final sale price the tug-of-war had caused. The outside buyer had won the day and made payment in full the very next. Eden had enough money to meet the farm's obligations for at least a couple of years not including any incoming profit. She smiled to herself as she let the feeling of financial security wash over her.

It saddened her to leave, and at first it seemed that she would have to say her goodbyes hastily because of the fast sale. Luckily the new owner had assured Eden's realtor that he was in no hurry to take possession of the home and that she could have as much time as she needed to move out. What a relief that had been. She knew she was dragging her feet, but she wanted to feel stronger emotionally before returning to Glen Ellen. Hector told her that Miami West was still buying their produce from her and the idea of facing Rico this soon was just too much.

Eden shifted her feet in the hot sand and looked over her painting with a critical eye. She wanted to get all the details just right. She wanted to absorb every little thing about this place to be able to call upon them in the recesses of her mind in years to come. Eden knew that once she left Newport behind coming back as a visitor would never recapture the way her connection to it pulsed through her veins now.

Eden added a few more touches of frosty white to the tips of the sea grass detailing the sand dunes in the foreground. Though her feet stood on Easton's, or First Beach, as it was known locally, her painting depicted the more rugged wildness of Sachuet's, or Second Beach. Then there was Third Beach, Navy Beach, Peabody's Beach and many others. Eden chuckled to herself. Not exactly the most creative names on the planet, but on an island with thirty-two miles of coastline she could see why the original founding islanders had run out of good names fast. The names didn't matter, Aquidneck Island boasted beautiful sandy beaches in both sunny and stormy weather and she was going to miss feeling connected to them in every season. One more dab of white and it was time to clean her brushes, pack up and head back to the cottage for a nap.

She hadn't been getting much sleep. Her dreams had left her feeling bereft each time she opened her eyes, but she needed to try. She couldn't help Rico find his way through the dark passages of his own heart, but she could take care of herself even if she didn't feel like it, and she was determined to do just that.

The cottage was much easier to find than he thought it would be. The small home was set among other similar cheery buildings on a crowded narrow street. Rico parked several houses away and walked to avoid being seen. It was early afternoon and the heat and humidity wrapped around him like a damp blanket. The tangy smell of the ocean seemed somehow comforting. Maybe it was because the nearness of the water brought home the knowledge that he was close to her now and he wouldn't be leaving without Eden. He knew he couldn't.

Her rental car was in the driveway and he smiled when he thought about how odd it must feel to her to drive a compact sedan instead of her dilapidated old pickup truck. He wondered if she missed the farm and her friends. It seemed too much to hope that she also missed him. It was beyond what he deserved—really anything from loathing upward was beyond what he deserved from her. For what seemed like the millionth time he tried to figure out someway to show her what was in his heart, and to find the words that could somehow express his shame and remorse for what he'd done. He knew they didn't exist.

Her tiny front yard was edged all around with overflowing beds of wild sea roses. Their bright magenta blossoms wiggled with the efforts of lumbering bumblebees as they scooted from flower to flower gathering pollen. It was an idyllic scene except where he would have expected the twittering of small songbirds he heard the raucous call of overhead seagulls as they dipped and climbed in the swirling thermals rising off the water's surface.

A pair of well-worn canvas sneakers sat abandoned by the front door, grains of sand still clung to the edges of the soles where the rubber wrapped up from the bottom. He smiled tenderly at their well-loved appearance.

Rico paused to look into the front windows but didn't see any signs of movement within the house. Small clean rooms half filled with packed boxes were testimony to Eden's preparations to leave. God he hoped she was coming back home—he just couldn't accept any other outcome.

He turned into the narrow alleyway beside the cottage and made his way to the back of the house.

The view was spectacular. The little cottage, and its neighbors, sat up on a small rise that overlooked the long stretch of sandy beach bordered by the blue-green Atlantic Ocean on one side, and rolling sand dunes on the other. Tall and thick, the sea grass and rose thickets grew in verdant patches lending color and wildness to the mounds of sand. The coolness of the fragrant ocean breeze helped to push away the humidity and heat and the sparkle of sunlight on the incoming waves made Rico flinch involuntarily from the glare. It was easy to see why Eden so loved this place. The sand was spotted with visitors but it wasn't nearly as crowded as the first beach he'd passed on his way to the cottage.

As he stood silently in the sunshine drinking in the view of Eden's paradise he heard his name called quietly, like a gentle moan on the soft breath of the wind. It came from inside of the house.

Eden tossed and turned in her sleep pushing at the thin sheet covering her. She felt warm and restless, the jumbled emotions corkscrewed around inside of her head as she dreamed.

She knew it was a dream because Rico was there. She kept getting glimpses of his reflection in the gilded mirror hovering magically before her eyes. Each time she saw him and turned around he was gone. She rolled to her back, fingers digging into the bottom sheet in her frustration. She called his name again as she turned to look back into the mirror and she again found his reflection there. He was smiling but his eyes held the same emptiness they had when he'd come up behind her at the farmhouse.

In the roller-coaster ride of her dream he stepped up behind her as he had that awful night two weeks earlier and slid his strong arms around her waist pulling her into the warmth and shelter of his big body. She watched his handsome face in the mirror trying to judge his mood. All the same warning bells clamored in her head to use caution. She ignored them as she had before. He was there, a thought that both frightened and soothed her.

In the vision of her dream his eyes changed to empty holes and his body cooled around her—he was a shell without a soul. Eden choked back a scream and tried to pull away from the terrifying vision of his image. She couldn't, when she looked again into the mirror his image was gone but she could still feel his cold embrace wrapped like steel around her overheated body.

She called him again and again. She used all her strength to call his name but it came only in soft plaintive tones, hanging unanswered in the coldness of her dream world. Her heart yearned to bind him to her, but he had become just the impression of a memory. She felt the warmth of her tears on her face. The unchecked droplets slid down the sides of her temples and into her hair. "Please!" She begged him in her sleep. "Please Rico."

Rico stood close to the sliding glass door just outside of Eden's bedroom, the palm of one hand pressed flat against the screen covered glass of the partially opened door, his other hand on the brittle cedar shake siding of the cottage. He rested his forehead against the pliable metal screening and watched her while she slept. Tenderness washed over him at the sight of her in repose.

She was restless with her dreams and pushed the sheet off her body kicking it down her long shapely legs as she rolled onto her back. Her long pale hair fanned out over the pillowcase and like her plain, white cotton bra and panties it gleamed in the sunwashed room.

As he watched her she fisted her hands and pulled at the bottom sheet arching her chest and raising her back off the bed in a naturally sensuous and feminine pose that brought his cock from flaccid to rock hard in the blink of an eye. His hungry gaze traveled from the twin slashes of her thin collarbones, down and over the round ripe globes of her full breasts to her narrow waist. He could see the shadow of her tawny pubic hair under the thin fabric of her panties. His eyes caressed her where her thighs met her body and he almost groaned out loud with the desire to touch her with his hands, to again make her wet and ready for him. She was so lovely, so perfect for him. He wanted to lose himself in her, to get pulled under by the waves of his desire for her, and never resurface. More than just her physical beauty called to him. Her warmth and loyalty, her intelligence and sense of fun all combined into the perfect lush package. Eden was as abundant as a summer garden brimming with bountiful gifts – she was his garden, his gift. She had already changed his life for the better though he hadn't done anything but diminish hers. He would spend the rest of his life trying to make up for that if he could convince her to let him try.

She called his name again as she slept, a gut-wrenching appeal for him to help her, with what he didn't know, but apparently hurting her while she was awake wasn't enough, he was also tormenting her in her dreams as well. The knowledge of that pierced his heart with guilty agony that was actually physical.

He fought the desire to bang on the door to wake her, or better yet to break the fucking thing down and rush in to give her the comfort of his arms, but he didn't know that she would welcome him or if his presence would frighten her. Still, he had to offer her something. "Shhh baby," Rico crooned softly. "I'm here with you. Sleep now."

Eden swallowed like her throat was parched and she nodded before rolling onto her stomach and settling back into deep slumber.

Rico felt his body stir at the sight of her delectable bottom and long elegant back. He berated himself silently, *lecherous fool*! She needed comfort and safety, and mostly she needed to be able to trust him. He was determined to control his sexual desires for her long enough to prove he could give her all that she needed and more.

Rico moved to the sidewall of the cottage and slid down to sit with his back against the building. She needed to sleep and he would wait until the time was right to approach her. For now just being nearby was enough. Rico closed his eyes and let the ocean breeze and warmth of the sun settle over him like nature's blanket, and he slept too.

Chapter Thirteen

Rico awoke a long time later. He wasn't sure how long he slept there in her tiny garden propped up by the wall of the small cottage, but the bright sunshine of the day had passed into the cooler, longer shadows of late afternoon. He stood and stretched to remove some of the stiffness from his cramped muscles. He felt convinced that there was some small miracle surrounding Eden like an aura. It seemed that the only time he ever felt like he really rested was when he slept while she was nearby.

He moved around to the back of the house again and noticed that the sliding door was pulled closed. Peering through the glass he saw that the bed just beyond was also empty. He tested the door and found it was unlocked.

"Eden?" He called out to her as he entered. It was time to get on with why he'd come. He made his way into her tiny room and listened to the silence of the house. "Eden, are you here?" The small rooms were all painted in soft, subtle shades of coastal colors. Her tiny bathroom and bedroom sported pale blue, while the living room and spare bedroom were dressed in a light mint green, everything was trimmed in white. The birch flooring and sand-tan scatter rugs echoed the sandy dunes on the long stretch of beach below. It was a place filled with summery lightness and a homey feel. Rico had to do some whirlwind bidding to buy this place, and his success meant that even if he lost Eden, he'd have a place to come to just to feel her presence, but if he were very lucky they would have many glorious vacations here together instead.

Wandering from room to room proved the building empty. The rental car was still in the yard.

Rico paused to empty his bladder and wash up. As he brought the small hand towel to his face he was surrounded by her delicate womanly perfume. Never had such simple things stirred his heart in such a way—more evidence of the way she had changed him he guessed.

Rico made his way out to the backyard again. The beach was almost deserted in the cooling early evening. Those who remained were packing their coolers and children off to their vehicles—everyone, except for a solitary figure strolling along the edge of the surf. Her light blonde head was bent and her slight shoulders hunched under the weight of the world pressing down on her. Rico swallowed past the lump in his throat and reached for a peppermint candy from the front pocket of his jeans feeling anxious and afraid. There was no reason for her to forgive him, not that he deserved it anyway. He had to convince her to give him a chance to make up for his brutish behavior. He had to, but he had no idea how he would accomplish it.

Despite the growing chill of the evening air Eden could feel the heat radiating up from the soles of her sneakers. The sand seemed to be able to hold onto the heat for a really long time. Her heart was like the sand she supposed. It didn't want her to give up her love or her anger with Rico, because when she gave those things up she'd be moving on without him and heaven help her she wasn't sure she could.

She knew it was useless to try to dissect the pictures in her dreams, they weren't important. The feelings they brought about were and they were the keys to her working through the pain and confusion and getting on with her life.

Eden kicked off her shoes and tied the shoelaces to each other so she could carry them together. She made her way closer to the incoming surf and walked into the cold wet sand where it met the rhythmic rush and retreat of the blue-green Atlantic. She watched her feet as she walked slowly along, trying to concentrate on the small shells, bits of sea glass and polished stones that littered the beach. It worked to quiet her mind and the moments of peacefulness were most welcome in the recesses of her battered heart.

Each time she brought her foot down onto the packed surface of the saturated sand the water pushed out and left the impression of her narrow foot and toes. Barely did she raise her foot again and see the print before the next spreading layer of seawater slid in to erase it. Was it like that with people too? Did the mark she left on others only survive until the next wave of emotion for someone else came along and erased the feelings of the past? She hoped not. Without surviving family of her own she wanted to believe that there were those in this world who would want to remember her, who would love her enough to hold on to the positive impressions she left as she passed through their lives even if their time together was brief.

She continued forward to the rocky end of the beach, then cut inward toward the dunes and found a spot between two high mounds of sand. They frothed over with bright sea grass and thickets of wild roses that undulated in the light wind. Eden nestled herself in the small sandy clearing between them. They provided the perfect privacy from anyone left on the populated side of the beach and they blocked the now chilling ocean breeze. Her shorts left her long legs unprotected so she pulled up her knees and wrapped her arms around them. With her chin on her knees she gazed out to sea and daydreamed.

Shorebirds danced nervously on the deserted beach as a vision of Rico came to her mind. He walked along the water's edge with his hands in his pockets. It was amazing that she remembered the grace of his movements so well. He seemed worried as he looked ahead and scanned the rocks of the point. Irritated terns, herons and gulls squawked their annoyance at having their late afternoon supper interrupted as they skittered away. Rico ignored them as he stopped and turned to scan the dunes. When his dark eyes collided with hers Eden felt her heart stop. It was no sleepy daydream heading in her direction—it was enigmatic, determined flesh and blood.

He approached to within a few feet of her, his expression guarded, his eyes never leaving her face. As he towered above her she had to fight the desire to scoot backward in the sand. He stood between her and the beach, there was no way to get away even if she wanted to run.

She looked pale and afraid and he noted the way her eyes kept darting around him trying to judge if there was enough room to escape. Rico dropped to his knees in front of her and buried his fingers in the sand to keep from reaching out. "Eden?" He spoke quietly to help her relax. "Are you all right?"

"Why are you here?" Her voice came out in the same whisper that she always used when she was hurting, and it served to peel a few more shreds off his already bloody heart. He hated that his presence distressed her so much.

"To apologize to you," he said softly, "to make amends."

She laughed out loud. Her reaction, brittle and sarcastic, held not one trace of mirth. "You want forgiveness? Try going to confession."

She started to rise from her seated position, but stopped when Rico held out a hand gesturing for her to wait. "I know you're afraid of -"

"I'm not afraid of you Rico. That's your fantasy. I'm getting on with my life so —" $\,$

"I love you Eden," he said.

The insistent tone of his voice and his determined expression weren't lost on her. She scrutinized his eyes and saw that what he said was true, there was pain and caring in their depths, but it didn't erase the fear of letting him near her heart to hurt her again. "And just look where that got me last time," she whispered.

"I'm so sorry, baby," Rico fought back his feelings of panic. "I know how much I hurt you and if I knew the words that would somehow make this all right again believe me I'd use them." He raked his hand through his hair in agitation. "I know you weren't having an affair with Sal, I know it was my own mistrust. The thing is if it had been any other woman I wouldn't have cared—but you aren't just any woman, you're the one who owns my heart." Rico paused and searched Eden's eyes looking for some sign that she still wanted him too, all he saw was her mistrust. "Nothing like that will ever happen again." He dug his fingers into the dry sand in discomposure. "I want your trust Eden, and I'll do everything I can to gain it back."

"I don't know if I can ever give that back to you," she said.

"You love me. I know you do," Rico told her. "Let me try. My life has been one failed moment after another and most of the time it didn't matter, but I can't fail at this! I won't fail us!" His voice climbed and tightened with his building fear of losing this fight. "I need you. Don't you see how much I need you in my life?" In his agitation Rico moved forward and pulled Eden toward him. His large hands moved gently up and down her arms and shoulders. "Please Eden. Let me show you who I really am!"

Eden could feel the way his big body trembled with emotion as he caressed her arms. His face was a stiff mask of pain and fear and her heart begged to reach out to him and offer comfort. She fought against her own anxiety for long moments while she looked into his eyes. What she found in their depths was desperation, shame and regret. He did nothing to cover his emotions from her, he was letting her see the real man, the

man he was now and her own heart, battered and bruised, opened like an early spring bloom to the man she loved.

She slid one pale, cool hand up and cupped his face relishing the scratchy feel of his heavy beard as he pressed his cheek into her palm. Green eyes misted with tears met remorse filled dark ones and acquiesced with a slow nod. "Show me," she said, and was rewarded by his sharp intake of breath. It sounded like he'd been holding it for a very long time.

Rico reached for Eden, determined to make up for all the pain and turmoil he'd left in his wake. Strong, gentle fingers brushed her hair back from her temples and caressed her face. Reaching behind her he freed her glorious mass of silky, moonbeam bright hair and swirled it around her narrow shoulders, leaning in he kissed her soft mouth.

Eden's world became the blurry and breathless space between them as he moved his big body closer. Her fear and pain flowed out and dissipated as his warm lips melded with her own. Tenderly they played upon hers, slowly he stirred her senses and feelings in an ever-building wave, and she held on tight to his wide shoulders as together they brought the kiss deeper.

Rico unhooked her bra through the thin fabric of her summer tank and pushed down the straps along with those of her tank top, his mouth and tongue licked and nipped the smooth skin of her face and neck as he moved down to her thin collarbones. Sliding his tongue along slowly as his large hands reached up to gently cup the underside of her swelling breasts he could feel her hands, light and gentle moving over the muscles of his back.

"Yes!" she whispered, her voice made husky and deep with the need that already pulsed through her, she was urging him foreword, asking for more.

He wanted to give her more, so much more. "I'm so sorry Eden," he murmured into the shell of her ear, "so damn sorry."

Rico told himself to go slow. He was already hard with need and eager to have her beneath him, but he wanted to show Eden how he cherished everything about her. He wanted this time to be perfect for her. He would give her everything in his heart and soul, all that he could, and he would pray that is was enough.

He leaned back to look lovingly at the bounty of her two full breasts, and he used his fingers to gently roll and tug on their delicate pink tips.

Eden threw her head back and moaned at the pleasure of his hands on her aching body as Rico molded the firm mounds against her ribcage. She thrust her breasts at him and he answered her silent request by bending low and suckling her. Opening his mouth wide he pulled as much as he could of her sweet flesh into the circle of his lips. He felt like a man starving as he moved from one breast to the other and back again.

The sun was setting behind him, and everywhere that his own shadow didn't block the light, Eden's naked skin was bathed in the deep glow of orange, purple and red. She wore the colors of the sunset like a painted butterfly as she writhed and moaned in his arms. Rico had never seen such natural beauty and the vision moved him to his very center.

In one swift motion he pulled her bra and tank top over her head and let them fall, abandoned in the sand behind him, but froze when Eden reached around him to remove his T-shirt too. He stilled as his knee-jerk reaction kicked in. He looked into her passion-heated gaze for a few short moments, and then he let go completely. His resistance to letting her into every corner of his past dissolved like salt in the ocean. The simple act of raising his arms for her to pull off and discard his shirt, loosened, then crumbled the last brick in his defensive wall.

Moving onto her knees Eden rubbed her face in the curly hair on his chest. God she loved the smell of him. Clean, musky and exotic they combined to stir her in the deepest places of her heart. She ran her tongue over the notch at his collarbone and she rubbed his turgid cock through the heavy fabric of his jeans, trailing her moist tongue down to the waistband. Then she began a slow ascent back up to find his sensitive places.

It was Rico's turn to arch toward Eden as she showed him first hand what his skillful lips and tongue had done to her body just moments before. He buried his hands in her hair and let her control the action as she sucked and nipped at his small dark areola and nipples. He burned with desire to be fully sheathed in the warmth and wetness of her, but he would let her guide them, as they made love there in the secluded nest of sand.

Eden pulled Rico forward onto his hands and knees and moved her body over his side and back as she peppered him with sweet, soft kisses. The silky weight of her breasts slid on his heated skin as she rubbed her cool body on the etched line drawings of his gang tattoos. It was a sensuous, erotic dance that that branded him with her love and understanding.

He held his breath again as she reached under him and unbuttoned his jeans, long fingers lingered at his waistband before pulling down the zipper and tugging his jeans off his hips and down around his knees. "Lie back for me," she told him.

The warm sand coated his naked back and the bare cheeks of his ass as Eden pulled off the rest of his clothes. She watched him for several minutes, as he lay fully erect, his cock dripping pre-cum in his excitement. Rico felt exposed and vulnerable as she sat half-dressed above him looking at his unclothed body with interest. He had to resist the desire to squirm under her intense scrutiny. She was teaching him a lesson about trust he realized. It would have to be something they shared together.

Eden watched Rico's body as his cock grew thicker still, it bobbed slightly as blood continued to engorge the stretching flesh and she licked her lips in anticipation of tasting him. He was lying still as she explored every inch of his naked body. She could see the light sheen, of nervous sweat covering him as he waited for her to look her fill. She didn't want any more walls between them, would knock them all down herself if she had too, she would have his trust if he also wanted hers.

She leaned in low and deep-throated his cock, slowly, very slowly. Sliding from tip to base, and back up again, glorified by Rico's increasing respiration and restlessness. He began to meet the movements of her head with his hips, pushing them up off the sand each time she came down on him again and again.

"Eden! God, baby, go slow," his voice already hoarse and deep with need. "Yeah, slow, that's right."

She slowed her tempo even more, but smiled to herself—going slow gave her the ability to use the muscles of her mouth to better advantage. She slowed down but she increased the suction and Rico began to writhe under her in response to this new twist in the pleasure she provided him. One of his hands clawed the sand next to him looking for some purchase to keep from losing the thread of restraint he had left.

Eden was moaning too as she fought her own battle to control her raging need. Rico had maneuvered the fingers of one hand up and into the leg of her shorts and he rubbed her clitoris firmly to match the rhythm of Eden's mouth on his engorged member. As Eden continued to suck him he delved deeper, two of his fingers were seated to the hilt in her sopping wet pussy. He used his thumb to make small circles on her hard nub.

Eden pushed her hips down onto his up-thrusting hand, squeezing her inner muscles as her own need drove her faster.

"Eden!" Rico ground out through clenched teeth as he reached his free hand down to still her head. "Woman, I can't take much more of this!" He laughed, warm and velvety, "Either you're on top, or I'm pulling you underneath me, but help me out here before I explode and we catch the grass on fire!"

She laughed, loud and wanton, as she stripped off her shorts and positioned herself over his huge jutting cock. Bracing her palms on Rico's rib cage, Eden leaned her hips low nearing, but not touching, the tip of his taut member, before rising up again and making another close but no contact encounter.

He watched her, loving the playful and confident smile on her sensual mouth. He knew she was the woman he'd love for the rest of his life. He stroked her silky thighs where they straddled his hips. Her hair fell around her shoulders glowing like molten lava in the fiery sunset light as she teased him beyond restraint. With a deep growl of frustration he rolled Eden onto her back in the sand and hovered above her on shaking arms, waiting for her permission.

"Do something!" she half laughed, half begged him. "Please Rico, anything!"

"Marry me," he asked.

"Ask me later!" She quipped nipping at the muscular flesh of his brawny shoulder. "I'm busy just now."

He reached his head down and drew one of her firm pink nipples into his mouth, sucking on it gently.

"Rico!" She raised her hips upward trying to capture him to pull him in, but he didn't move his any closer. His serious dark eyes looked deeply into hers. His need was clearly as strong as hers was, yet he waited for her answer.

"Say you'll marry me Eden."

"I'll marry you Rico but not until after you make me come!" Her laughter ended abruptly as he slid slowly, aching deep within her. They both gasped and held their breath at the raw intensity of their pairing. Both remained motionless for several moments as the sensations flooded them, filled them.

Rico cradled Eden's head in the palm of his hand and kissed her with all the love and caring that filled his soul, and as they both began to move together he finally knew what real love was.

Tears clouded Eden's vision as he moved slowly inside of her, prolonging each moment and each sensation. His hands and mouth left trails of heat and electric sizzle all over her body as Rico silently made love to her. Eden clawed at his back trying to bring him closer, trying to find some emotional purchase as her world spiraled upward and spun out of control. Their eyes locked in love and trust, she came hard, sobbing his name over and over again as her orgasms rolled through her body in a long delicious wave, and he followed her into the pounding liquid world of his own release.

Long moments later Rico felt himself come back to the real world, his eyes lovingly scanned Eden's face. "I have a lot to tell you Eden," he began tentatively, "much of it isn't pretty."

"I have a lot to tell you too, Rico," she assured him.

Rico laughed at the mischievous smile that played on her lips. "What on Earth could you possibly have to confess to me?" he asked.

"That I love you," she said. "I love the man you are now and I'm going to tell you over and over for the rest of our lives."

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