



## CHAPTER ONE

"Buenos dias!"

Having grown up in the hospitality industry, Carlos Garcia Chavez thought he'd seen everything. But nothing prepared him for the blonde standing in the doorway of the Presidential Villa. With her tight white dress and messy halo of platinum blond hair, she looked like she'd stepped out of a black-and-white newsreel. So much so, he half expected to hear her call him Mr. President. in a husky stage whisper.

What he got was a big, overly bright smile that sent awareness shooting through him. Something else he was unprepared for. He adjusted his grip on the wine bottle cradled in his arm and pushed the unexpected reaction aside.

"Buenas tardes, Señorita Boyd."

"Oh, right, you say tardes in the afternoon. My bad. I'm still on East Coast time. I'll catch on eventually.

Carlos refrained from pointing out that East Coast time would place her later in the day, not earlier. After all, the guest was always right, no matter how wrong they might be.

Meanwhile, this particular guest leaned. She leaned a hip against the door frame, a position that drew further attention to her curves. "So what can I do for you, Señor...?"

"Chavez. Carlos Chavez. I'm the general manager here at La Joya del Mayan."

"Did you say general manager? Damn. I knew this was too good to be true."

"There is a problem?" he asked, tensing. Carlos tensed. Errors were the kiss of death in the hotel industry. Mistakes led to bad reviews. He had enough on his plate keeping La Joya's current woes under wraps; he did not need to add to his troubles.

“Lucky for you, I haven’t unpacked yet.” He followed, trying not to stare at the way her bottom marked her steps like a white silk pendulum. “I mean, Delilah and Chloe might be generous, but seriously, this? Doesn’t matter if they are married to millionaires. Well, Del’s married to one. Chloe and her boyfriend aren’t married yet, although anyone with two eyes in their head can see they’re going to be. They’re absolutely crazy about each other. Do you want some champagne?” She lifted a bottle from the coffee table.

“No, thank you.” Judging from her rambling friendliness, she’d had enough for both of them. “You said there’d been an error?”

“I’ve never had Cristal before. This stuff is really good.”

“I’m glad you approve.”

“Oh, I do.” She took a long drink, nearly emptying the glass. “I definitely do. I should have served it at tomorrow’s night—I mean tomorrow night’s reception.”

“We can upgrade the menu if you’d like.”

She snorted, for some reason finding his suggestions amusing. “Little late for that.”

“Not at all. We can make changes right up to the last minute. So long as you’re happy.”

“Because everyone knows, it’s the bride who matters, right?” A shock of blond curls flopped over one eye. She swiped them away with a sloppy wave of her hand. “Long live the bride.”

Her groom was going to have his hands full tonight. Come to think of it, where was her groom? According to their records, Señora Boyd booked one of their famed wedding packages, but the front desk said she’d checked in alone. Most guests arrived either as couples or with a gaggle of family and friends.

Only unhappy brides drank alone.

Stop it. The senorita’s drinking arrangements were none of his business. For all he knew, she wanted to be alone. Her accommodations, however were his concern, and so he repeated his original question. “Is there a problem with your room?”

“Only that I’m here. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? To tell me I have to move?”

So that was her worry. His shoulders relaxed. “Not at all.”

“Seriously?”

“I handled the upgrade personally.” In fact, her friend, Señora Cartwright’s, phone call had been one of the few positive highlights of his first week. “For the next week, consider this villa your home away from home.”

“Really? Wow. I have the best friends.” She looked down at her glass, her eyes growing so damp that for a moment, Carlos feared she might cry.

“If I recall, Señora Cartwright said you’d admired the photos in our brochure,” he said.

The comment did its job, and distracted her. “More like drooled. This place is amazing. More than amazing, actually.”

“I’m glad you approve.”

“Oh, I do.” Draining her glass, she reached for the bottle again. “So, Señor...What did you say your name was again?”

“Carlos Chavez.”

“Car-rrr-los Cha-a-a-vez. I like how it flows off my tongue.” She gave a tipsy grin. “You sure you don’t want anything to drink?”

“Positive.”

“Then why are you carrying a bottle?”

The Cabernet.. In all the distraction, he’d almost forgotten the point of his visit. “My desk manager told me you talked with the Steinbergs while waiting to check in.”

She drew her brows into a sensuous-looking pout. “Who?”

“The couple from Massachusetts who were staying at the Paradiso.”

“Oh, right, Jake and Bridget. They’d walked up here from the beach. I told them they were wasting their time getting married at the Paradiso. I researched every destination wedding location in the eastern hemisphere, and none come close to being as romantic as this place.”

Given his family’s outrageous investment in creating said romance, Carlos certainly hoped so. The Chavez family prided itself on owning the most exotic, most enticing resorts in Mexico. “Apparently your enthusiasm was contagious because they placed a deposit for next spring.”

“I’m not surprised.”

She paused to wipe champagne from her upper lip with a flick of her tongue that left Carlos gripping the bottle a little tighter. He didn’t know whether she always moved with such sensuality or if the alcohol unleashed some hidden sexuality gene, but he found himself reacting in a most unwanted way.

“They said they stopped by on a whim, but no one hikes four miles along a beach on a whim. Besides, Bridget had that look, you know? After five minutes, I knew she’d made up her mind. Can you believe the front desk wanted to send her away with nothing more than a brochure?”

Yes, Carlos could. “Unfortunately, we are between wedding coordinators at the moment,” he told her. No need to explain the disaster he’d been sent to fix. “Thankfully, you were there to speak on our behalf. I wanted to come by and personally thank you for assistance, and to give you this with our compliments.” He presented the bottle. “Cabernet from Mexico’s own Parras Valley.”

“How sweet. Mexican wine.” She reached to take the bottle from him, only to stumble off balance and fall against his chest. Champagne sloshed over the rim onto his shirt, but Carlos barely noticed as he was far more focused on the hand pressed against his chest.

“I like how you pronounce Mexico.” There it was, the husky whisper. Carlos’s body stirred instinctively.

“Perhaps you and your fiancé can toast to a long life together.”

Gripping her shoulders, he righted the señorita and thrust the bottle into her grip. A bit rougher than necessary, perhaps, but he wasn’t in the mood to play substitute. The force caused her to stumble backward, although thankfully, she managed to catch her balance without assistance. Giving a soft “whoops,” she smiled and swayed her way to the writing desk.. “Nice thought, Señor Carlos. Unfortunately, he’s off having a long life with someone else, and I don’t feel like toasting that.”

“Pardon?” She had booked a wedding package, hadn’t she?

“My fiancé—ex-fiancé—decided he’d rather marry someone else.”

No wonder she was drinking. He felt a stab of sympathy. “I’m sorry for...” Did one call a broken engagement a loss? No matter, he hated the phrase. Loss was such an empty and meaningless word. Having your world implode was far more than a loss.

“You’re here alone, then,” he said, changing the subject.

“Honeymoon for one.” She raised her glass only to frown at the empty contents. “Wow, this stuff goes down way too easily.”

“Perhaps you ought to...”

Blue eyes glared at him. “Ought to what?”

“Nothing.” Wasn’t his place to monitor her behavior. She was a guest. His job was to make her happy.

“Do you know what he said? He said I cared more about getting married than I did him. Can you believe it?”

“I’m sorry.” What else could he say?

“Yeah, me, too.” She swayed her way back to the coffee table. “Like it’s a crime to be excited about getting married. News flash: It’s your wedding day. The one time in your life when you get to be special.”

Hard to believe a woman who looked like her needed a specific day to feel special, but then as he knew all too well, there existed women who needed constant reassurance, despite their beauty. Perhaps the señorita was one of those women.

“Besides, if Tom was that upset, why didn’t he say something sooner? He could have said, ‘Larissa, I don’t want a fancy wedding,’ but nooo, he let me spend fifteen months of planning while he was busy having deep ‘conversations’ with another woman, and then tells me I’m wedding obsessed.

“Seriously, what’s so great about having deep conversations anyway? Just because I don’t go around spouting my feelings to anyone who will listen, doesn’t mean I don’t have them. I’ll have you know I have lots of deep thoughts.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“Tons. More than Tom would ever know.” Turning so abruptly, the champagne yet again splashed over the rim of her glass, she marched toward the balcony.

He should go, thought Carlos. Leave her to wallow in peace. But he didn’t. Instead, something compelled him to follow her outside to where she stood looking at the Velas Jungle, her shoulders slumped in defeat.

“I would have listened to him, you know,” she said, the energy depleted from her voice.

“I’m sure you would have.”

He joined her at the rail. It was the view that made Las Joya famous. Across the way, snowy egrets had taken up their nightly residence in the mangroves, their noisy calls reverberating across the lagoon. The water rippled and lapped at the tree roots, creating a blurry mirror for the green and blue above.

The champagne glass dangled from her fingertips. He was debating reaching for the glass to keep her from dropping it into the water when she asked abruptly, “Are you married, Señor Carlos?”

The word yes sprang to his tongue, same as it always did. “Not anymore.”

“Divorced?”

“Widower.”

“Oh.” Downcast lashes cast shadows on her cheek. “I’m sorry.”

Again with the meaningless words. “It happened several years ago,” he replied.

“My problems must seem really silly to you.”

Her remark surprised him. Normally, people relaxed when they heard his answer, assuming the passage of time meant less pain and mistaking his numbness for healing grief. To hear her express sympathy, left him off balance. “I’m sure they don’t seem superficial to you.”

“But they are,” she said with a sigh. “They’re silly. I’m silly.”

She was sliding into self-flagellation, dangerous territory when combined with alcohol. Old warning bells rang in his head. “Why don’t we step back inside?” Away from the railing. “I’ll get you a glass of water.”

“I don’t want water,” she said, but she did push herself away from the rail. “I want more champagne.”

As long as it moved her off the terrace. He stepped back, expecting her to turn around, only to have her cup his cheek. Her blue eyes locked with his and stilled him in his tracks. “I’m sorry for your loss,” she said with far more sincerity than the word merited. Behind the kindness, Carlos recognized other emotions in her eyes. Need. Loneliness.

A spark passed through him, a flash of awareness that he was alone with a beautiful, vulnerable woman looking for reassurance. The similarities between now and the past were far too many, forming a dangerous rabbit hole down which he swore he’d never go again.

“Our staff is here for anything you need,” he told her, braking contact before other, more disturbing memories could rise to the surface. When it doubt, turn to business. The rule served him well these past five years. “We’ll do our best to ensure you enjoy your stay, regardless of the circumstances.”

“You’re sweet.”

On the contrary, he put an end to sweet a half decade ago.

After leading her inside, he made sure to lock the balcony door. With luck, she would curl up on the sofa and fall asleep. To be on the safe side, however, he made a mental note to have security keep an eye on the villa.

Images of a lifeless body floating atop water flashed before his eyes, stopping his heart.

Housekeeping, too. You could never be too careful.

The sun still beat strong on the sandstone walkway when he stepped outside. The beach side of the resort always remained sunny long after the lagoon settled in for the night. Guests enjoyed what they considered two sunsets. They would gather on their balconies or their private docks, margaritas in hand, and watch the shadows spread across the lagoon. A short while later, they’d turn their attention westward in time to see the sun slip behind the ocean. One more of the many perks that came with vacationing in paradise.

Personally, Carlos liked this time of day because the resort was quiet. Gave him time to walk the perimeter and ferret out any potential problems. There were

always problems. Creating paradise took work -- more work than people would ever realize. He'd been here six weeks now, not yet long enough to know all the resort's idiosyncrasies. Much of his time, thus far, had been consumed by cleaning up his predecessor's mess. Misused funds, unpaid accounts.... His predecessor's managerial incompetence knew no bounds. And of course, there was Maria. Stupid woman was supposed to plan weddings, not run off with the philandering idiot. A decade's worth of reputation in jeopardy because of two people's recklessness.

Rashness led to nothing but disaster.

"Whoops, excuse us." A pair of newlyweds cut around him to duck under the southwest archway, their arms filled with beach bags and each other. Carlos stepped aside, heaviness tugging at his heart as he watched the young woman playfully swat her husband's hand from her bottom. He'd been that way once himself, romantic and naive, believing the magic would last forever. Before a pair of needy brown eyes sucked him dry.

He wasn't an idiot. He was well aware there was more behind his family sending him to La Joya than righting managerial mistakes. They hoped that his tenure at La Joya might lighten his heart. As if being surrounded by romance would be enough to revive the man he used to be. What his family failed to realize was that man died. Destroyed by his own romantic illusions and desires, he could never be resurrected again, no matter what his surroundings.

No, Carlos's days of romance were over. Best he could do was let others enjoy the illusion while it lasted. Or, in the case of Señorita Boyd, help reality sting a little bit less.

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Who turned on the lights?

Even with her eyes closed, the brightness stabbed at Larissa's right eye. If she could cover her face, maybe she could eek out an hour or two more of sleep. She reached to her right only to swat at empty air. Same when she reached left. Whoever was trying to blind her had also stolen her pillows and shrunk her bed.

Prying open one eye, she found herself face-to-face with a royal blue wall. Her bedroom was beige-and-brown. Whose bedroom was this? More importantly, how did she get here?

Bit by bit, reality worked its way into her brain. Mexico. Sometime during the night, she'd decided to stare at the stars, and stumbled her way to the terrace. She must have fallen asleep on the divan because she lay on her stomach, the side of her face smashed against a royal blue throw pillow.

How much did she drink? Too much, seeing how her tongue felt like it'd been wrapped in cotton socks. And her head...Thinking made the pounding at the back of her skull worse. Damn Delilah and Chloe for sending her that champagne.

"Why? We weren't the ones filling your glass," her friend Chloe would say, and sadly, she'd be right. Larissa did the pouring all by herself. Seven hundred fifty milliliters of champagne and half a bottle of Spanish wine worth. She gagged, contemplating the volume.

Wouldn't Tom be thrilled to see her now? After all, wasn't she to blame for everything? Their breakup, his cheating. She challenges me, Larissa. Makes me think about things. All you talk about is the wedding. It's like you don't care about

anything else.

Apparently he missed the part where planning a wedding was a lot of work. Too busy having deep conversations with the other woman, no doubt.

Letting out a groan, she pushed herself to an upright position and stumbled to the living area, praying the powers that be included an industrial-strength coffeemaker. She still couldn't believe Delilah and Chloe paid to upgrade her to the presidential villa. The place was astounding, albeit filled with way too much sunshine at the moment. One glass wall looked out over the ocean, the other onto the lagoon. The entire villa was a glass box with curtains. Ironic since the resort boasted complete privacy.

Where did she put her sunglasses? She could have sworn she had them on her head when she checked in. Without them, her head was going to explode.

Oomph! She forgot the living room had a sunken conversation area. Missing the step, she lost her balance and pitched forward. Fortunately, her hand managed to catch the edge of the sofa. As her fingers curled around the cushion, a memory made its way into her head. Sad brown eyes with thick lashes that sent odd spiraling sensations down her back. They'd talked about relationships. He said he was a widower. She said she was sorry for his loss and...

And she touched him.

Oh, Lord, please say she did not come on to a complete stranger last night. A quick look at the open wine bottles said it was entirely possible.

A knock on the door sliced her head open. "Room service," an accented voice called out.

Peering through the peephole, Larissa spied a cart laded with silver serving pieces as well as—heaven help her—another bottle of champagne—and groaned. The wedding day breakfast package. She must have forgotten to cancel.

"For the bride," the server announced when she opened the door. He very diplomatically pretended not to notice her appearance, but Larissa caught the sideways glance as he wheeled the cart inside. Whatever. No different from the looks she got checking in. Single definitely stuck out at La Joya. Combing her fingers through her hair, she smiled brightly, as if she woke up wearing yesterday's clothes and smelling of stale wine every morning. Damn, but those sunglasses would definitely come in handy about now.

Dish by dish, the server unveiled the contents of each platter. Fresh strawberries. Whipped cream. Huevos motulenos with plantains and peas. Their aromas mingled together into one fruity, spicy fragrance. Larissa's stomach rose in her throat.

"Is there coffee?" she interrupted before the man could unveil the final dish, which she was pretty certain would be bacon. The greasy scent would send her right over the edge.

"I can serve myself," Larissa continued when he reached for the thermal pot.

Her upright quotient was nearing its end, and she didn't want to waste what little standing ability she had left on some elaborate presentation. Scribbling her room number on the bottom of the bill, she thrust the paper in the man's hand and hoped the generous tip would balance out her curt behavior.

"Please tell the chef everything looks wonderful." She swallowed hard to get

the words out. "Exactly as advertised."

"I'm glad you think so," a new voice replied. Before she could reply, the man from her memories strolled into the room. Tall, dark and way too crisp-looking.

Her vague memories didn't do him nearly enough justice. Broad shoulders. A hard, lean body. Her fingertips tingled recalling the feel of his torso all too clearly. Especially the way her palm spread against the taut muscles.

It was his face she'd forgotten. Hidden by the distraction of sad eyes was a face marked by character. A strong jaw, a prominent nose. Skin the color of burnished gold. It was a rugged, masculine face, carved to capture both attention and respect.

He greeted her with a polite nod. "Buenos dias, Señorita Boyd."

Dammit, she'd forgotten his name. He wasn't the kind of man a person forgot either. Maybe if she smiled brightly enough, she could fake her way through the conversation until it came to her. "Buenos dias. How are you doing this morning?"

"I am fine, señorita. A more important question is, how are you?"

"Right as rain," she lied.

He arched his brow, proof she wasn't fooling anyone, but chose to turn his attention to the room service cart. Larissa couldn't help but notice the server's nervousness regarding the inspection. Señor Whoever-He-Was must run a tight ship.

"You're having the bridal breakfast, I see," he said finally.

"Yes, I am."

"Interesting choice. Did you mean to?"

An odd question, although she'd been kicking herself over its appearance herself. She waited until he'd dismissed the server before asking, "What do you mean?"

"Only that considering your circumstances, I'm surprised you're interested in having the full bridal morning experience."

Was he referring to her hangover or the fact she was no longer a bride? His diplomatic description made it hard to tell.

He uncovered the bacon. A big mistake. Larissa started to gag.

"I'm looking forward to it," she replied, swallowing her stomach back into place. Easier than swallowing her pride, apparently. "No sense letting a good meal go to waste."

"I applaud your attitude. Personally, I wouldn't be able to look at food, let alone eat so much."

Okay, so they were talking about her hangover. "I have an iron stomach."

Again, he raised his brow, unconvinced. They both knew she hammered herself into oblivion last night. Only a fool would insist on pretending otherwise. Call her a fool then. A would had to salvage pride where she could. Especially considering her only clear memory from last night involved falling against that hard, lean chest.

"You have a far better constitution than I do," he remarked. "Cream and sugar? Or do you prefer your coffee black?"

What she would prefer would be if he—and the breakfast cart—left her alone so she could collapse. "Black, please."



"I have to warn you, Mexican coffee is brewed stronger than American. Many of our guests are taken by surprise."

"I'm willing to take the chance." Anything to hurry him out of her room. What was he doing here anyway? Her fingertips started to tingle again. Oh, no. Maybe she did come on to him, and he was here because he thought she wanted some kind of Mexican fling.

"While you are here, you must try our version of café de olla. We brew the coffee with cinnamon and piloncillo. It's sweet, but not overly so. The secret is in using the right pot."

"Uh-huh." She was far more interested in getting through this cup of coffee. Those stainless steel covers didn't do much to contain aromas, did they? His nattering on about brown sugar didn't help. Between the two, her stomach was pretty much ready to revolt. If she didn't know better, she'd swear all his talk was on purpose, to test how long she could hold on before cracking.

"Do all your guests get such personal service from the general manager, or am I one of the lucky ones?" Assuming he was the general manager; she could be promoting him in her head. Drat, why couldn't she remember his name?

His chuckle as she snatched the cup from his hands was low and sultry, making her stomach list. Well, either the sound or the champagne. "I suppose you could consider yourself lucky. Normally, our wedding director meets with our bridal guests."

"But you don't have one," she replied. Another piece of last night's conversation slipping into place.

The coffee smelled horrible. Apparently, the resort considered strong a synonym for burnt. Holding her breath, Larissa lapped at the hot liquid. The acidic taste burned her esophagus before joining the war in her stomach.

Check that, the coffee was still debating whether it wanted to join. She put the cup on the desk.

Meanwhile, her dark-suited guest was helping himself to a cup. "That's correct," he said. "We are in between coordinators at the moment. Which is why I'm making a point of working with our VIP customers personally. I want to make sure their experience with us is exactly as they anticipated."

"Little late there," Larissa replied. This trip already wasn't what she expected.

Realizing his faux pas, the manager cleared his throat. "That is why I decided to visit you first. I noticed—"

Carlos! His name rushed back. Unfortunately, so did the coffee. Larissa grabbed a nearby waste bucket.

And promptly threw up.

## CHAPTER TWO

"Are you feeling better yet?" The voice on the other side of the door rolled far more gently than Larissa's stomach.

"Yes," she managed to croak. After her embarrassing display with the waste bucket, she wasn't about to admit anything else.

Happy Wedding Day to me. Her big day. The moment she'd dreamed about her whole life, when the world would see that she, little Larissa Boyd, found her

Prince Charming. No more pinning sequins on someone else's wedding gown on standing in the sidelines..

Never, in all her dreams, did she see herself sprawled on Spanish tiles with her head propped against a walk-in shower.

Dammit, Tom.

"Do you need anything?"

Something to put her out of her misery might be nice. "I'm fine. I need a few minutes is all."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. There's no need for you to hang around. I'll be fine."

She listened for sounds of his departure, but heard none. You'd think he'd take advantage of her locking herself in the bathroom to get as far away from her as possible. Was he that afraid she'd pass out and bang her head?

Struggling to her feet, she wobbled to the sink. Shaky as her mind was, she was still able to appreciate her surroundings. The room was so large, you could fit three of her bathroom back home—one in the sunken tub alone. Needless to say, at the moment she could do without all the sunlight. What was it with this place and windows? Brightness poured in from all angles, bouncing off the glass accessories in near blinding proportion.

Too bad she couldn't keep her eyes closed forever. Crawl under the covers and start the day over. One look at her reflection, however, and she wondered if simply starting the day over would be enough. No wonder the room service guy looked at her askance. She looked like a rabid blue-eyed raccoon. Grabbing a tissue, she swiped at her eyes, succeeding only in spreading the smudges to her temple.

"Señorita?"

On top of everything, he wouldn't leave. Señor Chavez. No way she'd forget his name again. Although she'd bet he'd like to forget hers. In less than a day she'd gotten drunk, flirted with him and gotten sick in the wastebasket.

So much for being a VIP guest.

Clearly he wasn't going away until she showed her face, so she might as well drag herself outside. With a heavy sigh, she gave one last useless swipe at her mascara, and reached for the door.

Señor Chavez stood looking out to the lagoon. Meaning his back was to the room, thank goodness. She needed to work her way up to looking him in the eye. As it was, his black-suited presence filled the room with an awkward tension.

Interestingly, she could no longer smell the food. Her breakfast had disappeared.

"I moved the service card outside," he said. "I know how overwhelming certain aromas can be when you're feeling under the weather."

And yet, he'd made a production of serving her coffee. She'd been right; her little pretense didn't fool him one bit. If she weren't about to die, she'd be annoyed.

"And the waste bucket?"

"Outside as well. Housekeeping will bring you a fresh one later today."

"Thank you," she said, annoyance taking a back seat to manners. Whether he'd been testing her or not, she had no one to blame but herself for her condition, and they both knew it.

He glanced at her from over his shoulder. "Your bag rang while you were indisposed as well."

Took a moment to realize he meant her cell phone. "My friends checking in to make sure I arrived safely." Had to be. Delilah and Chloe were the only two people in her life who cared. Grandma was gone and Tom...well, like he'd call.

"The same people who paid for your upgrade?"

"And the champagne." The enablers. "I don't normally drink so much," she told him, figuring she should at least try and explain her sorry state. "Let alone on an empty stomach. It's just that last night, I was sitting here..."

When it struck her, she was on her honeymoon alone. What back in New York seemed like such a grand gesture of independence suddenly felt pathetic. And so she figured, why not indulge in a good old pity party?

"I guess I was feeling vulnerable," she told him. "Today was supposed to be my wedding day."

"I know. You told me last night."

"That's right, I did." She always did over share with strangers when she'd had a little too much to drink. Chloe used to tease her about how she practically shared her life story the day the two of them met, and that was after a few glasses of wine in a bar after their corporate orientation. Who knew what a bottle of Cristal made her babble? "Did I say anything else?"

"You don't remember?"

"For the most part I do." A small white lie. She remembered thinking the space didn't feel quite so empty once he arrived, and the way his five o'clock shadow had felt rough against his fingers. "There are a couple blank spots, though. I didn't do anything...embarrassing, did I?" Like come on to him? A flashing image of brown eyes looming dangerously close set her stomach to churning again.

"I left the coffee in case you needed the caffeine," he said. A neat change of subject that was answer enough. Inwardly, Larissa cringed.

"Would you like me to pour you a fresh cup?"

"No, thank you." She couldn't take the burnt smell for a second time. "I think I'm better off with something cold. Maybe one of those twenty-dollar colas from the mini-bar." A few dozen pain relievers would be nice as well, she thought, combing her fingers through her hair. "I don't suppose these rooms also come stocked with aspirin."

"Next to the coffeepot."

Sure enough, a bottle of pills sat on the desk, next to the thermos. They hadn't been there before. "I suspected you might need them."

"Thank you."

"You're most welcome. We strive for nothing less than one hundred percent satisfaction from all our guests. You said cola, correct?"

"That's not..." Before Larissa could utter a protest, she'd crossed the distance between terrace and cabinet. "Necessary."

"Of course it is. You're my guest. It's my job to make sure you're happy."

Although Larissa knew she was but one of a thousand guests, his lilting tone made the comment sound far more personal. As though she were the only one getting such hands-on treatment. She blamed her condition for the nervous

fluttering in her stomach. “Even the hung-over ones?”

“Especially the hung over ones,” he said popping open the can.

Larissa felt her cheeks flush. “My friends always did say I was high-maintenance.”

“Are you?”

Good question. It always struck her funny, how her New York circle gave her that reputation. Growing up, she’d perfected the art of staying out of the way. Expensive dresses and “sticky kid stuff” didn’t mix, according to her grandmother. If she was going to live there, Larissa had better learn to be careful.

“I prefer the term particular,” she replied.

Naturally, the universe decided to deflate her argument by tangling their fingers when Larissa reached for the soda can. The contact shocked her, so much so she jerked the can from his grip with a gasp. “I—um” She looked up in time to catch something—a light but not quite a light—flashing in his brown eyes. One blink and it disappeared. Hidden behind a polite, distant shade. Didn’t matter. Even if she hadn’t seen anything, the way his body stiffened at the contact was message enough. She did them both a favor and stepped back. “Are you sure I didn’t do or say anything stupid last night?”

“Nothing that bears repeating.”

But something, nonetheless. Enough that her proximity made him uncomfortable. Great, she thought, cringing. Probably best that she not to press for details. “I’ll do my best to stay under the radar for the rest of my visit. In fact, you’ll barely notice I’m here,” she added, taking a drink. Raising the can blocked her from seeing any skepticism.

On a positive note, the cold fizz felt wonderful on the back of her throat. Didn’t completely wash away the cotton sock taste, but helped.

“Speaking of your stay, Señorita...” Reaching into his breast pocket, he removed a neatly creased sheet of paper. “I had some questions about your itinerary, now that your original plans have...”

“Bitten the dust?” Larissa supplied. “And please, call me Larissa. Formality seems a little silly at this point, don’t you think?”

A hint of a smile played at the corner of his mouth. “Very well, Larissa. According to our records, you booked a number of activities for while you’re staying with us.”

Larissa remembered. The wedding coordinator made everything sound so wonderful over the phone. Unable to pick one or two, she selected everything. You only get one honeymoon, she’d rationalized. Why not make it as romantic as possible?

“I’m assuming you are no longer interested.”

“You assume correct.” Moonlight dinner cruises and couples massages weren’t exactly solo activities. “The only activity on my schedule this week is following the angle of the sun.” And hopefully figuring out what caused her perfect engagement to implode so spectacularly. See, Tom, I am capable of introspection.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the manager looking at his paper. “What? Is there a problem?”

“Not at all. I’ll make sure all your previous events are canceled. Although you

realize, by canceling at such short notice, you are respon—”

“Wait, wait, wait. Short notice? I canceled everything weeks ago.”

He frowned. “Not according to our records.”

“Well, your records are wrong.” It would take more than a couple bottles of wine to erase that phone call from her memory. “What did you think I was going to do? Marry myself?”

“I assumed you didn’t realize the wedding was off last night.”

A logical assumption. Wrong, but logical. “I spoke to your wedding planner six weeks ago.”

“Six weeks.” He inhaled deeply. “Are you sure you spoke directly with Maria del Olma?”

“Positive, and she assured me canceling wouldn’t be a problem.”

Except apparently it was, if his quivering jaw muscle was any indication. “It appears there’s been a miscommunication. Maria never noted the cancellation in your records.”

“Well, I’m noting it now.”

“I don’t suppose you have written confirmation.”

Larissa started to say yes, only to snap her mouth shut. Come to think of it, Maria didn’t send any follow-up. Normally, Larissa would request a letter for her files, but she’d been so upset she must have let it go. Plus, Delilah was getting married, and Chloe was having relationship drama. Following up slipped her mind.

Could she start this whole trip over? Please?

Turning on her heel, she stomped onto the terrace. Sunshine and brightness be damned; she needed fresh air. In keeping with the morning’s theme, she bumped into the lounge chair, stubbing her toe on a piece of plastic. Her missing sunglasses skidded across the floor. Score one positive. She shoved them on her face as she limped toward the railing.

At least the view remained as beautiful as she remembered. Unlike in New York where activity reigned 24/7, the day had yet to get started. The lagoon’s surface was an aqua-green mirror, the only sign of visible life a solitary egret stalking the opposite shore. Occasionally the leaves in the upper canopy would rustle as an unseen bird, or monkey maybe, alighted from a branch. After four years of city living, Larissa forgot such serenity existed.

She remembered when she decided to get married at La Joya. The photos online looked so gorgeous, she’d fallen in love at first sight. What could be more romantic than getting married in paradise? Delilah and Chloe always teased her when she said stuff like that. You think everything’s romantic, Delilah would say. Then they’d joked and call her a Bridezilla because she changed the venue three times.

She loved her friends, but they didn’t understand her any more than Tom did. She’d been planning her wedding day since she was six years old, and spied on her first dress fitting through the crack in her grandmother’s accordion doors. When the bride stepped out of the fitting room all white and sparkly, it was like a princess in real life. So pretty, so...special. Standing there, surrounded by faded yellow wallpaper, she glowed. They all did. All the brides, all the prom queens. Delilah did, too, when she married Simon. So much so, it took her breath away. All Larissa

wanted was to glow like that. To have one day where she was the princess.

And she'd come so close. She could still remember how excited she'd been when Tom proposed. Handsome, successful, stable Tom Wainwright wanted her. All those years dreaming a man would fall in love with her, and whisk her off into the sunset and finally her dream had come true. Or so she'd thought.

A soft cough reminded her she wasn't alone. Señor Chavez had moved to her elbow. "I'm told our former wedding coordinator was quite distracted toward the end of her tenure with us. Her abrupt departure has caused more than a few loose ends."

"Let me guess. She left six weeks ago."

"I'm afraid so."

Figures. How much did Larissa want to bet she took off shortly after their phone conversation?

"I'll personally take care of canceling all your obligations. However, there is one problem."

Say no more. Larissa made her living typing advertising sales contracts. An agreement was an agreement. Without evidence she actually spoke with Maria del Olma, it was her word against the computer system. "You're telling me I'm liable for the expense. How much?" She tried to remember the terms of their agreement. Technically, she gave them fewer than twenty-four hours. Which meant...

There was a pause. "The entire amount."

Oh for crying out loud. "Seriously? The whole thing?"

"I am afraid so."

"Even though you guys are the ones who made the mistake." She shook her head. If she ever found Maria del Olma, she would slap the woman. No way Tom would pony up any of his share, either. She could hear him now. This was your obsession, Larissa, not mine.

"You know this is completely unfair, don't you?"

"I'm sorry."

"You can't take something off the bill?" After all, it was his staff member's error.

"Please?" she asked, lowering her glasses. She could tell from his expression, he was struggling with a response, the need to recoup costs clashing with his desire to make the guest happy. Might as well throw a little hangdog-inspired guilt in to tilt the scales in her favor. "What if I pay half?"

He sighed. "Best I can do is reduce the cost by thirty percent."

"Only thirty?" This was so not helping her headache. "What about the fact that I brought in business? Didn't you say those people signed a contract?" In her opinion, she deserved half off for that alone.

A shadow crossed the railing as he appeared at her elbow. Looking right, she saw him studying her with an arched brow. "I thought you didn't remember last night."

"I remember the reason for the Cabernet." In fact, she was pretty sure she toasted the couple's health and happiness once or twice.

"The Steinbergs are the reason I'm willing to go as high as thirty."

"Oh."

"You have to understand, space was blocked off, food has been specially prepared. The bridal cake alone..."

"No need to explain. I get it." She'd heard the sales department make similar arguments every day. Legal contracts didn't care about your sob story.

"I am sorry."

Not as sorry as she was. "What's going to happen to everything I ordered?" "The custom-colored linen, the custom spa arrangements. Her headache doubled as she thought of all the little extras. She couldn't begin to list everything.

"What can be returned to vendors will be returned, the rest, like the food, will be served through the restaurant or sadly, thrown away."

"Including the cake?" Her beautiful, three-tier white chocolate cake with raspberry mousse filling.

"I suspect it will become tonight's dessert special."

"Well, isn't that peachy? I can order my reception dinner and pay twice. I might as well go ahead and have the reception anyway."

He stared, clearly trying to read whether she was serious. "Aren't we being a bit extreme? It is, after all, only a dinner."

"Only a dinner?" No, chicken in a bucket was only a dinner. This was fifteen months of work and planning. "We're talking about my wedding reception."

"Which, had it taken place, would have had you marrying a man who was unfaithful."

Larissa winced. "Thanks for reminding me."

"Better to see things clearly now than stay lost in a romantic haze only to discover the truth five months later," he replied. "Trust me, a dinner is a far easier price to pay."

"Reception," Larissa corrected under her breath. There was a difference. Clearly, he thought her as silly as everyone else. Maybe they were right, and she was silly and overly romantic. Didn't make today sting any less.

"I think I'm going to lie down," she said with a sniff. "My head feels like it's going to explode."

"Of course. I'll make sure housekeeping doesn't bother you," he said, moving toward the door. "Again, I am sorry for the miscommunication."

"Thirty percent sorry, anyway," she replied.

A small smile tugged at his mouth, but was quickly reined in. "I hope you feel better."

"Me, too," she told him, turning back to the view. Paradise had suddenly become very expensive.

\*

So help him, if Maria del Olma or her boyfriend ever stepped foot on resort property again, he would strangle both of them with his bare hands. Teeth clenched, Carlos let out a low growl, and wished he was farther away from Larissa's front door so he could growl louder. He knew his predecessor and the coordinator left the resort in chaos, but he'd thought they'd caught the worst of the errors weeks ago. Apparently he thought wrong.

At least housekeeping did its job and spirited away both the waste bucket and room service cart while he was having his awkward discussion with Señorita

Boyd. Guests might want to overindulge in Mexican paradise, but they didn't want to see the morning-after evidence. Señorita Boyd's—Larissa's—villa wouldn't be housekeeping's only stop. There would be a number of guests looking for dry toast and aspirin this morning.

But only one had the aspirin delivered personally by the general manager. Then again, none of the other guests invaded his thoughts all night long, either. He couldn't shake the image of her alone in her suite, drinking away a broken heart, to the point that when he woke up this morning, the first question in his head was how she fared.

The answer was about as he expected. The results of an alcohol-fueled pity party were never pretty. She looked like death warmed over, yesterday's sex appeal all but obliterated. To her credit, she tried, pretending her skin wasn't turning green while he talked about coffee. She lasted longer than he thought she would. Then, to work up the energy to negotiate her bill, as well. Admirable.

Too admirable seeing how he agreed to absorb thirty percent of her expenses. What came over him, making such an agreement? There were concessions and then there were concessions.

You know exactly what came over you. You looked into those big blue eyes and wanted nothing more than to make them sparkle.

Nonsense. He felt sorry for the woman, that was all. He knew all too well the pain of waking up and realizing you'd been living a delusion. And to have the covers ripped from your eyes so quickly...His own disenchantment unfolded slowly, and that pain was bad enough.

What would have happened if he'd realized the truth about Mirabelle from the beginning? Would he have still spent so much energy trying to make her happy? Probably. He'd been such a stubborn, romantic fool back then. Quick to fall, slow to let go.

Thank goodness he'd learned his lesson since then.

"Hola, primo! I've been looking all over for you."

His cousin, Jorge, jogged toward him. Like Carlos, he wore a black suit, although in Jorge's case, the jacket fit snugly around his barrel chest, a fact his cousin, an American football player at UCLA, took great pride in. "You do realize the resort has a perfectly good boat launch that allows you to cover the ground in half the time," he said, wiping the dampness from his upper lip.

"The boat launch doesn't allow me to see the beach side of the resort. You might want to consider walking this route yourself. You're out of breath."

"Because I've been walking all over the property looking for you. Where have you been? You missed morning coffee."

"I was meeting with a guest."

"At this hour of the morning? Don't tell me you're picking up Rodrigo's bad habits."

Upon hearing his predecessor's name, Carlos's muscles tensed. "I was meeting with La—Señorita Boyd—regarding her wedding plans."

"Boyd. Isn't she the woman who checked in by herself yesterday?"

"She is. Maria forgot to cancel her wedding ceremony."

"You're kidding."



"I wish I was," Carlos replied with a sigh. "It appears she was too busy sneaking around with Rodrigo to let catering know. I had to break the bad news to Señorita Boyd this morning."

"You're not charging her, are you?"

"What choice do I have? Everything was ordered, and you know as well as I do the resort isn't in a position to eat those kinds of costs right now. I gave her as much of a discount as I could."

That he even had to conduct such a negotiation made him want to rip his hair from his head. "Sometimes I don't know who I want to strangle more. Maria for being so careless or Rodrigo for mismanaging the resort into financial crisis."

"I thought that's why I came aboard. To give you an extra set of hands so you could strangle both simultaneously."

This was one of those rare days when Carlos wanted to take his cousin's joke seriously. "I need you to have someone go through every event Maria booked. Call the people and update their contracts. I do not want a repeat problem."

"I'll take care of it soon as we get back to the office."

"Thank you. Meanwhile, let's hope the wedding coordinator candidate I'm interviewing this afternoon is more levelheaded."

"He's male, so at least we won't have to worry about the two of you running off together."

Carlos ignored the remark. Wouldn't make a difference if the candidate was male or female. His days of losing his head were long gone and they both knew it. "Have you checked on the Campanella arrangements yet this morning?" he asked instead.

His cousin nodded. "Everything's running on schedule."

"Bueno."

"The señor and the señora did ask if you'd be willing to make a toast. Apparently someone they know was toasted by the captain of a cruise ship."

"And they would like something similar." Carlos thought of Larissa asking about her cake. "So many silly details. As if any will matter six months or even six hours later."

"It would mean a lot to them."

"Then I'll be there." Whatever a guest wanted. Especially guests like the Campanellas who seemed the type to leave online critiques. He wondered if Larissa Boyd left critiques? What would she say? The general manager efficiently provided aspirin?

"What's so amusing?"

He didn't realize he'd chuckled aloud. "Nothing."

"Uh-huh. Is everything all right, primo? You seem distracted this morning."

"Of course I'm distracted. I thought we were finished mopping up Rodrigo's and Maria's messes. Instead I had to bill a jilted customer on her wedding day."

"Better you than me. I would have caved completely out of sympathy."

Carlos didn't say how close he came to doing that very thing. The two of them fell into step back to the office. Although only midmorning, the sun already hung hot in the cloudless sky. Sunbathers, eager to turn their skin to Aztec gold, crowded both sides of the walkway. A mosaic of body shapes sprawled towels and chaise lounges.

Some of the more cautious tourists staked their claims on the popular cabana beds scattered strategically around the resort. He wondered, would Larissa Boyd find her way to one of them to sleep off her hangover or would she prefer the privacy of her terrace? Pale skin like hers would definitely burn if exposed too long.

"I have to admit," Jorge continued, "now that you tell me the wedding was canceled weeks ago, I'm surprised she's here. She must have had nonrefundable airline tickets."

"Or perhaps she simply needed to get away." He understood. After a while, all the well-meaning comments and sympathetic looks started to eat at your soul. It was either scream at people to go away or lose yourself in a place full of distractions. "Whatever her reason, ours is not the place to judge."

"The staff is fascinated by her. She made quite a memorable impression yesterday."

Blue smudged eyes and rat nest hair came to mind. Memorable indeed. Wonder what Jorge would say if he saw her this morning.

Interestingly, he was beginning to think this morning's version might be more memorable.

Mirabelle used to worry incessantly about her appearance, obsess over every hair, every ounce on her frame. As much as he reassured her that she would be the most beautiful woman in the world to him, his reassurances fell on deaf ears. Fell, and fell, and fell.

Something in him wanted to hope Larissa Boyd was different. Stronger.

"I don't think we've ever had a guest stay solo before." Jorge's voice saved his thoughts from traveling down a dark road.

"Of course we've had single guests," he replied.

"Single, yes, but always as part of a group. I can't remember ever having someone attend completely alone before. Certainly not a woman on her honeymoon."

"There's a first time for everything. Perhaps Señorita Boyd will spark a trend."

"Wouldn't that be nice?" Jorge grinned, his smile white and even. "We could become the new singles hot spot on the Riviera."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? A hotel full of heartbroken women."

"What is it the Americans say about getting back in the saddle? Perhaps our señorita could use a stirrup."

The idea of his muscular cousin touching pale American skin stuck hard in his chest, giving him heartburn. "The señorita came to nurse a broken heart. I doubt she's interested in riding lessons."

"You never know. Not everyone—"

"Not everyone what?" Carlos whipped around.

"Nothing."

As if Carlos didn't know what he was going to say. Not everyone grieves forever. Of anyone in the family, he expected Jorge to understand.

"It's just..." His cousin's voice softened. "It's been five years. Don't you think Mirabelle would want you to move on?"

"My days of giving Mirabelle everything she wanted died with her," he

replied. Fitting, really. Given all the times he failed her in life, why should his grief be any different?

Besides, he thought, looking out to the Atlantic, if she'd wanted him to move on, she should have left his heart intact. "The only people I care about making happy these days are our guests. In Señorita Boyd's case, that means protecting her privacy."

"Were you worrying about her privacy when you had security checking on her last night?"

Carlos stopped short. He should have known Jorge would hear of his orders. The hotel staff was a small community, and nothing escaped notice. "She'd been drinking. I thought it a good idea to watch out for her."

"Old habits die hard, do they?"

Some did anyway. He thought about arguing the point, and blaming liability for his behavior, but Jorge would see right through the excuse. After all, his cousin knew all about Mirabelle. More, he'd been there the day they found her.

"I didn't want to take any chances. There were too many similarities." More than he wanted to admit.

Before he could say anything, the two-way radio on his cousin's waist began to crackle. The first sentence was all Carlos needed to hear. "Housekeeping emergency, Presidential Villa."

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