2 in 1 GREAT VALUE

BILLIONAIRE, M.D.

Olivia Gates

SECRETS OF THE PLAYBOY'S BRIDE

Leanne Banks



Desire™

Leanne Banks

Billionaire, M.D. / Secrets of the Playboy's Bride: Billionaire, M.D. / Secrets of the Playboy's Bride

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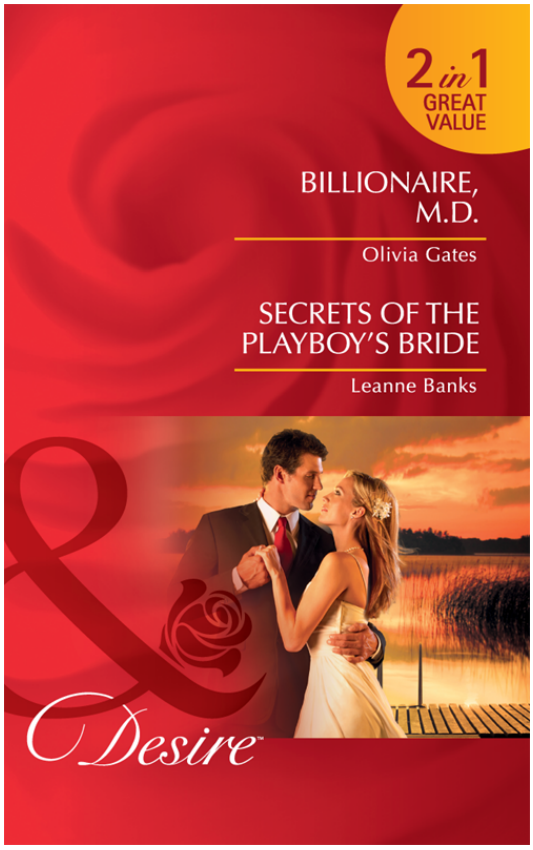
Billionaire, M.D. / Secrets of the Playboy's Bride: Billionaire, M.D. / Secrets of the Playboy's Bride / L. Banks — «HarperCollins»,

Billionaire, M. D. Spanish billionaire Rodrigo Valderrama rushed to the side of the woman he’s always wanted the moment he learned of her accident. Whisking Cybele away to his palatial seafront estate, the wealthy surgeon vowed to care for and protect the pregnant widow…and never let her know about his role in her pregnancy.Secrets of the Playboy’s BrideAll his life, self-made millionaire Leonardo Grant had yearned for success. Now he believed marriage to the right woman could secure him the respect no amount of money could. When Leo spotted Calista French, he knew he’d found his perfect bride. But their chance meeting had actually been carefully set up… Just what was his new society wife planning?

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BILLIONAIRE, M.D.
OLIVIA GATES
AND
SECRETS OF THE
PLAYBOY'S BRIDE
LEANNE BANKS

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BILLIONAIRE, M.D.
OLIVIA GATES

His forbidden fruit. His ultimate temptation.

The woman whose very existence had been like a corrosive acid coursing through his arteries. The woman he would have been eternally grateful if he never saw again till the day he died. He would have given anything to wake up one day free of her memory.

And it was her who'd woken up free of his.

The red-hot fist that had been squeezing his heart since he'd hurtled to the crash site to find her lying inert almost drove its tentacles inside his heart.

She was telling him she didn't remember the existence that was the bane of his. She'd forgotten the very identity that had been behind the destruction of one life. And the poisoning of his own.

And he shouldn't care. Shouldn't *have* cared.

But he did.

About the Author

OLIVIA GATES has always pursued creative passions—singing and many handicrafts. She still does, but only one of her passions grew gratifying enough, consuming enough, to become an ongoing career. Writing.

She is most fulfilled when she is creating worlds and conflicts for her characters, then exploring and untangling them bit by bit, sharing her protagonists' every heart-wrenching heartache and hope, their every heart-pounding doubt and trial, until she leads them to an indisputably earned and gloriously satisfying happy ending.

When she's not writing, she is a doctor, a wife to her own alpha male and a mother to one brilliant girl and one demanding angora cat. Visit Olivia at www.oliviagates.com.

To Natashya and Shane.

This one is definitely for you both.

Dear Reader,

It was such a thrill for me to write my first surgeon hero for Desire™.

I've written doctors before, but while in my other books medicine itself played a big part in the story, in this one I wanted to concentrate on and demonstrate in full measure why a surgeon can be such an irresistibly romantic hero.

So I created Rodrigo Valentino, the epitome of that hero. He is not only a self-made and phenomenal success, he is a savior, a protector. A tower of strength with extraordinary skills and knowledge, a man to lean on, whose strength of mind and will is surpassed only by that of his passion and tenderness. And in taking care of the injured as well as amnesic and pregnant Cybele Wilkinson, he goes all out, demonstrating those qualities that are everything a woman can dream of.

I loved writing Rodrigo so much, and the passionate, deeply emotional relationship that develops between him and Cybele, that I hope I will be writing more surgeons in the future.

I also hope that reading their story will give you as much pleasure as writing it gave me.

I would love to hear from you at oliviagates@gmail.com. You can also visit me on the web at www.oliviagates.com.

Enjoy, and thanks for reading,

Olivia Gates

One

She opened her eyes to another world.

A world filled with grainy grayness, like a TV channel with no transmission. But she didn't care.

This world had an angel watching over her.

And not just any angel. An archangel. If archangels were the personification of beauty and power, were hewn out of living rock and bronze and unadulterated maleness.

His image floated in the jumble of light and shadow, making her wonder if this was a dream. Or a hallucination. Or worse.

Probably worse. In spite of the angel's presence. Or because of it. Angels didn't watch over anyone who wasn't in some serious trouble, did they?

Would be a shame if he turned out to be the angel of death. Why make him so breathtaking if he was just a life-force extractor? He was way overqualified. Such overkill was uncalled for, if you asked her. Or maybe his extreme attractiveness was designed to make his targets willing to go where he led?

She'd be more than willing. *If* she could move.

She couldn't. Gravity overwhelmed her, squashed her back onto something that suddenly felt like a bed of thorns. Every cell in her body started to squirm, every nerve firing impulses. But the cells had no connection to each other and the nerves were unable to muster one spark of voluntary movement. Distress bombarded her, noise rose in her ears, pounding, nauseating her….

His face came closer, stilled the vertigo, swept over the cacophony, stifling it.

Her turmoil subsided. She didn't have to fight the pull of gravity, didn't have to fear the paralysis.

He was here. And he'd take care of everything.

She had no idea how she knew that. But she knew it.

She knew *him.*

Not that she had any idea who he was.

But everything inside her told her that she was safe, that everything would be okay. Because he was here.

Now if only she could get any part of her to work.

She shouldn't feel so inert upon waking up. But was she waking up? Or was she dreaming? That would explain the detachment between brain and body. That would explain *him.* He was too much to be real.

But she knew he was real. She just knew she wasn't imaginative enough to have made him up.

She knew something else, too. This man was important. In general. And to her, he was more than important. Vital.

"Cybele?"

Was that his voice? That dark, fathomless caress? It so suited the sheer magnificence of his face….

"Can you hear me?"

Boy, could she. She more than heard him. His voice spread across her skin, her pores soaking it up as if they were starved for nourishment. It permeated her with its richness, its every inflection sparking an inert nerve, restarting a vital process, reviving her.

"Cybele, if you can hear me, if you're awake this time, *por favor,* answer me."

Por favor? Spanish? Figured. So that's where the tinge of an accent came from—English intertwining with the sensuous music of the Latin tongue. She wanted to answer him. She wanted him to keep talking. Each syllable out of those works of art he had for lips, crooned in that intoxicating voice, was lulling her back to oblivion, this time a blissful one.

His face filled her field of vision. She could see every shard of gold among the emerald, moss and caramel that swirled into a luminous color she was certain she'd never seen except in his eyes.

She wanted to stab her fingers into the lushness of his raven mane, cup that leonine head, bring him even closer so she could pore over every strand's hue and radiance. She wanted to trace each groove and slash and plane that painted his face in complexity, wanted to touch each radiation of character.

This was a face mapped with anxiety and responsibility and distinction. She wanted to absorb the first, ease the second and marvel at the third. She wanted those lips against her own, mastering, filling her with the tongue that wrapped around those words and created such magic with them.

She knew she shouldn't be feeling anything like that now, that her body wasn't up to her desires. Her *body* knew that, but didn't acknowledge its incapacitation. It just needed him, close, all that maleness and bulk and power, all that tenderness and protection.

She craved this man. She'd always craved him.

"Cybele, *por Dios,* say something."

It was the raggedness, tearing at the power of his voice, that stirred her out of her hypnosis, forced her vocal cords to tauten, propelled air out of her lungs through them to produce the sound he demanded so anxiously.

"I c-can hear you…."

That came out an almost soundless rasp. From the way he tilted his ear toward her mouth, it was clear he wasn't sure whether she *had* produced sound or if he'd imagined it, whether it had been words or just a groan.

She tried again. "I'm a-awake …I think …I hope, a-and I h-hope you're r-real…."

She couldn't say anything more. Fire lanced in her throat, sealing it with a molten agony. She tried to cough up what felt like red-hot steel splinters before they burned through her larynx. Her sand-filled eyes gushed tears, ameliorating their burning dryness.

"Cybele!"

And he was all around her. He raised her, cradled her in the curve of a barricade of heat and support, seeping warmth into her frozen, quivering bones. She sank in his power, surrendered in relief as he cupped her head.

"Don't try to talk anymore. You were intubated for long hours during your surgery and your larynx must be sore."

Something cool touched her lips, then something warm and spicily fragrant lapped at their parched seam. Not his lips or his tongue. A glass and a liquid. She instinctively parted her lips and the contents rushed in a gentle flow, filling her mouth.

When she didn't swallow, he angled her head more securely. "It's a brew of anise and sage. It will soothe your throat."

He'd anticipated her discomfort, had been ready with a remedy. But why was he explaining? She would swallow anything he gave her. If she could without feeling as if nails were being driven into her throat. But he wanted her to. She had to do what he wanted.

She squeezed her eyes against the pain, swallowed. The liquid slid through the rawness, its peppery tinge bringing more tears to her eyes. That lasted only seconds. The soreness subsided under the balmy taste and temperature.

She moaned with relief, feeling rejuvenated with every encouraging sweep of tenderness that his thumb brushed over her cheek as she finished the rest of the glass's contents.

"Better now?"

The solicitude in his voice, in his eyes, thundered through her. She shuddered under the impact of her gratitude, her need to hide inside him, dissolve in his care. She tried to answer him, but this time it was emotion that clogged her throat.

But she *had* to express her thankfulness.

His face was so close, clenched with concern, more magnificent in proximity, a study of perfection in slashes of strength and carvings of character. But haggardness had sunk redness into

his eyes, iron into his jaw, and the unkemptness of a few days' growth of rough silk over that jaw and above those lips caused her heart to twist. The need to absorb his discomforts and worries as he had hers mushroomed inside her.

She turned her face, buried her lips into his hewn cheek. The bristle of his beard, the texture of his skin, the taste and scent of him tingled on her flesh, soaked into her senses. A gust of freshness and virility coursed through her, filled her lungs. His breath, rushing out on a ragged exhalation.

She opened her lips for more just as he jerked around to face her. It brought his lips brushing hers. And she knew.

This was the one thing she'd needed. This intimacy. With him.

Something she'd always had before and had missed? Something she'd had before and had lost? Something she'd never had and had long craved?

It didn't matter. She had it now.

She glided her lips against his, the flood of sensuality and sweetness of her flesh sweeping against his sizzling through her.

Then her lips were cold and bereft, the enclosure of muscle and maleness around her gone.

She slumped against what she now realized was a bed.

Where had he gone? Had it all been a hallucination? A side effect of emerging from a coma?

Her eyes teared up again with the loss. She turned her swimming head, searching for him, terrified she'd find only emptiness.

Far from emptiness, she registered her surroundings for the first time, the most luxurious and spacious hospital suite she'd ever seen. But if he wasn't there …

Her darting gaze and hurtling thoughts came to an abrupt halt.

He *was* there. Standing where he'd been when she'd first opened her eyes. But his image was distorted this time, turning him from an angel into a wrathful, inapproachable god who glowered down at her with disapproval.

She blinked once, then again, her heart shedding its sluggish rhythm for frantic pounding.

It was no use. His face remained cast in coldness. Instead of the angel she'd thought would do anything to protect her, this was the face of a man who'd stand aside and brood down at her as she drowned.

She stared up at him, something that felt as familiar as a second skin settling about her. Despondence.

It had been an illusion. Whatever she'd thought she'd seen on his face, whatever she'd felt flooding her in waves, had been her disorientation inventing what she wanted to see, to feel.

"It's clear you can move your head. Can you move everything else? Are you in any pain? Blink if it's too uncomfortable to talk. Once for yes, twice for no."

Tears surged into her eyes again. She blinked erratically. A low rumble unfurled from his depths. Must be frustration with her inability to follow such a simple direction.

But she couldn't help it. She now recognized his questions for what they were. Those asked of anyone whose consciousness had been compromised, as she was now certain hers had been. Ascertaining level of awareness, then sensory and motor functions, then pain level and site. But there was no personal worry behind the questions anymore, just clinical detachment.

She could barely breathe with missing his tenderness and anxiety for her well-being. Even if she'd imagined them.

"Cybele! Keep your eyes open, stay with me."

The urgency in his voice snapped through her, made her struggle to obey him. "I c-can't…."

He seemed to grow bigger, his hewn face etched with fierceness, frustration rippling off him. Then he exhaled. "Then just answer my questions, and I'll leave you to rest."

"I f-feel numb but." She concentrated, sent signals to her toes. They wiggled. That meant everything in between them and her brain was in working order. "Seems …motor functions are …

intact. Pain—not certain. I feel sore …like I've been flattened under a—a brick wall. B-but i-it's not pain indicating damage."

Just as the last word was out, all aches seemed to seep from every inch of her body to coalesce in one area. Her left arm.

In seconds she shot beyond the threshold of containable pain into brain-shredding agony.

It spilled from her lips on a butchered keen. "M-my arm."

She could swear he didn't move. But she found him beside her again, as if by magic, and cool relief splashed over the hot skewers of pain, putting them out.

She whimpered, realized what he'd done. She had an intravenous line in her right arm. He'd injected a drug—a narcotic analgesic from the instantaneous action—into the saline, flicked the drip to maximum.

"Are you still in pain?" She shook her head. He exhaled heavily. "That's good enough for now. I'll come back later…." He started to move away.

"No." Her good hand shot out without conscious volition, fueled by the dread that he'd disappear and she'd never see him again. This felt instinctive, engrained, the desperation that she could lose him. Or was it the resignation that he was already lost to her?

Her hand tightened around his, as if stronger contact would let her read his mind, reanimate hers, remind her what he'd been to her.

He relinquished her gaze, his incandescent one sweeping downward to where her hand was gripping his. "Your reflexes, motor power and coordination seem to be back to normal. All very good signs you're recovering better than my expectations."

From the way he said that, she guessed his expectations had ranged from pessimistic to dismal. "That …should be …a relief."

"Should be? You're not glad you're okay?"

"I am. I guess. Seems …I'm not …all there yet." The one thing that made her feel anything definite was him. And he could have been a mile away with the distance he'd placed between them. "So …what happened…to me?"

The hand beneath hers lurched. "You don't remember?" "It's all a …a blank."

His own gaze went blank for an endless moment. Then it gradually focused on her face, until she felt it was penetrating her, like an X-ray that would let him scan her, decipher her condition.

"You're probably suffering from post-traumatic amnesia. It's common to forget the traumatic episode."

Spoken like a doctor. Everything he'd said and done so far had pointed to him being one.

Was that all he was to her? Her doctor? Was that how he knew her? He'd been her doctor before the "traumatic episode" and she'd had a crush on him? Or had he just read the vital statistics on her admission papers? Had she formed dependence on and fascination for him when she'd been drifting in and out of consciousness as he'd managed her condition? Had she kissed a man who was here only in his professional capacity? A man who could be in a relationship, maybe married with children?

The pain of her suppositions grew unbearable. And she just had to know. "Wh-who are you?"

The hand beneath hers went still. All of him seemed to become rock, as if her question had a Medusa effect.

When he finally spoke, his voice had dipped an octave lower, a bass, slowed-down rasp, "You don't know me?"

"Sh-should I?" She squeezed her eyes shut as soon as the words were out. She'd just kissed him. And she was telling him that she had no idea who he was. "I know I should …b-but I can't r-remember."

Another protracted moment. Then he muttered, "You've forgotten me?"

She gaped up at him, shook her head, as if the movement would slot some comprehension into her mind. "Uh …I may have forgotten …how to speak, too. I had this …distinct belief language skills

…are the last to go …e-even in total …memory loss. I thought …saying I can't remember you … was the same as saying …I forgot who y-you are."

His gaze lengthened until she thought he wouldn't speak again. Ever. Then he let out a lung-deflating exhalation, raked his fingers through his gleaming wealth of hair. "I'm the one who's finding it hard to articulate. Your language skills are in perfect condition. In fact, I've never heard you speak that much in one breath."

"M-many fractured …breaths …you mean."

He nodded, noting her difficulty, then shook his head, in wonder it seemed. "One word to one short sentence at a time was your norm."

"So you. *do* know me. E-extensively, it seems."

The wings of his thick eyebrows drew closer together. "I wouldn't label my knowledge of you extensive."

"I'd label it …en-encyclopedic."

Another interminable silence. Then another darkest-bass murmur poured from him, thrumming every neuron in her hypersensitive nervous system. "It seems your memory deficit is the only thing that's extensive here, Cybele."

She knew she should be alarmed at this verdict. She wasn't.

She sighed. "I love …the way …you say …my name."

And if she'd thought he'd frozen before, it was nothing compared to the stillness that snared him now. It was as if time and space had hit a pause button and caught him in their stasis field.

Then, in such a controlled move, as if he were afraid she was made of soap bubbles and she'd burst if he as much as rattled the air around her, he sat down beside her on her pristine white bed.

His weight dipped the mattress, rolling her slightly toward him. The side of her thigh touched his through the thickness of his denim pants, through her own layers of covering. Something slid through the mass of aches that constituted her body, originating from somewhere deep within her, uncoiling through her gut to pool into her loins.

She was barely functioning, and he could wrench that kind of response from her every depleted cell? What would he do to her if she were in top condition? What *had* he done? Because she was certain this response to him wasn't new.

"You really don't remember who I am at all."

"You really …are finding it hard …to get my words, aren't you?" Her lips tugged. She was sure there was no humor in this situation, that when it all sank in she'd be horrified about her memory loss and what it might signify of neurological damage.

But for now, she just found it so endearing that this man, who she didn't need memory to know was a powerhouse, was so shaken by the realization.

It also said he cared what happened to her, right? She could enjoy that belief now, even if it proved to be a delusion later.

She sighed again. "I thought it was clear …what I meant. At least it sounded …clear to me. But what would I know? When I called your …knowledge of me …encyclopedic, I should have added …compared to mine. I haven't only …forgotten who you are, I have no idea …who *I* am."

Two

Rodrigo adjusted the drip, looking anywhere but at Cybele.

Cybele. His forbidden fruit. His ultimate temptation.

The woman whose very existence had been like corrosive acid coursing through his arteries. The woman the memory of whom he would have given anything to wake up free of one day.

And it was she who'd woken up free of the memory of him.

It had been two days since she'd dropped this bomb on him.

He was still reverberating with the shock.

She'd told him she didn't remember the existence that was the bane of his. She'd forgotten the very identity that had been behind the destruction of one life. And the poisoning of his own.

And he shouldn't care. Shouldn't *have* cared. Not beyond the care he offered his other patients. By all testimonies, he went above and beyond the demands of duty and the dictates of compassion for each one. He shouldn't have neglected everyone and everything to remain by her side, to do everything for her when he could have delegated her care to the highly qualified professionals he'd painstakingly picked and trained, those he paid far more than money to keep doing the stellar job they did.

He hadn't. During the three interminable days after her surgery until she woke up, whenever he'd told himself to tend to his other duties, he couldn't. She'd been in danger, and it had been beyond him to leave her.

Her inert form, her closed eyes, had been what had ruled him. The drive to get her to move, to open her eyes and look at him with those endless inky skies that had been as inescapable as a black hole since they'd first had him in their focus, had been what motivated him.

Periodically she had opened them, but there had been no sight or comprehension in them, no trace of the woman who'd invaded and occupied his thoughts ever since he'd laid eyes on her.

Yet he'd prayed that, if she never came back, her body would keep on functioning, that she'd keep opening her eyes, even if it was just a mechanical movement with no sentience behind it.

Two days ago, she'd opened those eyes and the blankness had been replaced by the fog of confusion. His heart had nearly torn a hole in his ribs when coherence had dawned in her gaze. Then she'd looked at him and there had been more.

He should have known then that she was suffering from something he hadn't factored in. Finding her distance and disdain replaced by warmth that had escalated to heat should have given him his first clue. Having her nuzzle him like a feline delighted at finding her owner, then that kiss that had rocked him to his foundations, should have clenched the diagnosis.

The Cybele Wilkinson he knew—his nemesis—would never have looked at or touched him that way if she were in her right mind. If she knew who he was.

It had still taken her saying that she wasn't and didn't to explain it all. And he'd thought *that* had explained it all.

But it was even worse. She didn't remember herself.

There was still something far worse. The temptation not to fill in the spaces that had consumed her memories, left her mind a blank slate. A slate that could be inscribed with anything that didn't mean they had to stay enemies.

But they had to. Now more than ever.

"I see you're still not talking to me."

Her voice, no longer raspy, but a smooth, rich, molten caress sweeping him from the inside out, forced him to turn his eyes to her against his will. "I've talked to you every time I came in."

"Yeah, two sentences every two hours for the past two days." She huffed something that bordered on amusement. "Feels like part of your medication regimen. Though the sparseness really contrasts with the intensiveness of your periodic checkups."

He could have relegated *those,* which hadn't needed to be so frequent, or so thorough, to nurses under his residents' supervision. But he hadn't let anyone come near her.

He turned his eyes away again, pretended to study her chart. "I've been giving you time to rest, for your throat to heal and for you to process the discovery of your amnesia."

She fidgeted, dragging his gaze back to her. "My throat has been perfectly fine since yesterday. It's a miracle what some soothing foods and drinks and talking to oneself can do. And I haven't given my amnesia any thought. I know I should be alarmed, but I'm not. Maybe it's a side effect of the trauma, and it will crash on me later as I get better. Or …I'm subconsciously relieved not to remember."

His voice sounded alien as he pushed an answer past the brutal temptation, the guilt, the rage, at her, at himself, at the whole damned universe. "Why wouldn't you want to remember?"

Her lips crooked. "If I knew, it wouldn't be a subconscious wish, would it? Am I still making sense only in my own ears?"

He tore his gaze away from her lips, focused on her eyes, cleared thorns from his throat. "No. I am not having an easy time processing the fact that you have total memory loss."

"And without memories, my imagination is having a field day thinking of outlandish explanations for why I'm not in a hurry to have my memories back. At least they seem outlandish. They might turn out to be the truth."

"And what are those theories?"

"That I was a notorious criminal or a spy, someone with a dark and dangerous past and who's in desperate need of a second chance, a clean slate. And now that it's been given to me, I'd rather not remember the past—my own identity most of all."

She struggled to sit up, groaning at the aches he knew her body had amassed. He tried to stop himself.

He failed. He lunged to help her, tried not to feel the supple heat of her flesh fill his hands as he pulled her up, adjusted her bed to a gentle slope. He struggled to ignore the gratitude filling her eyes, the softness of trust and willingness exhibited by every inch of her flesh. He roared inwardly at his senses as the feel and scent of her turned his insides to molten lava, his loins to rock. He gritted his teeth, made sure her intravenous line and the other leads monitoring her vital signs were secure.

Her hands joined his in checking her line and leads, an unconscious action born of engrained knowledge and ongoing application. He stepped away as if from a fiery pit.

She looked up at him, those royal blue eyes filling with a combo of confusion and hurt at his recoil. He took one more step back before he succumbed to the need to erase that crestfallen expression.

She lowered her eyes. "So—you're a doctor. A surgeon?" He was, for once, grateful for her questions. "Neurosurgeon."

She raised her eyes again. "And from the medical terms filling my mind and the knowledge of what the machines here are and what the values they're displaying mean—I'm some kind of medical professional, too?"

"You were a senior trauma/reconstructive surgery resident."

"Hmm, that blows my criminal or spy theories out of the water. But maybe I was in another form of trouble before I ended up here? A ruinous malpractice suit? Some catastrophic mistake that killed someone? Was I about to have my medical license revoked?"

"I never suspected you had this fertile an imagination."

"Just trying to figure out why I'm almost relieved I don't remember a thing. Was I perhaps running away to start again where no one knows me? Came here and …hey, where *is* here?"

He almost kept expecting her to say *gotcha.* But the notion of Cybele playing a trick on him was more inconceivable than her total memory loss. "This is my private medical center. It's on the outskirts of Barcelona."

"We're in Spain?" Her eyes widened. His heart kicked. Even with her lids still swollen and her face bruised and pallid, she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. "Okay, scratch that question. As far as my general knowledge can tell—and I feel it remains unaffected—there is no Barcelona anywhere else."

"Not that I know of, no."

"So—I sound American."

"You are American."

"And you're Spanish?"

"Maybe to the world, which considers all of Spain one community and everyone who hails from there as Spanish. But I am Catalan. And though in Catalonia we have the same king, and a constitution that declares 'the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation,' we were the first to be recognized as a *Nacionalidad* and a *Comunidad Autónoma* or a distinct historical nationality and an autonomous community, along with the Basque Country and Galicia. There are now seventeen such communities that make up Spain, with our rights to self-government recognized by the constitution."

"Fascinating. Sort of a federation, like the United States."

"There are similarities, but it's a different system. The regional governments are responsible for education, health, social services, culture, urban and rural development and, in some places, policing. But contrary to the States, Spain is described as a decentralized country, with central government spending estimated at less than twenty percent." And he was damned if he knew why he was telling her all that, now of all times.

She chewed her lower lip that was once again the color of deep pink rose petals. His lips tingled with the memory of those lips, plucking at them, bathing them with intoxicating heat and moistness. "I knew some of that, but not as clearly as you've put it."

He exhaled his aggravation at the disintegration of his sense and self-control. "Pardon the lesson. My fascination with the differences between the two systems comes from having both citizenships."

"So you acquired the American citizenship?"

"Actually, I was born in the States, and acquired my Spanish citizenship after I earned my medical degree. Long story."

"But you have an accent."

He blinked his surprise at the implication of her words, something he'd never suspected. "I spent my first eight years in an exclusively Spanish-speaking community in the States and learned English only from then on. But I was under the impression I'd totally lost the accent."

"Oh, no, you haven't. And I hope you never lose it. It's *gorgeous."*

Everything inside him surged. This was something else he'd never considered. What she'd do to him if, instead of hostility, admiration and invitation spread on her face, invaded her body, if instead of bristling at the sight of him, she looked at him as if she'd like nothing more than to feast on him. As she was now.

What was going on here? How had memory loss changed her character and attitude so diametrically? Did that point to more neurological damage than he'd feared? Or was this what she was really like, what her reaction to him would have been if not for the events that had messed up their whole situation?

"So …what's your name? What's mine, too, apart from Cybele?"

"You're Cybele Wilkinson. I'm Rodrigo." "Just …Rodrigo?"

She used to call him Dr. Valderrama, and in situations requiring informality she'd avoided calling him anything at all. But now she pressed back into her pillows, let his name melt on her tongue as if it were the darkest, richest chocolate. He felt her contented purr cascade down his body, caress his aching hardness….

This was unbelievable. That she could do this to him *now*. Or at all. It was worse than unbelievable. It was unacceptable.

He shredded his response. “Rodrigo Edmundo Arrellano i Bazán Valderrama i de Urquiza.”

Her eyes widened a fraction more with each surname. Then a huff that bordered on a giggle escaped her. “I did ask.”

His lips twisted. “That’s an excerpt of my names, actually. I can rattle off over forty more surnames.”

She giggled for real this time. “That’s a family tree going back to the Spanish Inquisition.”

“The Catalan, and the Spanish in general, take family trees very seriously. Because both maternal and paternal ancestors are mentioned, each name makes such a list. The Catalan also put *i* or *and* between surnames.”

“And do I have more than the measly Wilkinson?”

“All I know is that your father’s name was Cedric.”

“Was? H-he’s dead?”

“Since you were six or seven, I believe.”

She seemed to have trouble swallowing again. He had to fist his hands against the need to rush to her side again.

His heart still hammered in protest against his restraint when she finally whispered, “Do I have a mother? A family?”

“Your mother remarried and you have four half siblings. Three brothers and one sister. They all live in New York City.”

“D-do they know what happened to me?”

“I did inform them. Yesterday.” He hadn’t even thought of doing so until his head nurse had stressed the necessity of alerting her next of kin. For the seventh time. He hadn’t even registered the six previous times she had mentioned it. He waited for her next logical question. If they were on their way here to claim responsibility for her.

His gut tightened. Even with all he had against her, not the least of which was the reaction she wrenched from him, he hated to have to answer that question. To do so, he’d have to tell her that her family’s response to her danger had been so offhand, he’d ended the phone call with her mother on a barked, “Don’t bother explaining your situation to me, Mrs. Doherty. I’m sure you’d be of more use at your husband’s business dinner than you would be at Cybele’s bedside.”

But her next question did not follow a logical progression. Just as this whole conversation, which she’d steered, hadn’t. “So …what happened to me?”

And this was a question he wanted to avoid as fiercely.

No way to do that now that she’d asked so directly. He exhaled. “You were in a plane crash.”

A gasp tore out of her. “I just knew I was in an accident, that I wasn’t attacked or anything, but I thought it was an MVA or something. But …a plane crash?” She seemed to struggle with air that had gone thick, lodging in her lungs. He rocked on his heels with the effort not to rush to her with an oxygen mask and soothing hands. “Were there many injured o-or worse?”

Dios. She really remembered nothing. And he was the one who had to tell her. Everything. “It was a small plane. Seated four. There were only …two onboard this time.”

“Me and the pilot? I might not remember anything, but I just know I can’t fly a plane, small or otherwise.”

This was getting worse and worse. He didn’t want to answer her. He didn’t want to relive the three days before she’d woken up, that had gouged their scars in his psyche and soul.

He could pretend he had a surgery, escape her interrogation.

He couldn’t. Escape. Stop himself from answering her. “He was flying the plane, yes.” “Is—is he okay, too?”

Rodrigo gritted his teeth against the blast of pain that detonated behind his sternum. “He’s dead.”

“Oh, God ….” Her tears brimmed again and he couldn’t help himself anymore. He closed the distance he’d put between them, stilled the tremors of her hand with both of his. “D-did he die on impact?”

He debated telling her that he had. He could see survivor’s guilt mushrooming in her eyes. What purpose did it serve to tell her the truth but make her more miserable?

But then he always told his patients the truth. Sooner or later that always proved the best course of action.

He inhaled. “He died on the table after a six-hour surgery.”

During those hours, he’d wrestled with death, gaining an inch to lose two to its macabre pull, knowing that it would win the tug-of-war. But what had wrecked his sanity had been knowing that while he fought this losing battle, Cybele had been lying in his ER tended to by others.

Guilt had eaten through him. Triage had dictated he take care of her first, the one likely to survive. But he couldn’t have let Mel go without a fight. It had been an impossible choice. Emotionally, professionally, morally. He’d gone mad thinking she’d die or suffer irreversible damage because he’d made the wrong one.

Then he’d lost the fight for Mel’s life among colleagues’ proclamations that it had been a miracle he’d even kept him alive for hours when everyone had given up on him at the accident scene.

He’d rushed to her, knowing that while he’d exercised the ultimate futility on Mel, her condition had worsened. Terror of losing her, too, had been the one thing giving him continued access to what everyone extolled as his vast medical knowledge and surgical expertise.

“Tell me, please. The details of his injuries.”

He didn’t want to tell her how terrible it had all been.

But he had to. He inhaled a stream of what felt like aerosolized acid, then told her.

Her tears flowed steadily over a face gone numb with horror throughout his chilling report.

She finally whispered, “How did the accident happen?”

He needed this conversation to be over. He gritted his teeth. “That is one thing only you can know for sure. And it’ll probably be the last memory to return. The crash site and plane were analyzed for possible whys and hows. The plane shows no signs of malfunction and there were no distress transmissions prior to the crash.”

“So the pilot just lost control of the plane?”

“It would appear so.”

She digested this for a moment. “What about my injuries?”

“You should only concern yourself now with recuperating.”

“But I need to know a history of my injuries, their progression and management, to chart my recuperation.”

He grudgingly conceded her logic. “On site, you were unconscious. You had a severely bleeding scalp wound and bruising all over your body. But your severest injury was comminuted fractures of your left ulna and radius.”

She winced as she looked down on her splinted arm. “What was my Glasgow Coma Scale scoring?”

“Eleven. Best eye response was three, with your eyes opening only in response to speech. Best verbal response was four, with your speech ranging from random words to confused responses. Best motor function was four with flexion withdrawal response to pain. By the time I operated on you, your GCS had plunged to five.”

“Ouch. I was heading for decorticate coma. Did I have intracranial hemorrhage?”

He gave a difficult nod. “It must have been a slow leak. Your initial CTs and MRIs revealed nothing but slight brain edema, accounting for your depressed consciousness. But during the other

surgery, I was informed of your deteriorating neurological status, and new tests showed a steadily accumulating subdural hematoma."

"You didn't shave my hair evacuating it."

"No need. I operated via a new minimally invasive technique I've developed."

She gaped at him. "You've developed a new surgical technique? Excuse me while my mind, tattered as it is, barrels in awe."

He grunted something dismissive. She eyed him with a wonder that seemed only to rise at his discomfort. Just as he almost growled *stop it,* she raised one beautifully dense and dark eyebrow at him. "I trust I wasn't the guinea pig for said technique?"

Cybele gazed up at Rodrigo, a smile hovering on her lips.

His own lips tightened. "You're fine, aren't you?" "If you consider having to get my life story from you as *fine."*

The spectacular wings of his eyebrows snapped together. That wasn't annoyance or affront. That was mortification. Pain, even.

Words couldn't spill fast enough from her battered brain to her lips. "God, that was such a lame joke. Just shows I'm in no condition to know how or when to make one. I owe you my life."

"You owe me nothing. I was doing my job. And I didn't even do it well. I'm responsible for your current condition. It's my failure to manage you first that led to the deepening of the insult to your brai—"

"The pilot's worst injuries were neurological." She cut him short. It physically hurt to see the self-blame eating at him.

"Yes, but that had nothing to do with my decision—"

"And I bet you're the best neurosurgeon on the continent."

"I don't know about that, but being the most qualified one on hand didn't mea—"

"It *did* mean you had to take care of him yourself. And my initial condition misled you into believing my case wasn't urgent. You did the right thing. You fought for this man as he deserved to be fought for. And then you fought for me. And you saved me. And then, I'm certain my condition is temporary."

"We have no way of knowing that. Having total memory loss with the retention of all faculties of language and logic and knowledge and no problem in accumulating new memories is a very atypical form of amnesia. It might never resolve fully."

"Would that be a bad thing, in your opinion? If the idea of regaining my memories is almost… distressing, maybe my life was so bad, I'm better off not remembering it?"

He seemed at a loss for words. Then he finally found some. "I am not in a position to know the answer to that. But I am in a position to know that memory loss is a neurological deficit, and it's my calling to fix those. I can't under any circumstances wish that this wouldn't resolve. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to tend to my other patients. I'll be back every three hours to check on you."

With a curt nod, he turned and left her, exiting the huge, opulent suite in strides loaded with tense grace.

She wanted to run after him, beg him to come back.

What could possibly explain all this turmoil and her severe attraction to him? Had they been lovers, married even, and they'd separated, or maybe divorced… ?

She suddenly lurched as if from the blow of an ax as a memory lodged in her brain. No … a knowledge.

She *was* married.

And it was certainly not to Rodrigo.

Three

Rodrigo did come back in three hours. And stayed for three minutes. Long enough to check on her and adjust her medical management. Then he repeated that pattern for the next three days. She even felt him come in during her fitful sleep.

She hadn't had the chance to tell him what she'd remembered.

No. She hadn't *wanted* to tell him. Discovering she was married, even if she didn't know to whom, wasn't on her list of things to share with him of all people.

And he probably already knew.

She *could* have told him that she'd also remembered who she was. But then, she hadn't remembered much beyond the basics he'd told her.

This boded well for her memory deficit, if it was receding so early.

She didn't want it to recede, wanted to cling to the blankness with all her strength.

But it was no use. A few hours ago, a name had trickled into the parting darkness of her mind. Mel Braddock.

She was certain that was her husband's name. But she couldn't put a face to the name. The only memory she could attach to said name was a profession. General surgeon.

Beyond that, she remembered nothing of the marriage. She knew only that something dark pressed down on her every time the knowledge of it whispered in her mind.

She couldn't possibly feel this way if they'd been on good terms. And if he wasn't here, days after his wife had been involved in a serious accident, were they separated, getting divorced even? She was certain she was still married. Technically, at least. But the marriage was over. That would explain her overriding emotions for Rodrigo, that she innately knew it was okay to feel them.

On the strike of three hours, Rodrigo returned. And she'd progressed from not wanting to bring up any of it to wanting to scream it all at the top of her lungs.

He made no eye contact with her as he strode in flanked by two doctors and a nurse. He never came unescorted anymore. It was as if he didn't want to be alone with her again.

He checked her chart, informed his companions of his adjustment of her medications as if she wasn't in the room much less a medical professional who could understand everything they were saying. Frustration frothed inside her. Then it boiled over.

"I remembered a few things."

Rodrigo went still at her outburst. The other people in the room fidgeted, eyed her uncomfortably before turning uncertain gazes to their boss. Still without looking at her, he hung her chart back at the foot of the bed, murmured something clearly meant for the others' ears alone. They rushed out in a line.

The door had closed behind the last departing figure for over two minutes before he turned his eyes toward her.

She shuddered with the force of his elemental impact.

Oh, please. Let me have the right to feel this way about him.

The intensity of his being buzzed in her bones—of his focus, of his …wariness?

Was he anxious to know what she remembered? Worried about it? Because he suspected what it was—the husband she remembered only in name? He'd told her of her long-dead father, her existing family, but not about that husband. Would he have told her if she hadn't remembered?

But there was something more in his vibe. Something she'd felt before. After she'd kissed him. Disapproval? Antipathy?

Had they been on bad terms before the accident? How could they have been, if she felt this vast attraction to him, untainted by any negativity? Had the falling out been her fault? Was he bitter? Was

he now taking care of her to honor his calling, his duty, giving her extra special care for old times' sake, yet unable to resume their intimacy? *Had* they been intimate? Was he her lover?

No. He wasn't.

She might not remember much about herself, but the thought of being in a relationship, no matter how unhealthy, and seeking involvement with another felt abhorrent to her, no matter how inexorable the temptation. And then, there was him. He radiated nobility. She just knew Rodrigo Valderrama would never poach on another man's grounds, never cross the lines of honor, no matter how much he wanted her or how dishonorable the other man was.

But there was one paramount proof that told her they'd never been intimate. Her body. It burned for him but knew it had never had him. It would have borne his mark on its every cell if it had.

So what did it all mean? He had to tell her, before something beside memories short-circuited inside her brain.

He finally spoke. "What did you remember?"

"Who I am. That I'm married." He showed no outward reaction. So he *had* known. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask."

"I asked about family."

"I thought you were asking about flesh-and-blood relatives."

"You're being evasive."

"Am I?" He held her gaze, making her feel he was giving her a psyche and soul scan. Maybe trying to steer her thoughts, too. "So you remember everything?"

She exhaled. "I said I remembered 'a few things.' Seems I'm a stickler for saying exactly what I mean."

"You said you remembered who you were, and your marriage. That's just about everything, isn't it?"

"Not when I remember only the basics about myself, the name you told me, that I went to Harvard Medical School, that I worked at St. Giles Hospital and that I'm twenty-nine. I know far less than the basics about my marriage. I remembered only that I have a husband, and his name and profession."

"That's all?"

"The rest is speculation."

"What kind of speculation?"

"About the absence of both my family and husband more than a week after I've been involved in a major accident. I can only come up with very unfavorable explanations."

"What would those be?"

"That I'm a monster of such megaproportions that no one felt the need to rush to my bedside." Something flared in his eyes, that harshness. So she was right? He thought so, too? Her heart compressed as she waited for him to confirm or negate her suspicions. When he didn't, she dejectedly had to consider his silence as corroboration, condemnation. She still looked for a way out for herself, for her family. "Unless it is beyond them financially to make the trip here?"

"As far as I know, finances are no issue to your family."

"So you told them I was at death's door, and no one bothered to come."

"I told them no such thing. You weren't at death's door."

"It *could* have gone either way for a while."

Silence. Heavy. Oppressive. Then he simply said, "Yes."

"So I'm on the worst terms with them."

It seemed he'd let this go uncommented on, too. Then he gave a noncommittal shrug. "I don't know about the worst terms. But it's my understanding you're not close."

"Not even with my mother?"

"Especially with your mother."

"Great. See? I was right when I thought I was better off not remembering. Not knowing."

"It isn't as bad as you're painting it. By the time I called your family, you were stable, and there really was nothing for any of them to do but wait like the rest of us. Your mother did call twice for updates, and I told her you were doing very well. Physically. Psychologically, I suggested it might not be a good thing in this early phase for you to be jogged by their presence or contact, any more than you already are."

He was making excuses for her family, her mother. If they'd cared, they wouldn't have been satisfied with long-distance assurances. Or maybe he had discouraged them from coming, so he wouldn't introduce an unpredictable emotional element into her neurological recovery?

The truth was, she didn't care right now how things really stood with her family. What she was barely able to breathe from needing to know was her status with her husband.

"And that's my not-so-bad situation with my family. But from my husband's pointed absence, I can only assume the worst. That maybe we're separated or getting divorced."

She wanted him to say, *Yes, you are.*

Please, say it.

His jaw muscles bunched, his gaze chilled. When he finally spoke it felt like an arctic wind blasting her, freezing her insides with this antipathy that kept spiking out of nowhere.

"Far from being separated, you and your husband have been planning a second honeymoon."

Cybele doubted the plane crashing into the ground had a harder impact than Rodrigo's revelation.

Her mind emptied. Her heart spilled all of its beats at once.

For a long, horrified moment she stared at him, speech skills and thought processes gone, only blind instincts left. They all screamed *run, hide, deny.*

She'd been so certain…so…certain.

"A second honeymoon?" She heard her voice croaking. "Does that mean we …we've been married long?"

He waited an eternity before answering. At least it felt that way. By the time he did, she felt she'd aged ten years. "You were married six months ago."

"Six *months?* And already planning a second honeymoon?"

"Maybe I should have said honeymoon, period. Circumstances stopped you from having one when you first got married."

"And yet my adoring husband isn't here. Our plans probably were an attempt to salvage a marriage that was malfunctioning beyond repair, and we shouldn't have bothered going through the motions…."

She stopped, drenched in mortification. She instinctively knew she wasn't one to spew vindictiveness like that. Her words had been acidic enough to eat through the gleaming marble floor.

Their corrosiveness had evidently splashed Rodrigo. From the way his face slammed shut, he clearly disapproved of her sentiments and the way she'd expressed them. Of her.

"I don't know much about your relationship. But his reason for not being at your bedside *is* uncontestable. He's dead."

She lurched as if he'd backhanded her.

"He was flying the plane," she choked.

"You remember?"

"No. Oh, God." A geyser of nausea shot from her depths. She pitched to the side of the bed. Somehow she found Rodrigo around her, holding her head and a pan. She retched emptily, shook like a bell that had been struck by a giant mallet.

And it wasn't from a blow of grief. It was from one of horror, at the anger and relief that were her instinctive reactions.

What kind of monster was she to feel like that about somebody's death, let alone that of her husband? Even if she'd fiercely wanted out of the relationship. Was it because of what she felt for Rodrigo? She'd wished her husband dead to be with him?

No. *No.* She just knew it hadn't been like that. It had to have been something else. Could her husband have been abusing her? Was she the kind of woman who would have suffered humiliation and damage, too terrified to block the blows or run away?

She consulted her nature, what transcended memory, what couldn't be lost or forgotten, what was inborn and unchangeable.

It said, no way. If that man had abused her, emotionally or physically, she would have carved his brains out with forceps and sued him into his next few reincarnations.

So what did this mess mean?

"Are you okay?"

She shuddered miserably. "If feeling mad when I should be sad is okay. There must be more wrong with me than I realized."

After the surprise her words induced, contemplation settled on his face. "Anger *is* a normal reaction in your situation."

"What?" He knew why it was okay to feel so mad at a dead man?

"It's a common reaction for bereaved people to feel anger at their loved ones who die and leave them behind. It's worse when someone dies in an accident that that someone had a hand in or caused. The first reaction after shock and disbelief is rage, and it's all initially directed toward the victim. That also explains your earlier attack of bitterness. Your subconscious must have known that he was the one flying the plane. It might have recorded all the reports that flew around you at the crash site."

"You're saying I speak Spanish?"

He frowned. "Not to my knowledge. But maybe you approximated enough medical terminology to realize the extent of his injuries…."

"Ya lo sé hablar español."

She didn't know which of them was more flabbergasted.

The Spanish words had flowed from a corner in her mind to her tongue without conscious volition. And she certainly knew what they meant. *I know how to speak Spanish.*

"I…had no idea you spoke Spanish."

"Neither did I, obviously. But I get the feeling that the knowledge is partial…fresh."

"Fresh? How so?"

"It's just a feeling, since I remember no facts. It's like I've only started learning it recently."

He fixed her with a gaze that seeped into her skin, mingled into the rapids of her blood. Her temperature inched higher.

Was he thinking what she was thinking? That she'd started learning Spanish because of him? To understand his mother tongue, understand *him* better, to get closer to him?

At last he said, "Whatever the case may be, you evidently know enough Spanish to validate my theory."

He was assigning her reactions a perfectly human and natural source. Wonder what he'd say if she set him straight?

She bet he'd think her a monster. And she wouldn't blame him. She was beginning to think it herself.

Next second she was no longer thinking it. She knew it.

The memory that perforated her brain like a bullet was a visual. An image that corkscrewed into her marrow. The image of Mel, the husband she remembered with nothing but anger, whose death aroused only a mixture of resentment and liberation.

In a wheelchair.

Other facts dominoed like collapsing pillars, crushing everything beneath their impact. Not memories, just knowledge.

Mel had been paralyzed from the waist down. In a car accident. *During* their relationship. She didn't know if it had been before or after they'd gotten married. She didn't think it mattered.

She'd been right when she'd hypothesized why no one had rushed to her bedside. She was heartless.

What else could explain harboring such harshness toward someone who'd been so afflicted? The man she'd promised to love in sickness and in health? The one she'd basically felt "good riddance" toward when death *did* them part?

In the next moment, the air was sucked out of her lungs from a bigger blow.

"Cybele? *¿Te duele?*"

Her ears reverberated with the concern in Rodrigo's voice, her vision rippled over the anxiety warping his face. No. She wasn't okay. She was a monster. She was amnesic. And she was pregnant.

Four

Excruciating minutes of dry retching later, Cybele lay surrounded by Rodrigo, alternating between episodes of inertness and bone-rattling shudders.

He soothed her with the steady pressure of his containment, wiping her eyelids and lips in fragrant coolness, his stroking persistent, hypnotic. His stability finally earthed her misery.

He tilted the face she felt had swollen to twice its original size to his. “You remembered something else?”

“A few things,” she hiccupped, struggled to sit up. The temptation to lie in his arms was overwhelming. The urge only submerged her under another breaker of guilt and confusion.

He helped her sit up, then severed all contact, no doubt not wanting to continue it a second beyond necessary.

Needing to put more distance between them, she swung her numb legs to the floor, slipped into the downy slippers that were among the dozens of things he’d supplied for her comfort, things that felt tailored to her size and needs and desires.

She wobbled with her IV drip pole to the panoramic window overlooking the most amazing verdant hills she’d ever seen. Yet she saw nothing but Rodrigo’s face, seared into her retinas, along with the vague but nausea-inducing images of Mel in his wheelchair, his rugged good looks pinched and pale, his eyes accusing.

She swung around, almost keeled over. She gasped, saw Rodrigo’s body bunch like a panther about to uncoil in a flying leap. He was across the room, but he’d catch her if she collapsed.

She wouldn’t. Her skin was crackling where he’d touched her. She couldn’t get enough of his touch but couldn’t let him touch her again. She held out a detaining hand, steadied herself.

He still rose but kept his distance, his eyes catching the afternoon sun, which poured in ropes of warm gold through the wall-to-wall glass. Their amalgamated color glowed as he brooded across the space at her, his eyebrows lowered, his gaze immobilizing.

She hugged her tender left shoulder, her wretchedness thickening, hardening, settling into concrete deadness. “The things I just remembered …I wouldn’t call them real memories. At least, not when I compare them to the memories I’ve been accumulating since I regained consciousness. I remember those in Technicolor, frame by frame, each accompanied by sounds and scents and sensations. But the things I just recalled came in colorless, soundless and shapeless, like skeletons of data and knowledge. Like headings without articles. If that makes any sense.”

He lowered his eyes to his feet, before raising them again, the surgeon in him assessing. “It makes plenty of sense. I’ve dealt with a lot of post-traumatic amnesia cases, studied endless records, and no one described returning memories with more economy and efficiency than you just did. But it’s still early. Those skeletal memories will be fleshed out eventually….”

“I don’t want them fleshed out. I want them to stop coming, I want what came back to disappear.” She squeezed her shoulder, inducing more pain, to counteract the skewer turning in her gut. “They’ll keep exploding in my mind until they blow it apart.”

“What did you remember this time?”

Her shoulders sagged. “That Mel was a paraplegic.”

He didn’t nod or blink or breathe. He just held her gaze. It was the most profound and austere acknowledgment.

And she moaned the rest, “And I’m pregnant.”

He blinked, slowly, the motion steeped in significance. He knew. And it wasn’t a happy knowledge. Why?

One explanation was that she’d been leaving Mel, but he’d become paralyzed and she’d discovered her pregnancy and it had shattered their plans. Was that the origin of the antipathy she

had felt radiating from him from time to time? Was he angry at her for leading him on then telling him that she couldn't leave her husband now that he was disabled and she was expecting his child?

She wouldn't know unless he told her. It didn't seem he was volunteering any information.

She exhaled. "Judging from my concave abdomen, I'm in the first trimester."

"Yes." Then as if against his better judgment, he added, "You're three weeks pregnant."

"Three *weeks …?.* How on earth do you know that? Even if you had a pregnancy test done among others before my surgery, you can't pinpoint the stage of my pregnancy that accurate—" Her words dissipated under another gust of realization. "I'm pregnant through IVF. That's how you know how far along I am."

"Actually, you had artificial insemination. Twenty days ago." "Don't tell me. You know the exact hour I had it, too." "It was performed at 1:00 p.m."

She gaped at him, finding nothing to explain that too-specific knowledge. And the whole scenario of her pregnancy.

If it had been unplanned and she'd discovered it after she'd decided to leave Mel, that would still make her a cold-blooded two-timer. But it hadn't been unplanned. Pregnancies didn't come more planned than *that.* Evidently, she'd *wanted* to have a baby with Mel. So much that she'd made one through a procedure, when he could no longer make one with her the normal way. The intimate way.

So their marriage *had* been healthy. Until then. Which gave credence to Rodrigo's claim that they'd been planning a honeymoon. Maybe to celebrate her pregnancy.

So how come her first reaction to his death was bitter relief, and to her pregnancy such searing dismay?

What kind of twisted psyche did she have?

There was only one way to know. Rodrigo. He kept filling in the nothingness that had consumed most of what seemed to have been a maze of a life. But he was doing so reluctantly, cautiously, probably being of the school that thought providing another person's memories would make reclaiming hers more difficult, or would taint or distort them as they returned.

She didn't care. Nothing could be more tainted or distorted than her own interpretations. Whatever he told her would provide context, put it all in a better light. Make her someone she could live with. She had to pressure him into telling her what he knew….Her streaking thoughts shrieked to a halt.

She couldn't *believe* she hadn't wondered. About *how* he knew what he knew. She'd let his care sweep her up, found his knowledge of her an anchoring comfort she hadn't thought to question.

She blurted out the questions under pressure. "Just how do you know all this? How do you know me? And Mel?"

The answer detonated in her mind.

It was that look in his eyes. Barely curbed fierceness leashed behind the steel control of the surgeon and the suave refinement of the man. She remembered *that* look. *Really* remembered it. Not after she'd kissed him. Long before that. In that life she didn't remember.

In that life, Rodrigo had despised her.

And it hadn't been because she'd led him on, then wouldn't leave Mel. It was worse. Far worse.

He'd been Mel's best friend.

The implications of this knowledge were horrifying.

However things had been before, or worse, *after* Mel had been disabled, if she'd exhibited her attraction to Rodrigo, then he had good reason to detest her. The best.

"You remembered."

She raised hesitant eyes at his rasp. "Sort of."

"Sort of? Now that's eloquent. More skeletal headlines?"

There was that barely contained fury again. She blinked back distress. "I remember that you were his closest friend, and that's how you know so much about us, down to the hour we had a

procedure to conceive a baby. Sorry I can't do better." And she was damned if she'd ask him what the situation between *them* had been. She dreaded he'd verify her speculations. "I'm sure the rest will come back. In a flood or bit by bit. No need to hang around here waiting for either event. I want to be discharged."

He looked at her as if she'd sprouted two more sets of eyes. "Get back in bed, now, Cybele. Your lucidity is disintegrating with every moment on your feet, every word out of your mouth."

"Don't give me the patronizing medical tone, Dr. Valderrama. I'm a license-holding insider, if you remember."

"You mean if *you* remember, don't you?"

"I remember enough. I can recuperate outside this hospital."

"You can only under meticulous medical supervision." "I can provide that for myself."

"You mean you don't 'remember' the age-proven adage that doctors make the worst patients?"

"It has nothing to do with remembering it, just not subscribing to it. I can take care of myself."

"No, you can't. But I will discharge you. Into my custody. I will take you to my estate to continue your recuperation."

His declaration took the remaining air from her lungs.

His custody. His estate. She almost swayed under the impact of the images that crowded her mind, of what both would be like, the temptation to jump into his arms and say *Yes, please.*

She had to say no. Get away from him. And fast. "Listen, I was in a terrible accident, but I got off pretty lightly. I would have died if you and your ultra-efficient medical machine hadn't intervened, but you did, and you fixed me. I'm fine."

"You're so far from fine, you could be in another galaxy."

It was just *wrong.* That he'd have a sense of humor, too. That it would surface now. And would pluck at her own humor strings.

She sighed at her untimely, inappropriate reaction. "Don't exaggerate. All I have wrong with me is a few missing memories."

"A few? Shall we make a list of what you do remember, those headlines with the vanished articles, and another of the volumes you've had erased and might never be able to retrieve, then revisit your definition of 'a few'?"

"Cute." And he was. In an unbearably virile and overruling way. "But at the rate I'm retrieving headlines, I'll soon have enough to fill said volumes."

"Even if you do, that isn't your only problem. You had a severe concussion with brain edema and subdural hematoma. I operated on you for ten hours. Half of those were with orthopedic and vascular surgeons as we put your arm back together. Ramón said it was the most intricate open reduction and internal fixation of his career, while Bianca and I had a hell of a time repairing your blood vessels and nerves. Afterward, you were comatose for three days and woke up with a total memory deficit. Right now your neurological status is suspect, your arm is useless, you have bruises and contusions from head to toe and you're in your first trimester. Your body will need double the time and effort to heal during this most physiologically demanding time. It amazes me you're talking, and that much, moving at all and not lying in bed disoriented and sobbing for more painkillers."

"Thanks for the rundown of my condition, but seems I'm more amazing than you think. I'm pretty lucid and I can talk as endlessly as *you* evidently can. And the pain is nowhere as bad as before."

"You're pumped full of painkillers."

"No, I'm not. I stopped the drip."

"What?" He strode toward her in steps loaded with rising tension. He inspected her drip, scowled down on her.

"When?"

"The moment you walked out after your last inspection." "That means you have no more painkillers in your system."

"I don't need any. The pain in my arm is tolerable now. I think it was coming out of the anesthesia of unconsciousness that made it intolerable by comparison."

He shook his head. "I think we also need to examine your definition of 'pretty lucid.' You're not making sense to me. Why feel pain at all, when you can have it dealt with?"

"Some discomfort keeps me sharp, rebooting my system instead of lying in drug-induced comfort, which might mask some deterioration in progress. What about *that* doesn't make sense to you?"

He scowled. "I *was* wondering what kept you up and running."

"Now you know. *And* I vividly recall my medical training. I may be amnesic but I'm not reckless. I'll take every precaution, do things by the post-operative, post-trauma book…."

"I'm keeping you by my side until I'm satisfied that you're back to your old capable-of-taking-on-the-world self."

That silenced whatever argument she would have fired back.

She'd had the conviction that he didn't think much of her.

So he believed she was strong, but despised her because she'd come on stronger to him? Could she have done something so out-of-character? She abhorred infidelity, found no excuse for it. At least the woman who'd awakened from the coma did not.

Then he surprised her more. "I'm not talking about how you were when you were with Mel, but before that."

She didn't think to ask how he knew what she'd been like before Mel. She was busy dealing with the suspicion that he was right, that her relationship with Mel *had* derailed her.

More broad lines resurfaced. How she'd wanted to be nothing like her mother, who'd left a thriving career to serve the whims of Cybele's stepfather, how she'd thought she'd never marry, would have a child on her own when her career had become unshakable.

Though she didn't have a time line, she sensed that until months ago, she'd held the same convictions.

So how had she found herself married, at such a crucial time as her senior residency year, and pregnant, too? Had she loved Mel so much that she'd been so blinded? Had she had setbacks in her job in consequence, known things would keep going downhill and that was why she remembered him with all this resentment? Was that why she'd found an excuse to let her feelings for Rodrigo blossom?

Not that there could be an excuse for that.

But strangely, she wasn't sorry she was pregnant. In fact, that was what ameliorated this mess, the one thing she was looking forward to. That …and, to her mortification, being with Rodrigo.

Which was exactly why she couldn't accept his carte blanche proposal.

"Thank you for the kind offer, Rodrigo—"

He cut her off. "It's neither kind nor an offer. It's imperative and it's a decision."

Now *that* was a premium slice of unadulterated autocracy.

She sent up a fervent thank-you for the boost to her seconds-ago-nonexistent resistance. "Imperative or imperious? Decision or dictate?"

"Great language recall and usage. And take your pick." "I think it's clear I already did. And whatever you choose to call your *offer,* I can't accept it." "You mean you won't."

"Fine. If you insist on dissecting my refusal. I won't."

"It seems you *have* forgotten all about me, Cybele. If you remembered even the most basic things, you'd know that when I make a decision, saying no to me is not an option."

Cybele stared at him. Life was grossly, horribly unfair. How did one being end up endowed with all that?

And she'd thought he had it all before she'd seen him crook his lips in that I-click-my-fingers-and-all-sentient-beings-obey quasi smile.

Now there was one thought left in her mind. An urge. To get as far away from him as possible. Against all logic. And desire.

Her lips twisted, too. "I didn't get that memo. Or I 'forgot' I did. So *I* can say no to you. Consider it a one-off anomaly."

That tiger-like smirk deepened. "You can say what you want. I'm your surgeon and what *I* say goes."

The way he'd said *your surgeon.* Everything clamored inside her, wishing he was her anything-and-everything, for real.

She shook her head to disperse the idiotic yearnings. "I'll sign any waiver you need me to. I'm taking full responsibility."

"I'm the one taking full responsibility for you. If you do remember being a surgeon, you know that my being yours makes me second only to God in this situation. You have no say in God's will, do you?"

"You're taking the God complex too literally, aren't you?"

"My status in your case is an uncontestable fact. You're in my care and will remain there until I'm satisfied you no longer need it. The one choice I leave up to you is whether I follow you up in my home as my guest, or in my hospital as my patient."

Cybele looked away from his hypnotic gaze, his logic. But there was no escaping either. It *had* been desperation, wanting to get away from him. She *wasn't* in a condition to be without medical supervision. And who best to follow her up but her own surgeon? The surgeon who happened to be the best there was?

She knew he was. He was beyond the best. A genius. With billions and named-after-him revolutionary procedures and equipment to prove it.

But even had she been fit, she wouldn't have wanted to be discharged. For where could she go but home? A home she recalled with nothing but dreariness?

And she didn't want to be with anyone else. Certainly not with her mother and family. She remembered them as if they were someone else's unwanted acquaintances. Disappointing and distant. Their own actions reinforced that impression. The sum total of their concern over her accident and Mel's death had been a couple of phone calls. When told she was fine, didn't need anything, it seemed they'd considered it an excuse to stop worrying—if they *had* been worried—dismiss her and return to their real interests. She didn't remember specifics from her life with them, but this felt like the final straw in a string of lifelong letdowns.

She turned her face to him. He was watching her as if he'd been manipulating her thoughts, steering her toward the decision he wanted her to make. She wouldn't put mental powers beyond him. What was one more covert power among the glaringly obvious ones?

She nodded her capitulation.

He tilted his awesome head at her. "You concede your need for my supervision?" He wanted a concession in words? Good luck with that. She nodded again. "And which will it be? Guest or patient?"

He wanted her to pick, now? She'd hoped to let things float for a couple of days, until she factored in the implications of being either, the best course of action….

Just great. A scrambled memory surely hadn't touched her self-deception ability. Seemed she had that in spades.

She knew what the best course of action was. She *should* say patient. Should stay in the hospital where the insanities he provoked in her would be curbed, where she wouldn't be able to act on them. She *would* say patient.

Then she opened her mouth. "As if you don't already know."

She barely held back a curse, almost took the sullen words back.

She didn't. She was mesmerized by his watchfulness, by seeing it evaporate in a flare of… something. Triumph?

She had no idea. It was exhausting enough trying to read her own thoughts and reactions. She wasn't up to fathoming his. She only hoped he'd say something superior and smirking. It might trip a fuse that would make her retreat from the abyss of stupidity and self-destructiveness, do what sense and survival were yelling for her to do. Remain here, remain a patient to him, nothing more.

"It'll be an honor to have you as my guest, Cybele." Distress brimmed as the intensity in his eyes drained, leaving them as gentle as his voice. It was almost spilling over when that arrogance she'd prayed for coated his face. "It's a good thing you didn't say 'patient,' though. I would have overruled you again."

She bristled. "Now look here—"

He smoothly cut across her offense. "I would have, because I built this center to be a teaching hospital, and if you stay, there is no way I can fairly stop the doctors and students from having constant access to you, to study your intriguing neurological condition."

Seemed not only did no one say no to him, no one ever won an argument with him, either. He'd given her the one reason that would send her rocketing out of this hospital like a cartoon character with a thick trail of white exhaust clouds in her wake.

No way would she be poked and prodded by med students and doctors-in-training. In the life that felt like a half-remembered documentary of someone else's, she'd been both, then the boss of a bunch of the latter. She knew how nothing—starting with patients' comfort, privacy, even basic human rights—stood in the way of acquiring their coveted-above-all experience.

She sighed. "You always get what you want, don't you?"

"No. Not always."

The tormented look that seized his face arrested her in midbreath. Was this about …her? Was *she* something he wanted and couldn't get?

No. She just knew what she felt for him had always been only on her side. On his, there'd been nothing inappropriate. He'd never given her reason to believe the feelings were mutual.

This …despondency was probably about failing to save Mel. That had to be the one thing he'd wanted most. And he hadn't gotten it.

She swallowed the ground glass that seemed to fill her throat. "I—I think I'll take a nap now."

He inhaled, nodded. "Yes, you do that."

He started to turn away, stopped, his eyes focusing far in the distance. He seemed to be thinking terrible things.

A heart-thudding moment later, without looking back again, he muttered, "Mel's funeral is this afternoon." She gasped. She'd somehow never thought of that part. He looked back at her then, face gripped with urgency, eyes storming with entreaty. "You should know."

She gave a difficult nod. "Thanks for telling me."

"Don't thank me. I'm not sure I should have."

"Why? You don't think I can handle it?"

"You seem to be handling everything so well, I'm wondering if this isn't the calm before the storm."

"You think I'll collapse into a jibbering mess somewhere down the road?"

"You've been through so much. I wouldn't be surprised."

"I can't predict the future. But I'm as stable as can be now. I—I want to go. I have to."

"You don't have to do anything, Cybele. Mel wouldn't have wanted you to go through the added trauma."

So Mel had cared for her? Wanted the best for her?

She inhaled, shook her head. "I'm coming. You're not going to play the not-neurologically-stable-enough card, are you?"

His eyes almost drilled a crater of conflicted emotions between her own. “You should be okay. If you do everything I say.”

“And what is that?”

“Rest now. Attend the funeral in a wheelchair. And leave when I say. No arguments.”

She hadn’t the energy to do more than close her eyelids in consent. He hesitated, then walked back to her, took her elbow, guided her back to the bed. She sagged down on it.

He, too, dropped down, to his haunches. Heartbeats shook her frame as he took one numb foot after the other, slid off slippers that felt as if they were made of hot iron. He rose, touched her shoulder, didn’t need to apply force. She collapsed like water in a fountain with its pressure lost. He scooped up her legs, swung them over the bed, swept the cotton cover over her, stood back and murmured, “Rest.”

Without another look, he turned and crossed the room as if he’d been hit with a fast-forward button.

The moment the door clicked shut, shudders overtook her.

Rest? He really thought she could? After what he’d just done? Before she had to attend her dead husband’s funeral?

She ached. For him, because of him, because she breathed, with guilt, with lack of guilt.

She could only hope that the funeral, the closure ritual, might open up the locked, pitch-black cells in her mind.

Maybe then she’d get answers. And absolution.

Five

She didn't rest.

Four hours of tossing in bed later, at the entry of a genial brunette bearing a black skirt suit and its accessories, Cybele staggered up feeling worse than when she'd woken from her coma.

She winced a smile of thanks at the woman and insisted she didn't need help dressing. Her fiberglass arm cast was quite light and she could move her shoulder and elbow joints well enough to get into the front-fastening jacket and blouse.

After the woman left, she stood staring at the clothes Rodrigo had provided for her. To attend the funeral of the husband she didn't remember. Didn't want to remember.

She didn't need help dressing. She needed help de-stressing.

No chance of that. Only thing to do was dress the part, walk in and out of this. Or rather, get wheeled in and out.

In minutes she was staring at her reflection in the full-wall mirror in the state-of-the-art, white and gray bathroom.

Black wool suit, white silk blouse, two-inch black leather shoes. All designer items. All made as if for her.

A knock on the door ripped her out of morbid musings over the origin of such accuracy in judging her size.

She wanted to dart to the door, snatch it open and yell, *Let's get it over with.*

She walked slowly instead, opened the door like an automaton. Rodrigo was there. With a wheelchair. She sat down without a word.

In silence, he wheeled her through his space-age center to a gigantic elevator that could accommodate ten gurneys and their attending personnel. This was obviously a place equipped and staffed to deal with mass casualty situations. She stared ahead as they reached the vast entrance, feeling every eye on her, the woman their collective boss was tending to personally.

Once outside the controlled climate of the center, she shivered as the late February coolness settled on her face and legs. He stopped before a gleaming black Mercedes 600, slipped the warmth of the cashmere coat she realized had been draped over his arm all along around her shoulders as he handed her into the back of the car.

In moments he'd slid in beside her on the cream leather couch, signaled the chauffeur and the sleek beast of a vehicle shot forward soundlessly, the racing-by vistas of the Spanish countryside the only proof that it was streaking through the nearly empty streets.

None of the beauty zooming by made it past the surface of her awareness. All deeper levels converged on him. On the turmoil in the rigidity of his profile, the coiled tension of his body.

And she couldn't bear it anymore. "I'm …so sorry."

He turned to her. "What are you talking about?"

The harshness that flickered in his eyes, around his lips made her hesitate. It didn't stop her. "I'm talking about Mel." His eyes seemed to lash out an emerald flare. She almost backed down, singed and silenced. She forged on. "About your loss." His jaw muscles convulsed then his face turned to rock, as if he'd sucked in all emotion, buried it where it would never resurface for anyone to see. "I don't remember him or our relationship, but you don't have that mercy. You've lost your best friend. He died on your table, as you struggled to save him…."

"As I *failed* to save him, you mean."

His hiss hit her like the swipe of a sword across the neck.

She nearly suffocated on his anguish. Only the need to drain it made her choke out, "You didn't fail. There was nothing you could have done." His eyes flared again, zapping her with the force of

his frustration. “Don’t bother contradicting me or looking for ways to shoulder a nonexistent blame. Everyone knew he was beyond help.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better? What if I don’t want to feel better?”

“Unfounded guilt never did anyone any good. Certainly not the ones we feel guilty over.”

“How logical you can be, when logic serves no purpose.”

“I thought you advocated logic as what serves every purpose.”

“Not in this instance. And what I feel certainly isn’t hurting me any. I’m as fit as an ox.”

“So you’re dismissing emotional and psychological pain as irrelevant? I know that as surgeons we’re mainly concerned with physical disorders, things we can fix with our scalpels, but—”

“But nothing. I’m whole and hearty. Mel is dead.” “Through no fault of yours!” She couldn’t bear to see him bludgeoning himself with pain and guilt that way. “That’s the only point I’m making, the only one to *be* made here. I know it doesn’t make his loss any less traumatic or profound. And I am deeply sorry for—everyone. You, Mel, his parents, our baby.”

“But not yourself?”

“No.”

The brittle syllable hung between them, loaded with too much for mere words to express, and the better for it, she thought.

Twenty minutes of silence later her heart hiccupped in her chest. They were entering a private airport.

With every yard deeper into the lush, grassy expanses, tentacles of panic slid around her throat, slithered into her mind until the car came to a halt a few dozen feet from the stairs of a gleaming silver Boeing 737.

She blindly reached out to steady herself with the one thing that was unshakeable in her world. Rodrigo.

His arm came around her at the same moment she sought his support, memories billowing inside her head like the sooty smoke of an oil-spill fire. “This is where we boarded the plane.”

He stared down at her for a suspended moment before closing his eyes. *“Dios, lo siento,* Cybele —I’m so sorry. I didn’t factor in what it would do to you, being here, where your ordeal began.”

She snatched air into her constricted lungs, shook her head. “It’s probably the right thing to do, bringing me here. Maybe it’ll get the rest of my memories to explode back at once. I’d welcome that over the periodic detonations.”

“I can’t take credit for attempting shock therapy. We’re here for Mel’s funeral.” She gaped at him. He elaborated. “It’s not a traditional funeral. I had Mel’s parents flown over from the States so they can take his body home.”

She struggled to take it all in. Mel’s body. Here. In that hearse over there. His parents. She didn’t remember them. At all. They must be in the Boeing. Which had to be Rodrigo’s. They’d come down, and she’d see them. And instead of a stricken widow they could comfort and draw solace from, they’d find a numb stranger unable to share their grief.

“Rodrigo.” The plea to take her back now, that she’d been wrong, couldn’t handle this, congealed in her throat.

He’d turned his head away. A man and a woman in their early sixties had appeared at the jet’s open door.

He reached for his door handle, turned to her. “Stay here.”

Mortification filled her. She was such a wimp. He’d felt her reluctance to face her in-laws, was sparing her.

She couldn’t let him. She owed them better than that. She’d owe any grieving parents anything she could do to lessen their loss. “No, I’m coming with you. And no wheelchair, please. I don’t want them to think I’m worse than I am.” He pursed his lips, then nodded, exited the car. In seconds he was on her side, handing her out. She crushed his formal suit’s lapel. “What are their names?”

His eyes widened, as if shocked all over again at the total gaps in her memory. “Agnes and Steven Braddock.”

The names rang distant bells. She hadn’t known them long, or well. She was sure of that.

The pair descended as she and Rodrigo headed on an intercept course. Their faces became clearer with every step, setting off more memories. Of how Mel had looked in detail. And in color.

Her father-in-law had the same rangy physique and wealth of hair, only it was gray where Mel’s had been shades of bronze. Mel had had the startlingly turquoise eyes of her mother-in-law.

She stopped when they were a few steps way. Rodrigo didn’t.

He kept going, opened his arms, and the man and woman rushed right into them. The three of them merged into an embrace that squeezed her heart dry of its last cell of blood.

Everything hurt. Burned. She felt like strips were being torn out of her flesh. Acid filled her eyes, burned her cheeks.

The way he held them, the way they sought his comfort and consolation as if it was their very next breath, the way they all clung together …The way he looked, wide open and giving everything inside him for the couple to take their fill of, to draw strength from.

Just when she would have cried out *Enough—please,* the trio dissolved their merger of solace, turned, focused on her. Then Agnes closed the steps between them.

She tugged Cybele into a trembling hug, careful not to brush against her cast. “I can’t tell you how worried we were for you. It’s a prayer answered to see you so well.” So well? She’d looked like a convincing postmortem rehearsal last time she’d consulted a mirror. But then, compared to Mel, she was looking great. “It’s why we were so late coming here. Rodrigo couldn’t deal with this, with anything, until you were out of danger.”

“He shouldn’t have. I can’t imagine how you felt, having to put th-this off.”

Agnes shook her head, the sadness in her eyes deepening. “Mel was already beyond our reach, and coming sooner would have served no purpose. You were the one who needed Rodrigo’s full attention so he could pull you through.”

“He did. And while everyone says he’s phenomenal with all his patients, I’m sure he’s gone above and beyond even by his standards. I’m as sure it’s because I was Mel’s wife. It’s clear what a close friend of the whole family he is.”

The woman looked at her as if she’d said Rodrigo was in reality a reptile. “But Rodrigo isn’t just a friend of the family. He’s our son. He’s Mel’s brother.”

Cybele felt she’d stared at Agnes for ages, feeling her words reverberating in her mind in shock waves.

Rodrigo. Wasn’t Mel’s best friend. Was his brother. *How?*

“You didn’t know?” Agnes stopped, tutted to herself. “What am I asking. Rodrigo told us of your memory loss. You’ve forgotten.”

She hadn’t. She was positive. This was a brand-new revelation.

Questions heaved and pitched in her mind, splashed against the confines of her skull until she felt they’d shatter it.

Before she could relieve the pressure, launch the first few dozen, Rodrigo and Steven closed in on them. Rodrigo stood back as Steven mirrored his wife’s actions and sentiments.

“We’ve kept Cybele on her feet long enough,” Rodrigo addressed the couple who claimed to be his parents. “Why don’t you go back to the car with her, Agnes, while Steven and I arrange everything.”

Agnes? Steven? He didn’t call them mother and father?

She would have asked to be involved if she wasn’t burning for the chance to be alone with Agnes, to get to the bottom of this.

As soon as they settled into the car, Cybele turned to Agnes. And all the questions jammed in her mind.

What would she ask? How? This woman was here to claim her son's body. What would she think, feel, if said son's widow showed no interest in talking about him and was instead panting to know all about the man who'd turned out to be his brother?

She sat there, feeling at a deeper loss than she had since she'd woken up in this new life. Rodrigo's chauffeur offered them refreshments. She parroted what Agnes settled on, mechanically sipped her mint tea every time Agnes did hers.

Suddenly Agnes started to talk, the sorrow that coated her face mingling with other things. Love. Pride.

"Rodrigo was six, living in an exclusively Hispanic community in Southern California, when his mother died in a factory accident and he was taken into the system. Two years later, when Mel was six, we decided that he needed a sibling, one we'd realized we'd never be able to give him."

So that was it. Rodrigo was adopted.

Agnes went on. "We took Mel with us while we searched, since our one criteria for the child we'd adopt was that he get along with Mel. But Mel antagonized every child we thought was suited to our situation, got them to turn nasty. Then Rodrigo was suggested to us. We were told he was everything Mel wasn't—responsible, resourceful, respectful, with a steady temperament and a brilliant mind. But we'd been told so many good things about other children and we'd given up hope that any child would pass the test of interaction with Mel. Then Rodrigo walked in.

"After he introduced himself in the little English he knew, enquired politely why we were looking for another child, he asked to be left alone with Mel. Unknown to both boys, we were taken to where children's meetings with prospective parents were monitored. Mel was at his nastiest, calling Rodrigo names, making fun of his accent, insulting his parentage and situation. We were mortified that he even knew those …words, and would use them so viciously. Steven thought he felt threatened by Rodrigo, as he had by any child we sought. I told him whatever the reason, I couldn't let Mel abuse the poor boy, that we'd been wrong and Mel didn't need a sibling but firmer treatment until he outgrew his sullenness and nastiness. He hushed me, asked me to watch. And I watched.

"Rodrigo had so far shown no reaction. By then, other boys had lashed out, verbally and physically, at Mel's bullying. But Rodrigo sat there, watching him in what appeared to be deep contemplation. Then he stood up and calmly motioned him closer. Mel rained more abuse on him, but when he still didn't get the usual reaction, he seemed to be intrigued. I was certain Rodrigo would deck him and sneer *gotcha* or something. I bet Mel thought the same.

"We all held our breath as Rodrigo put a hand in his pocket. My mind streaked with worst-case scenarios. Steven surged up, too. But the director of the boys' home detained us. Then Rodrigo took out a butterfly. It was made of cardboard and elastic and metal springs and beautifully hand-painted. He wound it up and let it fly. And suddenly Mel was a child again, giggling and jumping after the butterfly as if it were real.

"We knew then that Rodrigo had won him over, that our search for a new son was over. I was shaking as we walked in to ask Rodrigo if he'd like to come live with us. He was stunned. He said no one wanted older children. We assured him that we did want him, but that he could try us out first. He insisted it was he who would prove himself to us. He turned and shook Mel's hand, told him he'd made other toys and promised to teach him how to make his own."

The images Agnes had weaved were overwhelming. The vision of Rodrigo as a child was painfully vivid. Self-possessed in the face of humiliation and adversity, stoic in a world where he had no one, determined as he proved himself worthy of respect.

"And did he teach him?" she asked.

Agnes sighed. "He tried. But Mel was short-fused, impatient, never staying with anything long enough for it to bear fruit. Rodrigo never stopped trying to involve him, get him to experience the pleasures of achievement. We loved him with all our hearts from the first day, but loved him more for how hard he tried."

"So your plan that a sibling would help Mel didn't work?"

"Oh, no, it did. Rodrigo did absorb a great deal of Mel's angst and instability. He became the older brother Mel emulated in everything. It was how Mel ended up in medicine."

"Then he must have grown out of his impatience. It takes a lot of perseverance to become a doctor."

"You really don't remember a thing about him, do you?" Now what did that mean? Before she pressed for an elaboration, Agnes sighed again. "Mel was brilliant, could do anything if only he set his mind to it. But only Rodrigo knew how to motivate him, to keep him in line. And when Rodrigo turned eighteen, he moved out."

"Why? Wasn't he happy with you?"

"He assured us that his need for independence had nothing to do with not loving us or not wanting to be with us. He confessed that he'd always felt the need to find his roots."

"And you feared he was only placating you?"

Agnes's soft features, which showed a once-great beauty lined by a life of emotional upheavals, spasmed with recalled anxiety. "We tried to help as he searched for his biological family, but his methods were far more effective, his instincts of where to look far sharper. He found his maternal relatives three years later and his grandparents were beside themselves with joy. Their whole extended family welcomed him with open arms."

Cybele couldn't think how anyone wouldn't. "Did he learn the identity of his father?"

"His grandparents didn't know. They had had a huge quarrel with his mother when she got pregnant and she wouldn't reveal the father's identity. She left home, saying she'd never return to their narrow-minded world. Once they had calmed down, they searched for her everywhere, kept hoping she'd come home. But they never heard from her again. They were devastated to learn their daughter was long dead, but ecstatic that Rodrigo had found them."

"And he changed his name from yours to theirs then?"

"He never took our name, just kept the name his mother had used. There were too many obstacles to our adopting him, and when he realized our struggles, he asked us to stop trying, said he knew we considered him our son and we didn't need to prove it to him. He was content to be our foster son to the world. He was eleven at the time. When he found his family, he still insisted *we* were his real family, since it was choice and love that bound us and not blood. He didn't legally take their names until he made sure we knew that it just suited his identity more to have his Catalan names."

"And you still thought he'd walk out of your life."

Agnes exhaled her agreement. "It was the worst day of my life when he told us that he was moving to Spain as soon as his medical training was over. I thought my worst fears of losing him had come true."

It struck Cybele as weird that Agnes didn't consider the day Mel had died the worst day of her life. But she was too intent on the story for the thought to take hold. "But you didn't lose him."

"I shouldn't have worried. Not with Rodrigo. I should have known he'd never abandon us, or even neglect us. He never stopped paying us the closest attention, was a constant presence in our lives —more so even than Mel, who lived under the same roof. Mel always had a problem expressing his emotions, and showed them with material, not moral, things. That's probably why he… he …" She stopped, looked away.

"He what?" Cybele tried not to sound rabid with curiosity. They were getting to some real explanation here. She knew it.

She almost shrieked with frustration when Agnes ignored her question, returned to her original topic. "Rodrigo continued to rise to greater successes but made sure we were there to share the joy of every step with him. Even when he moved here, he never let us or Mel feel that he was far away. He was constantly after us to move here, too, to start projects we've long dreamed of, offered us everything we'd need to establish them. But Mel said Spain was okay for vacations but he was a New

Yorker and could never live anywhere else. Though it was a difficult decision, we decided to stay in the States with him. We thought he was the one who …needed our presence more. But we do spend chunks of every winter with Rodrigo, and he comes to the States as frequently as possible."

And she'd met him during those frequent trips. Over and over. She just knew it. But she was just as sure, no matter how spotty her memory was, that *this* story hadn't been volunteered by anyone before. She was certain she hadn't been told Rodrigo was Mel's foster brother. Not by Mel, not by Rodrigo.

Why had neither man owned up to this fact?

Agnes touched her good hand. "I'm so sorry, my dear. I shouldn't have gone on and on down memory lane."

And the weirdest thing was, Agnes's musings hadn't been about the son she'd lost, but the son she'd acquired thirty years ago. "I'm glad you did. I need to know anything that will help me remember."

"And did you? Remember anything?"

It wasn't a simple question to ascertain her neurological state. Agnes wanted to know something. Something to do with what she'd started to say about Mel then dropped, as if ashamed, as if too distressed to broach it.

"Sporadic things," Cybele said cautiously, wondering how to lead back to the thread of conversation she just knew would explain why she'd felt this way about Mel, and about Rodrigo.

Agnes turned away from her. "They're back."

Cybele jerked, followed Agnes's gaze, frustration backing up in her throat. Then she saw Rodrigo prowling in those powerful, control-laden strides and the sight of him drowned out everything else.

Suddenly a collage of images became superimposed over his. Of her and Mel going out with Rodrigo and a different sexpot each time, women who'd fawned over him and whom he'd treated with scathing disinterest, playing true to his reputation as a ruthless playboy.

Something else dislodged in her mind, felt as if an image had moved from the obscurity of her peripheral vision into the clarity of her focus. How Mel had become exasperating around Rodrigo.

If these were true memories, they contradicted everything Agnes had said, everything she'd sensed about Rodrigo. They showed him as the one who was erratic and inconstant, who'd had a disruptive, not a stabilizing, effect on Mel. Could she have overlooked all that, and her revulsion toward promiscuous men, under the spell of his charisma? Or could that have been his attraction? The challenge of his unavailability? The ambition of being the one to tame the big bad wolf? Could she have been that perverse and stupid….?

"Are you ready, Agnes?"

Cybele lurched at the sound of Rodrigo's fathomless baritone.

Stomach churning with the sickening conjectures, she dazedly watched him hand Agnes out of the car. Then he bent to her.

"Stay here." She opened her mouth. A gentle hand beneath her jaw closed it for her. "No arguments, remember?"

"I want to do what you're all going to do," she mumbled.

"You've had enough. I shouldn't have let you come at all."

"I'm fine. Please."

That fierceness welled in his eyes again. Then he gave a curt nod, helped her out of the car.

She didn't only want to be there for these people to whom she felt such a powerful connection. She also hoped she'd get more answers from Agnes before she and Steven flew back home.

Cybele watched Rodrigo stride with Steven to the hearse, where another four men waited. One was Ramón Velázquez, her orthopedic surgeon and Rodrigo's best friend—for real—and partner.

Rodrigo and Ramón shared a solemn nod then opened the hearse's back door and slid the coffin out. Steven and the three other men joined in carrying it to the cargo bay of the Boeing.

Cybele stood transfixed beside Agnes, watching the grim procession, her eyes flitting between Rodrigo's face and Steven's. The same expression gripped both. It was the same one on Agnes's face. Something seemed…off about that expression.

Conjectures ping-ponged inside her head as everything seemed to fast-forward until the ritual was over, and Steven walked back with Rodrigo to join Agnes in hugging Cybele farewell. Then the Braddocks boarded the Boeing and Rodrigo led Cybele back to the Mercedes.

The car had just swung out of the airfield when she heard the roar of the jet's takeoff. She twisted around to watch it sail overhead before it hurtled away, its noise receding, its size diminishing.

And it came to her, why she knew that off expression. It was the exhausted resignation exhibited by families of patients who died after long, agonizing terminal illnesses. It didn't add up when Mel's death had been swift and shocking.

Something else became glaringly obvious. She turned to Rodrigo. He was looking outside his window.

She hated to intrude on the sanctity of his heartache. But she had to make sense of it all. "Rodrigo, I'm sorry, but—"

He rounded on her, his eyes simmering in the rays penetrating the mirrored window. "Don't say you're sorry again, Cybele."

"I'm sor—" She swallowed the apology he seemed unable to hear from her. "I was going to apologize for interrupting your thoughts. But I need to ask. *They* didn't ask. About my pregnancy."

He seemed taken aback. Then his face slammed shut. "Mel didn't tell them."

This was one answer she hadn't considered. Yet another twist. "Why? I can understand not telling them of our intention to have a baby this way, in case it didn't work. But after it did, why didn't he run to them with the news?"

His shrug was eloquent with his inability to guess Mel's motivations. With his intention to drop the subject.

She couldn't accommodate him. "Why didn't *you* tell them?"

"Because it's up to you whether or not to tell them."

"They're my baby's grandparents. Of course I want to tell them. If I'd realized they didn't know, I would have. It would have given them solace, knowing that a part of their son remains."

His jaw worked for a moment. Then he exhaled. "I'm glad you *didn't* bring it up. You're not in any shape to deal with the emotional fallout of a disclosure of this caliber. And instead of providing the solace you think it would have, at this stage, the news would have probably only aggravated their repressed grief."

But it *hadn't* been repressed grief she'd sensed from them.

Then again, what did she know? Her perceptions might be as scrambled as her memories. "You're probably right." *As usual,* she added inwardly. "I'll tell them when I'm back to normal and I'm certain the pregnancy is stable."

He lowered his eyes, his voice, and simply said, "Yes."

Feeling drained on all counts, she gazed up at him—the mystery that kept unraveling only to become more tangled. The anchor of this shifting, treacherous new existence of hers.

And she implored, "Can we go home now, please?"

Six

He took her home. His home.

They'd driven back from the airport to Barcelona city center. From there it had taken over an hour to reach his estate.

By the time they approached it at sunset, she felt saturated with the sheer beauty of the Catalan countryside.

Then they passed through the electronic, twenty-foot wrought iron gates, wound through the driveway, and with each yard deeper into his domain, she realized. There was no such thing as a limit to the capacity to appreciate beauty, to be stunned by it.

She turned her eyes to him. He'd been silent save for necessary words. She'd kept silent, too, struggling with the contradictions of what her heart told her and what her memories insisted on, with wanting to ask him to dispel her doubts.

But the more she remembered everything he'd said and done, everything everyone had said about him in the past days, the more only one conclusion made sense. Her memories had to be false.

He turned to her. After a long moment, he said, deep, quiet, "Welcome to Villa Candelaria, Cybele."

She swallowed past the emotions, yet her "Thank you" came out a tremulous gasp. She tried again. "When did you buy this place?"

"Actually, I built it. I named it after my mother."

The lump grew as images took shape and form. Of him as an orphan who'd never forgotten his mother until he one day was affluent enough to build such a place and name it after her, so her memory would continue somewhere outside of his mind and.

Okay, she'd start weeping any second now. Better steer this away from personal stuff. "This place looks …massive. Not just the building, but the land, too."

"It's thirty thousand square feet over twenty acres with a mile-long waterfront. Before you think I'm crazy to build all this for myself, I built it hoping it would become the home of many families, affording each privacy and land for whatever projects and pursuits they wished for. Not that it worked out that way."

The darkness that stained his face and voice seared her. He'd wished to surround himself with family. And he'd been thwarted at every turn, it seemed. Was he suffering from the loneliness and isolation she felt were such an integral part of her own psyche?

"I picked this land completely by chance. I was driving once, aimlessly, when I saw that crest of a hill overlooking this sea channel." She looked where he was pointing. "The vision slammed into my mind fully formed. A villa built into those rock formations as if it was a part of them."

She reversed the process, imagining those elements without the magnificent villa they now hugged as if it *were* an intrinsic part of their structure. "I always thought of the Mediterranean as all sandy beaches."

"Not this area of the northern Iberian coastline. Rugged rock is indigenous here."

The car drew to a smooth halt in front of thirty-foot wide stone steps among landscaped, terraced plateaus that surrounded the villa from all sides.

In seconds Rodrigo was handing her out and insisting she sit in the wheelchair she hadn't used much today. She acquiesced, wondered as he wheeled her up the gentle slope beside the steps if it had always been there, for older family members' convenience, or if it had been installed to accommodate Mel's condition.

Turning away from futile musings, she surrendered to the splendor all around her as they reached a gigantic patio that surrounded the villa. On one side it overlooked the magnificent property

that was part vineyards and orchards and part landscaped gardens, with the valley and mountains in the distance, and on the other side, the breathtaking sea and shoreline.

The patio led to the highest area overlooking the sea, a massive terrace garden that was illuminated by golden lights planted everywhere like luminescent flowers.

He took her inside and she got rapid impressions of the interior as he swept her to the quarters he'd designated for her.

She felt everything had been chosen with an eye for uniqueness and comfort, simplicity and grandeur, blending sweeping lines and spaces with bold wall colors, honey-colored ceilings and furniture that complemented both. French doors and colonial pillars merged seamlessly with the natural beauty of hardwood floors accentuated by marble and granite. She knew she could spend weeks poring over every detail, but in its whole, she felt this was a place this formidable man had wanted his family to love, to feel at home in from the moment they set foot in it. She knew *she* did. And she hadn't technically set foot in it yet.

Then she did. He opened a door, wheeled her in then helped her out of the chair. She stood as he wheeled the chair to one side, walked out to haul in two huge suitcases that had evidently been transported right behind them.

He placed one on the floor and the other on a luggage stand at the far side of the room, which opened into a full-fledged dressing room.

She stood mesmerized as he walked back to her.

He was overwhelming. A few levels beyond that.

He stopped before her, took her hand. She felt as though it burst in flames. "I promise you a detailed tour of the place. Later. In stages. Now you have to rest. Doctor's orders."

With that he gave her hand a gentle press, turned and left.

The moment the door clicked closed behind him, she staggered to lean on it, exhaled a choppy breath.

Doctor's orders. *Her* doctor …

She bit her lip. Hours ago, she'd consigned her husband's body to his parents. And all she could think of was Rodrigo. There wasn't even a twinge of guilt toward Mel. There *was* sadness, but it was the sadness she knew she'd feel for any human being's disability and death. For his loved ones' mourning. Nothing more.

What was wrong with her? What had been wrong with her and Mel? Or was there more wrong with her mind than she believed?

Her lungs deflated on a dejected exhalation.

All she could do now was never let any of those who'd loved and lost Mel know how unaffected by his loss she was. What did it matter what she felt in the secrecy of her heart and mind if she never let the knowledge out to hurt others? She couldn't change the way she felt, should stop feeling bad about it. It served no purpose, did no one any good.

With that rationalization reached, she felt as if a ten-pound rock had been lifted off her heart. Air flowed into her lungs all of a sudden, just as the lovely surroundings registered in her appreciation centers.

The room—if a thirty-something-by forty-something-foot space with a twelve-foot ceiling could be called that—was a manifestation of the ultimate in personal space.

With walls painted sea-blue and green, furniture of dark mahogany and ivory ceilings and accents, it was soothingly lit by golden lamps of the side and standing variety. French doors were draped in gauzy powder-blue curtains that undulated in the twilight sea breeze, wafting scents of salt and freshness with each billow. She sighed away her draining tension and pushed from the wood-paneled door.

She crossed the gleaming hardwood floor to the suitcases. They were more evidence of Rodrigo's all-inclusive care. She was certain she'd never owned anything so exquisite. She wondered

what he'd filled them with. If the outfit she had on was any indication, no doubt an array of haute couture and designer items, molding to her exact shape and appealing to her specific tastes.

She tried to move the one on the floor, just to set it on its wheels. Frantic pounding boomed in her head.

Man—what *had* he gotten her to wear? Steel armor in every shade? And he'd made the cases look weightless when he'd hauled them both in, simultaneously. She tugged again.

"¡Parada!"

She swung around at the booming order, the pounding in her head crashing down her spine to settle behind her ribs.

A robust, unmistakably Spanish woman in her late thirties was plowing her way across the room, alarm and displeasure furrowing the openness of her olive-skinned beauty.

"Rodrigo warned me that you'd give me a hard time."

Cybele blinked at the woman as she slapped her hand away from the suitcase's handle and hauled it onto the king-sized, draped-in-ivory-silk bed. She, too, made it look so light. Those Spaniards—uh, Catalans—must have something potent in their water.

The woman rounded on her, vitality and ire radiating from every line. Even her shoulder-length, glossy dark brown hair seemed pissed off. "He told me that you'd be a troublesome charge, and from the way you were trying to bust your surgery scar open, he was right. As he always is."

So it wasn't only she who thought he was always practically infallible. Her lips tugged as she tried to placate the force of nature before her. "I don't have a surgery scar to bust, thanks to Rodrigo's revolutionary minimally invasive approach."

"You have things in there—" the woman stabbed a finger in the air pointing at Cybele's head "—you can bust, no? What you busted before, necessitating such an approach."

From the throb of pain that was only now abating, she had to concede that. She'd probably raised her intracranial pressure tenfold trying to drag that behemoth of a bag. As she shrugged, she remembered Rodrigo telling her something.

She'd been too busy watching his lips wrap around each syllable to translate the words into an actual meaning. She now replayed them, made sense of them.

Rodrigo had said Consuelo, his cousin who lived here with her husband and three children and managed the place for him, would be with her shortly to see to her every need and to the correct and timely discharge of his instructions. She'd only nodded then, lost in his eyes. She now realized what he'd meant.

He didn't trust her to follow his instructions, was assigning a deputy to enforce their execution. And he certainly knew how to pick his wardens.

She stuck out her hand with a smile tugging at her lips. "You must be Consuelo. Rodrigo told me to expect you."

Consuelo took her hand, only to drag her forward and kiss her full on both cheeks.

Cybele didn't know what stunned her more, the affectionate salute, or Consuelo resuming her disapproval afterward.

Consuelo folded her arms over an ample bosom artfully contained and displayed by her floral dress with the lime background. "Seems Rodrigo didn't *really* tell you what to expect. So let *me* make it clear. I received you battered and bruised. I'm handing you back in tip-top shape. *I* won't put up with you not following Rodrigo's orders. I'm not soft and lenient like him."

"Soft and lenient?" Cybele squeaked her incredulity. Then she coughed it out on a laugh. "I wasn't aware there were two Rodrigos. I met the intractable and inexorable one."

Consuelo tutted. "If you think Rodrigo intractable and inexorable, wait till you've been around me twenty-four hours."

"Oh, the first twenty-four seconds were a sufficient demo."

Consuelo gave her an assessing look, shrewdness simmering in her dark chocolate eyes. “I know your type. A woman who wants to do everything for herself, says she can handle it when she can’t, keeps going when she shouldn’t, caring nothing about what it costs her, and it’s all because she dreads being an imposition, because she hates accepting help even when she dearly needs it.”

“Whoa. Spoken like an expert.”

“¡Maldita sea, es cierto!—that’s right. It takes one mule-headed, aggravatingly independent woman to know another.”

Another laugh overpowered Cybele. “Busted.”

“Sí, you are. And I’m reporting your reckless behavior to Rodrigo. He’ll probably have you chained to my wrist by your good arm until he gives you a clean bill of health.”

“Not that I wouldn’t be honored to have you as my …uh, keeper, but can I bribe you into keeping silent?”

“You can. And you know how.”

“I don’t try to lift rock-filled suitcases again?”

“And do everything I say. *When* I say it.”

“Uh …on second thought, I’ll take my chances with Rodrigo.”

“Ha. Try another one. Now hop to it. Rodrigo told me what kind of day—what kind of *week* you’ve had. You’re doing absolutely nothing but sleeping and resting for the next one. And eating. You look like you’re about to vanish.”

Cybele laughed as she whimsically peered down at her much lesser endowments. She could see how they were next to insubstantial by the super-lush Consuelo’s standards.

This woman would be good for her. As she was sure Rodrigo had known she would be. Every word out of her mouth tickled funny bones Cybele hadn’t known existed.

Consuelo hooked her arm through Cybele’s good one, walked her to bed then headed alone to the en suite bathroom. She talked all the time while she ran a bubble bath, emptied the suitcases, sorted everything in the dressing room, and laid out what Cybele would wear to bed. Cybele loved listening to her husky, vibrant voice delivering perfect English dipped in the molasses of her all-out Catalan accent. By the time she led Cybele to the all-marble-and-gold-fixtures, salonlike bathroom, she’d told her her life story. At least, everything that had happened since she and her husband had become Rodrigo’s house-and groundskeepers.

Cybele insisted she could take it from there. Consuelo insisted on leaving the door open. Cybele insisted she’d call out to prove she was still awake. Consuelo threatened to barge in after a minute’s silence. Cybele countered she could sing to prove her wakefulness then everyone within hearing distance would suffer the consequences of Consuelo’s overprotection.

Guffawing and belting out a string of amused Catalan, Consuelo finally exited the bathroom.

Grinning, Cybele undressed. The grin dissolved as she stared at herself in the mirror above the double sinks’ marble platform.

She had a feeling there’d once been more of her. Had she lost weight? A lot of it? Recently? Because she’d been unhappy? If she had been, why had she planned a pregnancy and a second honeymoon with Mel? What did Rodrigo think of the way she looked? Not now, since she looked like crap, but before? Was she his type? Did he have a type? Did he have a woman now? More than one… ?

Oh, God …she couldn’t finish a thought without it settling back on him, could she?

She clamped down on the spasm that twisted through her at the idea, the images of him with a woman …any other woman.

How insane was it to be jealous, when up to eight days ago she’d been married to his brother?

She exhaled a shuddering breath and stepped into the warm, jasmine-and-lilac-scented water. She moaned as she submerged her whole body, felt as if every deep-seated ache surged to her surface, bled through her pores to mingle with the bubbles and fluid silk that enveloped her.

She raised her eyes, realized the widescreen window was right across from her, showcasing a masterpiece of heavenly proportions. Magnificent cloud formations in every gradation of silver morphing across a darkening royal blue sky and an incandescent half moon.

Rodrigo's face superimposed itself on the splendor, his voice over the lapping of water around her, the swishing of blood in her ears. She shut her eyes, tried to sever the spell.

"Enough."

Consuelo's yelled *"¿Qué?"* jerked Cybele's eyes open.

Mortification threatened to boil her bathwater.

God—she'd cried that out loud.

She called out the first thing that came to her, to explain away her outburst. "Uh …I said I'm coming out. I've had enough."

And she had. In so many ways. But there was one more thing that she prayed she would soon have enough of. Rodrigo.

Any bets she never would?

It was good to face her weakness. Without self-deception, she'd be careful to plan her actions and control her responses, accept and expect no more than the medical supervision she was here for during her stay. Until it came to an end.

As it inevitably would.

Rodrigo stood outside Cybele's quarters, all his senses converged on every sound, every movement transmitted from within.

He'd tried to walk away. He couldn't. He'd leaned on her door, feeling her through it, tried to contain the urge to walk back in, remain close, see and hear and feel for himself that she was alive and aware.

The days during which she'd lain inert had gouged a fault line in his psyche. The past days since she'd come back, he hadn't been able to contemplate putting more than a few minutes' distance between them. It had been all he could do not to camp out in her room as he had during her coma. He had constantly curbed himself so he wouldn't suffocate her with worry, counted down every second of the three hours he'd imposed on himself between visits.

After he'd controlled the urge, he'd summoned Consuelo, had dragged himself away. Then he'd heard Consuelo's shout.

He hadn't barged into the room only because he'd frozen with horror for the seconds it took him to realize Consuelo had exclaimed *Stop,* and Consuelo's gregarious tones and Cybele's gentler, melodic ones had carried through the door, explaining the whole situation.

Now he heard Cybele's raised voice as she chattered with Consuelo from the bathroom. In a few minutes, Consuelo would make sure Cybele was tucked in bed and would walk out. He had to be gone before that. Just not yet.

He knew he was being obsessive, ridiculous, but he couldn't help it. The scare was too fresh, the trauma too deep.

He hadn't been there for Mel, and he'd died.

He had to be there for Cybele.

But to be there for her, he had to get ahold of himself. And to do that, he had to put today behind him.

It had felt like spiraling down through hell. Taking her to that airfield, realizing too late what he'd done, seeing his foster parents after months of barely speaking to them, only to give them the proof of his biggest failure. Mel's body.

The one thing mitigating this disaster was Cybele's memory loss. It *was* merciful. For her. For him, too. He didn't know if he could have handled her grief, too, had she remembered Mel.

But—was it better to have reprieve now, than to have it all come back with a vengeance later? Wouldn't it have been better if her grief coincided with his? Would he be able to bear it, to be of any help if she fell apart when he'd begun healing?

But then he had to factor in the changes in her.

The woman who'd woken up from the coma was not the Cybele Wilkinson he'd known the past year. Or the one Mel had said had become so volatile, she'd accused him of wanting her around only as the convenient help rolled into one with a medical supervisor—and who'd demanded a baby as proof that he valued her as his wife.

Rodrigo had at first found that impossible to believe. She'd never struck him as insecure or clingy. Just the opposite. But then her actions had proved Mel right.

So which persona was really her? The stable, guileless woman she'd been the past five days? The irritable introvert she'd been before Mel's accident? Or the neurotic wreck who'd made untenable emotional demands of him when he'd been wrecked himself?

And if this new persona was a by-product of the accident, of her injuries, once she healed, once she regained all her memories, would she revert? Would the woman who was bantering so naturally with Consuelo, who'd consoled him and wrestled verbally with him and made him forget everything but her, disappear?

He forced himself away from the door. Consuelo was asking what Cybele would like for breakfast. In a moment she'd walk out.

He strode away, speculations swarming inside his head.

He was staring at the haggard stranger in mourning clothes in his bathroom mirror when he realized something.

It made no difference. Whatever the answers were, no matter what she was, or what would happen from now on, it didn't matter.

She was in his life now. To stay.

Seven

You don’t have post-traumatic amnesia.”

Cybele’s eyes rounded at Rodrigo’s proclamation.

Her incredulity at his statement was only rivaled by the one she still couldn’t get over; that he’d transferred a miniature hospital to his estate so he could test and chart her progress daily.

Apart from wards and ORs, he had about everything else on site. A whole imaging facility with X-ray, MRI, CT machines and even a PET scan machine, which seemed like overkill just to follow up her arm’s and head’s healing progress. A comprehensive lab for every known test to check up on her overall condition and that of her pregnancy. Then there were the dozen neurological tests he subjected her to daily, plus the physiotherapy sessions for her fingers.

They’d just ended such a session and were heading out to the barbecue house at the seafront terrace garden to have lunch, after which he’d said they’d explore more of the estate.

He was walking beside her, his brows drawn together, his eyes plastered to the latest batch of results from another dozen tests. So what did he mean, she didn’t have …?

Terrible suspicion mushroomed, clouding the perfection of the day.

Could he think she’d capitalized on a transient memory loss and had been stringing him along for the past four weeks? Or worse, that she’d never had memory loss, that she was cunning enough, with a convoluted enough agenda, to have faked it from the start?

And she blurted it out, “You think I’m pretending?”

“What?” He raised his eyes sluggishly, stared ahead into nothingness as if the meaning of her words was oozing through his mind, searching for comprehension. Then it hit him. Hard. His head jerked toward her, his frown spectacular. *“No.”*

She waited for him to elaborate. He didn’t, buried his head back into the tests.

So she prodded. “So what do you mean I don’t have PTA? I woke up post-trauma with amnesia. Granted, it’s not a classic case, but what else could it be?”

Instead of answering, he held the door of the terrace pergola open for her. She stepped out into the late March midday, barely stopped herself from moaning as the sweet saltiness of the sea breeze splashed her face, weaved insistent fingers through her hair.

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