MILLS & BOON

The Rogue And The Rich Girl

Christine Pacheco

Vintage 90s

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Аннотация

Stranded! Nicole Jackson looked oh-so-sexy in a pair of jeans, but to Ace Lawson she was nothing but a nuisance. First, she hired him to take her on some wild adventure; then she got him stuck in the middle of nowhere. Now "Miss Prim" was expecting him to rescue her from a mess of her own making!Nicole had thought the trip would add excitement to her humdrum life, but she never dreamed she'd be trapped with "Mr. Seduction." Still, she had a feeling Ace could teach her a thing or two about life - and maybe she could give him a little education about true love… .

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Jared, this one is for you, light of my life, with thanks for the inspiration and unwavering belief.

Dear Reader,

I don't remember a time when I didn't want to be a writer. Even as a child, I spun fantastical tales, an outlet for a very creative imagination. Along the way, several special people encouraged me in ways I'll never forget.

In elementary school, the librarian actually gave the books I wrote their own shelf and glued checkout cards on the inside covers. In junior high, a teacher gave me a full year's credit of science projects for writing a book. I can't forget my mother, either, for always encouraging me to believe I could be anything I dreamed.

A lot of things have changed over the years, but not my love of the written word and the power it holds.

The call from Karen Taylor Richman at Silhouette changed my life, helping me realize a lifelong dream.

It's my sincere hope that I can capture your heart and engage your emotions, taking you away to the imaginary world I create. Just for a minute, I want you to take time out of your busy schedule for yourself, relax and enjoy.

All my very best wishes to you,

Christine Pacheco

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One

Ace Lawson glanced up from where he crouched on the airplane wing. The taxicab pulled to a halt, and he checked the scarred surface of his watch, not surprised to note it was already ten minutes past the hour.

As the woman opened the back door, he lifted his aviator glasses for a closer look.

Maybe it *had* been worth the wait.

Ankles, then calves emerged. He swore he heard the whisper of silk as she slipped from the car. But that was impossible—the taxi's engine hummed loudly. Obviously it had been too long since he'd been with a woman.

She paid the driver, leaning over to do so.

Ace allowed a long, low whistle.

If only he'd known this was a reward, he would have given up the boardroom five years earlier than he had.

The taxi sped off in a cloud of dust, leaving silence between him and the woman. She walked toward him. With one hand she carried a suitcase, with the other she clutched a tooled leather briefcase. In the wink of the morning sun, he noted the bright red of her sculptured nails.

Auburn hair flirted with her shoulders, a few wisps playing across her face in the desert heat. A skirt clung to her thighs, outlining the length of leg. A blazer hugged her shoulders,

thankfully minus any scary linebacker padding.

She exuded professionalism, from her spiked heels to silk blouse. Yet none of the armor hid her obviously dormant sensuality.

Ace jumped from the wing, then leaned back against it, dropping his glasses into place, determined to enjoy the show. He told himself she was a client, that her money paid his bills and bought medical supplies he needed to help the underprivileged. But none of that prevented him from watching the soft sway of her hips.

He allowed a quick grin. Her dress-for-success uniform might look good now, but he'd bet dollars to plane tickets she would be wilted in under an hour. Maybe less. And on Cabo de Bello, where artillery had been flying as often as pesky gulls, the rebels would likely find her an amusing diversion.

Oh well, if she wanted to act as though she were going on the *Love Boat,* he wouldn't stop her.

"Ace Lawson?" she asked, her voice slightly lilting, oddly intoxicating.

"Yep," he said, accepting her outstretched hand. Warm. Smooth. Healthy. A hell of a contradiction to some of the women's hands he'd seen lately. "And you're late," he added. Just like his ex had always been.

"Sorry." Her smile remained firmly in place, although she pulled back her hand.

He wondered if his calluses bothered her. Wondered if the

dirt under his nails bothered her. But he'd just finished a run. He wanted a cool shower, a colder beer and a soft pillow, but they were luxuries that had to wait.

"I didn't realize you meant to take off promptly at ten."

He ignored the apology. "Are you going to fly dressed like that? Or do you want five minutes to change?"

"Change?" Her smile vanished and she looked at her sheath-style skirt and spike-heeled leather pumps.

He took in the slick package of her chic appearance. Hell, the lady probably spent more each month on clothes than he'd made in the past ten years. What things he could do for others with that kind of money.

"Honey, you look like a million bucks, but your stockings are going to be glued to your legs and my seats eat stockings for lunch." He shrugged elaborately. "And them heels..."

"My heels? What's wrong with them?"

He didn't even try to hide his amusement as she tried to pull the sunken heel from the tar.

"They're stuck," he said unnecessarily.

She grimaced.

He grinned, then rubbed his forefinger across the stubble shading his chin. "Tell you what. I'll give you *into something more comfortable.*"

Nicole Jackson arched a tweezed eyebrow at him. He could well imagine an unfortunate underling receiving that harsh, wordless gesture. It might have terrorized some; it entertained

him. “Besides, Cessie here isn’t a Learjet.”

She cut a glance to the side, taking in the single-engine plane that sported faded paint.

“I noticed.”

Her tone irritated him. His Cessna was his only worldly possession, and he loved it as if it were the child he always wanted but never had. Heck, he and Cessie had been around the world several times in the past few years. And she’d never failed him. Unlike the women he’d known.

“So what do you say? You want to take me up on my offer? You’re down to four minutes.”

She stared at him—nearly eye to eye, he noticed.

“Where do you suggest I change?”

“Over there.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

“But that’s an outhouse,” she protested.

“No attendant on duty, either.”

She didn’t laugh. Didn’t smile. But her brows narrowed into a single, slim line.

“Look,” he said, patience waning. “We need to get in the air. If you don’t want to change, I’ll help you into the plane.”

“You’ll what?”

“That skirt won’t give an inch. You’ll have to lift it up or accept my help.” Ace hoped she decided not to change.

Indecision warred on her face. Finally, with obvious reluctance, she nodded. “I’ll need about ten minutes.”

Ace sighed.

"I'll try to cut it short."

She offered a tentative smile and his aggravation began to fade. Then she tried to yank her shoe free. And failed. With another sigh, he bent, capturing her ankle with his hand. The curve of her bone slid perfectly into the cup of his palm. Suddenly a breath threatened to choke him.

"Really, Mr. Lawson—"

"Ace."

"There's no need to..."

She trailed off as he looked up. Their gazes mingled for a flash of a second. A look, one he hesitated to name, passed between them.

"That is..."

"Yes?" He raised a brow.

"I'd appreciate the help."

"Put your hand on my shoulder," he instructed.

She nodded, setting down her briefcase.

Nothing prepared Ace for the feel of her fingers penetrating his whisper-thin T-shirt. Soft. Warm.

He jerked the reluctant heel from the black ooze, leaving several thin strips of leather behind.

"Thanks," she said, pulling her foot away from his hand.

Pushing to a standing position, Ace watched her slip stocking-clad toes into the ruined pump. Without another word, she picked up her briefcase and headed toward the rest room—outhouse, he mentally amended—once again with that seductive sway.

Hell, maybe this trip wouldn't be so bad after all. For the first time in days, Ace Lawson actually smiled.

Just as quickly, though, his smile disappeared. He had a job to do, then needed to take another hop into Central America.

To kill the minutes, he climbed aboard Cessie and started a second preflight instrument check—anything to keep his mind off what Nicole might look like beneath the tough exterior. Would her undergarments be serviceable cotton, or would they be silk, satin and lace? Did her bra have an underwire or an eighteen-hour support system? Did she even wear a bra?

Ace shook his head. He needed sleep. And a stop at Rosie's in Cartagena. He definitely didn't need a woman reminiscent of his wife.

The heat built inside the small compartment as the California desert sun blasted through the windshield. Hardly a breeze stirred and only a few Joshua trees fought for survival in the hostile environment.

She returned in under ten minutes, white athletic shoes a marked contrast to the black tar. Supple denim snuggled her thighs and hips, conforming to her curves like a good male friend. Or a lover.

His gut tightened.

Ace reached across the cockpit and opened the door. His muscles tightened as he grabbed the briefcase. "What have you got in here?" It was hard to believe she hadn't even struggled under the forty or so pounds.

“Notebook computer, power supply, cellular phone, calculator, modem, files. Why?”

Saying nothing, he reached for her suitcase. The luggage made the briefcase seem light. While she climbed aboard, he secured everything in the small area behind the seats.

Several minutes later, he taxied down the abandoned runway. The plane picked up speed. Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced at the woman next to him.

“Fasten your belt,” he instructed, not believing she hadn’t thought to do that.

Without checking to see if she’d obeyed, he continued down the rutted, weed-choked runway, easing back on the yoke.

Urging the plane’s nose into the air, Ace reveled in the freedom of flight. The engine throbbed steadily beneath him, just like a hot, willing and undemanding woman. The sound of wind rushed past the fuselage, reminding him of the whisper of damp, musky sheets sliding to the floor.

He checked his instruments, then looked at his passenger. She hadn’t followed orders. The ends of the safety belt rested at the side of the seat.

Her chest rose and fell in shallow motions and her vivid green eyes stared at nothing, unblinking. The tips of her manicured fingernails dug into her palms, and streaks of artificial color painted her cheeks. Her lips were tightly pursed. Obviously, the grip of fear held her paralyzed.

Ace groaned. He’d been hired to shuttle an uptight

businesswoman who got airsick before the land lay even three thousand feet beneath them. “Ms. Jackson?”

A sound emerged from her throat that was part whimper, part moan.

A knot twisted in his gut. The feeling was familiar, but something he’d thought he’d gotten rid of when Elana fled. Evidently not. Unfortunately, he no longer carried a bottle of mint-flavored antacid in his duffel to help tame the wild ulcer. Right now, his passenger could use it every bit as much as he.

“Are you okay?” he asked, hoping he would get the answer he wanted, not the one he feared.

She didn’t respond.

A burning in his stomach painfully reminded him of the ulcer’s existence.

Taking a hand from the yoke, he frantically dug through the map compartment for an airsick bag. There had to be one. Didn’t there?

A bead of sweat trickled down her patrician nose.

“Hang in there,” he urged. Ace prided himself on the ability to deal with anything life tossed his way. He’d flown through blazing fires, been shot at, tossed into jail for a crime he hadn’t committed, and another he had. And yet, he couldn’t deal with something so elemental, so natural.

Or maybe it was the woman herself who unsettled him.

The whimper in her voice became urgent.

“Damn.” While keeping one eye on the controls, he reached

again and again into the compartment.

She flinched.

And surprisingly, Ace experienced a twinge of sympathy. Digging under the maps, he searched for the waxy-feeling paper. To no avail.

The woman's shoulders drooped, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

Since there were no bags, he had only one option: try to keep her from needing one.

"Open your eyes, Ms. Jackson," he said softly, barely above the lulling hum of the engines. Fighting back impatience, he kept his tone even and cajoling. "You're making matters worse." For both of them.

She blinked.

"Take five deep breaths. Hold each for at least three seconds."

She followed his instructions, drawing in a drink of air. With each breath, his corresponding pain lessened.

"That's it," he added when she gulped again. "Exhale slowly."

She did.

"Now look out the window."

"The window?" The words were hardly above a croak.

"Try and fix your gaze in the distance. Don't look up, and definitely don't look down."

He surveyed the plane's gauges, though in reality he could fly unconsciously...and had done so on more than one occasion.

He noticed her hands had stopped trembling. "Take another

couple of breaths, and whatever you do, don't close your eyes, since that makes you more dizzy and disoriented."

A few minutes later, she looked in his direction. A hint of color started to blend with her blusher.

"You okay?"

She nodded weakly. "I think so."

Ace prayed so.

"How did you do that?"

"Learned that handy tip a few years ago. Dated a dancer."

"What does dancing have to do with it?"

"She did ballet—you know all those spins. She said she always tried to focus on an object every time she spun around, said it stopped her from getting dizzy."

"Evidently it works."

"Next time, remember to take your motion sickness pills *before* you get on the plane."

"I did."

He silently pleaded with the sky gods for smooth sailing, sans turbulence. "Are you always such a poor passenger?" Ace had a hard time believing he wasn't completely irritated by her—with her. Logic said he should have been. She was a painful reminder of his ex-wife and the hurt he'd run—flown—away from. Yet there was something vulnerable about Nicole Jackson, despite the way she dressed and acted. As if there was something more to the picture, something she didn't want anyone to uncover...

Absently he wondered what it would be like to unlock the

secrets. Her secrets.

She wiped back a wisp of escaped auburn hair and looked at him. “I do better in bigger aircraft.”

Dragged from his wayward thoughts by the sound of her voice, he responded, “Then why do you fly?”

“It’s more convenient.”

“For who?”

She shifted, squaring her shoulders. He saw her struggle to regain composure, hide the vulnerability he’d witnessed. With her looks, money and title of President, she was obviously accustomed to being in control. Which ought to make things interesting, because he had no intention of relinquishing half an ounce of his control to *any* woman.

“Fasten your belt,” he instructed, the words a little rough, as he tried not to notice how alluring she looked with the gleaming sun accenting the highlights in her hair.

Nicole Jackson was business, and in a few days she would be history. Noticing personal things—and wanting to discover them—wouldn’t make the trip any easier. And right now he needed easy.

Needed it bad.

* * *

Nicole fingered back the stands of hair that refused to cooperate. Her fingers no longer shook, but an uneasy sensation remained in her stomach. She recognized the feeling, and it had nothing to do with flying and everything to do with being out

of control. She detested the feeling, knowing it was a sign of weakness. Nicole didn't want to be out of control, especially when she was at the mercy of a man who didn't appear to have an ounce of mercy in his soul.

To give him credit though, he hadn't turned the plane around and gone back in for a landing. And judging by the expression on his face, the thought had obviously crossed his mind.

Cognizant of his gaze and the fact he'd glanced suggestively, more than once, at the belt, she forced her fingers to relax, then grabbed both ends and snapped them together.

Then he looked away, as if she weren't even there.

While he was deep in thought, or just plain ignoring her, she surveyed the man sitting next to her.

Deep lines were etched beside his haunted gray eyes, indicating that he'd seen more of life than some men twice his age. His dark blond hair was brushed back severely from his furrowed forehead. She knew, without a doubt, that the valleys grooved in his face were formed from experience, not laughter.

A masculine shading of stubble covered his jaw, leaving her to wonder if he'd been up all night or whether the look was typical of his personality. Either way, it was different than what she was accustomed to seeing.

Nicole noticed the way his hands curved around the yoke and remembered the sensual feel of his calluses. The feeling had been unique. And tantalizingly thrilling.

Evidently aware of her less-than-subtle scrutiny, he glanced in

her direction. His lips curved into something she thought might be considered a smile in less than polite circles. Momentarily, his harsh features had been transformed, until they weren't quite as brooding. In fact, he was quite attractive. Ruggedly so. Teasingly so. If one went for that type of man, which she definitely didn't. She had enough worries trying to save the account for her client, without adding Ace Lawson to the list of her problems.

"Are you still doing okay?"

Did she detect a slight hint of concern in his tone? "I think you and your plane are both safe."

"Good." There was no mistaking his relief. Nor her own. Obviously, the concern had been a figment of her imagination.

Without another word, he checked a map, glancing at the dials and gauges. He piloted the plane with confidence, almost arrogance. As much as he unsettled her, though, she knew she was in safe hands.

Ace Lawson's firm, Risky Business, specialized in flying people to areas no one else would. She was aware of the recent rebel activity on Cabo de Bello, and knew that was why the last commercial airline had canceled flights to the island. Two months ago, following a hurricane that decimated the runways, the smaller airlines had followed suit. Which left her with Ace Lawson.

Their legs brushed. Worn, nearly threadbare jeans melded to his thighs like a second skin. A jolt of awareness pierced her. His masculine scent—that of adventure spiced with danger—

surrounded her, making the cockpit intimate.

He grinned wolfishly; he didn't apologize.

She scooted away, pressing her right shoulder against the cold glass window. She could survive anything for two days, she told herself. Including Ace Lawson.

After all, she was paying his wages.

And that made him just another employee.

Vaguely she wondered why that thought gave her absolutely no comfort.

Two

Several hours later, a pocket of turbulence jolted the plane. Nicole wanted to squeeze her eyes shut, desperate to keep the consuming panic at bay. But remembering Ace's previous instructions, she forced herself to focus in the distance.

"That's a girl," he said.

She found the deep resonance of his voice oddly reassuring. Nicole clung to the lifeline of his calmness, and decided not to be ruffled by his patronizing manner.

Flying was the worst part of her job. Even though she'd logged nearly one hundred thousand air miles for the company her father started and she fought to save, Nicole had been unable to overcome the constant terror.

And this flight was worse than many of the others. Despite Ace's earlier remarks, she hadn't expected the comfort of a Learjet, but neither had she been prepared for the Cessna's cramped confines.

Each sensation was magnified tenfold, from the loudness of the creaking fuselage and constant drone of the engine, to the shudder of the seat and roll of dash instruments.

She hadn't thought she would have to sit so close to the pilot. His muscular thigh, wrapped in faded-to-white denim, pressed against her own, much softer leg. Sensually.

Each time he reached to check an instrument or map, his

motions rippled through her. The faint scent of the tropical after-shave clinging to his neck seemed much more potent to her neglected senses than the hundred-dollar-an-ounce cologne she was accustomed to on her male colleagues and rare dates.

He shifted, his hip bone brushing her thigh. She sucked in a huge gulp of air. The man was dangerous, more unnerving than flying, and the aura of power he possessed told her that for the first time ever, she was way out of her league.

Since she'd grown up and learned to deal with the crisscrossing of scars left by an uncomfortable childhood, that of never fitting in or belonging, never being quite good enough, Nicole had allowed no man close enough to bother her.

And she wouldn't start with Ace Lawson.

Straightening, she inched away from the close contact of their bodies.

"I have to stop to refuel before the last stint that'll take us over water."

The unease in Nicole's stomach became acid. Needing another dose of Dramamine, she shifted as much as the restricting belt allowed. She grappled behind the seat for her suitcase. When her fingers were unable to locate anything except the coarseness of canvas and layers of maps, she asked, "Where's my suitcase?"

"Under my duffel bag." He turned to her. "You're not sick again, are you?"

"I'm nervous about the landing," she admitted.

“I’ll take it easy and steady,” he promised.

She wondered if he was only talking about the plane.

“But if you need more medicine right away, there’s probably some in the first-aid kit.”

She glanced around. “Where’s that?”

“My duffel.”

The idea of rifling through his personal effects bothered her...more than the thought of the landing. “I’ll be okay.”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself. But there’s no need for heroics. In fact, I’d much prefer you didn’t attempt it.”

He guided the plane through puffy clouds. Nicole focused on a spot in the distance.

“Almost there.”

The plane rocked and bounced as the runway rose to meet them. She gripped the bottom of the seat until numbness froze her hands.

“You can wake up now, Sleeping Beauty.”

Nicole emerged from her self-imposed trance like a caterpillar transformed into a butterfly. She blinked, relieved to discover Ace taxiing to the tie-down area.

“You’re still alive,” he said.

“Tell that to my stomach.”

Ace laughed softly, then shook his head. He maneuvered the plane into the spot indicated by an attendant. When he shut down the engine, he turned to Nicole. “You hungry?”

“Couldn’t eat a thing.”

"You should try something light. This'll be your last opportunity for a decent meal until tonight."

"I'll take my chances."

He lifted a broad shoulder in a hint of a shrug, then dropped it again just as quickly. "We'll be leaving in about fifteen minutes."

Ace swung his long legs to the ground, then came around to her side of the plane. He offered his hand, and she accepted it, surprised by the tingle that chased up her spine at the warmth of his touch.

He released her, moving back a few steps. The motion caused his jacket to flap open. Something metallic glinted in the bright sunlight. She looked again. The handle of a knife.

Nicole gulped. A long knife, the size of the one she carved with at home, was sheathed in a leather holster. Her heart rate jumped. No man she'd ever known owned a knife like that, much less packed it casually on his waist. Instinctively, she knew he had the knowledge to wield it. A shiver of fear traced her spine.

"Is that really necessary?" she asked, her voice betraying her fear.

He followed her gaze. "This?" He pulled the knife from its home with a fluid motion and a vicious hiss.

The sunshine refracted in a hundred different directions, shooting rainbow colors into the sky. The brightness of the glint made her blink several times.

"Yes, it's really necessary."

Pulling her gaze away from the wickedly serrated metal edge,

she looked directly into Ace's hooded eyes. He'd certainly drawn the weapon quickly, proving his lazy good looks deceptive. "I received a letter from Governor Rodriguez just a few days ago, saying he was anxious to talk again. He wants this account saved as much as my client does." *As much as I do,* she thought.

"No doubt," he agreed.

His silence, combined with a tense stance, made her push on. In her years as a leader in the corporate world, she'd learned to read body language. And Ace's screamed he was hiding something. "Go on," she encouraged. "If you have something to say, say it."

In a single flip of the wrist, he expertly returned the knife to its worn home. "Look, Ms. Jackson, I have plenty to say about this trip of yours to Cabo de Bello. Regardless of that, my job is to get you there..."

His glance lazily traveled the length of her body. For the second time that day. She refused to shift uncomfortably, but standing still was one of the most difficult things she'd ever done.

When his piercing gaze finally met her face, he was met with her best impression of corporate coolness. But nothing could hide the way her blood rushed through her body.

"...And see that your butt is kept in one piece until I get you back home to your safe, insulated condo in Los Angeles."

"Really, Mr. Lawson—"

"Ace. The name's Ace. We're going to be spending the next couple of days together. You might as well dispense with the

formality." Calmly he folded his arms across his chest.

"If that's the way you want to play it..." She allowed her sentence to trail off.

"Honey, I guarantee you, this is anything but a game. The report that crossed your desk last week wasn't a joke. The island's politically unsettled, and I don't mean a comfortable 'vote 'em out of office' mentality. I'm talking about 'shoot 'em till they shut up' philosophy."

Back home, in her floor-to-ceiling glass-paned office, the crudely typed report seemed more the stuff of a grade-B movie than her life. Her heart beat faster.

Unfolding his arms, he made one hand into a fist. "You and your client are trying to change a way of life."

"Then why did you agree to pilot me?"

"Money."

Nicole arched a brow. "Somehow you don't seem the type to require a lot of money."

"You're right. I don't."

"Then why?"

"Anyone ever tell you you're a pushy broad?"

"The last man who did wore his front teeth in his lip."

Ace nearly cracked a smile. Nearly. "You're welcome to try."

"I'd prefer a simple answer."

"Right. I'm taking you to Cabo de Bello because you want to go and I need the cash."

She waited. And waited.

“That’s as simple as it gets,” he said.

He took her shoulders between his hands, firmly, but not excessively so. That didn’t stop a frisson of awareness from passing up her spine.

“I intend to take this opportunity to use every means at my disposal to get you to change your mind about representing your client on this. My beef isn’t with you, necessarily, but you’re the conduit. And if I take you out of the action, they’re out, too.”

Her jaw dropped. She closed her mouth with an audible snap. “You sound as if you have a vested interest, Mr. Lawson.”

“Nope.” He released her. A warm Pacific breeze toyed with his hair, subtracting years, if not determination, from his face. “I’ve got friends that don’t want to see Cabo de Bello become another sweatshop just to line the deep coffers of your client’s purse.”

“You’re being melodramatic.”

“Maybe you’re not being realistic,” he countered.

“They’ve invested over four million dollars and two years on this project—”

“Two years is nothing, compared with the way of life you’ll change forever,” he interrupted, hostility making his words deeper, more husky.

A primitive part of her responded with an internal leap to the sexiness in his voice. Yet, right now, he was on the opposite side of an issue, an issue her survival depended on. “Opening the plant on time hardly compares with ruining a way of life,” she said,

brows furrowing together.

"Sure it does. Your client..."

She didn't like the emphasis on the last word.

"...Will be getting clothes made at dirt-cheap prices, then selling them for a huge profit. The standard of living won't increase much here, but some fat cat in the States will get even fatter."

"That's free enterprise," she insisted.

"That's robbery. Just because it happens doesn't make it right. Have you stopped to think about the jobs that might be lost at home?

"Be warned, Ms. Jackson," he said, the heat of his breath feathering across her cheek. "I mean it when I say I intend to do everything in my power to send you back with a change of heart. You and your client can find another place that's anxious for your kind of progress."

Nicole shook her head and several strands of her hair met and mingled with his breath. "That's not possible."

More than he knew was at stake. Everything she'd spent years fighting for lay on this deal. If she didn't salvage the project, she would lose the account. God knew she—and WorldNet—couldn't afford it. Because of a series of disastrous failures, her company might be swallowed whole by the highest bidder, maybe by the one person she and her father had trusted implicitly.

Bitterly, she thought of Sam Weeder, her father's partner—her own godfather. Weeder had worked to undermine her

company since her father's death. He'd placed a mole inside WorldNet, jeopardizing accounts. Judging by last quarter's financial statements, he'd done a heck of a job.

Failure was unacceptable. She intended to approach success with single-minded determination.

"I can be persuasive." He traced his blunted fingernail down one of her cheekbones.

She winced, not liking the way her treacherous body responded, then pulled back. "I won't be persuaded. Not even if you pull out all the stops."

He grinned. Certain. Cocky. Threatening.

"Fifteen minutes," he said for the second time. "Be ready to fly." Obviously dismissing their conversation—his veiled threat and hinted promise—he pivoted and strode away, long legs gulping the distance to the outbuilding.

Her shoulders sagged against the plane. She hadn't counted on her pilot having an explosive personality, hadn't counted on the fact she might run into opposition even before she stepped foot on the Central American island near Belize.

Not one to wallow in useless thought, she pulled herself together and decided to freshen up. Standing on her tiptoes, Nicole reached behind the seat. She bit out a quick curse when she couldn't shove Ace's duffel off her bag.

Knowing she could make do with the few cosmetics in her briefcase, she grabbed it from the floor. Nicole snapped the latches open and took out a picture of the plant.

WorldNet's client blended the plant with the island's natural beauty. They'd spent millions of dollars on the state-of-the-art plant. It hadn't been until they were ready to start hiring that the trouble started.

She shook her head.

Saving the account would save her client. And WorldNet.

Nicole allowed the full-color glossy to flutter back into place. After digging out the cosmetics bag, she reached for the box of motion-sickness pills. She shook out the foil pouch, then sighed when seeing each piece of foil jaggedly torn. She had another box...in her unreachable luggage.

Nicole glanced around for her pilot, but didn't see him anywhere. And her allotted time was ticking away. For a few seconds she fought against her conscience, which told her not to rifle through his belongings, even though he'd earlier given his permission. Realizing she had no other options if she was to be prepared when he dictated, she closed the briefcase, set it on the floor, then knelt backward on the passenger seat.

She grasped the small zipper tab. The rasp of the zipper sounded unnaturally loud in the summer silence. She groaned when she noticed everything was tightly packed, with no evidence of the first-aid kit. If she wanted the Dramamine, she would have to dig for it.

Inserting her hands down the sides, she discovered nothing but the various textures of fabric—rough and smooth. Trying again, she came across a razor, obviously not used recently, a

tube of toothpaste squeezed from the middle and a nearly empty plastic bottle of after-shave. On her third attempt, she grabbed the folded kit. When she pulled it out, a piece of clothing snagged on a torn end of the vinyl.

Nicole tugged on the clothing, suspiciously soft, like satin. She pulled it free, holding it in her hand. "Pinocchio?" she whispered in disbelief. He didn't seem like the type. She pursed her lips. She couldn't believe she'd entrusted her life to a man who carried a knife and wore Pinocchio underwear.

Embarrassed by the intimacy of handling the material that wrapped, probably snugly, around Ace's hips, she gingerly took the nose between her thumb and forefinger and pulled it free from where it had snagged. It was at that second she noticed Pinocchio's nose was designed to accommodate a certain part of Ace's anatomy. With plenty of room for growth.

"Oh my God."

Heat chased up her cheeks. As if they'd singed her fingers, she threw the briefs back into the duffel bag, yanking the zipper shut. The man was too much.

Pulling her professional demeanor around her as a protective barrier, she raided the first-aid kit, leaving it on the seat between them.

She climbed down the plane and hurried to the rest room. By the time she had resculptured her cheekbones with an artful sweep of blush and pulled her hair back into a chignon, she was in control. Unshakable.

Even by Ace and his less-than-civilized tendencies.

He'd kept her off kilter so far, but she could handle it. Except for the missing polish on his veneer—the crude language, unshaven chin and well-worn blue jeans—he was exactly the same as every man she'd ever met.

An unfamiliar nagging voice reminded her of the long silky nose that had hung between her fingers, Pinocchio's ridiculous eyes wide with delight and mouth smiling devilishly. Of the two men she'd been involved with, one had worn baggy boxer shorts and the other had worn white briefs with standard apples and grapes on the tag. No, Ace wasn't like *any* man she'd known.

Nicole squared her shoulders and left the bathroom feeling confident and composed. Ace was signing the bottom of a fuel invoice when she reached the plane.

He handed the attendant the clipboard, then flicked his gaze over her. "I liked your hair the way it was."

She fingered the secured knot. "I prefer it up."

"Yeah." He took mirrored aviator shades from the breast pocket of his ragged denim jacket. "You would."

She felt a moment of regret when he put on the glasses, blocking out the intensity etched in his gray eyes. Simultaneously, she was glad. He saw too much.

"Ready?"

"Anytime you are," she answered, shoving aside the unwelcome thoughts of his all-knowing eyes. Nicole opened the passenger door and saw a half-dozen or so airsick bags

on her seat. She didn't know whether he was being courteous or cautious. Cautious, she decided, moving them to the map compartment. Ace wouldn't have done anything for her comfort, only his.

After a Learjet cleared, Ace taxied into position on the runway, and opened the throttle, giving the engine full power.

She wasn't sure why, but this takeoff didn't traumatize her as much as the first one had. Ace nudged the nose into the air, then leveled off, and her stomach only twisted with sporadic pains. She marveled at the sensation and told herself it had nothing to do with the pilot's obvious skills.

Many hours later, following another brief landing for fuel at a scary-looking airstrip near a small Mexican village, the sun splashed its majestic array of colors across a vivid blue backdrop, then dropped on the western horizon.

She craned her head to look out the window, seeing the world in a new way. Invariably, on commercial flights, she lowered the window shade so she wouldn't be forced to accept the reality of flirting with clouds while the land beneath her melded into a solid mass of potential crash sites.

Magenta swirled with purples and mauves, and she realized it was the first time she'd seen a sunset in over two years. Her job, first as Daddy's assistant, now as sole owner, consumed every available hour and even a few that weren't available. "It's beautiful up here," she said, nearly ten minutes later, after the sun had given a final wink, casting sparkling shimmers into the

Caribbean.

"There's no place like the sky," he agreed over the engine's roar.

For a moment, the grooves around his eyes relaxed, and Nicole glimpsed the real human being buried beneath layers of hard exterior. Was it possible...?

Instantly the softening disappeared.

The next few hours passed in a blur to her.

"We'll be landing soon."

Butterflies leapt to life, bringing her out of her silent plans for the meeting with the governor.

"You might want to take some more Dramamine."

"I've already taken some."

"You got them out of the bag?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I met Pinocchio."

"Pinocchio?" he echoed, seemingly confused.

"The underwear in your bag."

Ace laughed, and the sound was every bit as rich and vibrant as she'd thought. Like Kahlúa and cream splashed over big chunky ice cubes. And every bit as potent.

"They were a gag gift," he said. "At the bachelor party I went to a couple of days ago."

"I could hardly care what you dress in, Mr. Lawson." Still, she couldn't help but wonder how they would look on him.

"I assure you, Ms. Jackson, I've never worn anything like that."

She resisted the implied invitation to ask what he did wear.

“Not my style.”

Nicole turned away, looking out the window, seeing nothing except the vastness of water, which she assumed was the Caribbean. “I thought you said we’re landing.”

“We are.”

“Where?” she asked.

“Down there.”

“Down where?” she asked again, not seeing anything resembling an island, let alone a runway.

Outrageously, he winked at her. “Trust me.”

Her stomach dropped when Ace began the descent. Trusting him was the last thing she wanted to do. And the one thing she had to stake her life on.

The plane hit a patch of rough air, causing them to lose altitude drastically.

“We’ll be okay.”

She clutched the metal bar under her seat, the words *trust me* echoing in her mind.

They emerged from the turbulence, less than a heartbeat later.

“That wasn’t too bad, was it?”

“Terrifying,” she said.

“That wasn’t terrifying,” he said. “Terrifying is when you’re in the air with a bullet hole in the windshield and a fire in the engine.”

His tone was matter-of-fact, and it lit a responding flame somewhere inside her. He’d experienced the danger of living on

the edge but didn't allow it to bother him.

"Are you ever afraid?"

Ten, maybe fifteen seconds passed and she thought he didn't intend to answer. What was going on behind that smoky gaze? What was he hiding?

Finally he admitted, "Sometimes. Sometimes I'm afraid."

He looked at her. He obviously had a human side he didn't want to show often. For some reason, the fact that he'd afforded her a glimpse of his fallible humanity touched her.

"Why do you put yourself in a position like that in the first place?"

"Because life can be shallow and meaningless."

He specialized in taking people where no one else would. It had earned him a reputation she'd been scared to trust. Until she'd had no other options. "Putting yourself in danger makes life meaningful?"

"*Living* makes life meaningful," he said.

She started to ask another question, to dig a little deeper into the character he wanted shrouded, but he interrupted.

"The runway's just ahead."

Nicole looked out the windshield, seeing something that resembled a lump of coal, floating in the middle of the sea. "Cabo de Bello?"

He looked at his console again. "Yep."

A single light reflected in the distance. She felt like Columbus, discovering the blessed sight of land after months at sea.

Ace maneuvered the plane into a descent. Of all the things that could happen, gravity concerned her most.

"Hang on," he said. "This runway's still screwed up from the last tropical storm."

She knew that, but hearing him say it made it more immediate. Alarming.

As they got closer, it appeared palm tree fronds grabbed at them like demonic fingers. She swallowed a terrified scream. The landing gear snagged in a rut, making them careen wildly. Ace swore. Nicole prayed. The plane rocked and shuddered, and the seat belt sliced across her middle.

"We'll be okay in half a second," he shouted.

The acrid stench of smoking rubber burned her nose. But before she knew it, they slid to a gradual stop, several dozen yards away from a threatening stand of tropical trees.

He'd performed an exceptional landing.

"You all right?"

Her muscles felt stiff but, other than that, she was all right. She nodded.

"Sure?"

A man with dark skin, and hair black as the night sky, rushed toward them, flashlight casting shadows all around. His face was alive with excitement. He grabbed the pilot's door and threw it open. "Ah! Señor Ace. I saw a plane trying to land like a crazy dodo bird..." For emphasis, the man spread his arms wide and turned a circle on the ground. "...I knew it had to be you." He

grinned, sporting a hole where front teeth usually resided.

"Hola, mi amigo," Ace responded easily, shutting down the engine.

"Ah, Señor Ace, you brought company." He punched Ace in the arm. "Is about time. Me and my wife, we think it will never happen. Welcome, lady, welcome."

He reached across Ace, extending a hand. Ace pushed the man's hand back. Nicole frowned at Ace.

"Perhaps I should make some introductions, first. Ricardo, this is Nicole Jackson. With WorldNet. Nicole, my friend, Ricardo Maldanado."

Ricardo quickly dropped his hand to his side, as if the threat of her touch offended him. She turned the full force of her scowl on Ace. He'd known this would happen. But why? She wanted answers. Now.

"Later, Nicole," he promised. "You can have a piece of me later."

"You bring her here?" Ricardo demanded, waving his arms like the dodo bird he'd spoken of. "Are you loco? This is too much, even for you."

"What did you want me to do? Kick her out of my plane?"

"That would be better than bringing her here, no?"

"I don't think the lady likes parachutes."

"No. No." The man frantically shook his head, then glanced over his shoulder, his wide-eyed alarm clear. "Is too dangerous, Señor Ace. You must take her away. Pronto."

A shiver of fear, unlike anything she'd ever felt, started at the base of her spine and spiked its way up, until it shimmered at her nape. "No," Nicole said. She clutched Ace's biceps and felt the tension coiled in solid muscle. She'd come too far; her future, and everything she'd always worked for, was on the line. She couldn't quit. Couldn't lose. "I must meet with Governor Rodriguez. Please."

Because it vanished so quickly, she might only have imagined the momentary melting in Ace's glacier-cold eyes.

"Relax, Ricardo. I'll take care of the *señorita.*"

The man shook his head in jerky motions. "No, no. Is too risky."

"That's my business, Ricardo. Besides, the lady here knows what she's getting herself into."

Under the faded shirt he wore, she felt Ace's muscles bunch and constrict. "Tell that lazy brother of yours to get his butt over here with the taxi."

Ricardo clasped his hands together in the motion of prayer and lifted them heavenward. He rolled his eyes. *"Madre de Dios."*

"You'll be meeting Her soon enough if you don't do as I say, Ricardo. *"Comprende?"*

"Ah, *sí, sí."* He bobbed his head, then hurried away.

With the man's absence, the cockpit felt even smaller, the air lightning-charged. Frogs croaking and crickets chirping provided the only relief from the eerie silence.

"Satisfied?"

Ace had put himself on the line for her. And she had the uncomfortable feeling his help came with a price.

He turned slightly, his muscle flexing. She realized her hand was still wrapped around his upper arm. With a start, she unfurled her fingers and pretended the queasy feeling deep inside was from the flight and Ricardo's strange reaction, and not from the powerful effect Ace exacted on her.

"I didn't lie, did I? You really do know what you're getting yourself into? You know what you're up against?"

"You?" she asked, strangely breathlessly.

"Me?" He shook his head. "Hell, honey, I'm the least of your worries."

His voice contained a grainy undercurrent of urgency that made her uneasy.

"A lot of people don't want you here, Nicole. That should have been obvious by the meeting you just had with my friend. I can guarantee you my enemies won't be so gracious."

"What's going on here?" Tendrils of apprehension held her in their grips.

"A small revolution, Nicole. Sparked by you and your client."

She gulped and the blood drained from her face.

"Ricardo's right. If you had any sense, we'd get the plane refueled and be outta here before anyone knows you ever landed. You can be safe and sound in your bed, probably in your penthouse apartment, before another sun sets."

Ace shifted. The hilt of his knife reflected prisms of light from

the faint runway lamps. She was in a hostile land, entrusting her life to a virtual stranger. Ace hadn't candy-coated facts. Though the governor extended an invitation, others wouldn't be so kind.

And the man she'd hired to help her wasn't on her side. Fear was suddenly very real and very intimidating.

She heard the crank of a car's engine and loud oaths. After several tries, the engine caught, choked, then rushed on. A moment later, a taxi with a missing headlight and twisted fender screeched to a halt beside the plane.

Ace leaned forward, his shoulder brushing the softness of her breast.

His presence disturbed her, made her undoubtedly aware of being a woman. Made her fear she would never again recoup the control she'd lost to her enigmatic protector.

She sucked in a breath. Deeply.

When he sat back up, she saw something glimmer in his hand. Her heart missed a beat.

In his palm, Ace cradled a large pistol. Dread coiled deep inside.

"It's your call, Nicole."

Three

"Well?" Ace watched while a war of indecision waged on her suddenly pale face. He'd scared her. Intentionally. Cabo de Bello was beautiful. Deceptively beautiful.

The governor had managed to keep the opposition subdued...so far. But for how long was anyone's guess.

He saw Nicole shove away the fear and force grim determination in its place. She'd set a goal and refused to be deterred. It was a noble, if stupid, trait. The same kind of naïveté had gotten him into trouble. Thank God he was too old for that anymore.

"I want to stay."

"Yeah. I expected as much," he said. "Let's go."

After grabbing his small arsenal of weapons, the duffel and her suitcase, he joined her on the tarmac.

Ricardo and his brother, Poncho, glared, and Ace scowled at both men, patience at an end, and snapped, "Ricardo, put my plane in a hangar. I don't want anyone knowing we're here."

"Por favor, Señor—"

Ace cut off protests with a wave. A lot of islanders didn't want WorldNet's progress. Sweatshop working conditions were good for no one, except owners.

Yet here he was, with a woman who represented each of the things Ricardo and Poncho hated.

Nicole's appointment with Governor Rodriguez wasn't until the morning. Since Ace and Nicole would both have rooms in the mansion, Ace planned to make use of each minute. And as he'd told her, he intended to use whatever tactics he needed. Fair. And foul.

Slyly, he grinned.

Why fly to Rosie's when he had Nicole? After all, he'd felt a response ripple through her when he'd outlined the length of her cheekbone. She'd fought it, but her breath had caught. She was aware of him, just as he was aware of her.

"Ready?" he asked Nicole.

She nodded.

Poncho and Ricardo exchanged uneasy glances, then Ricardo shrugged as if in hopelessness. After tucking his gun into his waistband, Ace turned to see Nicole slide into the taxi gracefully. No easy trick, he knew.

"Watch the hole," he warned. "Part of the floor on that side has rusted through."

"Oh." She glanced at the floor before crossing her long legs.

Poncho climbed behind the wheel and swore several times in Spanish. The car jerked and a groan tore from Nicole's lips.

"Are you all right?"

"Just feeling a little wear and tear," she said.

Ace leaned over the seat and tapped Poncho on the shoulder. "Take it easy, *mi amigo.*"

"*Sí, sí,* I try, I try."

He sat back. “It’s only a few miles to the governor’s mansion.”

She managed a brave smile.

He couldn’t summon an answering frown. She had guts and tenacity in equal measures. He’d summed her up quickly when she’d stepped onto the Southern California tarmac. Although she’d been reminiscent of Elana, there’d been several subtle differences.

Sure, Nicole had all the trappings of a spoiled rich girl, from the diamond studs in her ears all the way down to designer aerobic shoes, but there was something more. She carried herself with determination, mixed with an enchanting, exciting vulnerability. Wariness and hurt showed in her face—he’d had plenty of experience recognizing both—even though she fought to hide it. All combined to intrigue him.

An urge to protect her nearly overwhelmed him. And the only thing that stopped him from reaching for her hand was the certainty she wouldn’t welcome it.

The car hit a pothole that jarred Ace’s teeth. Yet, stoically, Nicole never uttered a word, even when he saw her top teeth sink into her lower lip.

With each mile they drew closer to the governor’s mansion, Ace’s senses sharpened. He felt as though a hundred pairs of eyes stared at him, tracking every move.

Waiting. Watching.

Unconsciously, he reached for his gun. He cut a glance out the window, seeing swaying trees and low hanging clouds.

"What's the matter?"

Her nervous voice intruded. Never looking at her, he forced a lie. "Nothing."

"Then why are you playing with your gun?"

"I'm not." Even in the shrouding darkness, he knew she'd arched an auburn brow. He frowned, realizing his fingers were resting protectively on the deadly coldness of his weapon. "Nothing's wrong," he reasserted. "Habit."

The disbelief of her gaze penetrated the distance.

"You make a habit of playing with your gun, Mr. Lawson?"

"Ace," he corrected. Again. "The name's Ace. My dad's Mr. Lawson." He'd said it to distract her from her line of questioning, yet, for a second, he actually wondered what his name would sound like when her tongue curled around the word.

"*Ace,"* she said dutifully.

The sensation of a fist landed in his stomach. Lord, she made it sound seductive, just as he'd hoped—just as he'd feared. He groaned. If his name sounded that good, how would it feel to have her tongue on *his,* tasting, testing, teasing?

Shaken, he dragged a hand through the cropped length of his hair. Business, he reminded himself. Nicole was business. And he was a professional.

But his thoughts strayed to the upcoming night ahead. Business. Right. Sure. He'd sworn to do whatever it took to change her mind. Do it he would.

He shifted uncomfortably, his jeans suddenly too tight.

Poncho rounded a corner and slowed down. Ace ruthlessly shoved aside his thoughts as the governor's unkempt lawn and gardens loomed in the taxi's dirty headlight. In the month since Ace's last visit, natural vegetation had choked the life out of the carefully planted gardens. There were no signs of activity.

Ace leaned forward. "What's going on, *mi amigo?*"

The man shrugged several times. *"No sé."*

Ace rubbed the stubble on his chin. He'd spoken to Juan Rodriguez only two weeks ago. The man was anxious to meet Nicole. So where were the lights and welcoming committee?

Poncho stomped on the brake. The car jerked to a stop, spewing pebbles and dirt in every direction.

"Ace?"

Alone, he would have gone inside. But because of Nicole, he refused to take the chance.

Hairs on the back of his neck stirred in undeniable warning. "Turn around, Poncho. Get the hell out of here."

Tires squealed as Poncho forced the manual steering to perform a feat it wasn't designed for.

"What's going on?" Nicole asked in a breathless whisper, evidently confused, obviously reading his panic.

On the back of Poncho's seat, Ace beat an impatient staccato with his fingers. Mentally, he listed possibilities and options. He was aware of the nervous looks Poncho cast in the rearview mirror. "The governor was expecting us," Ace said finally.

"You think something's wrong?"

He nodded tightly. “I do.”

She fell silent for a few moments, moments he needed in order to think. A cloud sauntered away from the moon, affording him the opportunity to see her fingers were tightly knotted in her lap. Yet she didn’t say anything. Again he found a reason to admire her.

Dragging his attention away from Nicole, he cataloged the things that didn’t make sense. Leaning forward, he quietly asked Poncho, “Who knew I was coming here?”

“Señor Rodriguez.”

“Anyone else?”

The man met Ace’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “Even I did not know, until Ricardo tell me tonight.”

The answer only raised more questions. Acid churned in his stomach. The rebels were obviously more of a threat than Rodriguez or Ace had thought.

“I take you to *mi casa,* no?” Poncho offered.

“Gracias, mi amigo.” Ace knew they would be somewhat safe with his friends, a whole lot safer than if they strung a hammock between two palm trees.

“Is his home big enough for us?” Nicole asked quietly.

“No.” Ace wondered how she would react to an evening of camping out on the home’s dirt floor. The first time he’d stayed with the Maldanados, he’d thought of Elana. He knew the idea of spending five minutes in the house would have made her painted toes curl in her satin pumps.

Would Nicole's reaction be any different?

"Is Poncho married?"

"With five kids." He waited for a reaction. Lord knew, his ex had had definite problems when he'd mentioned kids. "Five noisy kids." Ace wished he could see Nicole's expression. Would her lips be curled in disgust at the thought of what having five kids would do to her career, not to mention her figure?

The issue of children had been the first of many to cause serious problems between him and Elana. He wanted kids—had a desperate burn in his gut to right the wrongs inflicted by his family.

But that wasn't to be. Sometimes he felt a pang of regret, but he'd learned to live with it, by risking his life so children could live longer.

"I hope Mrs. Maldanado won't mind the extra people."

"She probably won't even notice," Ace said wryly.

Poncho jerked the car to a sudden stop in front of a small shack. Ace climbed out and went around to Nicole's side. It was now or never.

"Let me help you," he said, opening her door. She placed her much-smaller hand in his palm. Awareness pulsed through him. It was as shocking as it was unwelcome.

Instead of letting her go as he knew he should, he closed his fingers around her hand, holding her captive.

Her eyes opened wide, bringing her gaze back around until it locked on his face. Neither said a word. Her breathing deepened.

His did the same. Her lips—soft, full, sensual—parted in silent invitation.

An invitation he resisted RSVPing to.

What was wrong with him? At thirty-seven, he'd been around the block. So why did the thought of surrendering to the strangeness of night and kissing her bother him?

He'd already said he would do what it took. So why the hesitation? Suddenly the idea of using her gave him qualms. He disliked the flash of conscience.

Poncho cleared his throat, then slammed closed the trunk lid, shattering the illusion of their near intimacy.

"Mi casa," Poncho said apologetically to Nicole.

Ace studied Nicole in the moon's glow. Though the Maldanados' home was rich compared to some on the island, it was poor compared with what she likely called home. To his amazement, she was graciousness itself.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Señor Maldanado." She smiled dazzlingly.

Poncho's face became a wreath of grins. *"De nada, señorita, de nada."*

She had more facets than the two-carat engagement ring Ace had given Elana. And Nicole's smile was more intense. For a second, he allowed himself to imagine what it would feel like to experience its full effect, bestowed on him and no one else.

The shack's door opened with a groan. He wondered if the facade would crack once she saw the five kids, two dogs, three

cats and a dozen or so chickens.

But she showed no sign of faltering as a cacophony of sound surged out the door.

"Where's my favorite lady?" Ace demanded, following Nicole inside.

A tall, slender woman, long black hair falling around her shoulders, swung around. "Ace!"

She rushed forward and was swept into Ace's outstretched arms. A strange sensation, something akin to jealousy, snapped at Nicole. Annoyed with herself, she shoved it aside. She had no attachment to Ace and shouldn't care how many women he smashed against his solid chest. Still, when he put down the woman, after only kissing her forehead, Nicole experienced relief.

"Living with this old man still agrees with you, Maria?"

The woman glanced over her shoulder at Poncho, then back at Ace. She winked. "*Sí.* I have not yet found anyone better. Any suggestions, *mi amigo?*"

"Yeah. Me."

Maria laughed, a sweet tinkling sound that Nicole couldn't duplicate if she were paid.

On the fringes, Nicole marveled at the easy camaraderie between Ace and the Maldanados. She had numerous friends and acquaintances, some of them very close, yet she'd never been part of this type of genuine affection. Growing up, she was her father's princess, a pampered child who'd eventually tired of adoration,

scared that if she failed, she would no longer be liked.

“Maria, let me introduce Nicole Jackson.” The rich timbre of Ace’s voice startled her from her reverie.

Maria turned with a smile. “Welcome, Señorita Jackson.”

“Thank you.” This kind of friendship was new. Despite the friends she had at home, a tug of isolation assailed her.

Ace cleared his throat and cocked his head to one side. “Nicole is CEO of WorldNet.”

Maria blinked, her gaze taking in her husband and Ace.

Nicole shifted, unaccustomed to the hostility the name of her company caused.

Maria found her composure and then wiped her hands on her apron. “You’ll join us for dinner?”

“And for the night, if possible.”

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