

MILLS & BOON



Vintage *Cherish*

**Rich Man,
Poor Bride**

LINDA GOODNIGHT

Linda Goodnight

Rich Man, Poor Bride

Аннотация

Dearest Godmother, I've almost perfected playing matchmaker, but for my next headstrong couple I need your advice! A rich, sexy Latino doctor sounds like every woman's dream, right? Well, not for the Jane-of-all-trades on my hotel staff. Ruthie Fernandez says she's already had her happy marriage, and all she wants now, even two years after her husband's death, is to care for her beloved mother-in-law. But I've seen the way she looks at smooth-talking Diego Vargas. She may think their worlds are too different, but isn't the heat between them enough to burn down any barriers...especially with the help of a little magic from me? Merry

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Ruthie entered the luxury suite...and sucked in a lungful of masculine-scented air.

There stood a gorgeous man without a stitch of clothing on his dark-skinned body.

His onyx eyes reflected the shock of her own. “What do you want?” he demanded.

“Maid service, sir. Towels.”

He frowned and one black eyebrow arched in disbelief. “Do all the maids in this hotel wear bathing suits?”

Oh, no. She’d forgotten how she was dressed. Her pulse thundered in her ears. “I’m the lifeguard. And a waitress and a bartender and—”

“Really?” A cynical twist of sculpted lips said he wasn’t buying her babbling explanations. Though her one-piece suit was modest, his gaze raked over her. “You’re a busy girl,” he mocked softly.

Staring into his incredible black eyes did strange things to her insides. Her brain had turned to tapioca pudding. All she could remember was that trouble with a guest could cost her this much-needed job.

And from the small cross necklace on his bare chest to his six-pack stomach, this man looked like nothing but trouble.

Rich Man, Poor Bride

Linda Goodnight



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For Kelli McBride: Fellow writer,
fabulous Web mistress and, most of all,
a dear friend who spurred me on from the beginning.

LINDA GOODNIGHT

A romantic at heart, Linda Goodnight believes in the traditional values of family and home. Writing books enables her to share her certainty that, with faith and perseverance, love can last forever and happy endings really are possible.

A native of Oklahoma, Linda lives in the country with her husband, Gene, and Mugsy, an adorably obnoxious rat terrier. She and Gene have a blended family of six grown children. An elementary school teacher, she is also a licensed nurse. When time permits, Linda loves to read, watch football and rodeo, and indulge in chocolate. She also enjoys taking long, calorie-burning walks in the nearby woods. Readers can write to her at linda@lindagoodnight.com.

The Tale of Ruth and Boaz

After leaving the arms of her mother and father for the wonders of a happy marriage, Ruth had believed her life settled. Then tragedy struck. This new wife and her beloved mother-in-law, Naomi, were left widowed and alone, with only the comfort of each other.

Reduced to poverty, Naomi insisted on traveling alone to a distant town, the land of her relatives. Ruth, she claimed, was still young and beautiful. A new husband and family would surely come into her life. But Ruth's love for Naomi was strong, and

she vowed to follow Naomi to the ends of the earth, if need be.

When they arrived at their destination, Ruth was true to her word. She worked diligently to provide for their household, even gleaning the leftover wheat in the field of a mighty landowner, Boaz. Ruth's demure beauty and loving diligence were noted by the wealthy scholar. As he daily watched her in his fields and saw the pure devotion she showed Naomi, he fell hopelessly in love.

The moment her period of mourning ended, he stood in line with other distant relatives to be the lucky man to win her heart. When he requested her hand in marriage, she could not deny the emotion between them and the care he took with her mother-in-law. With a heart full of love, she accepted his proposal.

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Prologue

Bones aching, Meredith Montrose put the finishing touches on her makeup in preparation for another day of managing La Torchere, the single most exclusive and private resort in southwest Florida. Dabbing blush over her wrinkled, leathery cheeks, she sighed. Who would believe an old crone like her was not yet thirty years old? Thirty.

Yet it was true. Though she still reeled with the knowledge that her own beloved aunt and godmother Lissa Bessart Piers would do such a thing, the fact remained. Aunt Lissa had cast a spell upon her. Just because Merry was a tad bit selfish, had an occasional temper tantrum, and had tried to sabotage her father's engagement to an older woman, her godmother decided she needed a lesson in humility and the power of love—and more empathy for the aging.

Now the deadline for breaking the curse loomed like an oncoming tidal wave. Less than a year left to break the spell that held her beautiful young body captive inside this withered, ugly, aching form. Less than a year to complete the task of pairing twenty-one couples with their true loves. She thanked her lucky stars that the latest matched couple, Jackie Hammond and Steven Rollins, would soon be married here on La Torchere's beach.

Seventeen down and four to go.

Then she could be free again—the beautiful, brilliant princess

Meredith Montrosa Bessart of Silestia. But if she failed she would serve out her lifetime in this body as hotel manager Merry Montrose without ever seeing her family or her beloved homeland again.

A shiver of dread made her hands tremble as she took up her cell picture phone, the most special tool in her bag of magical matchmaking tricks. At the press of a button, a handsome Latino face, a little sad and resigned and a lot weary, appeared in the tiny video screen. If fate was kind, Dr. Diego Vargas was about to meet his match.

Chapter One

Flip-flops popping, Ruthie Ellsworth Fernandez rushed down the hallway of La Torchere Resort dropping off extra gourmet coffee packets in Room 12 and a bottle of Perrier in Room 7 before jumping into the elevator. As she hit the ground floor, her pager buzzed for the hundredth time and a text message appeared: Towels to penthouse, followed by the guest's name.

A quick check of the time told her she had five whole minutes before reporting to lifeguard duty at the outdoor pool. Grabbing a stack of fluffy, blindingly white towels emblazoned with the candelabra insignia of the resort, Ruthie greeted several of the wealthy, high-class guests as she hopped back onto the elevator and headed to the penthouse. That suite, on the same floor as her small apartment, had been empty this morning. A new guest must have just arrived.

At the door she rapped softly, having learned in her few months as the hotel's Jane-of-all-trades that the rich and cultured expected the best in serene but entertaining surroundings, and they didn't mind paying for what they wanted. But they were darned fussy when service wasn't prompt and perfect.

When no one answered, she rapped again then used her maid's key to open the door.

All around her lay the trappings of class and wealth. Sumptuous carpets, plush furnishings. Casually elegant, the

tasteful decor was alive with splashes of tropical color. The suite was bigger than the home back in Texas she had shared with her late husband Jason and his mother, Naomi. And much bigger than the small suite of rooms she and Naomi now occupied at the resort.

Not that she was complaining. Not at all. She was ever so grateful to have a job that not only gave her a place to live as part of her pay, but allowed her to work as much as possible while still having time to care for her beloved mother-in-law. Naomi and her medical treatments came first, above everything else.

Ruthie entered the beautiful luxury suite, crossed through the living room and bedroom on her way to the bathroom to put the towels away. She pushed the door open, stepped into the massive bathroom...and sucked in a gasping lungful of damp, masculine-scented air. For there at the sink stood a gorgeous man without a stitch of clothing on his fit and trim, dark-skinned body. In the mirror a pair of onyx eyes reflected the shock in her own.

To Ruthie's horror, he whirled around and demanded, "What do you want?"

As she slowly backed toward the doorway, she thrust the towels at him. He ignored the offer and continued to stare at her.

"I'm the maid, Mr.—" She searched her memory for the man's name. Had it been on the pager? At this point she couldn't remember her own name, much less his. Mortified, she thrust the towels in his direction one more time, hoping, praying he would take them. "I didn't know—I thought you were— Please excuse

me.”

Ripping the towels from her grip, the man had the belated decency to hold them over the proper area. Still, she was in the same room with a handsome, mostly naked stranger. The heated blush moved from her face to her ears and clear down to her toes. Ruthie was certain if she looked down, her naked legs would be fiery red. Never had she walked in on an unclothed guest.

From somewhere his name appeared in her mind.

Dr. Diego Vargas. That’s who he was.

“I’ll just leave now, Dr. Vargas.” Backing up, she twisted one flip-flop, felt the rubber sandal slip from her foot and was forced to stop. Eyes never leaving his because, Lord knew, she dare not look lower, she fished around the floor by feel until her toes found their way back into the thong.

“Wait,” he demanded, coming toward her. “Who are you? Why are you in my room?”

Was the man deaf? “Maid service, sir. Towels.”

He frowned and one black eyebrow arched in disbelief. “Do all the maids in this hotel wear bathing suits?”

Oh, no. She’d forgotten how she was dressed. The blush deepened and her pulse thundered in her ears. Swallowing, she tried to explain. “I’m the lifeguard.”

The other eyebrow went up.

“And a waitress, and a bartender and—” She was stuttering now. How did she explain—with her brain shorted out from encountering the most fascinating male body she’d seen since

Antonio Banderas played Zorro—that she worked at anything and everything within the confines of the resort. Anything to earn the money for Naomi’s expensive treatments. “And the spa girl.”

“Really?” A cynical twist of sculpted lips said he wasn’t buying any of her babbling explanations. Those incredible black eyes raked over her, taking in every inch of her five-foot, five-inch body, most of it as nude as he was. She’d had no time to toss on a cover-up before delivering those towels, and though her one-piece suit was modest, under this man’s appraisal, a nun’s habit would feel risqué.

“You’re a busy girl,” he mocked softly. “And just what other services do you provide for your guests?”

Somehow she’d managed to back all the way through the living room, past several couches topped with throw pillows, past a fireplace, over an oriental rug, and to the entryway. She couldn’t find anywhere decent to look, and staring into those onyx eyes did strange things to her insides. Her gaze moved to his chest—a mistake, she knew, the moment a glistening water droplet trickled from the hollow of his throat down through a smattering of dark chest hair, past a small gold cross necklace dangling from a leather cord, over a six-pack stomach...and beyond.

Eyes glued to that one drop of water, she hardly heard the words tumbling out of her mouth. “Whatever you want—I mean, anything you need. La Torchere aims to please.”

Oh, dear, that didn’t come out right at all.

“Anything?”

“Yes. No. I mean—” She’d never been this tongue-tied in her life.

Every humiliated, fascinated pore in her body wanted to respond to his insulting tone, to explain in lucid terms they both could understand, but two things stopped her. Trouble with a guest could cost her this desperately needed job. And her brain had turned to tapioca pudding.

With the grace and dignity of a wounded buffalo, she did the next best thing. She headed for the nearest exit.

Diego followed the mysterious woman all through the suite determined to discover the real reason why she’d suddenly appeared in his room. He hadn’t called for more towels. And though he’d been in luxury accommodations all over the world, no maid he’d encountered had ever worn a bathing suit. And none had stuttered out so many different job descriptions that she was impossible to believe.

He had, on the other hand, endured his share of women who’d do anything to capture the attentions of an independently wealthy doctor with the social standing of the Vargas family. His lip curled in distaste as he strove to control an unwanted spike of interest.

Regardless of her incredulous babblings, his male antenna had arced fire when he’d caught sight of her in the mirror—a reaction he’d learned never to trust. Hormones had lied to him before.

Never mind that she looked as nervous as a new army recruit, one hand feeling behind her for the doorknob, her green eyes

wide in a fresh face devoid of makeup. Little Miss Maid-Lifeguard-Waitress might not fit the gold-digger image, but he was no fool.

There was nothing particularly seductive about the woman. Her hot-pink bathing suit was a Speedo, for crying out loud. Not purposefully revealing or sexy. But that little strip of spandex accented a swimmer's flat belly, a hint of rounded, tempting cleavage, and long tanned legs. A sprinkle of golden freckles kissed her shoulders and nose, and her dark blond hair was parted in the middle and yanked back into a knot at her neck. She shouldn't have looked sensual at all, but Diego's mouth watered.

He was a physician, his observational skills honed to perfection, and in this case, those skills were giving him fits. He noticed every detail of the lovely woman standing in his room ogling his nudity with a deer-in-the-headlights kind of interest.

His hands, which never perspired, broke out in a sweat that was repeated on the back of his neck. He swiped a hand over the moisture.

No woman had made him sweat since—he gripped the back of his neck and squeezed, shutting off thoughts of Leah.

Suddenly his uninvited guest found the knob and wrenched the door open.

“I'll just...go now.”

Her chest heaving in a way that made it impossible for him not to stare at her cleavage, she backed into the hallway, then turned and fled. The hot-pink thongs slapped against her feet as

she escaped.

In her haste, the Speedo crept up, revealing more and more hip and leg. The tiny jiggle of female flesh raised the hairs on Diego's arms. The woman's hand snaked around and yanked at the suit as she raced for the elevator without looking back.

Tempted to follow and find out who she really was, Diego ventured two steps into the hallway before remembering his state of undress. Glad for the towel held strategically over equipment that had come to attention in the woman's presence, he retreated into the suite and shut the door.

La Torchere was a private resort on a private island, reachable only by a private ferry. Sooner or later, he would run into the mysterious and lovely woman again. And he would get some answers. If she was a gold digger, as he suspected, who frequented luxury resorts in pursuit of men like him, he'd find out. It wouldn't be the first time a woman had appeared in his room uninvited. Nor did he suppose it would be the last time he'd be sought out for who he was and what he had.

Over the years he'd grown weary of searching for a woman who wanted him for himself. To Diego, love was a four-letter word used to manipulate and control. Human beings in general, and women in particular, were out for what they could get.

Real love may have existed in another time, another generation, but not today. Not since Leah had he encountered another person who loved unconditionally.

He fought back the wave of emptiness that came every time he

thought of Leah, the woman whose self-lessness had taught him the true meaning of love. He'd been younger then and idealistic enough to believe he could make a difference, a medical student still wet behind the ears. And Leah had encouraged his idealism with her tireless, uncompromising care for humanity.

Now at thirty-three he'd seen too much ugliness and met too many people who wanted to take but had nothing to give in return. He'd been duped more times than his ego wanted to remember, and now he'd sealed off his heart to this thing called love.

He felt so empty at times, but emotional isolation was a necessary method of self-preservation. His motto had become: Have fun with women, but never let your guard down.

Raking a hand through his still-damp hair, he went to the huge walk-in closet in the master bedroom and began to dress.

“Stop whining, Vargas,” he told himself. He was a lucky man and he knew it. He had wealth, privilege and worked in the career of his choosing. He had women when and where he wanted, and if the having resulted in more loneliness in the end, he'd learned to live with the situation.

He was tired, that was all. The last tour of duty in war-torn Africa had left him drained and heartsick, tormented by the awful devastation brought on by a people hell-bent on annihilating one another.

And that's why he was here—for some much needed R&R in a beautiful place guaranteed to lift the spirits.

The resort's manager, that oddly interesting, sometimes crotchety Montrose woman, had convinced him to attend a social gathering this afternoon. An ice breaker of sorts. So he would.

He pulled on a pair of casual khakis and a blue golf shirt, his thoughts bouncing back to his uninvited guest. She had already provided a brief distraction.

Shaking his head in self-mockery, Diego crossed the spacious suite. Distraction or not, he knew to beware of strange women bearing towels, especially those dressed in skin-tight bathing suits.

Diego had no more than entered the club room when the resort manager hurried in his direction as fast as her obviously arthritic knees could carry her.

“Dr. Vargas.” She gushed his name, her blue eyes sharp and intense in a wrinkled face. Growing up as the son of a cosmetic surgeon, Diego recognized great bone structure. Merry Montrose had once been a beautiful woman. “We are so delighted to welcome you to La Torchere.”

Diego managed an easy smile that he didn't feel, relying on social skills honed from childhood. Even exhausted and discontent, he could schmooze with the best of them.

“Your description of the resort was not an exaggeration,” he told Merry. “I'm looking forward to a much-needed vacation.”

When he'd run into the hotel manager at separate conferences in the same California hotel, he had, for reasons he still didn't understand, mentioned his upcoming leave from the army. Merry

Montrose, after extolling the virtues of her southwest Florida resort, had insisted he vacation here.

With the regal air of royalty and impeccable manners that would have pleased Diego's socialite mother, Ms. Montrose motioned around the room. "We have a wonderful social director who will arrange any activity you might have in mind. And the concierge will make reservations, order tickets, anything your heart desires. La Torchere aims to please."

Suppressing thoughts of a blond woman in a hot-pink Speedo who'd said the same thing, Diego selected a drink from a passing waiter and gazed around the room. Twenty or so beautiful people chatted and smiled over crystal flutes of champagne and fancy tropical drinks. They were the kind of blue-blooded people he'd grown up with as the son of a highly regarded plastic surgeon in Los Angeles.

But after the places he'd been and the horrors he'd seen, he no longer felt as comfortable among them as he once had.

He stifled the weary feeling that moved over him like a cloud on a sunny day and refocused on the chatty hotel manager.

"You'll like Sharmaine," she said, blue eyes piercing him with a fanatic eeriness. "I'm absolutely certain."

Diego tried to fill in the gaps he must have missed during his musings.

A tall, elegant blonde, dressed in a white sundress that showed off her salon tan to perfection, glided up to them.

"Dr. Diego Vargas," Merry said, "Meet Sharmaine Coleman."

Following the usual murmured introductions, Merry disappeared into the crowd to welcome other guests, leaving Diego alone with the newcomer. She was very beautiful, in a pampered, classy way. His usual type, though he experienced none of the shouting hormones the Speedo-clad maid had produced.

In minutes he discovered Sharmaine was from Georgia, her father was in paper goods, and she had graduated from Brown with a degree in art history. More to his interest, she was here “recovering” from her latest divorce.

“Is this your first visit to La Torchere?” she asked, twining long fingers around a stemmed glass.

“It is. Yours, too?”

“No, suga’. I love this place and come here often. The spa is to die for and the other guests are always so entertainin’.” She flashed him a perfect white-capped smile. “You have to try the herb body wrap at the spa. It eases away all your stress.”

“I’m not exactly a spa kind of guy.”

“Oh, too bad.” She managed a sexy pout. “What kind of guy are you?”

One that’s really tired of playing the mating game, he thought, then suffered immediate contrition. Sharmaine was friendly and undeniably great to look at. She didn’t deserve his cynicism.

Rather than tell her the truth—that he liked to run and sweat out all his stress—and see her nose curl in feminine distaste, Diego said, “On this trip I’m a tourist, eager to swim, snorkel and

see the sights.”

“Then put yourself into my capable hands, Doctor. No one knows all the fun and cozy spots like moi.” She tapped her breastbone with one long fingernail.

From the corner of his eye, Diego caught a flash of hot pink that brought to mind this afternoon’s intruder. A slight turn of his head afforded him a view of the outdoor swimming pool through floor-to-ceiling privacy glass that formed one wall of the club room. He saw a host of swimmers but none wore pink. Not that it mattered, but his curiosity about the woman was still piqued and would remain so until he discovered who she was and why she’d invaded his room. Perhaps she would also provide a little recreational diversion, as well.

A child ran on bare feet across the concrete and from somewhere he heard a whistle. The Speedo, as he was coming to think of her, had worn a whistle around her neck. He remembered the exact spot where the lanyard crossed the naked flesh of her bosom and the way the silver whistle bobbed when she backed away from him. Maybe she really was a lifeguard, though that still wouldn’t give her liberty to be in his room. He angled his head to one side, trying to see the opposite end of the pool, but one wall obstructed his view.

“Diego?” Sharmaine’s voice drew his attention from the pool to her.

“What?” he muttered. “Oh, sorry.”

“You seem entranced by the pool. Would you like to go for

a swim?”

Diego pushed a hand over the back of his neck. His mother would have his hide for woolgathering during polite conversation, and he'd done it twice in one afternoon. Hoping he could blame the lapse in manners on jet lag and mental fatigue, he focused on Sharmaine. “What I'd like is to have a nice quiet dinner. Have you any suggestions?”

She trailed a French-manicured fingernail over his forearm and intensified her liquid Southern accent. “Suga', you are talkin' to the right girl. I know just the place.”

And before he could say lobster bisque, Diego found himself with a dinner date. Considering his sudden and unexplained obsession with hot-pink spandex, he owed Sharmaine that much.

Thanks to his mother, no one could fault his impeccable manners. He knew the social game so well he could play it in his sleep. And that, it seemed to him, was the problem. Relationships, especially those of the male-female variety, never stirred him anymore. They came and went easily, as though they didn't matter. He wanted to feel that leap of kinship again, to care, to have someone touch him as deeply as Leah had. A few had touched Diego's body, but none had touched his soul.

He longed for that with all his being, but common sense said to hold himself aloof. He was good at that—too good perhaps.

Classy and confident, Sharmaine would fit well with the world he'd grown up in. He had a month's leave. And though he was weary of the fuss and bother of the ever-unsuccessful dating

game, why not spend some time with a beautiful female? He could have some harmless fun—they were both adults—then go on his way, heart intact.

Chapter Two

Ruthie blew the whistle a second time, then climbed down from her small perch to talk to the teenage boy who seemed intent on killing himself to impress a girl on the other side of the pool.

“Justin.” She caught up to him and blocked him from cartwheeling off the shallow end. “It is Justin, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. So?”

He couldn’t have been more than fifteen, all legs and arms and undeveloped chest. Ruthie didn’t let his teenage arrogance bother her. “I know a way to get her to pay attention to you.”

“Who?” Water dripped from the end of his nose. His stomach was stained red from all the acrobatics and belly flops.

“You know who.” She inclined her head. “Kelley. That cute girl in the striped bikini.”

“Oh. Her.” His words denied his interest, but color crept up his neck. Brown eyes flicked in that direction before returning to Ruthie.

“Instead of all this monkey business around the side of the pool, which could get you tossed out and embarrassed, why not try the high dive?” Before he had a chance to take offense to her threat, she rushed on. “You do an awesome somersault, but from down here no one can tell.”

“You think my somersault is good?”

Ruthie's smile was genuine. "You've got talent."

The boy's chicken chest puffed out. "Ya think?"

"Yep. Now go to it. I promise you, Kelley will be watching."

"Cool."

Before he could escape, Ruthie placed a hand on his wet arm and said gently, "No more crazy stunts, okay?"

"Sure. Whatever." And he was off to the diving board, walking this time, strutting his stuff instead of running.

Ruthie sympathized with the love-struck boy, remembering those years of adolescent uncertainty, those times of wanting to act grown-up and having no idea how to go about it. But Justin was in luck. Ruthie knew for a fact that Kelley had been watching him, too, pretending all the while not to.

Ruthie's lifeguard relief arrived, and after waiting long enough to watch Justin execute an acceptable somersault from the high dive, she gave him a thumbs-up and headed to her room. Leaving Naomi alone for more than a couple of hours worried her.

As she unlocked the door to the suite, the elevator down the hall pinged open and Dr. Diego Vargas stepped out. Remembering the embarrassing scene in his rooms, she blushed and hurried inside, hoping he wouldn't catch sight of her. She hadn't been able to get the man out of her thoughts all during her stint at the pool. Eventually, she'd have to run into him again, but today she needed time to regain her equilibrium.

Feeling an instant, slam-dunk attraction to a man was unusual for her. In fact, it hadn't happened since before her husband's

death two years ago. But this afternoon, the handsome Latino doctor in the penthouse had blindsided her.

Maybe that was the appeal. Dr. Vargas was Latino. Just like Jason.

Tossing her room key and whistle onto the small lamp table, she laughed at the comparison. The rich, spoiled doctor might be a dark and beautiful Hispanic male, but he was nothing like her hardworking, good-hearted Jason.

“Mama,” she called, moving from the living area toward the bedroom the two women shared. Their suite was small compared to some of the others, but she considered herself fortunate to have wrangled this much out of the cranky old resort manager. Only after Ruthie agreed to be at the hotel’s beck and call day and night as a fill-in and floater had Miss Montrose agreed to include the living quarters as part of her salary package. Most employees lived in staff quarters, but Miss Montrose wanted her inside the hotel so she could be on the job at a moment’s notice. Ruthie had accepted the conditions gladly. The more work she did, the more she earned. The living room, kitchenette, bedroom and bath weren’t home, but they were close to Naomi’s doctor, and that’s all that mattered right now.

“Mama,” she said again. “You in here?”

Her mother-in-law, whom Ruthie had called Mama almost from the first time Jason introduced them, sat in a chair next to the bed, her eyes closed. Lips moving silently, her fingers weakly prayed the rosary beads lying in her lap.

“Ah, Ruthie. It is you.”

Ruthie laughed softly. “And who else were you expecting? Prince Charming?”

“Maybe. Wasn’t he a native of Florida?” Naomi’s brown eyes still snapped with warmth and humor, though since Jason’s death, her sixty-eight-year-old body had grown frailer with each passing week. Lately, she’d been frighteningly ill on several occasions, suffering from blinding headaches, nausea and eye pain.

Naomi’s doctors back in Texas believed her vague transient symptoms were psychosomatic brought on by the tragic loss of her only child. Ruthie knew better. Which was exactly why she’d requested the transfer from her hotel in Texas to La Torchere, its sister resort. She’d been lucky to talk by telephone to Alexander Rochelle himself, the owner of both hotels. The kind and generous man had made the transfer arrangements as soon as she’d explained her dilemma. The only doctor who’d given them hope for a cure was a ferry ride across the water on the mainland of Florida. She’d hated leaving Texas and the only real home she’d ever known, but she would have moved to the moon if that’s where Naomi could find health again.

Someday her mother-in-law would be well. Then Ruthie could think about the home and family and roots she’d always wanted.

Kneeling in front of her mother-in-law, Ruthie grasped one soft, thin hand between her own water-cooled ones.

“How are you?”

“Better now that my daughter is here.” Naomi gently cupped

Ruthie's cheek. "You are gone half of last night and again today since the morning. Even the young must rest."

Ruthie's chest filled with love for this gentle Mexican woman who'd become more of a mother than her own had ever been. Working to earn money for Naomi's medical care was a privilege, a labor of love, though she could never make Naomi understand that. The older woman had tenderly taught a twenty-two-year-old military brat to be a wife, to cook, to make a real home. But, most important, she'd welcomed her son's wife into her life with open arms and a loving heart. No matter how much Ruthie might do, she could never give as much as Naomi had.

"Have you eaten anything?" Ruthie knew the answer before Naomi shook her head. Most days her mother-in-law barely mustered the strength to move from room to room. And the cup of prepackaged peaches Ruthie had left on the bedside stand remained untouched.

"Mama," she scolded gently. "You didn't touch that fruit."

"Later, chica."

"Did you see what I brought you from that banquet I worked last night?" Ruthie pumped her eyebrows for emphasis, hoping to generate interest in a special treat. "Chocolate cheesecake. Your favorite."

"My favorite? Ha. No one loves cheesecake like my Ruthie. You eat it."

"Mama, look at me." She tilted back on her knees and pooched out her belly. "One more pound and I won't fit into this

bathing suit. Besides I don't like cheesecake as much as I once did. And we can't let it go to waste. You'll be doing me a favor if you eat it. Please."

"How is it you bring these sweets and fancy foods from your work and do not like any of them? I know you, Ruthie Fernandez. You buy nothing for yourself. You work, work, work, saving pennies, doing without, all for a sick old lady who is not even your kin."

"Don't ever say that, Mama. You are my kin." Ruthie tapped her heart. "Right here, where it matters most."

"Always in Texas you say how much you love having a home and a husband. Roots, you say. Yet you are in Florida, living in a hotel. You are a good wife to my Jason, but he is gone now—" she crossed herself "—God rest his sweet soul. This place is full of rich, handsome men. You should be finding a new husband, not spending every minute working or caring for me."

Ruthie's heart pinched to hear her mother-in-law talk this way. She wasn't looking for a husband, especially among the snobbish rich and famous. And even if she were, she couldn't expect a man to care for Naomi the way she did.

"This is only temporary until you're well. Remember when you first started seeing Dr. Attenburg? Remember how much better you felt for a while?"

They'd had such hope for those few weeks until the money ran out.

A soft smile creased the wrinkled brown face. "Yes. So much

better. I believed Dr. Attenburg was going to cure me.”

“And he will. As soon as we can start the treatments again. I’ve saved up the money for the next round.” Almost. Every day Naomi grew weaker, and Ruthie was terrified of losing her. She had to start those treatments again soon.

“Already?”

Ruthie faked a jaunty grin. “Tomorrow I’ll call for an appointment.” Somehow, some way, she’d manage the expense. “And in no time you will be on your feet making me the world’s best tamales.”

“Better than Mrs. Sanchez’s, sí?”

“Sí, Mama. The best.” Ruthie fought a smile. Naomi and their former neighbor Mrs. Sanchez had a good-natured battle over who was the best cook. In the past two years, the battle had been on hold as Mama’s condition worsened.

Her print dress, once snug on a rounded body, now draped limply over her knees. Ruthie hugged those bony knees and stood. Leaning down, she kissed Naomi’s soft cheek. “Let me grab a shower to wash off this chlorine, and I’ll fix you something good to eat. Okay?”

“Rest, child.” Naomi’s fragile eyelids drooped.

“You rest, Mama,” she said, swallowing the lump that formed in her throat every time she looked at the woman who’d been so vital, so energetic before this strange illness took over. “I’m not the least bit tired.”

As Ruthie showered and dressed, she justified the tiny untruth

with the knowledge that more work meant more money. Because of the experimental nature of Naomi's expensive treatments, Dr. Attenburg required cash—a commodity in short supply in the Fernandez coffers. And now the good doctor said Naomi needed more intensive—and more expensive—therapy, a fact she wouldn't share with her mother-in-law. The money was her problem to solve. Naomi had to concentrate on getting well.

Gnawing on her bottom lip, Ruthie yanked her hair into a loose knot on her head and headed into the kitchen area. If only there was some faster way to earn more...Or perhaps Dr. Attenburg would consider extending a little credit.

Fretting, planning and mentally counting her pennies, she rummaged through the refrigerator trying to hustle up a healthy meal to tempt Naomi's decreased appetite. She sprinkled cheese on a simple noodle casserole and was sliding it into the microwave when her pager went off.

A glance revealed Merry Montrose's phone number. Ruthie tapped the number into her telephone. Holding the receiver between her shoulder and chin, she tossed together a green salad while listening to the manager's voice.

"One of the waiters can't make it in. He claims to be sick, though I have my doubts about that unless laziness is now a recognized malady. So I need you down here. Six sharp."

"The Banyan Room? At six?" Ruthie checked the digital clock on the microwave. Twenty-five minutes to finish dinner and make sure Naomi ate before reporting for duty. "Yes, ma'am. I'll

be there.”

“And don’t be late.”

“I won’t. I appreciate the work.” An understatement.

“There’s a very special couple with reservations tonight, and I want you to see that they have the best of everything.” The manager’s voice took on an intense edge.

“Of course. I’ll take good care of them.” Ruthie scrambled around for a piece of paper. She didn’t want to call an important guest by the wrong name. Finding a pen, she poised, ready.

“I’ve reserved table five, the cozy corner table with the perfect moonlit beach view, for Dr. Diego Vargas and Sharmaine Coleman.”

Ruthie’s insides took a nosedive. Not Dr. Vargas, the naked hunk in the penthouse! Swallowing hard, she jotted down the woman’s name then tossed the pen aside. Try as she might, she couldn’t forget the man. Though she wanted to request another server for that table, Ruthie knew better than to cross the resort manager.

Merry Montrose made her nervous, always sharp-tongued and on the alert as though looking for a reason to fire her. Losing this job was not an option, so Ruthie did everything possible to please the demanding old lady.

She had worked the Banyan Room numerous times and liked the atmosphere. Posh, quiet and expensive, the five-star facility only attracted the very wealthiest patrons. And the tips were incredible.

But the insulting Dr. Diego Vargas was the one person in the resort she did not want to see. Not yet. Not until she'd wiped away the vision of his smooth dark skin. And his perfect masculine chest. And his gorgeous face. And his—she slammed her eyes shut and tried not to think at all.

Tips or no tips, tonight was going to be a long night.

Ruthie spotted him the moment he walked in the door. If such a thing was possible Diego Vargas looked better in a suit than he did naked. And the woman at his side, Sharmaine Coleman, was exquisite in a short blue sleeveless dress cut down to there.

Fighting back the zip of interest in a man she didn't even know, Ruthie waited until the couple had been seated before approaching the table. From the explicit instructions she'd received from Merry Montrose both before and after her arrival at the restaurant, Ruthie knew the manager had some sort of interest in Dr. Vargas and his date. Perhaps they were personal friends, although it wouldn't be the first time the manager had requested special services for a particular couple. In fact, several of those couples had gone on to marry.

For some reason the thought of Diego Vargas marrying Sharmaine Coleman bothered her. But she knew her job and would perform it to perfection. She had to. Her paycheck was Naomi's lifeline. For a woman with little education, service work was the best Ruthie could hope for.

Complaining guests could get her fired, and after her run-in with Dr. Vargas, that was a distinct possibility if she upset him

again. Even though he'd insulted her with his insinuations, the customer at La Torchere was always right.

Nestled in a corner amidst a tropical minigarden of bougainvillea and ponytail palms, table five looked out toward the beach. Ruthie had seen to the place settings herself, so she knew the silver gleamed, the polished crystal reflected the candlelight, and the napkins were perfectly fanned. No couple could resist the romantic ambience. Ruthie had even made certain that a fresh orchid centered the white linen tablecloth. Now if only she could manage to serve them without Dr. Vargas recognizing her. Hopefully he hadn't gotten as close a look at her as she had him.

Ruthie suppressed a nervous giggle. That much was a given. She'd definitely seen much more of him than he had of her.

Gathering her courage, Ruthie straightened her bow tie, smoothed tense palms over her red fitted vest and black pants, then moved unobtrusively through the softly lit room.

With a deep breath, she thought, Ready or not, here we go.

"Good evening, Dr. Vargas, Miss Coleman. Welcome to the Banyan Room. My name is Ruthie and I'll be your server tonight."

Diego turned his attention from the lovely blond woman to her. Ruthie tried to keep her expression professional and friendly, but the minute Diego's eyes met hers, recognition flared.

"Well. Hello again." The corner of his mouth twitched beneath coal-black eyes that studied her intently.

Darn. Darn. Darn. Why did he have to have such a good memory?

She inclined her head, hoping to move on without further acknowledgment but couldn't stop the hot flush sweeping over her.

Sharmaine didn't miss the reaction. "You two have met?"

"In my suite this afternoon," Diego said, his expression a mix of suspicion and curiosity. "Delivering towels."

"Oh. How...interesting." With a single glance and those choice words, Sharmaine dismissed Ruthie as an inconsequential servant.

Ruthie didn't know why that bothered her. She'd never considered any honest work as menial, but something in Sharmaine's tone struck at her self-confidence. For the first time in her life, Ruthie felt second-class.

Add to that, Dr. Vargas's insinuations that she'd gone into his room for reasons other than those stated, and Ruthie knew she should be insulted. But she took it all in stride. Serving spoiled, not-so-nice guests was part of the job.

She also recognized the subtle need for Sharmaine to put her down. The claws were sheathed but Ruthie suspected that the pretty blonde was conveying a proprietary interest in the doctor. Ruthie found that almost laughable. Even if she were in the market for romance, which she was not, a man like Diego Vargas was out of her league and she knew it.

To salvage her pride and follow her boss's orders, Ruthie

concentrated on her job.

“The manager of La Torchere, Merry Montrose, wishes to extend her personal welcome, and as a token of her good will, offers you a complimentary bottle of wine.”

She sounded as stiff and pinched as a starched corset. How awful to have to carry on a conversation with a man when visions of his slender, masculine body kept flashing in her head.

“Would you care to see the wine list, sir?”

Dr. Vargas hesitated a minute, looking as if he'd say more, then seemed to take pity on her. He ordered wine—Californian, she noted—and said nothing more, but as she hurried away to turn in their order, she felt his intense black gaze follow her.

Once inside the kitchen, she longed to bolt for the back door, head up to her rooms and hide under the bed. Since when had she allowed a snooty guest to get to her? Or worse when had she ever been so oddly affected by a man—a man who'd insulted her, no less? Sure, he was handsome. And yes, she'd love to know if he wore that leather necklace underneath his crisp blue shirt. But something more than sexy looks and an embarrassing moment drew her to Diego Vargas. And whatever it was would simply have to go away.

Diego couldn't believe his eyes. All afternoon he'd wondered about his mystery woman in the pink Speedo. And now here she was again. This time, he'd discovered her name. Ruthie.

He'd been startled to look up and recognize the fresh-faced waitress as his afternoon intruder. A waitress acting as a maid

dressed like a lifeguard. If anything, seeing her again had raised more questions.

The familiar sense of wariness shifted through him. How was it that the same woman who'd come uninvited into his suite was now his server in the restaurant. A waitress with her sights set on a better life could gain access to information about each guest. She would have known he was single and alone, and the fact that he had money was evident in his use of the penthouse suite. Perhaps she'd come to his room, hoping he'd welcome her. Or more likely she'd thought he wasn't in the room and had come snooping. Although he couldn't decide what purpose that would serve.

Yes, she remained an enigma, and he would be very careful about solving that puzzle.

Sipping at the glass of fine wine, he watched her move with speed and grace between his table and two others near by. While she'd been stiff and formal taking his order, she appeared more relaxed everywhere else, smiling, talking in a soft drawl that tickled his ears. He wondered about that. Why would she finagle her way into his room under false pretenses then behave as though she didn't want to see him at all?

Sad for a man to become so jaded that he believed he represented a trust fund to all females. But that was the truth, as hard as it was to swallow sometimes.

Perhaps Ruthie was, as she claimed, a hotel employee who'd made a mistake by entering his room un-announced and

unbidden. He wondered why he couldn't leave it at that, just as he wondered why she'd stayed in his head all afternoon.

"Diego." Sharmaine tapped one finger on his arm.

Reluctantly he drew his thoughts away from the mysterious young woman and back to his date.

"The beach in moonlight is beautiful, isn't it?" he offered, hoping Sharmaine had not noticed his mental lapse.

Sharmaine tilted her wineglass in a toast. "Aren't you a smooth one? Staring at the waitress one minute and talking about moonlight in the next."

"Waitress?" He feigned innocence. "What waitress? I was looking for the magician who made you so lovely."

That much at least was true. Sharmaine was a beautiful woman.

She cocked an eyebrow and laughed. "Good answer."

Stroking the front of her dress, she toyed with the pendant dangling between her breasts. As red-blooded as any man, Diego followed the movement and recognized the invitation. But he wasn't ready to RSVP. Not yet, anyway.

"After dinner maybe we could walk along the beach. The water looks calm and peaceful." Peace. Something he craved right now.

"In this dress and these shoes? No suga', not this little girl. Now, dancing might be fun."

Disappointment filtered through Diego. He'd much rather have taken dinner at the outside café so he could feel the breeze

and smell the ocean. They were at a gorgeous resort with miles and miles of wild subtropical island around them. Sharmaine had recommended the elegant Banyan Room, but in his estimation, nothing man invented could beat the beauty of nature.

“Dancing it is.” His reply was polite if not enthusiastic. He liked dancing, was good at it, thanks to lessons as a child, but tonight he longed for something more...natural.

In his peripheral vision, he saw his waitress at the table on the opposite side of a small border of plants. For reasons he couldn't understand, his radar went up and he overheard a man's voice coming from that direction. He couldn't catch the words but he caught the inflection. Her soft drawl murmured something in return. The man's voice, slurred as if he'd had too much to drink, elevated. Harsh words followed a near-insulting turn of phrase.

The hairs on Diego's arm rose to attention. No man, regardless of his status, had a right to speak that way to a woman. And he sure had no business hitting on the waitress in a posh restaurant. If the fellow didn't shut up, he might have to cut his vacation short to visit an orthodontist.

“Sir.” The waitress's voice, though strained, remained ever so polite. “I would appreciate it if you'd let go of my arm.”

He had hold of her arm!

Diego fisted his napkin, thrust it onto the table and started to rise. Fire boiled in his belly.

“Diego?” Sharmaine looked up at him with startled blue eyes. “You look positively fierce. Whatever are you doing?”

"I'm going to instruct the man at the next table in some badly neglected manners."

"Oh, don't be silly." She waved off his concerns. "Girls like that know how to take care of themselves."

He wanted to ask what she meant by "girls like that," but he was much too focused on the other table. "She shouldn't have to."

Before he could think the matter through he was standing next to the waitress glaring down at a twenty-something surfer boy with I-get-what-I-want written all over him. "Is there a problem here?"

The blond man snarled. "Butt out, buddy."

"Please, Dr. Vargas, don't concern yourself." Her soft drawl was laced with tension, her pretty green eyes worried. "Return to your table and I'll be with you shortly."

"Not until this guy takes his hands off you."

"I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't make a scene," she said firmly. "Everything here is under control."

"Doesn't look that way to me." He speared the surfer boy with a challenging glare. "Hands off. Now."

The man let go of her arm and scraped his chair back. He was at least six feet tall but looked as soft as an old pillow.

The young woman's eyes widened in alarm. "Gentlemen, please sit down before the manager is alerted and we disturb other guests. This is a restaurant, not a barroom."

"That's right, Vargas. If Ruthie here wants to spend some extra time with me, that's our business. Right, Ruthie?"

“Mr. Peterson, if you’ll take your seat, we’ll talk again after your meal. Okay?”

The surfer considered her suggestion for a moment, posturing a bit for Diego’s benefit, then he shrugged. “Sure, baby. Why not? Later works better, anyway—if you get my drift.”

Fire still burned inside Diego. He really wanted to punch the insulting little twerp, but Ruthie seemed bent on making peace.

“Dr. Vargas, let me escort you to your table and pour you another glass of wine.”

Reluctantly, Diego turned back toward his table but couldn’t resist a final glare at the other man. Ruthie was at his elbow.

“Please, sir,” she hissed, green eyes wide and anxious. “You’re going to get me fired.”

Incredulous, he stopped and stared at her. “I was trying to help you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Didn’t sound that way from where I was sitting.”

“Keeping guests happy is part of my job. If one of them has a few too many cocktails and misbehaves, that’s my problem. I cannot afford to offend a guest.”

Diego couldn’t believe this woman. “You’re making me the heavy?”

“I’m just asking you to please stay out of my business. First you insult me in your suite and now you’re jeopardizing my livelihood.”

“I didn’t order those towels.” The denial sounded petulant,

childish.

“Well, somebody did.”

“Then I owe you an apology.”

“Apology accepted. Would you care for an appetizer before dinner?”

Smooth as silk she brushed him off and left him feeling like an idiot for offering his help. Sharmaine was right. Ruthie could take care of herself.

Tension knotted in his neck, he settled back into his chair.

Ruthie topped off his wineglass as if nothing had occurred, but her hand shook the tiniest bit.

When she moved away, Sharmaine pouted. “Really, Diego, you’ve paid more attention to that waitress tonight than you have to me.”

He couldn’t deny the truth. He had been far more attuned to Ruthie than he had to his lovely date. And he could offer no logical explanation for his behavior.

“That, sweet lady, is because the waitress served the prime rib.” Tilting his head, he gave her his most charming and disarming grin. “Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had prime rib?”

Sharmaine found that amusing. “So,” she said, “the way to a man’s heart really is through his stomach?”

Diego struggled to keep his mind on the conversation and off the most disturbing urge to follow Ruthie into the kitchen and apologize again. Considering Ruthie’s reaction to his offer of

help, he was not on her list of all-time favorite males.

“That’s what they say.”

“Oh, pooh. Now I’ll have to learn to cook.”

“Or hire one.”

Sharmaine responded with a throaty chuckle, and Diego knew he’d been forgiven for being less than the perfect dinner partner. To tell the truth, he was hard-pressed to understand himself tonight. He was sitting with a beautiful woman who fit into his social world. A woman who obviously enjoyed men and who would lead him on a merry chase if he would let her. Her game was clear. There was no subterfuge, and his heart was in no danger.

But he couldn’t take his mind, or his eyes, off a certain green-eyed waitress.

Chapter Three

“Ruthie, the craft class needs more hot-glue sticks.” Merry Montrose pushed a package at her. “And afterward drop this off to Miss Parris Hammond in Room 17. She’s been waiting, rather impatiently I must say, for it to arrive. It’s a donation, I think, for the charity auction from some pro football player in Miami. Then take these flowers up to Miss Coleman and tell her Dr. Vargas sent them.”

“Is there a card?” Stomach dipping at the doctor’s name, Ruthie took the package and the flowers. “I saw Miss Coleman heading for the tennis courts about twenty minutes ago.”

“Really?” Merry’s blue eyes flamed with interest. “Was Dr. Vargas with her by any chance?”

“No. She was with another guest.”

“Male or female?”

“Male. Mr. Plinkton, I believe.”

“Drat. Have I chosen wrong again?” The manager mumbled an incomprehensible sentence under her breath. Jabbing at the numbers on her cell phone, she waved Ruthie away impatiently. “Go on, then. Leave the flowers in the room. I’ll have to try something else.”

What in the world was Miss Montrose talking about? She acted as though she had some hand in getting Diego and Sharmaine together. With no real clue to where this conversation

was going, Ruthie opted not to ask for clarification. The less she knew of Diego Vargas the better.

“I’ll take these things right up,” she said, and started out of the small office.

“And one more thing, Ruthie,” the older woman called. “You’ll be working at the pub from nine to closing tonight.”

Except for frequent stops to check on Naomi, Ruthie had run constantly from one task to the other all morning. With the tourist season upon them the resort was really hopping. She hated to admit it but her feet and body ached for rest. Though unwilling to turn down the offer of work, she was really too tired to tend bar tonight. She hadn’t been sleeping well lately.

First, there was the constant worry over her mother-in-law and finances. Dr. Attenburg had extended credit at the clinic, but Ruthie had to come up with that money soon. And if that wasn’t enough to ruin a good night’s rest, now her mind was experiencing flights of fancy. After last evening in the Banyan Room, she’d dreamed of Diego Vargas, the kind of dreams that made her blush to remember them. To add to the craziness, she saw the man practically every time she turned a corner on her way to the next job. More than once, as she’d come out of a guest room, the handsome doctor had appeared in the hall or the elevator. Each time she’d scurried away like a timid mouse until she’d come to both dread and yearn for those frequent encounters.

When he’d played rescuer in the restaurant, she’d vacillated

between horror and thrill. Horror that the management would think she had insulted the drunk and lecherous Mr. Peterson in some way. And thrill that a man like Diego would intervene on her behalf.

And now Miss Montrose had to mention his name and start Ruthie thinking about him all over again.

As quickly as possible she completed the errands, then hurried down to the café to pick up the special Mexican lunch she'd ordered for Mama.

In minutes she had the disposable box in hand and hopped onto the elevator. The spicy scent of enchilada filled the small space. Carry-out was a luxury, but Ruthie would pay any price to see Mama eat a hearty meal again. After lunch they had an appointment with Dr. Attenburg. Twice weekly, now that the kind doctor had given them an extension, they'd go to the mainland for the IV treatments. The outing always left Mama exhausted, but Ruthie was hopeful that these symptoms would soon disappear with the new, more powerful drugs.

As she entered the suite, her pager beeped. Accustomed to the summons, she waved at Naomi while sliding the meal carton onto the table and went directly to the phone.

When Ruthie had replaced the telephone receiver, Naomi asked, "Work again, yes?"

"A guest wanting his in-room bar restocked."

"Will you have time before we go inland?"

Ruthie checked her watch. "It won't take long. I'll do it now."

“But you have not eaten lunch.”

“I’ll grab a bite later, Mama.” She kissed the older woman’s cheek. “You eat. I’ll be back in less than an hour to take you to the clinic.”

Whistling softly, Diego slapped a towel over his hot, sweaty shoulder and headed for the stairwell. Nothing like a game of beach volleyball to stir the senses, relax the muscles and elevate the bad mood he’d awakened with.

The stairs were empty as usual, a fact that amused him. Resort guests exercised like crazy to lose weight and keep in shape but opted for the brief elevator ride to their rooms. In the military, good physical condition kept a man alive, and even though in Diego’s job he was generally well protected, the extreme conditions in Third-World countries required optimum health in order to function. He took two steps at a time, listening to the hollow echo of rubber against metal as he thundered upward.

When he approached the second floor, he hesitated. According to the resort information in his room, a hot tub was on this landing. Figuring his muscles could use a few minutes of soothing whirlpool, he pushed open the heavy door that led onto the carpeted hallway and stepped out.

From his left, a door opened and movement caught his attention. His pulse jerked, reacting in a clinically abnormal manner. Ruthie, the waitress-maid-lifeguard, pulled a door closed behind her and turned, catching sight of him.

“Hello again,” he said. She looked fresh and professional in

creased navy walking shorts and a crisp, white polo. Her blond hair was slicked back into a charming ponytail that made her look young and innocent.

“Dr. Vargas,” she replied politely. Even from several feet away he could tell she was reluctant to speak to him, but she’d avoided him long enough. He needed to clear the air.

“Diego,” he corrected as he tossed the towel around his neck and anchored it on each side with his hands. “Still mad at me?”

She shook her head, and the glimmer of a smile lit her face. “Actually, I should apologize.”

He tilted his head in silent agreement. “I was trying to help, not add to the problem.”

“I realize that now. But I can’t afford to upset a guest.” Her clear green eyes took in his sweaty appearance. “Volleyball?”

“Yeah.” He was tempted to remind her that he was a guest, too, but decided that sounded woefully childish. “And now I’m looking for the hot tub.”

“This is the floor. Would you like me to show you?”

“Lead on.”

He followed her down the corridor and into a large sunroom. Enclosed in glass, the room could be opened to the sights and sounds of the surf below. Now the windows were closed and fogged over with humidity from the hot water. A small self-serve bar lined one wall. Next to the bar was a bathroom complete with shower, toiletries, towels and several generic swimsuits. A plethora of green plants created a near junglelike atmosphere, a

great place for a romantic interlude.

He shot a quick glance at Ruthie and wondered if she was the type. Might be interesting to find out.

She bent to check the water temperature, and Diego lost his breath as the demure shorts edged upward against firm smooth thighs.

Yes, indeed. Very interesting.

Completely unaware that he'd been ogling her legs and backside, Ruthie rose and asked, "Would you like me to fix you a drink while you change?"

"Who said I was changing?" He stripped off his tank top and tossed it on the floor.

"Oh. Well." Just as she had that day in his suite, Ruthie looked everywhere but at his chest. Her reaction to his body stoked his ego.

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