

Chapter 6

Rémi took the day off from her responsibilities at the club to take Nuria to a birthday brunch. It had been a while since the two of them had had any time together and her friend said as much as they sat across from each other at Nuria's favorite Brazilian restaurant taking bites from each other's plates and drinking caipirinhas. With her dreadlocks curling around her face and throat and the wicked glint of her labret stud punctuating the deep red of her mouth, Nuria looked fantastic.

"You look like the birthday present, not the birthday girl," Rémi teased, flicking Nuria's chin with a playful finger.

"Birthday girls should always look ready to be opened," she said with a growl.

"Ha! Just don't get into any trouble tonight. You know you can get."

Sounds of the restaurant swirled around them. The low voiced conversations of other diners. Clink and tinkle of cutlery against china. Here and there, the gentle thud of plates being placed on tables. Sunlight leaned, golden and friendly, against windows revealing the passing parade of people on the boardwalk just outside.

Nuria's eyes glinted. "Dez got me a gift."

"Trouble?"

"I think so." She tugged a chunk of beef from the skewer across her plate and bit deeply into it. A line of juice escaped her mouth and her tongue darted out to catch it.

"Are you going to take it?"

"Definitely."

Rémi laughed. Ice cubes clinked as she swirled the remnants of the caipirinha in her glass. "Why am I not surprised?"

"You and I know trouble's not so bad. Especially when you have it in your bed tied up on its belly and whimpering your name."

Rémi put the glass to her mouth and snared an ice cube with her tongue. "I'll remember you said that."

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After brunch, she dropped Nuria off at her place then headed back to her own, intent only on taking a nap then working out at home before heading back to Nuria's for her birthday party. But her friend's words about trouble—and they were so true—kept echoing in her head. The trouble she wanted to get into took the shape of Claudia. But would it be worth the potential loss of a friendship?

At the condo, she sat in a warm pool of sunlight on the stairs and out through the windows. But for once she didn't see the spectacular Miami skyline carved against an azure sky or the meditation garden below her window with its gently waving trees and white rocks. She saw Claudia and Dez, her best friend. She saw trouble. Still, Rémi knew what her decision was. Had known it when she'd walked out to that balcony in Montreal and seen the older woman sitting there on that bench, waiting for her. Rémi just hoped she could live with its consequences when the time came.

She picked up her cell phone and dialed.

“Did I catch you at a bad time?” she asked when Claudia answered.

Rémi heard something, a roughness or cough in the other woman’s voice when she answered the phone. Claudia cleared her throat.

“No. Now is fine.” She cleared her throat again.

Rémi squirmed against the stairs, even though, obviously Claudia couldn’t see her.

“Would you come to dinner with me tomorrow night?”

She didn’t know what to expect but it wasn’t the immediate, “Yes. I’d love to.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Claudia laughed weakly. It was a new almost rusty sound as if she hadn’t laughed all day. Or all week. “What time and what should I wear?”

Rémi’s surprise slowly began to give way to excitement. Her heart pounded even more heavily in her chest. “Seven o’ clock. And anything you want.”

“Even my sequined gown from senior prom 1976.”

“If you want,” she murmured, answering the tease. “As long as you’re comfortable.”

“That’s the best offer I’ve had all month.”

A pleasant, glowing warmth blossomed in Rémi’s chest. “Good. I’ll see you at seven tomorrow then.”

“Seven o’ clock.”

Rémi held the warm phone to her cheek even after Claudia hung up. She said yes. Rémi could barely believe it, but Claudia had said yes.