

SPANISH LOVE SONG



PG FORTE

Copyright 2009, PG Forte

This is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are no construed to be real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely incidental. All rights are reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief excerpts or quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

*“If you can't comprehend,
read it in my eyes.
If you don't understand it's love
in a thin disguise.
And what it takes to move you,
each time that you resist,
is more than just a pretty face
to prove that I exist.”*

A Word in Spanish ~ Elton John and Bernie Taupin

CHAPTER ONE

Alcázares Reales de Sevilla, España

Late Fifteenth Century

The evening was balmy and warm. The air, already thick and sweet with the fragrance of a thousand blossoms, was made even more so by the guitars of the *Sevillanas*. The courtyard of the royal palace was a crowded place tonight and in the flickering torchlight, the jewels and glittering raiment worn by those in attendance threatened to outshine the stars.

Truly, if the world had an epicenter, *Sevilla* was its name. Of that Damian Ysidro Esposito-Montoya, Vizconde de Castile was absolutely certain; and he was one of the privileged few lucky enough to live there, at the very heart of all that was cultured and elegant, beautiful and refined. As he glanced around appreciatively, he was aware of an almost unbearable excitement welling up inside him. The night was young and filled with infinite possibilities.

“Well, *amigo*, it appears your beauty has caught someone’s eyes,” the voice of the duke, his patron, murmured in his ear. “Did you know of this?”

Damian inclined his head and smiled back at him, his expression an almost perfect blend of humility, adoration and gratitude. “*Si. Muchisimas gracias, Excelencia*. I am flattered. You honor me, as always, with your kind regard.”

“You misunderstand me,” the duke replied peevishly. “The eyes to which I’m referring are not my own. They belong to that creature over there, the one lounging against that pillar on the far side of the hall. Who is he? Do we know him?”

Dutifully turning his head in the direction the duke was indicating, Damian cast a desultory glance across the marble floor of the *patio de las Doncellas*, already knowing what he would find there. “Ah. *Si*, Excellency. He arrived here a fortnight ago in the company of that Italian baron who you found so amusing at dinner the other night. His name is...oh, dear, let me see if I cannot recall it

for you. Is it *Señor*...Quintano, perhaps? *Si*. I'm almost certain that is what he is called."

While the duke processed the information he'd been given, Damian allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. *Yes, that was very well done*. As the duke's most trusted attendant, he was expected to remember and keep track of the names and status of everyone at court, as well as any other information His Excellency might find useful to know. As his most intimate companion, on the other hand, he was expected to not have eyes, or even the smallest level of interest, for any other man.

It was important, therefore, that he strike the proper tone when attempting to recall the name of the man who, had the duke but known it, had spent most of the past few evenings watching Damian from beside that very same pillar. Damian was confident his answer—calm, disinterested, just hesitant enough—had achieved the desired effect. In truth, however, there had been no "perhaps" about it. He knew the man's name almost as well as he did his own.

His name was Conrad, Conrad Quintano, and those eyes that had been at the center of the duke's complaint, the eyes Damian could feel trained upon him even now, were surely the most astonishingly mesmerizing orbs the good God had ever created.

The same adjectives could also be applied to the man himself. Conrad was, perhaps, half a head shorter than Damian, but possessed of so powerful a physique that just gazing upon it quite literally stole Damian's breath away. His face was hard, not beautiful in any sense of the word, but strong and so very masculine. His usual expression was dour, grim, the look of a man who had perhaps seen too much of the world. But, fierce as Conrad was wont to appear, there was yet a sweetness to his mouth that Damian could almost taste and he wished, oh, how he wished, that he could taste it in truth.

As of yet, they'd exchanged only a few brief smiles and a handful of words in passing, but Damian had spent most of the intervening hours spinning deliciously erotic fantasies in which they did and said so much more. These last few nights in particular, as he rolled about on his cot, quite unable to sleep, those same sweet syllables had repeated themselves endlessly within his head. Conrad

Quintano. Conrad Quintano. *Con-rad Quin-ta-no*.

“He looks like a peasant,” the duke observed.

Damian sighed. He did *not* look like a peasant. There was a regal air about the man that showed itself in the way he stood, the way he walked, the way he held himself. “And yet, he seems quite taken with you, my lord.”

“What’s that you say?” the duke snapped. “Me? Are you blind, Montoya? It is *you* he’s been staring at.”

“*Si*,” Damian murmured, pressing closer to the duke’s side, faking a tremor. “I fear your Excellency is quite right about that. If looks could kill, I know I would be in grave peril. It’s obvious he envies me my position and wishes to replace me by your side. In truth, now that I think it, I’m not sure I should *not* fear for my life. He looks to me to be extremely dangerous. Do you not think so, Excellency? And more than capable of doing...well, just about anything he might wish to do.”

The last part of his speech was no exaggeration and Damian could not completely suppress an actual shiver of delight as he thought about it. In his fantasies, Conrad had already done a great many things to him, all of them capably.

The duke frowned. “Has this been going on for some time then? You should have spoken to me of it earlier. Who does the brigand think he is, to threaten you while you are under my protection? It’s insupportable. I shall have those eyes plucked from his head, for his presumption. Perhaps I should send a few men over there now, to teach him some manners.”

Ay, dios mio. Damian bit his lip. It was possible he’d overplayed that last hand. “Oh, but surely that’s not necessary? If your Excellency pleases, would you not prefer me to bring him over here, that you might speak with him instead?”

The duke looked affronted. “You forget yourself. Why should I wish to speak to such a one as he? Did you not just hear me say it? The man is a peasant. I am sure of it.”

Damian nodded. “*Si*, Excellency, I do not doubt you. I am sure you are correct, as always. But,

if you'll forgive me, that is precisely my point. One would not wish to discount the peasants too quickly, would you not agree? For, upon my honor, I'm convinced they must rank among the world's most proficient lovers."

"Montoya!" The duke scowled in outrage. "What nonsense is this? Is it your intention to insult me?"

Damian shook his head. "No, no, *Excelencia. Le ruego perdonarme*. Never would I do such a thing. If my lord will but allow me to explain?"

"*Si*. Do so." the duke replied, glaring at Damian through narrowed eyes. "Immediately."

"Well, my lord, if you will but consider their numbers, I'm sure you will agree with me. How can they *not* be prodigiously skillful at the art of lovemaking? There are *so* very many of them in the world. Given the rate at which they're reproducing, they must be devoting *all* of their time to practice!"

It took a moment for Damian's thrust to hit home. Eventually, it did however. The duke laughed aloud, clapped Damian on the back and turned immediately to the neighbor on his other side and repeated the joke, giving himself the credit for having thought of it.

Satisfied the danger had been averted, Damian allowed himself the luxury of glancing once again in Conrad's direction, but the space beside the pillar was now vacant. Disappointed, Damian scanned the courtyard, hoping for at least another glimpse of the man, but Conrad was nowhere in sight. *Que pena*, Damian thought sighing sadly, his enjoyment of the night severely diminished. *What a pity*.

Never, in all his life, had Damian known anyone who affected him in the way Conrad did. Next to him, all other men dwindled into insignificance. They left him cold, whereas Conrad fired his blood.

He wanted him as he had never wanted anyone. His body ached to have him in all the most unholy ways. There had to be some means by which he might satisfy the lust that raged within him or

it would surely drive him mad.

All he needed was a small space of time in which to indulge his desires, just a few short hours, perhaps a single night, if he were lucky. If he could but contrive a way in which the two of them might be alone together, undisturbed—was that really so much to ask? Ah, if only fate would smile upon him.

Madre de Dios, he prayed. *Help me, please. For favor, Señora bendecida intercede for me with your most holy Son—su hijo más santo. Grant me this favor, este favor un muy pequeño, and I will never again ask Heaven's aid in anything, but willingly accept, without complaint, whatever penance the future has in store for me.*

CHAPTER TWO

Conrad stalked, ghost-like, through the castle's deserted upstairs hallway, while the laughter of imbeciles rang in his ears and a fire raged in his heart. Nearly six hundred years he had roamed the earth, visiting destruction wherever he wished, withholding it at his pleasure, and they dared make mock? They dared make *him* the butt of their jokes? His fangs throbbed angrily, demanding he seek retribution.

By now, he should be beyond caring what mere mortals thought of him. They and their lies and their petty, insubstantial little lives should be beneath his notice. But this, he supposed, was what came of his futile attempts to live, once again, among them. He'd tried to turn his back on who and what he truly was. He'd tried to forget. He should have known better.

A peasant am I? Well, yes, he supposed, at one time that may have been true, but that was at least several lifetimes ago. In the centuries since he'd been turned to the dark, he'd fought and murdered his way up through the ranks of the undead. He was now accounted practically a prince among his own kind, the undisputed lord and master of his own, unruly nation. Just because he had never felt the slightest inclination to actually rule over his people, that did not mean they were not still his to command should he ever wish to do so.

Perhaps, after tonight, he would. Perhaps he would take up the reins of power and transform his clan into a fierce and fearsome tribe such as the world had never before seen. Then his name would be one to cause even the wisest and most powerful of men to tremble—and not just those who were simpering, witless fools!

Such glory would have to wait for another time, however, because tonight, he had a small score to settle with two of the fools.

Arriving at his destination—the suite of rooms reserved for the baron with whom he was

traveling—Conrad let himself into the baron’s bedchamber. It did not take long to find what he was seeking. The baron was in the habit of taking a mild soporific to help him sleep. A few grains of the substance would also suffice to put *el Duque* into a long and heavy slumber and grant Conrad the space and time he needed in which to exact his revenge.

After pocketing the potion, Conrad left the baron’s chambers and retraced his steps down the hallway. He smiled grimly as he considered what lay ahead. There were many other punishments he could have devised for the duke. Few would have been as entertaining. None would have provided him the same level of enjoyment.

How better to humble the pompous, arrogant nobleman than by seducing away his favorite plaything? And, if it so happened that the plaything in question must also suffer—from the ruining of all his prospects and the blighting of his future—well, what of it? It was surely no more than the young man deserved.

Ever since his arrival in *Sevilla*, Conrad had been almost painfully aware of the oh-so-charming Viscount Montoya. As was clear to him now, the admiring glances and shy-seeming smiles Damian had been wont to cast in his direction had unbalanced Conrad’s mind and seriously clouded his judgment. It was one thing, after all, to appreciate a young man’s good looks, anyone might be excused for doing so, but he had allowed himself to fall victim to the ridiculous fiction that the spoiled, pampered object of his infatuation actually returned his feelings. It was a fantasy. A dream. One he could neither excuse nor forgive.

I should have made a quick meal of him the very first night, and put an end to the craving. He was still not sure why he had not done so. It had not been from fear of discovery. Over the years, he had become so adept at his feeding, so subtle in his technique, that his prey rarely even realized they’d been caught, unless he wished them to. Damian wouldn’t have even known what had happened to him. He could have gone his own way afterwards, just as Conrad—his hunger pleasantly sated—would have gone his, and no one need ever be the wiser.

But, it had been such a very long time since anyone had gazed at Conrad in so adoring a fashion, if, in fact, anyone ever had. His wife may have done so once, he supposed, but that good woman had been dust for hundreds of years and Conrad could no longer recall her features. He still retained a vague impression of dark eyes and dark hair, but it was possible he was wrong even about that, and it certainly didn't help his recollections any that when he closed his own eyes now and tried to think back and remember the only face that came to mind was Damian's!

It had felt good to bask in the young man's apparent regard. It had felt too good—like warm, spring sunshine after a cold and bitter winter. Conrad should have realized that anything that reminded him of sunshine could never be a good thing. Not for him. Not anymore. Not for a very long time.

With the sins of six centuries weighing heavy on his soul, he had supposed himself immune to all the more tender emotions. Love, devotion, compassion, remorse—he had assumed his ability to feel such things had been lost, destroyed along with the rest of his humanity. Yet, Damian, clever fool that he was, had found a way to slip his blade past Conrad's defenses, to pierce the heart he hadn't even known he still possessed.

Perhaps, the boy had not even meant to do so. Perhaps the touch had been completely unintentional. Intentional or not, however, Conrad could not allow such an attack to go uncountered.

He looks to me to be extremely dangerous...

Out of all the nonsense Damian had spouted this evening, that was the one bit of sense. Tonight, he would find that out. Tonight, he would learn, to his sorrow, just how dangerous Conrad really was.

CHAPTER THREE

Skulking unseen in the upstairs corridor, Conrad watched as Damian rounded the corner and headed his way. It had taken very little time for the duke to succumb to the drugs Conrad had slipped into his wine; but it appeared to have taken Damian even less time to settle the seemingly inebriated duke in his bedchamber. Now, as he hurried along the hallway, he had the look about him of a man who'd just been let off on holiday, the look of a man speeding towards his lover's bed, rather than away from it. Conrad wondered briefly where Damian thought he was going. Wherever it was, he was almost certainly not going to reach his destination tonight.

Conrad lifted himself from the shadows. "My lord. A word with you, sir, if I may?"

Damian stopped short, surprise giving way to delight—or so it would have appeared, if the sudden smile that wreathed his lips had been something in which Conrad still believed. As it was, he had to stop himself from scowling. No one should be allowed to smile in such a fashion and not have it mean something.

"Why, of course, *Señor* Quintano," Damian purred as he essayed a deep bow. "*El placer es mío*. I am at your complete disposal. Only, please, tell me how I may be of assistance to you?"

"You are too kind," Conrad replied, pleased to note the boy had finally resolved his doubts as to Conrad's identity. That was good. After all, where was the lesson learned if he could not clearly recall the name of the man who was about to ruin him? "But, on the contrary, it is I who wish to be of assistance to you."

"You do?" A small smile played over Damian's lips. "Then I am indeed honored. Please, do go on."

"I'm afraid I could not help but overhear part of your conversation, this evening, with his excellency the duke," Conrad said as he moved closer. Close enough so that Damian was all but caged within one of the deep doorways that lined the corridor. Close enough that the boy's heartbeat was

clearly audible and the scent of his blood an almost overpowering lure. “You appear to be laboring under a small misconception and I thought, if you would but allow it, I might be able to correct your thinking?”

“By all means.” Damian’s eyes gleamed and Conrad could all but feel his anticipation. “I look forward to your correction.”

Holding his own anticipation in check, Conrad shrugged. “Perhaps not, my friend. For I am afraid what I have to say to you will not come as a happy surprise. As it turns out you see, most peasants of my acquaintance have been sadly lacking in skill when it comes to the subtle art of pleasuring a man.”

At that, Damian’s smile flickered and went out. Color suffused his face. “You read lips,” he said, his voice dull. “I hadn’t realized. What a very...useful skill to possess.”

Conrad sighed. “Alas, no. I fear you are once again mistaken. I do not read lips. I do, however, possess very excellent hearing. Right now, for example, I can hear the pounding of your heart. It is kicking so fiercely against your chest that it calls to mind a young buck that’s been pulled down by wolves and knows it’s about to have its throat ripped out.”

Damian had gone altogether still. He cleared his throat with obvious difficulty. “How exceptionally vivid,” he murmured, lips curling in disgust. “What a wonderfully descriptive image your words have painted for me. *Gracias, Señor*. I’m sure I shall treasure the memory of it always.”

“Oh, yes. I am sure you shall.” Once again Conrad shortened the distance between them, until Damian was well within his reach. “In fact, I am confident there will be much for you to remember about this evening.” As he laid his palm against the center of Damian’s chest, Damian gasped faintly. A tremor ran through him and Conrad felt the boy’s heart lurch. He smiled. “And there it goes again. My apologies. I fear I must be frightening you.”

To Conrad’s surprise, Damian shook his head. “No, *Señor*,” he murmured faintly. “This time it is *you* who are mistaken.”

“Do you think so?” Conrad’s smile widened as he took in the stubborn set of Damian’s jaw, the rebellious gleam in his eye. The hunter in him was unexpectedly pleased with this sudden show of boldness. Where was the fun, after all, in a chase that was over too soon? “Myself, I do not see how that could be possible. For, as it happens, I am rarely mistaken.”

Damian swallowed hard and forced a smile. “And I...am hardly ever frightened.” And, suddenly, he was in motion. Leaning in, he erased the gap between them; cupping his hands around Conrad’s face, pressing his lips to Conrad’s mouth. Startled, Conrad fell back a step. Damian moved with him, sliding the fingers of one hand up into Conrad’s hair, slanting his head to the side as he tried to deepen the kiss; which, after a moment, Conrad allowed him to do, giving in to his own, almost overpowering curiosity to see where this was headed.

Another instant, and even his curiosity lost its sway in the wake of a shocking new discovery. Damian’s lips seemed to fit Conrad’s mouth so perfectly it was as though they’d been divinely crafted for just that purpose. *Made for me*, Conrad thought hazily as hunger churned in his stomach and his fangs pulsed with their need. *He was made for me*.

Growling now, Conrad gripped Damian’s shoulders, forcing him back against the heavy planks of the door. Damian arched against him, thrusting his hips into Conrad’s; leaving Conrad with no doubt as to what it was Damian wanted from him: the very same thing he wanted from Damian. Wanted, and fully intended to have—right here, right now—with no thought to the consequences. Afterwards, they could both die on the spot, and he’d be content.

“Be careful, young one,” Conrad warned as he pressed his lips against Damian’s throat, searching for just the right place. “You’re playing with fire.” As close as he was to losing control, he knew the same could be said of himself.

A wild laugh escaped Damian’s lips. “Ah, but this old castle can be so dreadfully drafty. How else is one to stay warm?”

How, indeed? Conrad couldn’t help but agree. A moment later, his mouth found what it had

been seeking, and all other thought fled. He sank his fangs into Damian's neck, shuddering with the bliss of that first, sweet taste. *Made for me.* Unbidden, the thought came again. *For me and for me alone.*

"*Dios,*" Damian gasped as he clutched Conrad tighter, his legs clearly threatening to give way.

Conrad pressed himself even closer, using the weight of his own body to hold Damian in place against the door and keep him from falling. But his actions had unintended results. Damian's erection rubbed against his own, reminding Conrad that there were other needs to be met, other desires to be fulfilled. He wrenched his mouth away from Damian's throat.

"Your chambers," he demanded, fixing Damian with a fierce gaze. "Where are they?"

Damian frowned, as though struggling for comprehension. He eyed Conrad doubtfully. In the silence, Conrad could hear the approach of footsteps ascending the stairs at the far end of the hallway.

"Quickly. Someone is climbing the stairs. If you've any wish to avoid being discovered, you must take me to your rooms now."

Damian's eyes flickered briefly in the direction of the stairs, then back to lock with Conrad, but still he hesitated, saying nothing, as though weighing his decision.

"Now, *hidalgo,*" Conrad repeated. "For, I swear, if you do not, I will have you right here in this corridor, in plain sight of anyone who passes, whether it results in your ruination or not."

Damian's chin lifted. "I thought, perhaps, that might be part of your plan?" he said, sparing another quick glance in the direction of the stairs. "Have I misunderstood? Did you not intend to humiliate me, as punishment for having insulted you?" There was a hint of challenge now in the husky depths of his voice.

Conrad stared at him in disbelief as he struggled to restrain his inner beast. His hunger was so far from satisfied, he might very conceivably kill anyone who attempted to take Damian from him. He might kill Damian, as well, if he continued to thwart him like this. "Plans can change," he growled

quietly.

“I’m delighted to hear you say so,” Damian replied, a wicked smile breaking over his lips. He reached behind him. His hand scrabbled briefly, finally making contact with the door’s handle. Then he shoved the door open and practically fell backward into the room, pulling Conrad in with him.

Whose room is this, Conrad wondered, glancing around the bedchamber as Damian secured the door behind them. The room was empty, save for the two of them. Conrad scented the air, searching for clues to the room’s owner. But only one scent lingered on the still air. Damian’s. Snarling in disbelief, Conrad turned and pinned the younger man against the door. “What are you playing at?” he demanded in furious tones. If Damian was, once again, looking to make a fool of him, it might well become the last reckless act of his young life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Damian had no sooner finished bolting the door to his room when he was seized by the shoulders and spun roughly around. “What are you playing at tonight?” Conrad snarled, shoving him hard against the door. “This is *your* room.”

Confused and severely annoyed—his head was still ringing from its impact with the heavy, oaken door—Damian glared back at him. “*Si*. My room. As requested.” What was wrong with the heavens this evening, he couldn’t help but wonder. Why could they not simply make up their minds? Did they intend to grant him his heart’s desire, or to punish him for his presumption?

To be fair, he had not immediately seen the Hand of Providence at work in the night’s events. When the duke first expressed a desire to retire early, Damian had assumed his excellency was in an amorous mood; he expected he’d be spending the rest of the night with him in his chambers. With thoughts of Conrad filling his head and the man himself nowhere in sight, it had not seemed the worst option. At least, that way, he might find some relief for the seething tension that had been making sleep impossible.

But, the duke had begun to snore before his servants had even finished undressing him, which was when it occurred to Damian that perhaps his prayers had *not* gone unheard after all. As soundly as the duke was sleeping, Damian knew it was highly doubtful he’d be wanted again until morning. Suddenly, the night was his own and he knew just how he hoped to spend it.

He’d been going in search of Conrad when, miraculously, Conrad found him—right outside his own chamber door. It was then Damian knew for a certainty that Heaven was, indeed, smiling down upon him; until a moment later, when his faith was once again shaken by Conrad’s anger. But only temporarily. Because, what reason could there be for Conrad to be so furious, unless he wanted Damian and felt himself scorned?

If that was the case, then *bueno*, they were of one mind, for Damian wanted Conrad as well.

Kissing him had seemed the quickest way of getting that point across and, *Dios mio*, the man could kiss! As far as Damian was concerned, in that moment, they had both as good as declared themselves. The rest was mere details.

So then, why was Conrad *still* so angry?

"Tell me," Conrad demanded. "If you were this close to safety all along, why would you have risked exposure by dallying with me in the hallway for as long as you did?"

Damian shrugged. "Because I did not think you would be amenable to moving." He was surprised it needed to be said. "As I have told you, I assumed your plan was to use the threat of discovery to try and frighten me. Since privacy would have removed much of the danger, I had to assume it would not appeal to you."

"So, you were willing to risk yourself to indulge my wishes?" A cold smile curled Conrad's lips. "How extraordinarily accommodating. I suppose I should thank you?"

Damian sighed. In truth, he had not judged it that great a risk. Of the two of them, it was Conrad who would likely suffer most were they to be caught. Or had Conrad not overheard the duke's threat to put his eyes out if he did not stop staring at Damian? "If I had urged you to come to my room before you suggested it, would you have accepted my invitation?"

The smile faded slowly from Conrad's face. "I don't know."

"I thought it unlikely."

"Another assumption?" Relaxing the iron grip he'd held on Damian's shoulders, Conrad traced his fingers over Damian's throat. "You should take care, *hidalgo*," he murmured. His voice, so cool, so quiet, so steely edged, seemed to chill even the air around them. "It is unwise to make so many assumptions. To act too rashly on what one only *believes* to be true can lead a man into danger. But, then, I'm forgetting. You're not one who is easily frightened, are you?"

Damian met Conrad's gaze. "No," he answered, as coolly as he could. "I am not."

Taking advantage of Conrad's lessened hold on him, Damian shoved away from the door.

Crossing to the dresser where he kept his decanter of port, he poured himself some wine. The last thing he wanted was for Conrad to realize how very frightened he'd suddenly become. There was another assumption he'd been making. He'd assumed Conrad had been as much affected by the kiss they'd shared as he had been; that when Conrad said his plans had changed, it meant he'd given up his quest for vengeance. But, what if Damian had been wrong in that assumption? What if their kiss had meant nothing at all to Conrad?

What if he was *still* seeking revenge?

"I am not often surprised anymore," Conrad said, his voice still quietly reflective. "Yet you have surprised me more than once tonight."

Damian sighed. "Well, one can but *try* not to be too predictable," he murmured as he drank his wine. "But, now, my dear sir, if you feel your honor has been satisfied and you have nothing else to gain here, perhaps you might use your very excellent hearing to determine if it would be possible for you to safely leave?"

"Do you think to be rid of me that easily?" Conrad asked, coming away from the door. He moved silently across the floor but, even facing in the other direction, Damian could sense him draw near. "Be warned, my friend. I do not plan on leaving until I've gotten everything for which I've come."

Steeling himself, Damian turned to face him. He braced his hands on the edge of the dresser behind him, and schooled his features into an expression of polite inquiry. "Indeed, *Señor*? So then perhaps you would be so good as to enlighten me. What exactly are you here for?"

"I think you already know the answer to that," Conrad answered, his gaze focused on Damian's mouth. "At least in part."

As always, the force of that gaze was so intense Damian could practically feel its touch upon his skin. His lips tingled under Conrad's scrutiny. He had to resist the urge to lick them. He widened his eyes and stared at Conrad in mock surprise. "Oh, but surely I've misunderstood. You cannot be

suggesting I make yet *another* assumption?"

"They do seem difficult to avoid," Conrad replied, sounding almost conversational. "I will admit that I, too, have made assumptions tonight. For one thing, I had assumed this duke of yours was not the sort of man who would find amusement in sharing those he considers his."

Damian shrugged. "It's a reasonable thought, is it not? What man would?"

"I've known a few."

Feeling not at all reassured by *that*, or by the dark gleam in Conrad's eyes, Damian turned away again and poured himself another glass of wine. "Have you?"

"And you, my friend," Conrad continued musingly, as though Damian had not even spoken. "I had assumed you to be a man of some intelligence. Never would I have imagined you would be so careless for your own well-being that you would rush headlong into a situation so clearly guaranteed to alienate the affections of your *patrón*."

Damian lifted his glass in a small salute. "It's true, I am not often foolish."

"And yet...you kissed me."

Damian nodded. "*Si*. So I did." And he'd do so again, if the opportunity presented itself. Even now, he had to fight the urge to throw himself at Conrad once again. Instead, he swallowed more wine.

"Why would you do such a thing?" Conrad demanded, so abruptly Damian felt a momentary loss of balance. "It cannot have been merely to satisfy an impulse. Did you think it would distract me from my anger? Or do you simply enjoy being reckless?"

"I did it for me," Damian snapped. He felt the color flooding his face and cursed himself for losing control. "Because it was what *I* wanted to do. Why should I not, for once, consider my own desires? All my life I've done what was expected of me, first by my father, now by the duke; and what have I to show for it?"

A wry smile curved Conrad's lips. "Why, what is this?" he asked as his gaze swept the room.

“Could it be the little bird has grown tired of his gilded cage? Is your life become so drear you long to escape it? Shall I oblige you in this? I could, you know.”

Damian shook his head. “*Gracias, Señor*, but no. I beg your pardon, much as I appreciate your kind offer, why should I wish to escape? I assure you, I’m quite content with my life here, in this *cage*, as you call it. If it were up to me, I would choose never to leave *Sevilla*. But, alas, such is not to be my fate.”

Conrad’s eyebrows rose. “And why is that?”

Damian sighed. “Oh, what does it matter?” Wandering over to the window, he pulled the drapes aside and looked out. Moonlight illuminated the gardens below. Faint strains of music drifted to him on the sweet-smelling air. And, in the perfect sky above, the stars were shining. *Only a fool would wish to be anywhere else*, he thought as he glanced up at them.

“It has been decided that the duke should marry,” he explained, with his back to the room. “And, soon, if the Crown has anything to say about it. Already, negotiations have begun with the families of several prospective brides. But, when that happy day arrives and the entire realm rejoices in their union, I shall not be here to see it. Out of deference to the new Duchess, whoever she may be, I am to be sent away.”

Turning again, he smiled at Conrad. “I will, of course, be rewarded most generously for my service. I am to receive a title, an estate in the country and, in all likelihood, a wife will be found for me as well. The appearances must be preserved, after all, and it has been determined that this arrangement is in the best interest of all concerned.”

“This is hardly a tragedy,” Conrad pointed out. “Are you so in love with the duke that you cannot bear to be parted from him? You’ll forgive my skepticism, but you do not kiss like a man whose heart belongs to another.”

“I have never claimed it to be the case,” Damian replied. “I have said only that I am not unhappy with my life here and would prefer for it to continue.”

“Still, the future you have outlined for yourself is not an unpleasant one. Many people would count themselves lucky to be in your place.”

Damian inclined his head. “It is as you say. As the younger son of a very minor nobleman, my options have always been limited; this is hardly the worst fate for one such as I. And, indeed, the arrangement will please many people. My father will be made happy because I will have increased the family fortune and brought honor to our name. My mother will be overjoyed at the prospect of more grandchildren for her to dote upon. I’m sure even my future bride will find contentment with her lot. Not only will she have escaped a life of spinsterhood, but she will have her own household to run, a staff to oversee and, assuming we can contrive to produce them, children to raise. His excellency, as well, will lose little and gain much as I will, of course, be expected to host several hunting parties for him each year, during which time I may rejoice in being, once again, at his disposal.”

Filling his glass one more time, Damian sighed. “As it turns out, the only people likely to be at all inconvenienced are my elder brother—who I will have at last eclipsed—and I, myself. For I do not wish to spend the rest of my years rustivating in bucolic seclusion, barred from society, from *Sevilla*, from this life to which I’m so well suited. I ask you, what am I to do with myself in the country? Shall I read, do you think? Take long walks through the mud? Grow things? And the hunting—*ay, dios mio*—to go riding about through the trees and the weeds, clambering after a pack of dogs! Tell me, what manner of sport is that? ”

This time, when Damian paused, Conrad said nothing. Disappointed, Damian shrugged and once again drained his glass, feeling the sweet thrill of the drink as it hit his stomach. Warmth blossomed inside him and with it came the courage to speak of that which, up until now, he’d expressed only of in his moments of silent prayer.

“I know that, to many others, it may seem a trivial thing,” he said, crossing to Conrad who continued to watch him in brooding silence. “A matter of no great importance. But I cannot help that.

It is *my* life and I do not think it too much to ask that I have some say in how I am to live it. Or, failing that, I would like to have at least *one thing* of my own choosing; one reckless act that is just for me, a single moment of passion I can remember always and whose memory will be enough to warm me for the rest of my life. Surely I deserve that much?"

Conrad shook his head. "You may be right, my friend, but even the most deserving of us seldom get what we deserve."

"Then, perhaps, I shall try being undeserving instead." Damian's heart was beating faster as he leaned in toward Conrad, hoping for another kiss. But Conrad held him off.

"So I am to be your reckless act of passion, is that what tonight has been about?" he asked, frowning sternly. "And why choose me for this honor? Am I such a peasant that I should feel gratitude for whatever attention you would bestow on me?"

Damian's heart plummeted as he took in the remote expression in Conrad's eyes. The thought that, by his own words, he'd ruined his chances with this man, left him sick with disappointment. "My apologies, sir," he mumbled, his gaze faltering. "It seems I have presumed too much. It's just...I have wanted you so very badly, from almost the first moment I saw you. These past weeks, I've thought of little else but how I might steal a few minutes alone with you. I had thought—I had *hoped*—you might feel the same, but it appears I've been mistaken. If so, I—"

"Silence," Conrad commanded softly, laying a finger upon Damian's lips. "That's enough now. No more talk. You were not mistaken, *caro mio*. I feel just as you do."

Truly? Damian gazed back at him almost afraid to hope it might be so. Up until this moment, he hadn't even realized how much he'd wanted this, counted on it. Needed it. Too overcome to speak, he mutely pursed his lips and kissed the finger that lay pressed against his mouth.

A soft growl emerged from Conrad's throat; his eyes glowed like molten gold as he pulled Damian to him. Damian melted into his arms, struck by an overwhelming sense of rightness. It was as though he'd been waiting his entire life for this man, for this moment. *Sí, mí querido*, he thought,

almost giddy with desire, as Conrad's lips met his; as Conrad's hands molded and shaped themselves to his body; as Conrad pulled him even closer, with the clear intent of laying claim to whatever he touched. *Take anything you like. Take everything.*

CHAPTER FIVE

Damian barely noticed when Conrad began to walk him backward towards the bed, stripping most of his clothes from him along the way, until he finally tumbled, nearly naked, upon the mattress. While he hurried to remove the rest of his garments, Damian watched Conrad undress, gradually revealing powerful muscles encased in evenly bronzed skin beneath a light dusting of golden brown hair.

“But...you’re beautiful!” Damian gasped, feeling all but dazzled by the vision of perfection standing before him. He’d known it would be the case but, all the same, he’d not been expecting this. It was everything a man’s body should be; down to the small white scars that hinted at a life lived hard, of risks taken and battles won.

Conrad smiled as his own gaze traveled over Damian’s body. “Then it seems we are well matched,” he said as he joined him on the bed.

The thrill of holding Conrad in his arms, skin to skin, stole Damian’s breath and he moved against him just to feel the shifting of the muscles in their arms and legs as they intertwined, the stiffness of their cocks sliding against one another, all the jostling softness underneath. It made him mad with desire and yet, at the same time, he felt an unaccustomed shyness. He ran his hands over the rugged contours of Conrad’s back, over his skin, smooth as polished ivory, he breathed deeply, inhaling his scent, and still he could not keep the thought from creeping into his head that it wasn’t a man he was bedding tonight at all, but a god.

Then Conrad claimed his mouth again and Damian’s thoughts spun out of control; it no longer mattered what or even who he was with. He lost track of time, he lost track of everything—all but the taste of Conrad’s lips on his, heady and exotic as spiced wine. That was something he didn’t think he ever *could* forget. That was one memory he was sure he would keep ’til his dying day.

One of Conrad's hands had wound itself in Damian's hair; now, he used his grip to tug Damian's head to the side. Damian gave into the pressure eagerly, wanting only to please. But the loss of Conrad's mouth on his, left him feeling bereft. He wanted it back. He needed it back. Normally, he would have caged his lover's face in his hands and *taken* it back, but not tonight. Tonight he could only give, he could only ache with need and tremble in breathless anticipation. His entire mind seemed focused on Conrad's mouth, following its path as it traveled slow and sure along the length of his neck.

"*Dios mio,*" Damian gasped as Conrad's teeth bit softly into his flesh. A flood of luscious heat rushed through him, followed shortly by a wave of cold terror as reality intruded. "No," he gasped again. "Don't do that. Stop." Pinned as he was to the bed, it was impossible to shove Conrad away but he thrashed and bucked as hard as he could in an attempt to free himself. An angry growl rumbled out of Conrad's throat as Damian continued to fight him—all to no avail. It did not even seem as though Conrad were making any particular effort to restrain him, yet Damian was held fast, immobile beneath him. "Please, *Señor,*" he begged at last, ceasing to struggle, resorting instead to words. "Don't do this, I beg of you. Have mercy."

At that, Conrad stilled. Slowly, he lifted his head. His eyes were shuttered, barely visible beneath heavy lids, his expression suspicious and grim. "What is it that's troubling you?"

Damian shook his head, feeling wretched. "What does it matter?" How could he have been such a fool? Dangerous as he'd known Conrad to be, still he'd thought himself safe with him. Now he would pay the price for his foolishness. "You knew I was not free to take a lover into my bed and yet, my neck— If you've marked me, as I fear you must have by now, how am I to explain it to the duke? Unless I can somehow convince him it was he who bit my neck in this fashion, while too drunk to recall it, my life is as good as ended. Is it still revenge you're after? If so, *felicidades*, you have likely achieved your goal."

Conrad looked startled. His gaze flicked curiously to Damian's neck, then moved back to his

face; one side of his mouth curling up in the smallest of smiles. “So. It seems the little bird can be frightened, after all? Calm yourself, my dear, I’ve left no marks upon you.”

“Truly?” Damian asked hopefully. “How is that possible?”

“You can check your reflection in the glass, if you doubt me,” Conrad suggested. Straightening up, he released Damian from his grasp. “But I give you my word on it.” He sat back on his heels between Damian’s spread legs and gazed at him thoughtfully. “I do not say it would not have given me great pleasure to mark you for myself, or that I had not thought of doing so, but I do not wish to cause you harm. In truth, it would pain me to see you come to grief.”

Damian rubbed his hands over his face, he felt positively weak with relief. “*Gracias.*”

Conrad sighed. “You should know, however, that you were not wrong in your initial assumption. I was, indeed, very angry with you earlier this evening. I came here tonight with every intention of exacting retribution—from you as well as from the duke. That’s why I went to the effort of drugging him, after all. I wanted to keep him out of the way while I occupied myself with you.”

“You—you drugged him?” Damian propped himself up on his elbows and stared at Conrad. “Is that why he sleeps so soundly? But...how? And, *why?* What would prompt you take such a risk?” If ever Damian had wondered whether Conrad was not in fact a peasant, this would have provided positive proof that he was not. Surely, no one of humble birth would ever dare do such a thing—it spelled death if he were to be found out. And, indeed, most men would have counted themselves honored to be insulted by so exalted a personage as a duke.

“How is of no importance.” Conrad waved the question away. “As for why—did I not just explain that to you? I wanted satisfaction. I wanted to make you both rue your words, to take what was his, make it my own and then flaunt my conquest in his face. I judged him to be the type who’d likely be quite jealous of such things. Would you not agree?”

“*Sí,*” Damian agreed, feeling faint. “Most assuredly.”

“Then, it is as I thought. It would have been a most effective plan.” Conrad shrugged.

“However, I have since reconsidered.” His eyes flickered over Damian’s face once again. “It seems to me now unnecessarily cruel to use you in so heartless a fashion, as well as a tragic waste of such a beautiful mouth. But, if I were ever to find out that you’ve merely been lying to me—”

“I swear to you I am not,” Damian insisted, shaken by the narrowness of his escape. “It was never my intention to insult you—indeed I had no idea you could even hear me. I only said what I did to distract his excellency, to keep him from guessing at my attraction for you. As well as to keep him from attempting to divert your attention away from me; I was sure he would wish to see it focused on himself instead.” Dropping his gaze, he confessed. “And I, too, am jealous of what I consider mine.”

At that, Conrad laughed. “I should thank you, then, for having saved me from *el Duque’s* attentions.” Taking Damian’s chin between his fingers, he forced him to look at him again. “But what is it you are calling yours? Surely you do not think to refer to me in this fashion?”

Damian swallowed hard. “I know it cannot be forever but, I thought, for a little while, perhaps. Could it not be so? *Te quiero para mí*—I want you for myself. I have from the very beginning.”

“And you shall have me,” Conrad promised, still holding his gaze. “But, Damian, let us be very clear about something. It is *you* who will belong to *me* after tonight, not the other way around. Is that understood?”

The words, the hint of wicked laughter in Conrad’s voice, the passion glimmering in his eyes left Damian weak with need. Swallowing was twice as difficult as before, words were nearly impossible. “*Sí, Señor;*” he managed at last. “I understand.”

“Good.” Conrad’s eyes gleamed gold once again. Releasing Damian’s chin, he grasped him by the back of his neck. He pulled him close, taking his lips in yet another mind-numbing kiss. Damian settled his hands at either side of Conrad’s waist, anchoring himself with the touch because, just like before, it seemed as though the room had started to spin.

Conrad pressed forward, slowly lowering Damian onto the bed. This time, when his mouth

sought Damian's throat, Damian held nothing back. He arched his neck, offering himself willingly, putting all his faith in Conrad's promise not to harm him.

It was foolish to give so much trust, so much control to a man about whom he knew so very little; a man who, by his own admission, had come here tonight seeking vengeance; one who would apparently stop at nothing in the pursuit of that or any other passion. But, how could he not trust him? And how could he not put everything he had at risk in order to be with him, for even a little while? Such a man was everything he'd ever hoped to find.

The pulling sensation at his throat grew stronger, sending another wave of heat spiraling throughout Damian's body. He was acutely aware of every slight sensation, from the thundering of his own pulse to the slick sheen of sweat that limned his skin in all the places where his body met Conrad's. When his growing arousal became too great to ignore, he slid a hand between them, awkwardly trying to grasp both their shafts at once, squeezing and stroking them, one against one another, with feverish need.

Growling in approval, Conrad canted his hips forward, pushing himself harder into Damian's hand. Damian tightened his grip in response, stroking faster, aided now by the leaking fluid that coated his fingers. He worked his other hand between their straining bodies as well, this time reaching for the tender sacs that held their balls. He tugged and twisted, juggling them in his hand. The scent of arousal grew so thick that Damian could almost taste it on the back of his tongue.

"Now, Conrad. Please," he murmured, stretching up to briefly test his teeth against the muscle of Conrad's shoulder. "Take me now." He was desperate for the feel of Conrad's hands on his body, for the heat of his shaft as it filled him over and over again, for the strength of his arms wrapped around him. It would feel so good—he knew that beyond any possible doubt. It would feel like nothing he had ever experienced.

A harsh gasp tore from Conrad's throat as he released Damian's neck. Rearing up on his knees, he loomed over Damian; his skin flushed and glistening, his eyes hooded, inscrutable, as he

gripped Damian's thighs and bent his legs back, spreading them wide.

"Is this what you want from me?" he asked, as he slid the tip of his shaft up and down along the crack of Damian's ass. He smiled mockingly at him, taunting him, waiting for his nod of assent before proceeding to press into him with torturous slowness...and then he stopped, waiting again.

Damian had never before been taken in this position, face to face. He found it unbearably intimate. "More," he murmured as he shut his eyes tight and wriggled impatiently. "Put it all the way in."

"First, open your eyes and tell me again, what this is about. Why have you watched me as you have these past weeks? Why do you give yourself to me tonight?"

Damian's eyes flew open. He stared at Conrad in alarm. Why all the questions? Was this a trick? A trap? Was he teasing? But, no. One look at Conrad's face told him this was nothing so frivolous.

Whether or not Conrad enjoyed, or even understood, the power he wielded over him, Damian could not say. But somehow he did not think Conrad was seeking to dominate him now out of cruelty, or even for what pleasure it might bring him. It seemed, rather, that he lived for it in the same way a lesser man might live for air or water. Conrad needed this, Damian realized with a profound sense of shock. And, by extension Conrad needed *him*.

"Tell me," Conrad prompted again.

"Because I am yours, *Señor* Quintano." It cost him nothing to say so. It was true anyway. *Conrad Quintano. Conrad Quintano. Con-rad Quin-ta-no.* It had probably been true all along. "All yours. Always yours."

Hunger blazed in Conrad's eyes and he began to move, filling Damian to perfection then withdrawing and slowly thrusting again. Moaning in pleasure, Damian took hold of his own shaft once more, pumping quickly, until Conrad covered his hand with his and forced him to stop.

"No," Damian all but whimpered. "Don't. I need—"

“Shh,” Conrad commanded softly. “I know what it is you need. And, if you will trust me, I will see to it you have all that and more.”

Damian gazed at him doubtfully. His cock throbbed and he could not keep his hand from tightening on it, squeezing harder. “Conrad...”

“Trust me, *caro*. Give yourself over to me. Let me have all of you.”

Reluctantly, Damian relinquished both his hold on his shaft and all his control. His heart pounded fiercely as Conrad’s hand closed over him, the muscles of his stomach rippled nervously; never in his life could he recall a time when he’d felt more vulnerable.

Again Conrad began to move, surging into Damian with the same slow, steady rhythm as before, while his hand kept time, gliding just as slowly over Damian’s flesh. Damian could barely breathe. His nervousness forgotten, he writhed on the bed, eyes closed, hands clawing at the covers. It was like being caught between anvil and hammer. Every stroke of Conrad’s cock, each touch of Conrad’s hand, reverberated through him, edging Damian closer and closer to climax. And he could do nothing to alter either the direction or the speed of his course.

“You are so beautiful right now,” Conrad murmured, his voice hoarse, breathless with his own need. “I could take you like this for hours.”

Surely, he doesn’t mean hours? Damian doubted either of them could stand even many more minutes of such sweet torture—certainly he could not. He forced his eyes open. The veins stood out starkly on Conrad’s neck. His muscles were taut as bowstrings; and in the savage lines of his face Damian could clearly read the effort he was making to deny himself, to delay his own pleasure in order to give everything he had to Damian.

Whatever Damian had been expecting from him tonight, whatever he’d been hoping for, it hadn’t been this and something broke apart inside him at that moment. He knew he could never go back to the life he’d been living, nor never again feel whole without this man.

“Conrad, *mi querido*,” he gasped, as he exploded in an ecstatic rush of heat and emotion.

“Don’t hold back. I’m yours, all yours. Take me now, take me forever.”

He spurted helplessly between Conrad’s fingers, felt his body convulse and tighten around Conrad’s shaft. With a muffled roar, Conrad abandoned his previous caution and plunged hard into him, again and again, causing Damian to climax a second time, even as he felt Conrad shudder and pulse within him, caught up in his own release.

Afterwards, too sated to move, Damian relaxed on the bed, eyes closed, as Conrad gingerly withdrew from him. He gasped softly when he felt the first soft touch of Conrad’s tongue roving over his belly, moving towards his chest, cleaning up after him. Eyes still closed, he smiled. “That feels nice.”

“I’ve no doubt it does,” Conrad replied, a hint of amusement warming his voice. “Though ‘nice’ is not, perhaps, exactly how I would have chosen to phrase it.” A moment later, he settled himself on the bed beside Damian. “So how does the little bird feel now?” he asked. “Has his ‘nice’ flight satisfied the urge to fly outside his cage?”

“For tonight.” Damian opened his eyes and smiled at Conrad. “But, might he not hope to take to the sky again on the morrow if, perchance, his excellency were to once again find himself so unaccountably exhausted?”

Conrad smiled back at him. “Indeed he might. And I’m sure no one would be in the least surprised were such a thing to occur. For, I believe it is not uncommon for these mysterious malaises to sometimes take weeks to resolve themselves.”

“*Bueno.*” Closing his eyes again, Damian nestled his head against Conrad’s shoulder. “It’s settled then.”

“I should leave you now,” Conrad said quietly after a moment had passed.

Damian nodded. It was for the best, if not at all what he wanted. “Until tomorrow then, my dearest sky.”

Conrad had been right, Damian decided as he drifted off to sleep; assumptions were indeed

very dangerous things. All along he'd assumed he could never feel so much at home as he did right here, in the *Alcazar*, and that he could never wish to be anywhere else in creation. Now he knew better. He still didn't doubt that *Sevilla* was the epicenter of the civilized world, but what did that matter to one such as he? A bird, after all, could only ever truly belong to the sky.

COMING SOON

OLD SINS, LONG SHADOWS

(Children of Night, Book 2)

Living forever is not as easy as you think and loving forever—that's damn near impossible for even the most committed couples.

Can an eighth century soldier really find love everlasting with a fifteenth century courtier? For four hundred years Conrad and Damian thought the answer was yes. Friends, lovers, life-mates, the two were inseparable until their sins tore them apart. Now, with old secrets and new dangers threatening everything they hold dear, can they finally put the past behind them, find the forgiveness they so desperately seek and rekindle the love that never quite died; or will the shadow that's fallen between them tear their family apart as well?

Old Sins, Long Shadows is the centuries-spanning, second installment in the Children of Night series, a very noir tale of trust, betrayal and vampire family values which all go to prove that the Beatles very nearly had it right. All you need *is* love...and an occasional side of blood.

EXCERPT:

Quintano House
San Francisco
Present Day

"Ah, there you are!" Damian swept into the kitchen, startling Conrad, who was seated at the table. "Good. I've been looking for you."

Conrad fumbled the PVC bag of blood he'd been about to bite into, nearly dropping it. He bit

back an oath and glanced up, scowling. Damian was dressed as though he'd just come from the gym, and all in black, like a damn cliché. His dark hair was pulled away from his face and the scent of exertion still clung to his skin. Conrad's fingers clenched more tightly around the bag in his hand. His heart pounded with a savage rhythm. Of all the people he could not bear to be this close to right now, with his hunger running rampant and his self-control at low ebb, Damian undoubtedly topped the list.

“What do you want?” he growled frustrated by his inability to tame the simmering need that even now was urging him to grab Damian by the throat, slam him against the nearest surface, bury his fangs in his neck and reclaim what was his. He buried his fangs in the bag instead, and felt his gut heave at the faint chemical taste.

It tasted wrong. It was always going to taste wrong. And it was *never* going to be enough to satisfy either his hunger or his thirst.

“I need to talk to you about something.” Seemingly oblivious to Conrad's foul mood, Damian pulled the chair out from the short end of the table and seated himself. Close enough to Conrad they could have clasped hands on the tabletop had either of them been so inclined. Close enough that they might speak together softly and not be overheard. Entirely too close.

“Very well, then. Talk.” Forcing himself not to recoil, Conrad swallowed another mouthful. Another tremor wracked his frame. He tried not to imagine the pitiful picture he knew he must present. He would survive it. His pride had taken worse hits than this, over the centuries.

