

Sweet Finish

A slightly silly, somewhat sweet holiday story.

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"Mila, what the hell is that?"

I didn't bother looking up as I carefully slid the flan onto the cake layer. Even thought about not replying, because trying to get a somewhat fragile layer of custard centered on a layer of light, spongy, liquid-soaked cake took some concentrating. You'd think Adam would've known better than to just barge into my kitchen without warning, but he was sounding peevisish and I really didn't need a fight today, so I went ahead and answered, deliberately keeping my voice mild. "Knock, knock and *hola, que tal*, to you too."

"Sorry."

It worked. In that one word he already sounded less with the peeved and more sheepish.

"I called a couple times, but you didn't pick up."

"Had my hands full with piroulines, couldn't answer." I tilted my head towards the rolled wafer cookies cooling on racks. "And if I wasn't answering, why'd you come over anyway?"

"Because you're supposed to be on your first vacation in four years and not working. I was hoping you weren't answering because you were out relaxing by the pool or maybe—" He paused in blatantly faux surprise, as if the idea had just occurred to him. "Doing something as revolutionary as taking a nap. But since this is you we're talking about—."

Peevisish to sheepish to accusatory in 3.2 seconds. Mood Swing Adam strikes again.
Fabulous.

"Sitting by a pool is boring and pointless. And I am relaxing." Grabbing two narrow spatulas, I carefully slid them underneath the flan and edged it over about an eighth of an inch. There. That was better. I looked up in time to find Adam leaning against the counter, crunching into one of the piroulines.

"Hey—only a couple. I need those."

Ignoring me and reaching for more of the rolled wafers, he grumbled, not quite *sotto voce*, "You're cooking."

Boy, just full of the genius observations today, wasn't he?

"Yes, Adam, how very astute of you. I'm cooking. Which relaxes me." I slid a second smaller flan into place on top of the first one, carefully pouring the residual caramel sauce over the top and allowing it to dribble down the sides of both flans and onto the cake.

"Cooking easy, comfort foods relaxes you—same as me," he pointed out. "What you're working on is a, pastry and b, doesn't look easy, which means you're doing something for work, which is counterintuitive to that whole relaxing thing you're supposed to be doing. On your *vacation*."

Bastard. The temptation to knock that smug, bossy expression off that pretty face would've been close to overwhelming if I didn't recognize the healthy dose of worry lurking in those dark green eyes.

"It's been four years, Mila," he repeated. And I *knew*, because I knew Adam, that he was holding back from mentioning that the reason for my vacation four years ago hadn't been so much vacation as getting away for a few days so my ex could move his things from the condo and file for divorce. Not so much with the relaxing, that little break had been.

"Adam, I know, but *de verdad*, I just wanted to give this another test run before I have to make it for a job. *After* my vacation," I added as I saw his dark brows starting to draw into a heavy line again.

Shaking his head, he blew out a long breath. "God help me, one of these days, Mila—"

"You've been saying that for how many years now?"

"Too many," he grumbled. "Okay, so *digame*. What are you creating?"

"Custom wedding cake. We're catering a New Year's Eve wedding and the celebrants wanted a cake that 'reflects the season, is culturally significant, and totally *us*.'" I finished my recitation in a deliberately earnest singsong, choking back a laugh as his mouth opened, then closed, then opened again.

"I know I'm gonna be sorry for asking, but *what*?"

Taking the bowl of ganache from where it had been resting on the counter, I fitted it into the mixer and started it running at a low speed, whipping it into a mousse-like consistency.

"His family's Nicaraguan, her family's Cuban, they're both Miami born and bred and are currently UM grad students who are *very* into their cultural identities."

"Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack." I added a splash of Cointreau to the ganache—just enough to help loosen the mixture a little more as well as to provide contrast to the dark chocolate and the hint of coconut milk I'd added to the already added.

"God save us from idealistic grad students."

I felt him coming up behind me, his cheek grazing my hair as he leaned in and peered over my shoulder. "You know, this is why I work in a restaurant kitchen and not catering. No one tells me what to do or how to do it."

As I stopped the mixer, his arm predictably wormed its way between my waist and arm, finger extended. Slapping his hand, I picked up a spoon. "Not true." I scooped out a healthy blob and turned, pushing at his chest to gain enough space to reach up and give him a taste.

"You have to answer to whoever owns the restaurant."

"Good point, but I still don't have to make culturally signi..." His protest dribbled away as the chocolate took effect and a blissful expression took over his face, the corners of his mouth turning up and his eyes closing briefly before they opened again, a glazed, happy light in the olive depths. God, but I loved putting that look on his face. Taking the spoon from me, he turned it so he could feed me the little bit he'd left behind. *Mmm...* first the dark intensity of the chocolate, spiked through with a bright burst of orange, tempered by the sweet, mellow coconut. I felt the corners of my own mouth turning up and my eyes closing as he laughed, the sound vibrating through the hand he had resting on my waist.

"You did good, *m'ija*."

Moment of bliss over, I mentally revisited the experience, categorizing the strength of each individual flavor. "Enough Cointreau?"

He nodded and set the spoon aside, stooping to extract a bottle from my small undercounter wine cooler. "Yeah. Any more and I think the alcohol would threaten to overwhelm. If you want more orange, put in a couple of drops of oil. Maybe candied orange peel?"

Shaking my head, I reached for a pastry bag already fitted with the proper tip and began filling it with the whipped chocolate. "Wasted for what I'm doing with this. Although maybe I'll use some as garnish."

"Okay, so what are you doing, exactly?" He put a filled wine glass on the counter beside me before taking a seat at the island. "I'm guessing, based on what you've said, the base is a *tres leches*?"

"You guess right, Kemo," I replied, taking a sip from my glass, idly noting what a nice light finish the Gwerztraminer provided for the dark chocolate. I smiled at Adam as I took another sip to which he raised his glass and nodded. He'd always been better with the wine pairings than me but wasn't obnoxious about it, thank God. "So there's our bow to the Nicaraguan side of the cultural experience."

"Provided you don't have a fight break out over the cake's provenance," he countered with a wicked grin.

"Hey, the majority of my research points to it being of Nicaraguan origin—or at the very least, equal to Mexican. That's my story and I'm stickin' to it." I shrugged as I started to fill the piroulines with the ganache. "Then the flan for the Cuban side, natch. I'm going to put a light whipped cream around the sides and top of the cake, but allow the flan to stand alone."

"And those?" He nodded at the tray of piroulines.

"Ringing the outside of the cake layer." I pursed my lips. "I'm trying to decide if I want to drizzle a *cajeta* over the top of everything."

"*Another* caramel sauce? When the flan already has one?" Adam snorted. "You trying to kill these people, Mila?"

"It's a Latin wedding. At the holidays. Excess all around. Bet you a steak dinner this exercise in artery clogging winds up being the most reserved element of the whole thing."

"Filet or strip?"

"Strip—and if I win, you have to make it Kobe beef." I was serious about my meat, thank you, especially when Adam was an artist at grilling the perfect steak. Setting the pastry bag aside, I brought the tray of filled wafer cookies and my wine over to the island. "Then I was thinking to finish off the presentation, perhaps a spun sugar cage?"

"No way—too prison-like, don't you think?" The expression on his face was half teasing, half serious. "Nicaraguan, Cuban... what do you think the likelihood is for someone being related to or at least knowing a political prisoner or two?"

"Oh crap, I hadn't even thought of that. You really think that's possible?" Visions of sparkling freeform amber sugar sculptures disappeared in a poof of political turmoil.

"Better safe than sorry, don't you think?"

"Crap."

"So, we've covered the culturally significant aspects—how are you working in reflecting the season? Sparklers stuck in the piroulines for New Year's Eve? Maybe some of your assistants shooting pistols off at midnight?"

"Hmm..." I pretended to consider his suggestions just long enough for that familiar look of horror to cross his face. Good to keep the boy on his toes. "Oh come on," I finally relented. "My desserts don't need to resort to pistol shots to draw attention to them."

"The sparklers?" he asked suspiciously.

"Maybe... maybe..." Again, the horror crossed his face, his eyes opening so wide, a full ring of white was visible around the dark green irises while I leaned against the island's marble top, giggling helplessly.

"Okay, okay, I give—I'm sorry. I do have an idea, but at this point, I'm not sure you want to know."

He shot me the Evil Eye he'd learned from my mother years ago. "Oh, try me," he muttered before taking a healthy sip of wine, as if to brace himself.

"Aside from the fact that it's New Year's Eve, the big day happens to fall on the sixth day of Christmas."

This was going to be good. I perched on a stool and watched the range of expressions cross his face: confusion gave way to slow realization, followed by the subtle bobbing of his head and the slight movement of his lips as he went through the litany of days.

"*Oye, digame*—how in hell are you going to incorporate six geese a'laying?"

"Not with compromising positions."

"Did I *say* anything?"

"Did you have to? I've known you long enough to know your brain knows every shortcut to the gutter."

"Damn, *m'ija*, that's cold."

"Truth hurts, baby." I slid from the stool and went to the refrigerator retrieving a covered tray. After placing it on the island, I crossed to one of the perimeter counters and picked up another tray, plus the rest of the supplies I already had set out and returned to the island. While I worked, Adam didn't say anything, just sat back and watched until I was done with the first one.

"What do you think?"

I held up the figure I'd fashioned from pieces of puff pastry, a graceful neck springing from a full body and leading to a tiny head onto which I'd painted a dark beak and eyes with melted chocolate. After a moment's consideration, I dipped my ultra thin paintbrush into the edible liquid gold and very lightly brushed a few more graceful, wispy lines along the body and each pastry wing.

"Mila, I hate to break it to you, *mi vida*, but that's a swan."

I smiled and very carefully set the perfect little bird onto the waves of whipped cream covering the *tres leches*. "Swans, geese, close enough. By the time this bad boy gets rolled out, these people will probably be so tanked they won't be able to tell grandmas from girlfriends."

He sighed. "You're counting on an awful lot of drinking going on."

"I repeat—"

"Yeah, yeah, Latin wedding, holidays, blah, blah, blah." Leaning over, he peered into the swan's cavity. "What'd you use for the filling? It looks like—"

"Yeah, it is." Heh. This I was proud of. "I made another flan, chilled it, cut miniature rounds, then tucked them into the cavity."

Adam's head lifted, a look of awe on his face. "That's brilliant."

Blowing on my fingernails, I buffed them across the front of my red apron, then started working on another swan.

"It's a beautiful cake, Mila."

"Thanks." With careful, deft strokes, I painted the eyes and beak, then gently pressed the neck into the body, securing it with another dollop of chocolate.

"Why do you do this to yourself?" His voice was soft. "You don't like weddings."

I shrugged as much as I was able while painting the wings. "I like weddings just fine, Adam. As a pastry chef, I can't afford to not like weddings. Too much of my livelihood depends on fulfilling someone else's dream." Attach the wings to the body and *voilà* another swan. After finding just the perfect wave of whipped cream on which to perch the little beast, I started in on another.

"I just don't believe in this half-assed concept of one true love and soulmates that most people seem to associate with marriage. It's an illusion." Glancing up at the cake I admitted, "I guess I could be accused of perpetuating the myth as well, but if I don't, someone else will and why should they reap the financial benefits simply because I'm a cynic?"

"Just because *he* burned you—"

Couldn't help but smile. To this day, Adam couldn't say my ex's name out loud. Claimed it gave him heartburn. "It has nothing to do with Daniel." Our divorce may have hurt, but it hadn't destroyed any romantic illusions. Not really. "I loved him, thought we were compatible for the long run, turned out we weren't, end of story."

I glanced up in time to see him shove a hand through his hair, pushing it off his face. Another sign we were headed back to Peevish Adam. "No. *Not* end of story. Why won't you believe in at least the possibility, Mila?" He asked the question, just like he did every time we had this discussion, and like every time we had this discussion, he sounded beyond frustrated. And every time we had this discussion, I'd put him off with some b.s. excuse or by simply not saying anything, letting him believe it *was* because of Daniel. But I don't know—maybe it was the time of year, maybe it was the wine I was drinking on an empty stomach, but it seemed like as good a time as any to clue him into the *real* reason.

"Because, *mi querido amigo*, of you."

"*Me?*"

"Come on, Adam, look where your blind faith in the concept of soulmates has landed you."

He straightened so fast, the teak stool squeaked in protest. "Whaddaya mean?"

I regarded him across the coffee-colored expanse of marble between us, fighting back a smile. For all his vast experience, he was *such* an innocent. "Adam, *mi amor*, we've known each other since the day your varsity football playing ass mistakenly landed in home ec junior year. And in all those years I've watched as the endless search for your perfect soulmate has resulted in one ex-wife and a string of ex-lovers, each of whom you were convinced was the One, none of whom actually *was*, and the last of which was your *sous* chef, you moron, who I had to protect you from last summer because she was coming after you with your own Wüsthof fillet knife, threatening to turn you from a rooster to a hen."

"Can I help it if I finally realized it wasn't going to work long term?" He cringed and crossed his legs. "And you know, I'm not sure I ever said thanks for the save."

I bent my head further over the swan I was working on. "You never had to, fool, although God knows I should've left you to her tender mercies for being dumb enough to shit where you eat. But no matter how much of a *bobo* you are, I'll always have your back. It's what we do for each other except I do it more often for you than you do for me because of this ridiculous, never ending search for true love."

Never mind how many times it resulted in my putting him up for at least a week while he recovered, making his favorite comfort foods and letting him rest his head in my lap as he nursed a glass of the good single malt I kept just for him. Listening to him bitch and moan *again* over failing to find the One. *Again*. "My best friend, the incurable romantic." The blockhead. "When are you going to figure it out for the myth it is?"

"It's not a myth," he muttered stubbornly. "I am absolutely convinced that each person has their perfect match out there. So I've struck out some, but at least I still have faith."

"You can have faith for both of us, *m'ijo*." I placed the sixth swan and surveyed the finished product. Okay, *almost* finished product. It was still missing... something.

"Oh, I know what it needs." I reached down to the shelf beneath the island's surface and brought out a stack of sealed containers. "I've been playing around with these—I'll improve them, obviously, for the finished product, but just to get the idea..." I muttered as I opened the containers and selected several items. A couple of minutes later, I stepped back—*now* it was finished.

"What do you think?" Graduated clusters of creamy white orange blossoms with gold-tipped stamens and dramatic red poinsettias cascaded down from the top of the flans and across the *tres leches*, with bunches of shiny dark red berries and glossy holly interspersed throughout. With the six swans/geese placidly clustered together on the opposite side of the gold and white confection, it gave the feel of a tropical winter wonderland.

"Or maybe palm fronds and tropical fruits? I can make some from marzipan, airbrush them and dust them with crystallized sugar—"

All of a sudden, Adam was behind me, one hand clamped over my mouth, shutting me up mid-stress. "Don't you dare change a single thing. It's the most remarkable wedding cake I've ever seen and these flaky, idealistic grad students are going to be blessed to have such a sweet beginning to their lives. It's beautiful," he said, taking one of my sugary, chocolate and gold stained hands in his and lifting it.

"Now tell me again who's the romantic around here?" he whispered right in my ear before pressing a kiss to my palm.

I blinked in shock. "I never said I *wasn't*. I just—"

"What are you going to do with this one?" he broke in before I could step any further in it. In one smooth move he was back on his stool, topping off our wineglasses—thank God.

Raising the chilled glass, I pressed it against my cheek before taking a careful sip. Because guzzling was way too unladylike, even for me. "I, uh... I guess I'll take it over to my parents' for dinner, sans the floral decorations and swans. That way Mami and Abuelita will think it's just one of my crazy experiments and not a sample wedding cake. Because I really can't take a lecture from them right now."

"Been getting on your case again?"

My eyes about rolled out of my head. "Where've you been for the last twenty years? When *haven't* they been getting on my case? First it was because I wasn't married, then I was married, but not popping out *angelitos* within nine months of the wedding, then it was because I wasn't married anymore and by the way, have I heard that Daniel remarried and his wife just had their second baby? Now, lately, it's been them telling me how many candles they light so I don't wind up a lonely, dried up old maid, but if worst comes to worst, at least they'll have me to take care of them in *their* old age because God forbid I should ever, *ever* consider dumping them in some old folks' home, they'd be the shame of all their friends whose children gratefully invite them into their homes to live out their last days in the warm bosom of *la familia* and—."

"Okay, enough—" Cringing, he held a hand up while I caught my breath. "I get it. Much to my dismay." His voice remained casual as he asked, "You want me to come with—provide some distraction?"

I started clearing off the island, carrying tools and supplies to the sink. "You don't have a date?"

Glancing over my shoulder, I could see him staring at the cake. "This time of year is slow for dating." He drained his wine then gathered up more of the left-behind tools and utensils. "People are either already hooked up and the ones who aren't are kind of pathetic about it."

Okay, I could see that. "Sure, come along. It's been a while since they got the chance to try to marry you off again. Consider it payment for saving you from castration."

**

New Year's Eve

He was right, damn him. I was a romantic. There—I said it. Maybe not on the level he was, but from my secluded vantage point, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of wistfulness and the same sort of warm gushiness that had me reaching for the Kleenex every single time I watched *Love Actually* or *Sense and Sensibility*. My idealistic grad students were nothing short of glowing in the light from thousands of tiny votive candles positioned on every flat surface and the nets of flickering white lights suspended from the ceiling and strung in the dozens of potted palms scattered throughout the vast, high-ceilinged room.

A spectacular starlit tropical winter wonderland. My vision for the cake had wound up being the perfect fit. At least I was good at that.

I watched as, hands together on the engraved silver and crystal knife, they cut into the cake, feeding each other small bites, the bride giggling as her new husband put a small blob of whipped cream on the end of her nose and kissed it off.

Personally, I could've done without the constant "I love you, baby, no, I love *you*, baby, love you more, baby, no, I love *you* more, baby," that seemed to be the only thing they were capable of saying to each other, but hey, it *was* their wedding day.

As soon as they were done with the ceremonial cutting and the pictures that every relative insisted on taking, I stepped forward from my discreet place against the wall and collected the cake to take it back to so I could return it to the kitchen and have it cut into servings. My assistants were already busy slicing the plainer *tres leches* cakes and flans I'd prepared for anyone who didn't want to go into a complete diabetic coma while other members of the staff cut the holiday *turrones*, arranged platters of grapes, cut in bunches of twelve for the New Year's countdown, and prepared trays of Cuban coffee, the rich, strong aroma filling the kitchen and practically giving me a contact high.

"You need help with that?"

I whirled, long-bladed knife in hand, barely missing disemboweling him. "*Madre santisima*, Adam Cardenas! You *know* better than to sneak up on me when I've got a knife in my hand. You'd lose your mind if I did that to you in your kitchen."

"I know, I'm sorry, I know—" He held up his hands in surrender. "I still have the scar from the last time."

"You'd think the twenty-four stitches would've taught you," I grumbled. "What are you doing here anyway?"

And why'd he look so nice? Guess he'd found himself a holiday hookup, after all. Because why else would he be in his favorite black dress slacks and the dark green dress shirt I'd bought him for his birthday, that matched his eyes perfectly. He *would* wear that for a hookup, the son of a bitch. Even had a fresh haircut, his black hair shorter than it'd been in years, layered

all over so that it didn't fall in his face anymore and finished with some sort of product that left it glossy but not stiff looking.

All of a sudden, I felt like a total scrunge, even though my chef's whites were spotless and my hair was bound back in a tight French braid, the only hair style I could successfully create on my own. Still though, I'd been in and out of a hot kitchen for over six hours, leaving me with wisps of hair flying around my face, not wearing a lick of makeup, and I probably smelled like garlic while he smelled... wonderful. All light and citrusy.

Great.

"How's it going?" he asked, not answering my question. Just as well. It wasn't like I didn't already know the answer and I *really* didn't want to hear about the latest conquest. He was probably just killing time until he went to pick her up so they could ring in the new year and knowing Adam, their new future together.

Nope. Didn't want to hear a *word*. Besides, I'd hear plenty once they broke up. Unless this time actually was the One. God forbid.

"Mila?"

I gave myself a mental slap upside the head and tried to remember what he'd asked. Oh, yeah— "Well, the DJ's played *Feliz Navidad* about six times so far, with the singing getting exponentially louder each time, but the Macarena and the Electric Slide only once each. Given the choice, I'll take Feliciano with an increasingly drunk chorus over bad dance tracks any day. Their first dance was a pleasant surprise—Alejandro Sanz and Lena's *Tu Corazón*, but they also dragged out the drippy schlock that is *Endless Love*. At least it was the Mariah and Luther version, not the Diana and Lionel. Let's see, what else—" I tapped my finger against my lips, smiling as his eyes widened. God, he was easy.

"Two fights have broken out, one between cousins from each family and one between a couple of bridesmaids over one of the groomsmen, complete with hair pulling. The mothers have been comparing the naked baby pictures of each of their darlings that they insisted on blowing up and perching on easels at the entrance to the ballroom and most of the men over the age of fifty have retreated to the terrace where they can smoke and argue whose country's politics suck more and what the Marlins chances are for next season."

I grinned as he dropped onto a nearby stool, laughing uncontrollably. "In other words," he finally managed to gasp, "it's everything you expected it to be."

"Pretty much." Snagging two *tacitos* of the Cuban coffee from one of the trays, I set one in front of him. "So, you never answered—what brings you here? You hardly ever come to my gigs."

Why did I ask? Didn't I just get through insisting I didn't want to know? And just like that, his entire demeanor changed—going oddly serious as he still didn't answer. Staring down into the dark coffee, he tossed it back in one quick swallow and set the small cup on the counter with a definitive *thump*.

"I still believe in soulmates, Mila."

Oh *God*. Here we went again.

"I know." I turned back to the cake, blinking hard as I picked up my knife. "And you know, I'm not going to try to convince you otherwise, because it's just a lost cause."

I felt warmth and a gentle pressure against my back. "Can I help with that?" he asked again, but this time his words were soft as his hand came to rest right over my suddenly trembling one. Looking at his larger hand curved around mine, I flashed on my giddy little newlyweds and how they'd looked in this same pose just a few minutes ago.

A lifetime ago, it seemed, because my world? Kind of felt like it was tilting sideways and everything I thought I knew was starting to completely skew.

"You've been wrong, all this time, you know." His breath was a gentle caress against my ear.

"About?"

"You aren't a cynic and you *are* a romantic. A full-blown, hearts and flowers romantic."

"Yeah, I know."

"You've just channeled all that passion and feeling into your desserts."

"Yeah, I know." It was pretty much all I was capable of saying with him pressed up against me, shoulders to thighs, his arm around me as he held my right hand steady on the knife.

"And... you were right, too."

"About?" Back to my original answer—good thing because it was only one word, which was even easier.

"I have been an idiot about this whole soulmate business. It wasn't until you said that you didn't believe in them because of me, that I realized the reason I kept searching in all the wrong places was because when it didn't work, I always came *back* to the same place. I always came back to you."

"Yeah, I know."

"How long, Mila?"

I lifted a shoulder, feeling it rub against his chest. "I have no idea, Adam. I just know you kept insisting that soulmates weren't only partners and lovers, but best friends, and I kept waiting for you to make the connection, you idiot. Then when you didn't, over and over, it

seemed like the whole thing was a crock. Because, really... if it *was* true, then wouldn't you—" My voice cracked on the last few words. I'd held this in for *so* long.

His hand tightened over mine. "Why didn't you ever say anything? Make a move or hit me over the head with a maple cutting block or something?"

I sniffled and rubbed at the corners of my eyes with my free arm, the sleeve of my whites rough against my skin, grounding me in something real. Because what I thought might be happening couldn't possibly be real, could it? "I couldn't risk it. What if we were both wrong? I didn't want to lose what I did have of you."

"You haven't been able to lose me through twenty years, two marriages, and way too many mistakes on my part. Forget it, Mila—we're a done deal."

He took my left hand in his, sliding something cool and smooth over the ring finger, before lifting it and kissing first the back, then turning it over and kissing the palm. Just like he had that day back in my kitchen. Only then did he bring our joined hands back around, opening his so I could see.

Three bands—one of pink gold, one of yellow gold, crossing over each other, the third, white, paved with dozens of small diamonds, wrapping around the other two, holding them close in an eternal embrace. Carefully, I moved my hand in his, the tiny, brilliant diamonds sparkling in the bright kitchen lights.

"Milagros Acevedo, you're my best friend, my partner, my rock—my soulmate in every way that counts. I'm done being stupid and I'm done searching. Be mine?"

I was still gripping the knife's handle with my right hand, so tight, my fingers were starting to go numb. Words—all these things I wanted to say—remained trapped in my throat along with my breath and my heartbeat. Long seconds ticked by as I lifted my head from our

joined hands to discover that the entire kitchen had come to a standstill, everyone stuck in position like it was a freeze-frame. It was so uncharacteristically still, I imagined I could hear my own heartbeat. I *knew* I could feel his, hitting his chest and vibrating against my back, getting faster with each passing moment.

"Mila, please. I know it's a risk but it's the new year—time for a new beginning. Please?" Now it was his hands that were shaking and that's when I realized he didn't know. Didn't understand— But I still couldn't talk. I couldn't do anything other than tilt my head back, reach back with my free hand and pull his head down.

Oh... holy *cow*, could Adam kiss. Had he always been able to kiss like this? If so, what the hell had I been thinking? My knife clattered to the floor as I turned completely in his arms and reached up to grab onto the front of his shirt. Faintly, I registered the sounds of applause and laughter and wolf whistles and a few calls of *j'aproveche!*

Finally, we came up for air, foreheads together as we breathed deep.

"So does this mean you're finally willing to give the concept of soulmates a chance?"

The expression in those dark green eyes was hopeful—and more than a little nervous.

"God, Adam, you are such a dolt."

His eyes widened. "Why?"

"You still don't get it, do you?" I slid my hands up his chest, his neck and to his face, cupping it in my palms. "I've always been willing to give the concept a chance—but only for you."

"Only for me."

"Yeah."

He shook his head, an uncharacteristic red staining his high cheekbones. "God, I really am a dolt."

"Yeah, but you're my dolt."

His hands covered mine, fingers stroking the ring he'd given me. "Always."