

Chapter 1

It Could Have Been Worse

Three large men blocked the door to the club as I approached with my lady. We were looking forward to an evening of Latin dancing and pleasant conversation. I found this club by searching the internet. The location wasn't the best in town, but the website said that the band kept the crowd jumping like water drops on a hot griddle. I liked the sound of that. I wanted to see for myself.

At UCLA, I had taken a dance class to meet the physical education requirement. With my sense of rhythm and timing, the Latin dances were very appealing. I learned that the willingness to unabashedly shake your hips was an important prerequisite for the rumba, the mambo, the cha-cha and the samba. Although I lacked any Latin heritage, I had an uncanny ability to rotate my hips like a Kitchen-Aid mixer.

So here we were, me and the beautiful Rosa, nearing the ominous-looking gorillas at the door. She was the manager at the Westside Carwash. I was in the habit of taking my car there when my finger could write my initials in the dust on the fender. Rosa had an engaging smile and eyes that would persuade any man to upgrade from the basic wash to at least the Silver Spray and Wax or maybe even to the Gold.

She was impressed by my better-than-average command of her native tongue. I started with, "Me llamo Kenny". I knew that my efforts in language lab during my freshman year in college would pay off some day. "Dónde está la

parada de autobus? (where is the bus stop?)” was a snap for me. After a year of two-hour stints every week in the lab, I could roll my r’s like a Castilian cavalier. I knew that I didn’t sound like a native speaker to Rosa, but she appreciated the effort. There’s something about sharing the common bond of language that draws people closer. I loved the moments when she spoke to me in her rapid Spanish staccato, as though I would understand everything she said.

Rosa was surprised when I asked her to go dancing. After all, I was an intermittent customer at the car wash. When I joked with her at the cash register, she encouraged my attention. I mentioned that I liked to dance the rumba.

“Do you like to dance? I asked.”

“Of course. What lady doesn’t like to dance?”

So here we were on La Cienega Boulevard walking toward the club. I was looking forward to an evening of hearing syncopated Latin rhythms. I learned that the enjoyment of dancing did not depend on the existence of a romantic relationship. It was unlikely that an evening with Rosa would develop into anything more. But if two people like to dance, that is pleasure enough.

The moment of truth arrived. I looked at one of the muscle-bound pillars guarding the entrance to the club and smiled my most engaging smile.

“Two for dancing please.”

“You’re not on the list,” he growled, then dismissed me as his gaze turned to Rosa’s red dress. How could you not notice? The hem passed across

her mid thigh. The slope of her lovely breasts rose above the halter top decorated with rhinestones.

“Do you know who this lady is, my good man?” I said in my most baritone voice, re-engaging with the Hulk.

“No, I don’t know who she is.”

“Well, I’ll tell you if you can look at me for a minute. Do you know who Tito Puente and Celia Cruz are?”

“Sure, what about it?”

“This beautiful young thing is the adopted granddaughter of Tito and Celia. Celia and Tito were on tour in Barcelona. They were walking to a restaurant for lunch. A gypsy woman was holding a baby in her arms. The gypsy stopped them in the street and asked if Celia would hold the baby while she went to the nearby grocery store for some milk. Tito gave her ten pesos to help out. The gypsy never returned for the baby.”

Now all three doormen were leaning in, attentive to the tale.

The second doorman, bending forward, asked, “What happened next?”

“Celia and Tito took the baby to lunch with them. Celia asked the waiter to bring a glass of warm milk and a rubber glove. As the waiter brought her the items, Celia reached up to her hat and pulled out a hat pin with a big pearl on top. Then she poured the milk into the glove, tied off the opening and made a small prick in the end of the index finger. She gently fed the baby and sang a Cuban rumba tune. The baby started moving her feet to the beat of the song. Tito watched with a wide grin.”

“This is an amazing story! I’m a big fan of both of them,” the third doorman said.

“You know that Celia and Tito teamed up occasionally for performances, but they each had a spouse and their own children. Their children were grown and married but had not yet given either of them grandchildren. Celia and Tito decided that, since they both enjoyed the baby so much and, since they met the child at the same time, they both would adopt her as their joint granddaughter.”

“They would each take their turn with her, bringing the baby on the road to concerts and dance halls. The infant loved the music and the dancing. She became a marvelous dancer. That baby is now the beautiful Rosa who you see standing before you today.”

A look of disbelief and amazement crossed the doormen’s faces.

“Wouldn’t it be a shame if this wonderful dancer, the granddaughter of Tito Puente and Celia Cruz, could not dance the rumba on the floor of your club? As a tribute to their memory, I think all of you should escort us to the finest table in the house, order us a bottle of champagne and we’ll drink a toast to the memories of Celia and Tito.”

Breaking into a knowing smile, the leader of the doormen leaned closer to me. “You all right, man. I like your style.” Then his beefy hand descended to make contact with my up-turned palm. The doors opened wide and in we went.

We sat at our table watching the waiter deliver the champagne.

“Kenny, why did you tell those guys that I was the granddaughter of Tito Puente and Celia Cruz? I like to dance, but maybe I’m not that good.”

“Well, if those guys are watching us dance, it would be a good idea for you to put on the best show you can and smile a lot.”

“I’ll try,” she said.

“If I had to fight with them, who knows, they might have been injured and embarrassed in front of their Boss. My story saved them the pain. Besides, they enjoyed themselves enough to be kind and generous to us. Everyone’s happy.”

Rosa looked at me with a grin.

“I don’t know who you are, except for your first name. We know each other from the car wash, but I really don’t know you. Tell me.”

“I will be happy to tell you, mi querida; but first, let’s dance.”

We walked to the dance floor. The band began their version of *Tequila* with conga drum and maracas accenting the beat. I noticed that Rosa’s backfield was already in motion. I activated my Kitchen-Aid hips. We were off and running.