



CHAPTER ONE



*W*hile I was giving birth to Lucy, my husband, Alessandro, was lying in bed with my sister, Isabel.

I spent three weeks recovering after Lucy's birth. I slept, ate, fed my child, combed my hair and looked at my dark circles in the mirror while lying on my wide mahogany bed. Like my mother, Aura, I had always looked forward to watching the world from my mattress, but three weeks were long enough. I wanted to join Isabel, Alessandro and Julio in the downstairs world of meals and mundane conversation. Yet on this sunny morning in May no one came to call on me.

I sat on the bed as my daughter slept in the crib next to it. The linen sheets were rumpled under my legs, my nightgown stained with evening sweat. I turned my attention to the bowl of water and the sponge the maid had laid out for me, added drops of my cologne to the water and sponged my skin until I was certain I had transformed my salty sweat odor into the rose fragrance that later made me famous all over Paipa. I then discarded my cotton nightgown for a silk one.

After brushing my long hair I gathered it as best I could, looked in the mirror, pinched my cheeks and tried to get up. The toilette ritual had exhausted me. It was the first time I conducted it alone and I felt sorry I had sent the maid away. After two attempts I sat down and decided to rest. I dozed off and was awakened by footsteps.

“What is it?” I asked Mariela.

“I was wondering if I should start cooking lunch.”

“I thought you had already started.”

“Doña Isabel never returned from the market this morning.”

“She probably went to see the seamstress with the new material I gave her.”

“I don’t know, Madam Inés, it’s getting late.” Mariela’s voice sounded strained. “I have enough ingredients to make soup. Should I start? You must be hungry.”

“Go ahead.”

“Would you like some juice?”

“What fruits do we have?”

“Oranges.”

“That’s fine. Is Alessandro downstairs?”

“I haven’t seen him since dinner.”

“Did he sleep in the study?”

“The door is locked.”

“Get started on the soup. I’ll be going down for lunch. Call me when it’s ready.”

The maid hesitated at the door. “Madam, are you sure you are strong enough to make it down the stairs?”

“I’ll call you if I need help. Now go get my juice.”

I sat on the bed and glanced over at my daughter snugly wrapped and sleeping in her crib. Then I reclined back on my pillows and fell asleep. Half an hour later the maid's footsteps awakened me, and I had enough time to finish my juice before the baby cried for food.