

Madam Strange, Teller of the Future
By R. A. Conti

Book 5 - Yoli

Chapter 22

Bianca's phone rang in the middle of a session with a client. *Damn! I thought I put that thing on mute. I'm getting careless*, she thought. She hoped the interruption wouldn't ruin the session. "Sorry about that," she apologized.

The client seemed unperturbed. "It's okay. It happens to me all the time. Now, you were saying?"

"I see rosy times ahead for you, but nothing extraordinary. No new love affairs-."

"Well, *that's* good!" the woman replied, grinning. "My *husband* will be relieved."

Bianca smiled. "No babies, or winning the lottery, or new cars. Just contentment. I hope you're not disappointed."

"Heck, no. That's good news after what I've been through. I could use some normalcy." Bianca didn't know how she knew this woman needed the predictions she offered but felt pleased she was right.

Most customers didn't want to hear that things would be normal. They came because their lives were mundane. They hoped for prophecies of something extraordinary in the future. Bianca often had to hint at stuff without giving details just to convince them they were getting their money's worth. They usually left satisfied with her readings.

This woman seemed pleased, however she wasn't ready to leave yet. Bianca wondered what else she wanted. Maybe this stranger hadn't come for a reading at all. She was never sure how the people who needed her real help found her.

They sat in silence. Bianca waited. The woman didn't say anything.

Bianca decided to nudge the woman. "Was there something *else*?" she asked.

"Oh, sorry. I guess you have other customers. I shouldn't take up any more of your time."

"My time is yours," Bianca replied. "Other customers can wait."

"That's *very* kind of you."

It was Bianca's cue. "So, talk to me," she said. "What's going on?"

The woman sighed. "It started out nice but things went downhill really fast," she began.

"Um, before you begin, why don't you tell me your name?"

"Yolanda. My friends call me Yoli."

"It's my pleasure to meet you, Yoli," Bianca replied as warmly as she could. She needed to shift from detached fortune-teller to sympathetic confidante. "What things are you referring to?"

"Everything," she whispered, looking down. "Everything." She fell silent again. Bianca waited for details. Yoli remained quiet.

“This may come as a surprise to you, but I’m a fortune-teller, not a mind reader.”

Yoli smiled. “Of course. Let’s see. Where do I begin?”

“I find it’s best to begin at the beginning. Stories tend to make more sense that way.”

Yoli nodded. She seemed embarrassed to go on. “It’s not easy,” she admitted.

“It never is. Try, anyway. Take your time. I can wait.” *But not too much longer*, Bianca thought.

“My husband doesn’t know anything about any of this.”

Bianca smiled to encourage Yoli to be frank. “Don’t worry, Yoli, I won’t tell him,” she said. “Everything you say here is confidential.” Yoli nodded.

“I was fourteen and Dave was seventeen. He was a guitarist in a band. It was the best band I ever heard in my life. What did I know about bands at that age? Pretty much nothing. But that’s not important.”

“It wasn’t the band that attracted you, was it?” Bianca interrupted. Yoli shook her head. “It was the guitarist.” Yoli nodded sheepishly. Bianca nodded, too. “Been there. Please go on.”

“Yeah, but I bet you didn’t go there the way *I* did. You see, I fell in love with Dave at the first song I heard him play. I don’t even remember what it was. I don’t think the band ever recorded it. But the way he played! The way he strummed those strings and moved his fingers on the frets... well, I wanted him to move his fingers that same way on *me*. It happened that fast.”

“To you and probably to thousands of other girls.”

“Yeah, but what happened afterward probably *didn’t* happen to other girls.”

“Usually, the band members didn’t want anything more than one night stands from their female fans.”

“Dave wanted more. A *lot* more. I figured that because I was fourteen and he was seventeen he wouldn’t even talk to me let alone be *interested* in me. He told me later that he’d noticed me in the crowd and couldn’t take his eyes off me. To this day I don’t know why.”

“I think I know. You’re gorgeous, Yoli. You were probably gorgeous back then.”

“No, I was clumsy, gawky, skinny, and mostly clueless.”

“But *not* to him, obviously” Bianca commented.

Yoli nodded. “He couldn’t believe that I was only fourteen. He introduced me as his ‘girlfriend that lost her birth certificate and was actually much older than she claimed.’ It was our little joke.”

“So... how long did it last?”

“A couple of years. Long enough that we got to know each other pretty well. Of course, there wasn’t much to know because we were so young. Our lives were just beginning.”

“What changed?”

“I got pregnant.” Bianca nodded. *That’s when it usually changes*, she thought. *Poor girl.* Then Yoli added something Bianca had never heard before.

“He was ecstatic. He said it was like a dream come true- to have a beautiful, wonderful girlfriend and make a baby with her. He wrote a song about us but it wasn’t very good. I didn’t care. I wasn’t paying much attention to his guitar-playing or songwriting by then.”

“So he *wanted* the baby? You were lucky. That doesn’t happen to most girls in similar situations. I bet you’re happily married to him now.”

Yoli shook her head.

“He wanted the baby *and* me. I didn’t want the baby, just him. I hated babies and kids. He convinced me to stay pregnant. He told me I would change when I had my own kid. I went behind his back and arranged to give up the baby for adoption as soon as it was born.”

“It? You don’t know what sex it was?”

“A girl.”

“Okay, go on.”

“He was shocked. It was the first time I saw him angry- *really* angry. He didn’t hit me or anything but he no longer wanted to be with me. I could tell he cooled when he didn’t touch me even after I’d healed from giving birth and was eager to have sex again. He made excuses. There was always another rehearsal or gig, or he was just too tired. I didn’t know *what* to do.” Yoli paused. Bianca sensed her recollections hurt her somewhat.

“I also didn’t know what he did behind my back. He tracked the baby down and found out who adopted it.”

“You mean your daughter.”

Yoli’s face changed from calm to ferocious. “No! It’s *not* mine!” she exclaimed. “I don’t have a daughter.”

“Sorry. Please go on. How long before you broke up?”

Yoli sighed. “Not long. He was in college. He stopped coming home on weekends. When he did, he rarely called me. Finally, I told him not to bother me anymore. I knew he wasn’t interested.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He thanked me and hung up.”

“So that was the end of it?”

“For years I thought it was. I moved on, met Keith after college, and we got married. No kids. Neither of us wanted them.” Yoli became lost in her recollection. Bianca sensed the crux of Yoli’s story was just ahead in the telling. She waited. “That was how we bonded. We made fun of moms in the park with their baby strollers.” Yoli paused again.

“The first time we met I was sitting reading on a bench at lunchtime. I liked getting out of the office into the fresh air. The benches were usually crowded at that hour but I happened to be alone that day. Keith sat down. I ignored him.

“Moms were going by. Or maybe they were nannies. We were in Rittenhouse Square. There were a lot of well-to-do people living in the neighborhood. Anyway, he started mumbling. I thought he was trying to get my attention but I ignored him. He wasn’t, though. He was commenting on the kids going by. It was really negative stuff but funny as hell.

“Look at them. The future of humanity. All piss, shit, vomit, and screaming. Why does anybody bother? What possible reward could anyone get out of having the little monsters?” he

said. I couldn't believe what I was hearing but I didn't react." Bianca didn't react either. She waited for Yoli to go on with her story.

"I wonder how much they pay *her* to take care of the little shit?" he went on. 'I can't imagine needing a job like that. I'd rather just kill myself if I ever got that desperate.'

"Why would anyone want one of those... *things*?" I replied, low enough so only he could hear me.

"I know! People must be crazy, am I right?" he agreed.

"I'll never be *that* crazy. If I want to ruin my life, there are better ways to do it," I added. He was quiet for a moment or two. Then, he surprised the hell out of me.

"Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?" he asked.

"I was floored! I wondered if I'd just been stupid enough to fall for a pickup, crude as it was. But I couldn't turn him down. I'd never met a man who called kids 'little shits.' Most of the guys I dated wanted kids more than they wanted me. I was just a baby machine to them. I didn't want to be a baby machine. I wanted a man who wanted *me*, not his own kids. Someone who would go on wanting me for the rest of my life. I had to know if this strange guy was like that. I said yes.

"I took Keith back to my place after dinner and stripped down as soon as we got inside. 'I'm on the pill,' I whispered.

"I always use a condom anyway," he replied, and then proudly showed me the one he took from his wallet.

"Let's get to it, then," I said. We got to it, and it was like the earliest days with Dave when it was *only* him, his sweet guitar, and passion. A great deal of passion. And it's stayed that way until now."

"So what's changed?" Bianca asked.

"Dave contacted me on Facebook. I made the mistake of friending him thinking we could just catch up. He didn't say anything much at first but then he wrangled my phone number out of me and called me. He's been part of that kid's life for years. Now she wants to be part of *mine*. I came here hoping you would tell me nothing would change and I would be safe from her. Now, I'm wondering if that's true."

"Do you think I lied to you, Yoli? I never lie, and I don't like dissatisfied customers. I'll refund your money."

"Keep it. I probably owe you *more* for listening to my story."

Bianca shook her head. She had suspected Yoli came to see her because she needed more than someone to listen. She needed Bianca's help dealing with this crisis in her life.

"So, I gather you haven't decided what to do about this?" Yoli shook her head. "Have you looked at the options?"

"What options?" Yoli asked.

"I see several paths."

"What are they?" Bianca heard a challenge in Yoli's voice. She didn't like telling people what their options were. She felt she might restrict their freedom to choose. Bianca might see

only the paths that appeared to her, but because she wasn't living the other person's life, she might miss other paths they ought to consider. She preferred prompting them to think through their problems for themselves.

"I can't answer that, Yoli. But I can offer my services anytime you need me. I'm here for you. Feel free to come back when you need to talk. Consider me your friend. I won't charge you anything." Yoli nodded, stood up abruptly, and walked out. Bianca feared she had let Yoli down and wondered if she would ever see her again.

Chapter 23

"Keith doesn't know about your daughter, does he." Bianca stated the next time Yoli came in. Yoli nodded.

"What's he gonna think of the fact that I've kept it from him all these years?" she asked.

"Why would he think anything at all? Doesn't it affirm your commitment to not having anything to do with kids?"

"It's not the kid that's the problem, Bianca. It's the lie. He's a stickler for the truth. He made me promise I had told him every detail about myself *before* he married me. I swore that I had. Now he's gonna find out I left out something *really* big. What else is he gonna think I left out? I'm scared he will leave me and I'll be all alone."

"You think your marriage is built on a lie, don't you?"

"Sort of."

"Most people's entire lives are built on lies, Yoli. Some lies they tell themselves, or others tell them, and some come from the society and culture they live in. But lies are the norm, not the exception."

"That's my point. Lying wasn't the norm for *us*. Truth was, and I've betrayed that. How can he trust me anymore when I tell him I love him? He can't. He won't. I'm so fucked."

"You don't believe what I told you about your life not changing in the future, do you?" Bianca asked, solemnly. Yoli shook her head. "That's okay. I'm glad you're being honest with me. Yoli, I don't think you really came to me to read your fortune."

"Then why did I come to you?" Yoli challenged.

"You needed someone's help. You chose me."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. I'm flattered. You see, I do other things besides reading people's fortunes."

"Like what?"

"I help them fix what's wrong with their lives."

"Nobody can fix this, Bianca!"

Bianca wanted to brag about the problems she had already dealt with and how she fixed them but she held back. Whatever she'd accomplished in the past likely wouldn't impress Yoli. It was her own crisis that interested her.

“So, did you think about your options?” Bianca asked. Yoli nodded. “And, what are they?”

“One, I let my daughter into my life but lose Keith. Two, that I keep my daughter out of my life and keep my husband. I don’t see any other choices.”

“There are likely countless other possibilities.” Yoli didn’t believe Bianca. She wondered if she had made a mistake coming back to see her.

“Name one,” Yoli tested Bianca.

“Your husband accepts your daughter because she’s a part of you.”

“But she’s *not!* We’re strangers.”

“Just think about it. What would it mean if he turned out to react differently than you predict? Maybe you don’t know him as well as you think. Or maybe there’s stuff in *his* life he never shared with you that will come out when he finds out you have a secret you never told him.”

“That *won’t* happen. I am *so* fucked.”

“If you say so. However, I *can* predict the outcome if you stick with *that* attitude.”

“And that would be?”

“This will ruin your life. You have to do something if you don’t want that to happen.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know,” Yoli muttered. Bianca ignored her cynicism. She wasn’t a miracle worker and couldn’t help someone who didn’t want to help herself. A grim silence settled over them. Bianca thought Yoli had exhausted all her trust and sympathy. She felt ready to say good-bye to Yoli and let her move on.

“Thanks for being honest with me, Bianca.”

“It’s what I do. Well, part of what I do. A *small* part, really.”

“It’s a *lot*. It’s what I needed. I appreciate your frankness.”

“Let me tell you why, when I read your future, I genuinely didn’t see any upheaval there. It’s because I believe you will solve this problem and your life will get better, not worse. You are assuming the worst, but you ought to be aiming for the best outcome. It’s there, but you have to search for it.”

“I know. But where do I *start*?”

“How do you feel about this unnamed daughter?”

“I really don’t know. I gave birth to her, but I’m not her mother. I’m sure of that. And her name is Yvonne. Ironic isn’t it? I didn’t choose her name, nor did Dave. And her adoptive parents never knew *my* name.”

“So there’s a connection between you, although it’s a small one,” Bianca observed. Yoli nodded. “I think there’s a lot stronger connection but you haven’t explored it yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think you care about your daughter’s feelings.”

Yoli nodded. “I do,” she confessed.

“And you don’t want to hurt her.”

“I don’t.”

“But you don’t want to hurt yourself either.”

“That’s true.”

“I’m willing to bet that you think you’ll like her and regret what you did when you got rid of her-.”

“I only did what I thought was best!” Yoli yelled. “I was only sixteen. I could *not* have become a mom. My life would have been ruined. I never thought she’d come back after all these years. I assumed I was done with her.”

“And were you done with Dave?” Bianca asked. Yoli nodded. “Are you sure?” Yoli didn’t nod. “I thought so.”

“I can’t help it. I remembered how good we were together. We were only kids, but we were sure our passion was eternal.”

“Maybe it was. Maybe it just took a break for a few years.”

“But it ended half my lifetime ago!”

“You’re lying to yourself if you believe that.”

“*I am* lying, and I feel terrible about it. I never wanted to hurt anybody. There are three people I could hurt, depending on what I do.”

“Four. There are four people. Don’t leave yourself out.”

“You’re right. I could get hurt, as well. This could ruin my life.”

“What did I tell you when I did your fortune, Yoli?”

“That things were gonna remain calm and normal.”

“Did you believe me?” Bianca asked.

“Sure!”

“No, you didn’t. If you had you would have left and gone on with your life.”

“I couldn’t leave.”

“I know. But *why* couldn’t you leave?”

“Because I felt something about you. You’re different. You seem to understand things other people don’t. At least, not any other people that *I* know.”

“You flatter me.”

“I never flatter people,” Yoli insisted. “It’s the same as lying.”

“In that case, thanks.”

“So what should I do?”

“We’re back to that again. I don’t know.” Yoli jumped up and hurried out. Bianca felt she had accomplished what she should have. She stirred up Yoli and made her question her assumptions.

Yoli was nowhere near a solution to her problem yet but she had taken the first step. Bianca felt pleased that she could help. However, she couldn’t predict what would happen next. That fact made her feel good. The universe might have a surprise in store for Yoli, and Bianca wouldn’t know what it was until Yoli decided what to do next. In a sense, she was creating her own future. *Few people get that chance*, Bianca thought. *I hope Yoli comes to recognize how fortunate she is.*

Keith had never heard his wife plead the way she did when she tried to persuade him to go with her.

“A fortune-teller, Yoli? Is this your idea of a joke?”

“Just humor me, Keith. Please.”

Keith loved Yoli and thought he could comply, but reluctantly. He considered fortune-tellers to be con artists who preyed on vulnerable suckers. He had never known his wife to be a sucker.

“All right, but five minutes and then I’m out of there,” he said.

“Okay.”

“You must be Keith,” Bianca said, smiling. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Five minutes,” Keith grumbled. Yoli looked worriedly at Bianca hoping Keith hadn’t offended her. Bianca didn’t stop smiling. They all sat down.

“Okay, Yoli,” Bianca said. “Now that you have us here, is there something you wanted to say?”

Keith looked at his wife. She frowned, nodded, and then sighed. He got the distinct impression Yoli was afraid of him for some reason and regretted his gruffness. *If this is important to her, Keith thought, then I owe it to her to be here.* He smiled at Yoli, urging her to start. Bianca waited. This was going to be Yoli’s show and she was only present to give Yoli the confidence that she could tell her husband the shocking news. She knew Yoli hoped he wouldn’t get up and walk out of their marriage.

Bianca and Keith looked at Yoli and waited. She didn’t look at either of them. “You can begin whenever you feel you’re ready,” Bianca said.

“When I was sixteen-.”

“That was long before I met you,” Keith interrupted.

Yoli glared at him. “Don’t interrupt me! This is hard enough as it is.” Keith didn’t want this- whatever it was- to be hard for his wife. He took her hand and waited patiently for her to continue.

“When I was sixteen I had a daughter.”

“What?”

“I knew this would happen!” Yoli exclaimed.

“Nothing has *happened*, Yoli. Keith’s just surprised by what you said.”

Keith nodded. “She’s right. Now, go on.”

“I had a daughter and I put her up for adoption. I think I only saw her once right after she was born. That was the way I wanted it.”

“You didn’t want to keep her?” he asked.

“Of course not! I couldn’t. I was only sixteen. It would have ruined my life to have a baby.”

“Go on.” Keith wanted Yoli to tell him who the father was but refused to ask.

“The father was my boyfriend at the time. He was the guitar player in a local band, way older than me, but we really loved each other.”

Keith suddenly felt protective of his wife. “I guess he *made* you get rid of the baby.”

“No. It wasn’t like that. He would have kept the baby and married me. That’s what he wanted but he never told me. We broke up a few months later. I didn’t want anything to do with him anymore.”

“So you moved on. Seems to me it was a pretty smart decision considering how young you were.”

Yoli nodded. “I thought it was, too. But he did something I only just recently learned about. He found out immediately who adopted the baby and kept tabs on her for years. Eventually, he contacted her parents. They didn’t believe he was their father at first but he asked for a DNA test and it proved he was telling the truth. He’s been her second dad for several years.”

“He sounds like a nice guy.”

“He was. But there’s a problem.”

“Okay.”

“She’s been asking about her *real* mother. My former boyfriend tracked me down. His name is Dave, by the way. The girl’s name is Yvonne.”

“And she wants to meet you,” Keith said. Yoli looked at him, afraid he now hated her and would divorce her immediately. Yoli nodded. “So what’s the problem?” he asked.

“I thought *you* would be the problem. I thought you’d hate me for what I did.”

“Hate you for having the child or hate you for giving her up for adoption?”

“Neither. Hate me for keeping this from you all these years.”

“Well, that does bother me, a little. But only a little. What bothers me more is your being afraid of me.”

Way to go, Keith, Bianca thought. She didn’t interrupt their conversation.

“So you don’t care that I lied?” *He’s on your side, Yoli*, Bianca thought. *Don’t blow it.*

“I don’t think whether or not you lied is important. What’s important is this daughter and how you feel about her.”

“That’s the other problem. I feel I owe it to her to meet her. I think it would hurt her if I refused. I don’t see any harm in a simple meeting.” *Nice, Yoli*, Bianca thought. *I’m glad you decided to be honest with your husband about your feelings.*

Keith squeezed his wife’s hand. “I agree.” He thought the conversation had ended well. So did Bianca. She assumed she would never see Yoli again. She felt happy she helped, if only in a small way. The couple thanked her and left. Bianca puttered around her RV until it was time to open for customers in the late afternoon.

The only customer that showed up later was Yoli. She was alone and distraught.

“What happened?” Bianca asked.

“I said too much.”

“Sit and talk to me.”

“Keith asked me about Dave on the way home. I guess I felt I could be completely honest with him because of the way things worked out while we were here. I went too far.”

“You told him more about how it was with you and Dave than you should have,” Bianca suggested. Yoli nodded. “Is he angry?”

“No. But he’s jealous.”

“Of Dave?”

“Strangely, no. Of Yvonne.”

“What’s *she* got to do with this?”

“He seems to feel I’ll suddenly fall in love with the daughter I never knew and he’ll have to share me with her permanently.”

“Has he told you that?”

“Not in words.”

“But you’re sure that’s how he feels?”

Yoli nodded. “He’s changed his mind about me seeing her. Which is a problem because I already told Dave I would see her and he told Yvonne, too.”

“Shit!”

“Yeah, shit. And I’m in it deep. The thing of it is, I was willing to meet her for *her* sake, not mine. I don’t want anything to do with her and I don’t even know if she wants anything to do with me, long-term. Dave said she just wants to meet me. Keith thinks that’s only the beginning and she’ll want more, maybe a lot more.”

“So he’s jealous of a kid he never met? And *you’ve* never met?”

Yoli nodded. “And he’s hinted that I’m going to have to make a choice.”

“No! He said that?”

“Not exactly. But I can tell when he feels threatened.”

“How?”

“He withdraws into himself like a turtle in a protective shell, only his shell is an emotional and not a physical one.”

“You know him well.”

“I love him. And I’m afraid I’ve pushed him too far and I’m going to lose him.”

“I don’t think so, Yoli. Remember my original prediction about your future?”

“Yeah. You were so far off it’s pathetic!”

“That’s the wrong attitude. What if I wasn’t far off at all, but right on, only it’s going to be a bumpy ride now before things smooth out later?”

“I don’t see how that’s possible, Bianca. I should never have come here the first time.”

“But you did. And I helped you. More than I’ve helped anyone else for a long time. You owe me.”

“Then I’ll pay you and leave. How much do you want?”

“Keep your money. I want you to trust me. See this through. You won’t be sorry.”

“Do you *guarantee* that?” Yoli’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

“I don’t guarantee *anything*. You’re old enough to have learned that life doesn’t include guarantees no matter how much we might want them. Trust me and trust *yourself*.”

“That’ll be hard.”

“That’s because you’re still that sixteen-year-old girl who gave her baby up and has felt guilty about it ever since.”

“I *never* felt guilty!” Yoli protested.

“Didn’t you? I think you’ve been lying to *yourself* for years and now it’s time to face the truth and finish growing up. You won’t be sorry.”

“I already am,” Yoli mumbled. Then she jumped up and ran out. Bianca smiled. She knew she would see Yoli at least one more time. That prediction was guaranteed.

Chapter 24

They met in a coffee shop near where Yvonne lived. It was her idea to meet in public. “I know this must be hard for you,” she said. Yvonne was tall for a fourteen-year-old girl and seemed much older. “Dave’s told me about why you did what you did.”

“It was a long time ago,” Yoli replied nervously. She didn’t want to seem dismissive and added, “but it’s really nice to meet you.”

“I really appreciate your doing this.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Oh, but it is,” Yvonne insisted.

“Why, if you don’t mind my asking? I mean, I only remember seeing you *once*. You can’t possibly recall *ever* seeing me.”

“But I do, in a way.”

“How is that possible?” Yoli asked.

“This woman kept appearing in my dreams while I was growing up and I never knew who she was. One day I was hanging out at Uncle Dave’s and I mentioned a dream to him. He didn’t say anything but he talked to my mom and dad. They told me who she *might* be. Now that I’ve met you, I know they were telling me the truth.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I think I do.”

“What do you mean, Yvonne?”

“I think there’s a connection between us that can’t be broken.” Yvonne replied. She seemed convinced she was right. Her certainty struck Yoli.

“If there is, why wasn’t *I* aware of it?” Yoli asked.

“I can’t answer that. But *I* was aware of it, and that’s all that’s important to me. And now, here you are. Just like in my dreams.”

“So when did they tell you that you were adopted?”

“As soon as I could understand what that meant but it was only a couple of years ago. They felt they should be honest, although they didn’t tell me Uncle Dave was my father. He didn’t want me to know.”

“Your parents must be amazing people,” Yoli commented.

“Oh, they are. I really love them.”

“I can see that.” Yoli began wondering if she had given up more than she ever knew when she let go of Yvonne right after giving birth to her. *I could have had all that love*, she thought. She suddenly felt crushing sadness. *Somebody else got it instead. And I gave up Dave’s love, too. I lost more than I ever dreamed.* Yoli suddenly no longer felt certain Keith’s love had compensated for or could have ever replaced the love she now felt she lost. All her emotions from back then flooded her. She tried to ignore them.

“I have a confession to make,” Yoli said. Yvonne looked expectantly at her mother and waited. “I never dreamed of you. Not once... in all these years.”

“It’s okay, Yolanda,” Yvonne soothed. “Look, I understand why you did what you did. I probably would do the same thing if it happened to me.”

“But you won’t let it happen to you, right? You’ll be careful.”

“I assume you and Dave were careful, too.”

Yoli nodded. “We thought we were.”

Yvonne realized she was far more mature emotionally at fourteen than Yoli was even now. “You would like me to forgive you, wouldn’t you?” she asked. Yoli nodded and almost burst into tears. She wasn’t regretting this meeting yet, but she was close. And, worse, she didn’t know how she was going to go on with her life after this meeting with her daughter ended. Then Yoli realized she had suddenly thought of Yvonne as her daughter. Maybe she would want to be with Yvonne now, get to know her, spend time with her, and become part of her life.

Yoli had hesitated to meet Yvonne because she felt the girl wanted something more than just a meeting with her. She thought Yvonne might feel she had a claim on Yoli, a claim Yoli wouldn’t want to accept. Now Yoli worried she carried a dormant emotional claim on Yvonne. Yoli panicked. *What if my daughter wants nothing to do with me? What if all she wanted was just this meeting and a short conversation, and I’ll never get to become Aunt Yoli?*

Yvonne remained silent and waited. She felt the ball was in Yoli’s court. She also felt this conversation seemed harder on Yoli than she (Yvonne) assumed it was going to be. *Maybe Uncle Dave steered me wrong when he urged me to talk to Yolanda*, she thought. *Does he have other motives?*

Yvonne rose abruptly from the coffee shop booth. “Well, I’m going to walk home, now. Homework awaits! Thanks for meeting me, Yolanda.” She wanted to kiss Yoli on her cheek but hesitated. *Maybe that would be going too far*, she cautioned herself. *I don’t know what this meeting has done to her. She seems uncomfortable.*

“Wait!” Yoli said. Yvonne paused before she walked away. “Could I see you again?” Yvonne hesitated. She had satisfied her need to meet Yoli. She would need time to evaluate her

feelings about their conversation before she knew what she wanted to do next. If she chose to do anything. But she didn't want to hurt Yoli's feelings.

"I... I guess so. But I don't know when. Why don't you talk to Uncle Dave?"

"Sure. Good suggestion. I'll do that." *It could be the best idea*, Yoli thought. She might need Dave's help dealing with the feelings this meeting with Yvonne had churned up. *He's known her all her life. I only just met her today. Maybe he can tell me more about her.* Yoli smiled weakly and then Yvonne walked away.

Their first encounter was over. Both felt relieved.

"Where were you?" Keith asked as Yoli walked in the back door from the driveway. "I looked for you and noticed your car was gone, but you hadn't told me you were leaving."

"Out."

"Anywhere special?"

"Why are you interrogating me, Keith?"

"Yoli, I *wasn't* interrogating you. Where did you go?"

"To meet my daughter."

"Oh... well, how'd it go? Did you like her?" Yoli shrugged. "Did *she* seem to like you?" She shrugged again. "What's wrong?"

"I realized how much I missed..."

What does she mean? Keith asked himself. Then he realized what she meant. "That bad, huh? Do you want to talk about it?"

"No!" Keith tried to put his arm around Yoli. "Leave me alone!" she insisted and pulled back. "Please."

Keith exercised his maximum self-control. "I'll be around if you change your mind." He left the kitchen. Yoli went to the refrigerator, found the wine bottle, and poured herself a drink in the nearest glass she could find. It was the one they used to rinse their mouths after they brushed their teeth. She had just put it in the dishwasher. Yoli drained the wine in one gulp. She didn't notice that it tasted like toothpaste. Then she hurried to their bedroom. She needed to be alone, possibly for a long time.

Yoli suddenly felt guilty for everything she did in her life back to when she made eyes at the cute guitarist in that crappy band she couldn't even remember the name of. *My whole life's been a lie. How could I have been so stupid?*

Yoli had forgotten what she was like when she was fourteen. Ironically, Yoli didn't have to look far to find a fourteen-year-old to reconnect with. Her daughter that she just met was the same age as Yoli was when she met Dave.

Dave- her Dave- had been a part of Yvonne's life almost since her birth. *I threw my daughter, my boyfriend, and all the love I could ever have wanted away. Why did I do that? How could I have been so stupid?* Yoli wished she could go back and change her past. She felt willing to give up everything she had now to recover what she lost when she was sixteen.

Then she realized she couldn't change anything. Not in the past, anyway. She thought she could start changing things now but didn't know what to do. As she had only now discovered, the last time she took drastic action she had ruined her life. She didn't want to make the same mistake again.

It was time to go back to Bianca. *She'll tell me what I ought to do*, Yoli thought. She couldn't have been more wrong.

Bianca never told people what they should do although she knew many of her customers came to her seeking guidance. She tried to help them with introspection that led them to revelations about themselves. Bianca knew truths that come from within a person are stronger than ideas that come from outside. Especially ideas that come fortune-tellers!

She knew Yoli would come back but she didn't know when. It was sooner than she expected and Yoli was more distraught than she anticipated. "You lied to me," Yoli said. "There's an upheaval happening and I'm in the middle of it. And it's all *your* fault."

"Was it I who told you to give up your newborn when you were sixteen?"

"Uh, no."

"Who did?"

"Nobody, really. Well, I made the decision all by myself."

"Then whose fault is it that you're feeling this way *now*?" Bianca asked.

"Mine. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You likely would have had to face the consequences of what you did sooner or later. It's happening now for a reason."

"What reason?"

"That, I do not know."

"Well, what *do* you know?"

"This time you don't have to deal with this on your own," Bianca said. Yoli looked puzzled. "You have people that love you and care about you, Yoli. In fact, the circle of those people has just grown larger. You can't make the mistake now that you made back then."

"Does that circle include *you*?" Yoli asked.

"You don't need me. I'm just a fortune-teller. We're a dime-a-dozen."

"No, you're different. I knew it the first time I met you. I've been to other fortune-tellers, just for fun, with my girlfriends, when we were being silly. You're not like the others. I knew they were conning me. I never felt you were. I felt just the opposite."

"What do you mean?"

"I felt you could see inside me, see me better than I saw myself."

"Yoli, how *I* see you isn't important. How you see yourself is. You're getting better but you have a long way to go."

Yoli sighed. She hoped coming to Bianca would solve her problem quickly. It hadn't gotten worse but it hadn't gotten better, either. She felt stuck not knowing what to do. "You can't tell me *anything* about my future?" she whined. Bianca shook her head. She didn't want to tell Yoli she didn't have a set future. Her path was wide open. Yoli wouldn't know what it was until

she made some decisions. The first one would be reaching out to the people who cared about her. Bianca wasn't optimistic that Yoli would do that but she didn't say anything.

Yet again, Yoli got up and walked out without speaking to Bianca. Bianca felt certain she would see Yoli at least one more time.

Dave called Yoli about her meeting with their daughter. "She hasn't talked to me. I don't know why. I was wondering if something bad happened when you two met."

"No. It felt nice to finally meet her. I mean, I never thought about her until you came to me. I had forgotten about what happened when I was sixteen."

"I never got over what you did, Yoli."

"I felt I had to do it, Dave. There was no other choice."

"There *was*. I would have done anything to be with you and raise a daughter with you. When you did what you did and then broke up with me, I realized I'd lost you. But I didn't have to lose our daughter, too."

"How did you track her down?" Yoli asked.

"I knew someone who knew someone in an agency where adoption records were kept. It only took a few months."

"What happened when you called Yvonne's parents?"

"They were shocked, of course, as I expected them to be. But I explained who I was and offered to do a DNA test. Then I asked if I could somehow be part of my daughter's life. Maybe only a small part, but a part nevertheless."

"And they *let* you? They must be pretty amazing people."

"They felt sorry for me. I told them what you did to me-."

"What *I* did to you?"

"Yes, Yoli. You did what you did without my knowledge. It was a shock. I thought we really loved each other. I wanted to be with you for the rest of my life."

"But a family would have ruined your chance of being a guitar player."

"I didn't care about being a guitar player anymore. The guitar was no longer my first love..."

"Oh, and I was?"

"Well, I only *thought* you were. But after you broke up with me, Yvonne was. I knew I couldn't have her. I didn't want to deny her a good life with parents who already loved her. I asked if I could be her Uncle Dave and they agreed. Later, I got to babysit her, and take her places on weekends. They adopted other kids and I got to be friends with them, too, but nobody was like my Yvonne."

"You mean *our* Yvonne."

"No, Yoli. She was never *our* Yvonne, not even for a few moments. You saw to that."

His statement hit Yoli hard and she hung up. *How could I have been so stupid? I know I was only sixteen, but that's no excuse. I gave up the life I really would have wanted and got this*

life instead. Now it's too late. Dave and Yvonne got wonderful lives. I ended up miserable but didn't know it until now.

Yoli knew she couldn't change what she did in her past but she might change her future. She could find the love she lost, but how?

It was time to go back to visit Bianca. This time, Yoli wanted a real reading of her future. She had to know what she would do to fix her life, now that she knew how badly she had broken it all those years ago. *Bianca can see the future*, Yoli reminded herself. *She already knows.*

“Actually, to put it bluntly,” Bianca explained, “I’m a fraud. I don’t ‘see’ anything. But I *feel* things. They’re not feelings about the future of my customers but about the present. Sometimes I feel trouble. Other times I feel happiness. Other times- like with you- I feel deep distress I can’t name but know it’s really important.”

“Well, if you felt *that* with me, why didn’t you say so?”

“Because people come to me not for negative predictions but positive ones. I felt your distress and I offered you hope that you shouldn’t worry because everything would work out okay.”

“But it *hasn’t* worked out okay, Bianca.”

“You don’t know that yet, Yoli.”

“You’re full of shit, Bianca.” Yoli stood up.

“You can storm out of here now if you want to. But I predict you’ll be back. You need me.”

“Ha! I don’t need *anyone*. I can fix this on my own.” *Just like you fixed your little problem when you were sixteen*, Bianca thought. *And how well did that work out?*

Yoli stormed out. Then she sat in her car and cried.

“Do you think she’s doing this because I’ve failed her somehow?” Keith asked. Bianca felt sorry for him.

“No. I think this has nothing to do with you. This is happening because she never resolved her feelings about what she did when she was sixteen. She didn’t know those feelings were unresolved. Now she knows, but she still either doesn’t know how to resolve them or lacks the maturity to know what to do.”

“I thought she was the most mature woman I ever met,” Keith said. “She didn’t seem to do any of the bullshit stuff that other women did. They played games. Yoli never did. She seemed honest and sincere and that made her special. That’s was why I fell in love with her. What can I do?”

“Talk to her. But more importantly, *listen* to her. Try to get her in touch with her deepest feelings.”

“I don’t know how to do that. Feelings have never been my strong suit.”

“Do you *still* love her?”

“Well, I thought I did.”

“But now you’re not sure?” Bianca asked. Keith nodded. “It’s okay. You need to be honest with yourself if you hope to save her from herself and get back the wife you want.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“This kind of honesty is never easy, my friend. But I’m here for both of you if you need me.”

“I think we will need you.”

Bianca wasn’t certain.

Yoli denied her deepest feelings and went into adulthood hiding how she felt about herself. Maybe her denial made her believe things about herself that weren’t true. Things such as that she had healed from losing Yvonne, grew up, and ultimately forgave herself for what she did when she was sixteen.

What if Yoli only thought she and Keith loved each other? What if Keith believed her when she told him she loved him but it wasn’t true? Of course, Yoli hadn’t known it until now. Maybe Keith reached out to Bianca because he only recently learned how fragile his marriage was.

Bianca felt sorry for the couple but remained confident this would all work out well in the end. She just didn’t know what that end would be. She also had no idea what ‘working out well’ meant for Yoli and Keith.

Things had been working well for Yvonne and Dave for years. They had a solid relationship. Keith and Yoli’s relationship seemed not to have been as solid as they thought. How they dealt with that fact would determine what ultimately happened to them.

“What did you tell my husband?” Yoli demanded.

“I didn’t tell him anything. We just talked. Why do you ask?”

“He’s been different.”

“How so?”

“He’s been more attentive, more loving.”

“Well, that doesn’t surprise me. He does love you, right?” Yoli nodded. “And you do love him, right?” Yoli didn’t nod. “Um, why not?”

“I don’t think I’ve been fair to him all these years. It’s just hit me. I’ve been living a lie.”

“That’s a bit melodramatic, isn’t it?”

“It’s really how I feel. We hit it off the first time we met. We knew ourselves well and as we talked we both had strong feelings we ought to maybe be together. It wasn’t love at first sight-.”

“It never is, despite what people think.”

Yoli ignored Bianca’s cynical comment. She still believed in romantic fantasies. Bianca had talked to many disappointed and unhappy people in her work as a ‘fortune-teller.’ She learned that fantasies, romantic or otherwise, never worked out, no matter how hard people wished they would. The problem was that few people ever matured enough to accept that fact.

Most people hung on to some kind of fantasy until they died. Their final fantasy was that somehow, unlike everyone else who ever walked this earth, they wouldn't die.

Bianca knew how difficult it was to enlighten people. The truth was rarely pretty. (One of the most popular fantasies held by many people was that the truth was pretty. 'I thought Jesus loved me. But then I got cancer.' Bianca heard people tell her that and similar things too many times to remember. She always felt sorry for them.)

Reality was harsh. Real love was elusive. Most people were too fucked up inside to know where to start looking for love so they never found it. That was just the way life was. Bianca always did what she could to ease their torment even if they were unaware of it. She rarely knew if what she told them in her 'readings' ever helped them. Only in cases like this when she remained in touch with customers a while and learned more about their lives. Mostly, the more she learned, the harder it became to help. Their healing had to come from within them. Bianca knew it. They didn't.

But she tried to help anyway, even if it was only to keep nudging them in the right direction.

Chapter 25

Yoli seemed different the next time she showed up. She appeared solemn. Bianca hoped it was because Yoli had already done some serious introspection and perhaps come to a place where she needed a bit more help before she could go the rest of the way. Bianca was ready to give her the push she needed.

"What's been happening?" Bianca asked.

"I've been thinking."

"Anything good?"

Yoli nodded. "Yeah, I think so, but I'm still confused. I think I have more questions than answers."

"Believe it or not, that's a good thing." Yoli seemed surprised by Bianca's comment. "Answers are overrated. Some people cling to them as if they are real solutions to their problems but they're not even close. They use them as stopping points or delaying tactics to put off finding the hard solutions." Yoli suddenly felt better about her confusion.

"So, tell me what you've been thinking about," Bianca said.

"My parents."

"That's good. Do you know *why* you've been thinking about them?"

"They always loved me and never seemed to ever waver."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"I guess so."

"Trust me, it's good. But you're questioning it. Why?"

"I never got As. I never even got that many Bs. My parents didn't care. They told me learning was about more than just grades. They sometimes asked me to tell them what I'd

learned and then were impressed by my answers. ‘That’s good enough for me,’ my dad would say. ‘I think you got the gist of it,’ my mom would agree. I could never figure them out.”

“Why did their reactions bother you?”

“They didn’t make any sense. Other girls talked about how their parents yelled at them about their report cards. My parents never did that once. Even when I got an F in Gym Class. ‘Been there,’ my dad said. ‘Me, too,’ mom agreed.

“The other girls talked about how their parents told them they needed the best grades to get into the best colleges. Like that was even a real goal to an eleven-year-old! College was something that concerned *old* people. My parents never even mentioned it.”

“You thought because they didn’t try to drive you harder that they didn’t love you?”

“No, that wasn’t it. I *knew* they loved me. I just couldn’t figure out *why*. I wasn’t special. I wasn’t even average.”

“But you *were* special to them, Yoli. You were their daughter.”

“How could *that* have been enough?”

“Because they loved *you*, not some fantasy child.”

“How could they *do* that to me?”

Bianca had never heard that question asked in a similar situation before and didn’t know how to reply. Yoli looked at her, expecting Bianca to say something. Bianca shrugged. “I don’t know. Did you ask them?”

“I can’t do that?”

“Oh. Are they dead?”

“No, they’re very much alive.”

“Don’t you talk to them?”

“Yeah. We get along great.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“I guess I’m afraid they won’t understand if I ask them why they loved me or why they did what they did for me all those years. Maybe my questions will even offend them.”

“I don’t see how they could be offended. But maybe it depends on how you ask.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Or, *what* you specifically ask them.”

“I still don’t understand,” Yoli insisted.

“What is it you *really* want to know?”

Yoli thought for a while. Bianca waited. She thought she had asked the question Yoli needed to hear and wasn’t surprised Yoli didn’t answer immediately.

“Why did they do what they did for me when I got pregnant?” Yoli replied. “They didn’t react the way I expected.”

“What did they do?”

“They were supportive from the moment I told them.”

“That’s *good*, right?” Bianca asked.

“Yeah, it was, sort of.”

“But only sort of? Most girls that age would feel grateful if their parents were understanding and sympathetic.”

“I knew girls whose parents all but disowned them. Well, I didn’t know them personally, but I heard rumors.”

“And that’s what you were expecting?” Yoli nodded. “You should have felt relieved to have their support.”

“I guess I felt scared.”

“Scared? Why on earth would you feel scared?”

“All that love- directed at *me*. I wasn’t worthy of it.”

“They didn’t think you were unworthy.”

“But they *should* have. That’s how love works. You only get it when you obey the rules. When you break them, the love stops. Well, I broke a *big* one but their love got stronger. How could that happen?”

“Are you glad it did?” Bianca asked. “Answer me honestly. Take a moment to think.” Yoli shook her head. “Why?”

“Because I somehow knew that despite all the love they poured into me that I couldn’t pour out the same kind of love to anyone else, *especially* my own baby.”

“You couldn’t be the same kind of parent they were?” Bianca asked.

Yoli nodded. “I just didn’t have it in me. I knew I would fail. I couldn’t risk that so I got rid of my daughter the only way I could. They supported me. They helped with all the arrangements. But it was *my* idea.”

“Do you see now why I read your future the way I did the first time you came to see me?”

“Uh... no.”

“You’ve found out the truth about love Yoli. It’s what was missing from your life. It’s not missing anymore. You’re surrounded by it, but you feel you don’t deserve it. Except that you *do*. All you have to do is start loving yourself. Unless you do that, no other love will ever be possible.”

“I don’t know...”

Bianca felt sorry for Yoli. She seemed like a lost or bewildered child.

“It’s okay to feel overwhelmed. This is big. Take your time.”

“I don’t know,” Yoli repeated.

Bianca stood up abruptly. “I cannot help you any further,” she said. “Please leave and don’t come back.”

Bianca had given up on Yoli and she knew it.

Yoli had assumed Bianca didn’t love her but she thought the fortune teller at least liked her. *Why else would she be helping me?* Yet Bianca threw Yoli out. *What did I say?* Yoli asked herself later.

It wasn’t what she said that made Bianca order her to leave. It was what Yoli didn’t or couldn’t say. Perhaps she would never say it. Maybe Bianca’s prediction about Yoli’s future was

a little off. Perhaps she wasn't going to find love and she was only going to paper over her existential dilemma and go on with her mundane life. Maybe Yoli would act as if nothing ever happened, as if she never came to Bianca, never asked for help, and never came back several times to follow up.

Bianca felt sorry for Yoli. She felt sorry for herself, too. Bianca envied the kind of love Yoli could have if only she started loving herself.

Bianca loved herself, and always had, but finding others to love and be loved by had mostly been impossible. It wasn't their fault, or hers. It was just the way her life was, and she didn't lament what she missed. Meeting Yoli had reminded her. Recognition of her loss hurt for a while, but then she moved on. Moving on was the only thing she knew how to do. She wished Yoli well.

"I have a problem, Keith, but I don't know how to fix it. I can't go back and change what I did when I was sixteen. Yeah, I can have a relationship with Yvonne now, but that's not going to fix things. I'd like to move forward."

"How?"

"I'd like to become a mother again but get it right this time. But only if you feel okay. I wouldn't expect you to do anything special. I mean, I'll do all the work. Your life doesn't have to change."

"I think it already has, Yoli. That's because you've changed. I thought I loved the old you a lot. But that was before I met the new Yoli. Now I love you even more. I would love to be a father. I've never thought I wanted the opportunity. But if it makes you happy it will make me happy, too."

"You're sure? We can't change our minds after I get pregnant. I won't do *that* again. We'd be committed."

"I already am, Yoli."

They started that night.

Loving her new son and loving her husband turned out to be the easiest things Yoli ever had to do. All the love she thought she lacked had been locked up inside her waiting for release. It took Bianca to set Yoli's love free. In Bianca's honor, they named their son Benjamin. They thought of Bianca every time they looked at him. And Yvonne adored her new step-brother.

Bianca moved on and never thought of them again.