

SURRENDER TO LOVE

A novella by MaryAnn Diorio

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Prologue

Dr. Teresa Lopez Gonzalez screamed, stumbled, and covered her face with her hands. “No! It’s not true!” She gasped for air as the tragic news sucked the life out of her. “You’re talking about the wrong person. It can’t be my husband. Roberto is at work.” Trembling, she grabbed the edge of the kitchen counter to keep from falling.

This couldn’t be happening to her. Surely it was all a dream. A bad dream. She would awaken soon to discover all was well.

The police officer lowered his head then lifted it again. Compassion filled his glistening eyes. “Ma’am. I’m sorry. So very sorry.” He reached into his belt pouch. “We found this in your husband’s shirt pocket.”

Teresa’s stomach clenched. She immediately recognized the blue identification badge that Roberto carried to his job five days a week as chief mural artist for the city of New York. He’d been so proud of his current project—an outdoor mural for the north wall of the Drug Rehabilitation Building in Harlem. An attempt to revitalize the neighborhood where he volunteered in his spare time to minister to street gangs. He’d been thrilled to get the assignment.

Dizziness coiled itself around her brain, strangling her thinking. Her body shook with cold tremors as her mind spun deliriously. She could still hear her husband’s voice lingering in her ear from their parting conversation that morning. “I love you, Tessa Babe.” Her chest clenched. He always called her by her nickname. “I’ll be thinking of you today. Can’t wait to get home to you tonight.” Teresa stumbled back as a wrenching sob overtook her.

The officer handed her the ID.

Her hands shook as she reached for the familiar badge. Roberto’s handsome face looked at her with that warm smile she’d grown to love so much during their two, oh-so-short years of marriage. Another sob formed in her throat, stifling her breath. She shook her head. Impossible. Roberto could not be dead. Just this morning she’d kissed him goodbye with all the passion of their first love and an expectation that he’d be home after work.

But now he would never come home again.

Never.

Dazed, she fell into the nearest chair and stared through the window of the kitchen door behind the officer. A light rain fell against a gray sky. “What happened?” Her voice was barely a whisper. “Please, tell me what happened?”

The officer plunged his thumbs into his belt. “The scaffold collapsed, and your husband fell.”

Teresa cringed as waves of nausea convulsed her. She looked up at the officer's face, grim with concern. “My husband was painting a mural on the old drug rehab building in Harlem. He was working outside the ninth floor.” The words caught in her throat.

The officer nodded, anguish written all over his face. “Our investigation showed that the scaffold had not been properly secured and—”

She raised an open palm and shook her head. “No more. Please. Don’t tell me anymore.” The horrific image of Roberto hurtling to the ground was more than she could bear. What were his final thoughts? Did he even have time to think? He was ready to die, she knew that. But he wouldn't want to die in such a horrific way.

“I understand, ma’am. Is there anything I can do for you?”

Fire welled up in her throat. “No. Nothing. Thank you for doing your job.”

“Sorry to have been the harbinger of bad news, ma’am.” He gave her a nod of respect, opened the back door, and left.

Yielding to the gut-wrenching sobs that exploded from her soul, Teresa buried her face in her hands and wept.

Chapter One

Five years later . . .

Arms laden with the day’s mail, Teresa fumbled in her purse for the key to the apartment she shared with her widowed mother Marisol. Teresa looked forward to relaxing after a grueling day at the life coaching center. Even though home was now Mamá’s apartment. After Roberto’s untimely death, Teresa had accepted her mother’s generous invitation to move in with her. According to Mamá, two widows living in the same house were better than one. Especially since those widows were mother and daughter.

But Teresa had her doubts. Had Roberto not left her with only a small insurance policy, she would have preferred to live on her own. At least she’d had enough money to complete her advanced degree in life coaching, something she’d wanted to do for a long time. With that sheepskin in hand, her options had dramatically increased, as had her income. Once she built her coaching practice to where she wanted it, she’d move out and get a place of her own.

Teresa located the key just as Mamá opened the door.

“I saw you through the window.” Mamá embraced her daughter. “Come in from the cold. December in New Jersey feels like the North Pole.”

Teresa rolled her eyes. “How do you know, Mamá? You’ve never been to the North Pole.”

Mamá laughed. “Cold is cold no matter where you find it. Ah, for the warm climate of Puerto Rico.” Mamá rubbed her hands.

Teresa entered the apartment and shut the door against the frigid wind behind her. She suppressed a wave of shivers. “A warmer climate does sound more inviting right about now.” Teresa gave Mamá a peck on the cheek. “So, how was your day?”

“The usual. Bible study. Prayer. Then grocery shopping for today's meals.” Mamá smiled. “I made your favorite. Arroz con pollo.”

“Thank you.” Mamá meant well, but returning to live with her mother had not been easy. For one thing, Mamá controlled the menu. Sometimes, when Teresa got home from work, all she wanted to do was order pizza or make a sandwich. But Mamá always had a hot meal prepared for her.

While Mamá dished out the evening meal, Teresa sorted through the mail. The usual. Junk flyers and a few bills. She laid the bills to one side and gathered the advertisements. She was about to throw them into the trashcan when a small yellow envelope slid out from the pile of flyers. It was addressed to Mamá from Ramona Sanchez, Mamá’s childhood friend in Puerto Rico.

“You must be hungry.” Mamá set the plates on the kitchen table.

“Smells good, but I’m not very hungry.”

Mamá straightened and furrowed her brows. “Teresa Rosita, you must start eating more.” When Mamá wanted to make a point, she always called her by her full given name. “Ever since Roberto died, you’ve become as thin as an *habichuela verde*.”

Teresa stiffened. “I am not as thin as a green bean, Mamá.”

The older woman pointed a finger in warning. “Well, you are close to it. And you, a doctor. You should know better.”

“I’m a doctor of philosophy.”

Mamá shook her finger. “That’s even more reason for you to practice good sense. Philosophy is about loving knowledge, isn’t it? And good philosophy means thinking straight, doesn’t it? And thinking straight means eating enough to take care of your body, right?”

Teresa blew out a long breath. She couldn’t deny her mother’s simple logic, although it didn’t quite fit in with her own understanding of philosophy. She stifled a smile and handed the yellow envelope to Mamá. “For you. From Ramona.”

Mamá took the envelope and turned it over, inspecting the stamp. She carefully opened the flap. “This must be her annual Christmas update.” Mamá opened the envelope. “So, it’s not her Christmas letter. It’s a personal letter.” She read it aloud.

Teresa listened while removing her coat and scarf. Ramona’s son Marcos was having trouble with his thirteen-year-old daughter Pilar. Teresa vaguely remembered her mother’s telling her, several years earlier, about Ramona’s granddaughter whose mother had died in childbirth. Teresa’s heart tightened. Poor girl. No wonder she was having challenges.

Her mother continued to read. “Since your daughter Teresa is a life coach, my son Marcos would like to hire her to coach Pilar. He thinks coaching will give Pilar some goals and help her move on with her life. Do you think Teresa would be willing to come to Puerto Rico for a short visit?”

Mamá looked up and smiled. “Teresa, this would be perfect for you. You could get

away for a while to deal with your own troubled heart and, at the same time, you could help Ramona's granddaughter."

Teresa clenched her jaw. Once again Mamá was trying to plan her life for her. "Mamá, I can't get away right now. I can't afford it. Besides, I have clients I have to take care of here in the States."

Her mother put an arm around her and smiled sheepishly. "You worry too much. I was planning to give you a vacation trip as a Christmas gift. God knows you need a vacation. And what better place to go than Puerto Rico?" Mamá gave her a smug look. "So the travel expense problem is solved."

Teresa couldn't do this. She couldn't leave her hometown. The town where she'd lived with Roberto. The town where he was buried. Who would put Christmas flowers on his grave? Who would weep for him? Who would uphold his memory? A memory she wore as a badge of honor. To betray that memory in any way would be to betray the man she'd adored in marriage for two agonizingly short years.

A knot formed in Teresa's stomach. "Mamá, I don't mean to be rude or ungrateful, but I don't want to go to Puerto Rico. Not now. Not ever."

Mamá put her hands on her ample hips and frowned. "Teresa, I'm worried about you. You used to be excited about life. Now all you do is go to work and to church. And when you're home, you spend most of your time in front of the TV, watching old romantic movies. My dear child, you can't go on like this."

Mamá was right. Teresa had put her life on pause. But how could she hit play again? Moving forward meant leaving behind the man who gave her life. The man who was her life. "Mamá, I can't go to Puerto Rico. I just can't. Please understand."

"Teresa, I've tried to understand. But it's been five years since Roberto died. There comes a point when you have to let go of the past if you want to live in the present and have hope for the future. Isn't that what you tell your clients?"

Mamá's words stung. "There is no future for me without Roberto."

Mamá took her hands. "Teresa, listen to me. Roberto would hate to see you like this. Remember how much he loved life? He wants you to love life, too."

Teresa had never considered that Roberto might want her to move on with her life. "Okay, suppose I do go to Puerto Rico. What about living expenses while I'm there? A hotel in San Juan isn't cheap."

Mamá's eyes lit up. "That problem is solved, too. In her letter, Ramona invited you to stay at her beautiful inn free of charge. You will love it. It's right on the ocean." Mamá pressed her fingertips to her lips and kissed them in delight. "And she will also provide all of your meals."

Teresa raised an eyebrow. That left only her clients. And, truth be told, she didn't need to see them in her office. She could coach them by telephone or by Skype from anywhere in the world. That was one of the perks that had attracted her to the coaching profession in the first place, besides the opportunity to help transform people's lives. And Ramona sounded desperate about her little granddaughter.

Mamá's eyes widened. "Well?"

"I'll think about it."

Mamá raised her hands in frustration. "¡Teresita! *Tu estás en la luna!* You have your head in the clouds. What's there to think about?"

"Mamá, you know I hate it when you're overbearing. I'm thirty-one years old. Just

let me be while I think this through.”

Mamá rubbed a hand across her forehead. “I’m sorry. I’m only trying to help.”

Teresa pulled out a chair from the kitchen table. “I know. But the best help you can give me is to let me work things out on my own.”

“You’ve been trying to work things out on your own for five years now, and you’re still depressed over Roberto.”

Teresa's stomach boiled like a cauldron. “You seem to forget that he is my husband.”

Mamá placed her hands on Teresa's shoulders. “He was your husband. He is now with the Lord and you are still here. You must go on with your life.”

Teresa sank into a kitchen chair. Roberto's death had cut out her very heart, leaving her raw and broken. Unable to go on. Unable to dream. To feel.

Her future had died with Roberto. She’d moved back in with her mother, hoping to assuage the grief. But now her pain had only grown worse. She could think of nothing else but her husband. The way he brought her coffee in the mornings. His beard tickling her face when he kissed her. His deep, bass voice when he read a passage of Scripture in their evening Bible studies. She would never forget him. How could she? She would never betray him by marrying another. Never leave him behind. Surely Mamá understood. She was a widow herself. Yet, Mamá had managed to survive and even to love life again.

But how?

Teresa joined Mamá in saying grace. Then, taking a mouthful of *arroz con pollo*, she swallowed it together with the lump in her throat. Yes. She would go to Puerto Rico. Not for herself, but for Ramona’s granddaughter.

Maybe she’d have more success helping Pilar than she’d had helping herself.

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