

# KEEP IT TOGETHER

In the friend-zone



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
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# **Keep It Together**

## **A Sweet Friends to Lovers Romantic Comedy**

Sworn To Loathe You Book 4

Rachel John

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# Chapter 1 - Carmen

“Hi, Carmen.”

I looked up from my desk to see the water guy strolling towards me with this week’s supply of five-gallon water bottles stacked on a dolly, his smile set at a thousand watts. Brandon, with his tiny shorts and powerful thighs, had a confidence he liked to manifest towards anyone with a willing ear. Maybe I was a softie, because while my coworkers practically hid under their desks when he showed up, I found him endearing.

“Hey, Brandon. How was your New Year’s Eve?” I asked.

He stopped and rested his elbow on the top bar of the dolly, pursing his lips at my question. “Excellent. It was just me and my dog, snuggled up in bed by nine-thirty. Neither of us like fireworks or staying up late. And as a result...” He moved his hands up and down his CrossFit body. “We were on our morning run by five the next day. This year can’t be anything but excellent for me. It’s already built into my routine.”

“How inspiring,” my friend Sadie said with a small dollop of mockery as she walked past us to reach the elevators. She smiled big when Brandon turned and frowned at her. Sadie was such a stinker, bless her heart.

“What about you?” Brandon asked, turning back to me. “Go to any New Year’s Eve parties on Saturday or anything?”

“Yep. A family party.” And by family I meant anyone who knew my parents, related and unrelated. They were all equally nosy, with the ability to hug as fiercely as they pried into my love life. There was always someone’s daughter’s soccer coach’s *tío* who was very handsome, rich, single, and only a little bit eccentric. If I took them up on it, I could have blind dates lined up from now until the end of eternity.

I yawned. “Sorry. I wish I was in bed at nine-thirty on any night.”

Brandon took my yawn as his cue to launch into all sorts of advice about energy recovery and optimal sleep rhythms, but he quickly lost me because another familiar face walked in the building with a delivery. Flowers this time.

Oh, please, no. Not him. Not today, when my hair was thrown back in a

ponytail, my makeup was a relic from yesterday, my to-do list was a mile long, and my concentration was already at half-power. I couldn't even blame it on a party. Last night I stayed up way too late reading a stupid high-seas romance to see if the pirate rescued the girl. He did. And the loss of sleep was totally worth it. Well, mostly worth it.

I hadn't considered in my rush to get here this morning that I might see *him*.

Flower deliveries always showed up in the hands of one Isaac Romano, florist at Beautiful Blooms. Isaac. That name was so formal-sounding when I'd always known him as Zac.

I couldn't believe he became a florist. Or that he grew up to be so incredibly hot. But the most baffling thing? Why he was still pretending not to know me. The old me. The one with a bad haircut, braces, and a mouth that never shut up at the right times.

How long were we going to play this game? We 'met' briefly at an after-work thing at a restaurant around the corner last year, and when he didn't show any signs of recognition, not even of my name, I went along with it. Even when his eyes met mine, over and over again, he said nothing. So, I said nothing. I would *not* be the one to bring up a past he apparently didn't remember.

After asking for my number through a mutual friend and getting a no, I braced myself for his next move. I had everything I'd longed to say to him planned out. How dare he be intrigued by the cleaned-up, grown-up version of me when he couldn't even remember breaking my awkward middle-school heart?

Except, that was it. He didn't approach me again.

But he did start showing up at our office with flower deliveries. He used to have someone else do it. Now, it's always him.

Today, he had on a fitted leather jacket that complimented his dark hair in the same way his dark-wash jeans brought out the blue in his eyes. He was holding a solid square vase filled with a mixture of yellow roses and daisies. It was a gorgeous arrangement, just like the man carrying them. Holy guacamole, he was attractive—and didn't he know it. The second he noticed me watching him, his lopsided smirk came out to play before he finally dropped his gaze and continued strolling on by, looking satisfied. Like all he needed was to rest his eyes on me for a few seconds, and then his day was complete.

A tiny part of me melted. A very tiny part. But then I froze it again with my special ice powers. Bad Carmen. No melting.

“Carmen?”

“Hmm?” I focused back on Brandon, touching the corner of my mouth self-consciously. Not to check for drool or anything. Just because.

Behind us, Isaac brought the flowers over to a desk and carefully turned the arrangement around so Margaret could read the birthday card. She was beaming. Isaac was beaming, putting his dimples on display. The flowers were so sunshiny yellow it almost hurt to look at them. It was a happiness-fest over there, and I wasn't the only one watching. That man was eye candy.

You'd think the corporate headquarters for a dating app would have better security. Sure, this was only the first floor and all the data on clients was locked away upstairs, but still. Did we let just anyone in here? All these deliveries were distracting. *He* was distracting.

“So, I'll see you next week?”

My eyes went back to poor Brandon, who was just trying to leave our clearly one-sided conversation with some dignity. “Yes, of course. Have a great week.”

He smiled and gave me finger guns. “Right back at you, gorgeous.”

I waited until he strolled away with the water before collapsing into the gliding rocking chair next to my desk. That's right, a gliding rocking chair. I had heard all sorts of zany things about the GoWithFriends work culture before I started here, and I was happy to report, most of them weren't too far off the mark. Everyone should have a rocking chair by their desk. It was excellent for brainstorming, or for times of stress, like right now.

Okay, back to work. I pulled up my calendar and realized I was two minutes late to a very important phone meeting. Great. Just great. I didn't have time to wait for Captain Flowers over there to exit the building. I had to be on top of things no matter what was going on around me.

Taking in a deep breath, I picked up my desk phone. Freddy's was the hottest new restaurant in downtown Phoenix, and if I could convince the manager to give us a regular reservation slot, our clients would be very happy.

My job at GoWithFriends was to find unique, local places for people to meet up for group dates, and it was as amazing as it sounded. I was thrilled to be a part of making online dating more fun, casual, and stress-free for people.

Okay, it was go-time. I put in the number of the restaurant owner, and

waited the four long rings until he picked up.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Kruder?”

“That’s me. Is this Carmen Ortega?”

“It is. Thank you so much for taking my call. It’s such an honor to talk to you, and I know you’re busy so I’ll get right to it. Have you considered our offer to partner up?” We didn’t pay companies to accommodate us, but we did promote them to our members and in ads to potential new members across social media platforms. Some places were more eager for free promotion than others. I had a feeling Mr. Kruder wasn’t dying for attention. His restaurant was doing just fine without us.

“Yes, well, I’m afraid I can’t give you an ongoing reservation. We’re much too busy for that. I could squeeze in a party of ten or less with at least a week’s notice, but the weekend is absolutely out of the question. Actually, before five on any night is out of the question.”

Darn, that’s what I was afraid of. Most working people couldn’t do a mid-week afternoon group date.

“What about between meal-times, say at two p.m. on a Saturday or Sunday?”

“No, I’m afraid that won’t work. Even our lunch hour on weekends is packed, and there is no lull.”

I took a deep breath, reminding myself to focus on what he *was* offering. “We could absolutely give you a week’s notice. What about a midweek appointment. Say, Mondays at four-thirty p.m.?”

He gave a large sigh. And then there was silence.

“May I be frank with you?” he finally asked.

“Of course.”

“Miss Ortega, in general, large parties are problematic for restaurants. They always have people they’re waiting on, and yet the food needs to come out synchronized. They require us to rearrange tables. And although the whole party wants to sit together, they don’t want to pay together, which leads to extra work for our servers. I could go on, but basically what I’m telling you is I’m not interested in reserving a space for large parties. We are not Chuck-E-Cheese. So, I am very sorry, but your request is denied.”

Wow, that was taking frank to a whole new level. And why had he offered us a slot only to take it back? On the bright side, I could definitely cross them off my list and move on, which I guessed was better than



continuing to chase a lead to nowhere. Still, I needed to be sure.

“Do you have morning hours? Perhaps you could use one of our groups as a practice run for new servers or to test out potential menu items?”

“Madam, that is absolutely out of the question.” His words were getting snippier with every syllable, and that was when I knew I’d pushed too far.

“I understand. And I thank you for your time, sir.”

“Of course. Freddy Kruder at your service.”

“It was a pleasure to speak with you, Freddy. I mean Mr. Kruger. Freddy Kruger.” What was my mouth doing? “I’m so sorry, sir. I—”

“That’s quite enough.” Click. Call ended. Life over. I had mixed up a very snooty chef with a psychopathic murderer from *Nightmare on Elm Street*. I was absolutely winning at my job.

“Argghhh.” I dropped the phone on the desk and leaned over, squeezing my fists against my forehead. “Could this day get any worse?”

“You’re not supposed to ask that.” A smooth voice replied. “The universe will hear you and give you a flat tire or something, just for asking.”

“You’re the flat tire,” I mumbled.

It was him. Because in addition to becoming an incredibly beautiful specimen of a man, Isaac’s voice had turned out to be rich and deep to match. I looked up at him and frowned. He’d never approached my desk before. Now he was leaning against it, looking way too comfortable. This close, I could see the little scar above his eyebrow from when he’d run into a tree branch as a kid. It was weird to know that story, but not know him.

“I don’t have time for the conversation we need to have,” I told him.

“The one where you explain why you were talking to Freddy Kruger on the phone just now?”

“No. The other one, *Zac*.”

There was a long pause while we sized each other up.

“No one’s called me that in a long time.” He straightened up from leaning against my desk and sat down in my desk chair instead, rolling towards me until our knees almost touched. And then they did touch. It was magical.

No. There was no magic going on here.

I pushed back in my glider, but then I had to hold that position with the tips of my toes pressed into the floor. Not that those few inches made any difference. He smelled like fresh air, greenery, and a hint of something deliciously masculine. It wasn’t fair. Nothing about this was fair.

“I won’t bite. Please don’t do that. It looks uncomfortable.” Isaac reached out and lightly pulled on the arms of my glider until it returned to its resting position with my legs touching his.

I crossed my arms. “You’re very forward for a flower delivery man.”

“That’s true. But like you said, we need to have a conversation.”

“You waited long enough.”

For the first time, he looked the tiniest bit vulnerable. “I did, and I’d like to explain why. Maybe we can talk about it when there’s more time, and it’s just us.”

I didn’t have to look around to know all those eyes that watched him walk in here were now trained on the two of us.

He pulled a business card out of the inside pocket of his jacket. “I’m going to leave my card here in case you want to call me later.”

“Don’t bother,” I murmured. Maybe it was silly to hold a grudge this long, but I wasn’t ready to trust him, even with something as simple as my time.

He put the card down anyway. Then he rolled back and stood up, before slowly walking away, glancing back once to see my reaction. I didn’t give him one. I just stared, making sure he actually left.

Once he did, I left his business card where it was, not sure yet what I planned to do with it. I could always pass it along to someone who needed to order flowers. Maybe then I wouldn’t feel so twisty inside for standing my ground. I was normally friendly with everyone. But when it came to Isaac, I needed walls. Tall ones.

## Chapter 2 - Isaac

“Uncle Isaac is back!” My niece Piper was better than any bell over the door at announcing visitors to the flower shop.

“Hi, baby.” I met her halfway across the floor and swung her around.

“Are you helping your mom?”

“Yes. I’m lots of help.”

“She sure is. I needed *someone* as my backup.” Grace glared at me from behind the counter, although her eyes turned soft when Piper took my hand. As always, Piper’s tiny fingers were a little bit sticky from candy or pancake syrup or whatever she’d dipped them into, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. She wouldn’t be five forever. Soon, she’d be off to kindergarten instead of being our little shadow in this shop.

I couldn’t blame Grace for being irritated with me, though. Once again, I’d held back a few of the deliveries from our courier so I could take them myself. Sometimes it was nice to be a part of where the finished arrangements went. It brought everything full circle. Of course, I had another reason for making deliveries to GoWithFriends, but I wouldn’t be sharing that with my sister.

Did I think Carmen was going to keep my business card and call me? No. But at least I wasn’t biding my time and hiding in this shop thinking of her. We’d actually talked.

“Sorry for leaving you this morning. Was it busy? Where’s Natalie?”

“I didn’t schedule her for today. We’ve been busier than I expected, but nothing we couldn’t handle. However, you have a bridal consultation in five minutes.” Grace reached across the counter and handed me a tablet with the bride’s information pulled up. “She’s bringing her mother along, and while she didn’t say it, I can sense there’s conflict there.”

“No worries. I’ll take good care of them.”

Grace’s shoulders visibly relaxed. “I was afraid you wouldn’t be back in time.”

“I know. But I’m here. You and Piper go prep the next wave of orders.” I reached out and pulled a piece of fern from the top of Grace’s dark hair.

She'd been playing with her hair color again. There were streaks of red in it that brightened at the ends.

"You hate it," she said, picking up a chunk of her hair and waving the end at me. "I saw you scrunching your nose at me when you first saw my hair this morning."

"Actually, I don't hate it at all. It looks good." I definitely preferred it to the blonde she used to have. Going blonde seemed like a lot of unnecessary work when she looked perfectly fine with the natural jet-black hair we'd both inherited from the Italian side of our family. I didn't say any of that, though, because I valued my life more than I valued my opinions.

"Well, thank you." Grace retied the strings on her apron and headed into the back, looking a lot less grumpy. Piper trailed after her, although she turned my way several times and gave me puppy dog eyes. I shook my head, no. Even at five, Piper was amazing with the clueless customers who came in looking for something special for an anniversary or birthday, but brides were a whole different ballgame. They didn't want to be charmed, they wanted to be wowed.

That was probably the reason Grace didn't like dealing with brides at all. If she had it her way, she would always be elbow deep in flowers and never take on consultations. She wasn't bad at them, they just stressed her out.

I wished she'd take my advice and train our part-timers Natalie and Sam to do things like bridal consultations. I could see them itching to do more and learn more, get more hours and more experience. But Grace had a hard time trusting people. The shop was her baby, and because it was her baby, I deferred to her more than I should, even though we ran it together. I would do anything for Grace and Piper. I would always show up. But sometimes I let myself dream of other things. Other ideas. Just not right now.

I sat at our consultation table and read up on the bride. Wedding six months from now in May. We'd have to go with flowers that could handle the Arizona heat. Small church venue. Reception following. Indoors, thank goodness. Wedding colors—eucalyptus, fuchsia, and pale petal pink. It didn't take a genius to see flowers had been on her mind when she picked those colors out.

I wasn't as good at designing as Grace, but possibilities formed in my mind as I pulled up the app we used for wedding consultations. Well, the one I used. Grace preferred to sketch out her bouquet ideas. My creative skills were more of the click and drag variety. I liked that I could sort through

flower selections by season, hardiness, and availability.

The bell over the door chimed and I looked up to see our bride-to-be; dark-haired, tall, and looking very excited. She was followed by a short scowling woman.

The bride hurried over and put out her hand. “You must be Isaac. Grace told me all about you. I’m Amalia, and this is my mother, Maria.”

“*Hola*,” Maria muttered, settling into a chair across from me and setting a big lumpy bag on top of her lap. She pulled out some kind of needle-point project, followed by handfuls of embroidery thread that immediately fell all over the floor.

I reached out and gathered up the fallen thread, ready to make a friendly inquiry as to what she was working on, but Amalia gave me a tiny headshake that clearly meant, *don’t engage*. Okay then.

I put all the thread on the table like it belonged there, and then immediately turned to Amalia. “Let’s get started.”

Like many brides, she’d created a Pinterest board, so we scrolled through that and talked options, including what each would cost per piece.

“Amalia.” Maria tapped her daughter’s arm, interrupting her. “Amalia.” She glanced at me before launching into rapid Spanish.

I knew enough to pick out bits and pieces, especially the words I often encountered in my line of work. It boiled down to this: Amalia had an aunt (or maybe Maria had an aunt?) who would do the flowers for cheap. This situation came up more than you would think, and who won in the end always boiled down to who was the more determined party. My money was not on Amalia, but maybe she’d surprise me.

Amalia frowned. “No, Mamá. *No quiero flores artificiales.*”

“*Flores de seda*. Silk,” Maria said, finally turning and acknowledging me. “They last forever.”

“Mamá.” Amalia put her hands up in a plea. “I don’t want them to last forever. That’s what pictures are for. And we’re already using Tomás for the pictures. He’s good. I’m not saying he’s not. But we also have Santi and Theresa making the cakes. The D.J. is your cousin’s boy. How many favors do you want to owe?”

It was the right question to ask. Or maybe the wrong one, because Maria narrowed her eyes and turned to study me, making me feel a little like a dusty item she’d suddenly found a use for.

“You are very handsome. Are you single, too?”

“Má.” Amalia groaned. “No.”

“She’s taken,” I pointed out, hoping with all my heart this wasn’t about finding her daughter a replacement groom.

Maria laughed. “Oh, you are funny. Amalia is too good for you. No. I have a list. You pick from this list.” She reached into her needle point bag and pulled out several half-done projects, setting them on the table before finding a tattered notebook.

Amalia groaned. “She keeps a list of every single person she knows, so she’s always prepared to make a match when the time is right. And there’s never a wrong time.”

“Never a wrong time,” Maria echoed, ignoring the sarcasm from her daughter.

“Do they know they’re on this list?” I asked.

“They know. I’m an excellent matchmaker. A call from me is like...” She stopped to think. “It’s like the Publisher’s Clearing House of love. That’s me. And you, *señor*, are like the big check that shows up at the door.” She held out her arms. “Big check.”

“As flattering as that is, I don’t think...I...can...” My words slowed as her answering glare burned into my soul. I could do this. It was a simple no. I said no all the time. I’d said no to the leftover cheesecake in my fridge this morning. I could say no to this woman. And I would... as soon as she stopped staring at me like that.

Maria narrowed her eyes. “You want to do Amalia’s flowers? You pick from this list.” She jabbed at the old notebook in her hands.

I made the mistake of glancing at Amalia for support. And while she was definitely appalled at her mother’s behavior, I also saw desperate hope there. I was her wild card, her Hail Mary, her last-ditch effort to have real flowers at her wedding. If I said no, what would she have to go through at the next flower shop?

This was hitting at a weak spot I thought I’d conquered. Because of some serious stupidity in my teen years, I never wanted to disappoint people again. I avoided it whenever possible. It was why my ex-fiancée had to be the one to break things off. I couldn’t do it. I was terrified of hurting her. Instead, she’d hurt me.

I didn’t even know Amalia, but I could feel that familiar dread creeping up. This was a small thing for me if I said yes, and it would mean the world to her.

I scratched the back of my neck. “So, I choose a name? And then what?”

“Two. You pick two girls. I set up the dates.”

When had we bypassed picking one name? “Two dates?”

Maria nodded. “Yes. I am a woman of my word. Are you a man of your word? You will show up to these dates and be handsome and charming. It’s just coffee. No dinner or movies or anything. You promise this, and I will buy all the flowers for my daughter’s wedding. Right now.”

“Mamá, I’ll pay for the flowers,” Amalia murmured.

“No. Your papá and I pay.” She said the words with finality, all while staring at me and waiting for my answer.

“Can I see this list?”

She opened it up to a bookmarked page in the middle and set the book in front of me.

“Why are some crossed out?” I asked. There were lines of handwritten names with notes beside them in Spanish. But many had been scribbled out.

“Married now. Some move away. Things like that.”

“Oh, okay.”

I read through the not crossed-out ones with no idea of what I was supposed to do. How was I supposed to decide based on a name? A name didn’t tell me where the person lived, how old they were, or whether they had volunteered themselves or been coerced like me.

Maria must have recognized my bewilderment. “I have pictures. This girl here.” She tapped on one of the names. “Dessie Hice. She does my hair. Very pretty and successful. You’ll see.” She scrolled frantically through the pictures on her phone until she found the one she was looking for and turned to show me.

Dessie Hice was close to my age, and more importantly she didn’t have serial killer eyes. “Okay, sure.” Oh, man. I’d said yes. To a semi-professional matchmaker.

“Next.” Maria flipped the page. “Pick one of these over here.”

I looked at the names on the next page, prepared to choose someone at random, but my eyes stopped on *Carmen Ortega*. Maybe it was a sign, or maybe it was the world’s biggest coincidence. Either way, I had to choose her. How could I not?

“What if she doesn’t want to go out with me?” I asked in what I hoped was a casual and non-specific way. “Like, what if the person refuses?”

“Why would they refuse?” Maria frowned at me.

“Let’s say they do. Then what?”

“Then I will send someone in their place.” Maria shrugged. It made no difference to her who I went out with. So much for being a matchmaker.

Carmen was going to murder me. Well, if it was her. It was possible there was another Carmen Ortega out there. Not that I was interested in any other Carmen Ortega. Just her. Only her. I had to make things right with Carmen, one way or another. Maybe this was the way.

“I pick this one,” I said, pointing to her name.

“Ah. My next-door neighbor’s daughter. Very special girl. But you’re right. She may say no.”

“She doesn’t like setups,” Amalia explained. “I told you not to write her name down, Mamá.”

“It’s okay. I’ll take your picture.” Maria smiled. “She’ll say yes to you, *guapo*.”

I wouldn’t count on that.



## Chapter 3 - Carmen

“Carmen!” My mother pounded on my front door. “We need you. It’s really important this time. I swear.”

Ten faces smiled knowingly at me from my computer screen, because of course, I was not on mute, and my mother was as loud as my walls were thin. “Sorry, guys. Be right back.” I muted myself and turned off my camera before sliding across the linoleum floor in my fuzzy socks to get the door.

I had been promised certain things when I moved into the casita behind my parents’ house a few years ago. Mainly, that I would be like any other renter they’d ever had. Well, except I wouldn’t make messes or skip out on rent. And in return for being a model tenant who was quiet and responsible, they agreed to respect my privacy. It wouldn’t be at all like I was still living at home.

What had I been thinking? It was exactly like living at home. When my brother came to visit, he raided *my* fridge before he raided theirs. If I wasn’t quick enough, my mother would empty my clothes out of the dryer and mix them in with her baskets. My younger sister owned more pairs of my underwear than I did. And then there were all these fun interruptions because I was *right here*.

And yet, I couldn’t bring myself to move away. Family ties were as much a blessing as a curse.

“Má, what is it?” I asked. “Is the neighbor dog loose again?” His favorite pastime was digging under the fence and coming over to chase our chickens around the yard. Not that I could blame him. Chasing chickens was pretty fun.

“No. It’s Maria. She says she wants to talk to you about Amalia’s bridal shower.”

That did not constitute an emergency, and we both knew it. She just didn’t want to tell Maria no. No one told Maria no. She had been our neighbor for longer than I’d lived on this earth, and the woman was a force of nature.

“I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

My mother glanced behind me to my double computer screens where

my wool felting group was continuing on without me, and from the sounds of it, having a great time. I stood a little taller, trying to look dignified. We always got some felting done. It just happened alongside a good helping of gossip and off-color jokes. This was my Monday night stress-reliever. And sometimes Sunday night. And Friday night. Basically, any day of the week I could find someone in our group wanting to chat and felt. But Mondays were official.

“You can teach them bad words in Spanish later, Carmen.”

“We talk about all sorts of things, Má.”

Right then, Tawny, who may or may not have been drinking during the entire meeting, burst out into the “If You Like Piña Coladas” song. She and the felted hedgehog in her hands swayed back and forth to the beat of the music.

I sighed. “Okay, fine. Tell Maria I’ll be there in three minutes.”

“That’s my girl.” My mother smiled and waved to the group, not knowing my camera was off and they couldn’t see her. As soon as I had the door shut, I slid back to my desk and turned on my microphone and camera.

“I have to go. It’s Maria. The woman I told you about who cornered me on New Year’s Eve.”

“The one with the list of men she wants to set you up with?” Belinda asked, pushing up her reading glasses. She shushed Tawny until she stopped singing and put down her hedgehog.

“Yes. Except she wants to talk to me about her daughter’s wedding plans, so if I can keep her occupied with that, I’ll be fine. I’m going to be one of the bridesmaids.”

“How fun!” Jeanie thought everything was fun, but in this case, she was right. Amalia and I had grown up together. Because she was a few years older than me, she felt more like a cousin than anything else. Being one of her bridesmaids would be fun. I was looking forward to the ceremony and the reception and dancing. All of it, really.

“Show us your newest penguin before you go,” Belinda reminded me.

Some of the women sold their creations online. I made mine solely for my own amusement. My latest project was a series of penguins waddling in a line. The one I made tonight was jolly and round, and he was looking off to the side sort of dreamily. I already planned to make a grumpy, taller, impatient penguin to stand behind him.

After a chorus of oohs and awes for the little guy, I signed off and shut

down my computer. My felting group had started as a way for me to share my hobby obsession with like-minded people, but over time, they had also become the ladies I confided in. They had years of life experience on me. Plus, I didn't have to worry about them blabbing my secrets because they didn't know anyone else in my life. Who would they tell?

A diary might work the same way for some people, but it had never been as satisfying for me. I had several discarded journaling attempts as evidence for that. A diary couldn't talk back or laugh with me. It couldn't give me advice or tell me everything was going to be okay after a bad break up.

*A diary can't betray you like people can*, the grudge in my head whispered. I told it to shut up and went to slide my feet into my fuzzy Crocs before going outside. Fuzzy socks inside fuzzy Crocs was the epitome of comfort, and there was nothing I liked better than being cozy in every way possible.

I headed across the yard and into my parents' house, crossing through the kitchen and ducking into the hallway to get the lay of the land before making my presence known. Country music blared from behind the door of my sister's room at the end of the hall. In the living room, Maria was sharing about the wedding preparations while my mother made small sounds of encouragement in return.

Was she disappointed Maria got to plan a wedding before she did? Probably. I was twenty-six, and my brother Eddie twenty-eight. Neither of us were anywhere near giving my parents grandchildren. My seventeen-year-old baby sister would probably get there first. But I was in no hurry to tie myself to anyone, especially after finding out guys my age were only interested in the pursuit. If I had a type, it was tall, dark, and unwilling to commit.

For now, I was fine with having fun and making friends. I flirted. I went out. But more than anything else, I wanted to end every night out happy and comfortable in my own skin, and most importantly, with no regrets. I was done getting my heart broken.

I turned the corner and went to hug our neighbor while my mother eagerly snuck out of the room. "Did you pick a day for Amalia's bridal shower?" I asked.

"*Sí, el primero de marzo*. That's a Saturday. But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about." Maria picked up her old embroidery bag from the couch and began digging through it. I knew from the determined look on her face when she pulled out her matchmaking notebook that I was not going

to get out of this conversation unscathed.

“I found you a man. Great looking. Very nice. Business owner.”

He was probably sixty-five with hair sticking out of his ears. “Maria, I told you I’m too busy for blind dates.”

“It’s just a coffee date. Make time for this one. His name is Isaac Romano, and he’s a florist. Good, right? I show you a picture.” She was too busy scrolling through photos on her phone to notice the look of horror on my face. *I take it back. Sixty-five with hairy ears sounds perfect.*

“How did you find him?” I managed to squeak out.

“He’s doing the flowers for Amalia’s wedding. If he has time for you, you have time for him, *preciosa*.”

She turned the phone to show me. Some choice bad words crossed my mind as I stared at Isaac’s face. To his credit, his expression in the photo was incredibly reluctant and embarrassed, but he’d also let Maria take it.

“Give him to someone else.”

Maria frowned at me. “But he picked you.”

“What do you mean, he picked me?”

“I showed him the list. He picked your name.”

My face heated up, and I wanted to say it was all from anger, but there was also embarrassment and flattery intertwined, making it hard to think straight. Isaac wanted to see me outside of his occasional flower deliveries, and he’d found a way. Not that I was giving in without making this work in my favor, too.

“If I go out with him, I want you to take me off the list.”

Maria made a face. “Why, Carmen?”

“Because I’m not even supposed to be in there. I told you no dates. I’m doing you a favor by agreeing to this one. And Gia. I know you have plans for her once she graduates from high school. But she’s too young to go in your little book.”

She pursed her lips, and then nodded. “Okay. You go out with him, I take you both off.”

Well, that was a relief. And maybe this would be good. I’d finally get to tell Isaac exactly what I thought of him. There would be no more dancing around the way he’d once treated me. No more glaring at him while he made flower deliveries. We could examine the remains of our old friendship, and then bury it once and for all. If he had any other objectives for this date, he’d just have to shelf those.

Getting rejected at age thirteen is traumatic. But when the guy who rejects you is your long-time pen pal? That changes you.

## Chapter 4 - Isaac

*Dear Carmen,*

*I'm in Mrs Maldonos third grade class. I live in Mesa, AZ. If we were going to be pen pals I have some questions for you first.*

- 1. what would you do if a coyote attacked*
- 2. Do you have any cool scars?*
- 3. How tall are you?*

*From,*

*Zac Romano*

*Dear Zac,*

*My teacher says we have to be pen pals and write three times. No swapping allowed. I know this because Ty didn't want to write to a girl, but my teacher said he had to. And then he cried. Just kidding. He pouted, which is pretty much the same thing. So let's be pen pals.*

*Answers:*

- 1. If a coyote attacked I would scream and run at his face. But coyotes don't attack. They run across the road real fast and look for chickens. Pacificaly, our chickens.*
- 2. I have a scab on my knee. I don't know if it's a scar yet. I'll let you know.*
- 3. I'm not tall. My brother calls me stumpy but you can't call me that, okay?*

*Your friend,*

*Carmen Ortega*

“Isaac, there’s a call for you,” Grace hollered from up front.

“Call for you,” Piper echoed.

I didn’t like the amused lilt to their voices. It meant bad things. Sometimes customers had weird requests, and although Grace was not a bleeding heart like me, she still preferred to punt to me rather than telling them no herself. She said I was more diplomatic. Last month, it was the lady who insisted on coming in the back and making her own arrangements. After the second time we had to tell her we couldn’t allow it for liability reasons. Actually, it was for sanity reasons. Everything came to a grinding halt until she was done playing florist-for-a-day.

I came to stand next to Grace behind the front counter and reached over to tickle Piper’s nose with a strand of her hair, making her giggle. “Who is it?” I whispered to Grace. I’d been on a roll greening the vases for tomorrow’s orders before closing. Natalie and Sam had been working on it, but their shifts ended at four. This had better be important.

Grace covered the lower half of the phone. “Maria Esposito. She says it’s about your dates.”

Not important, but I’d give Maria this: she was efficient. The matchmaker didn’t even make it forty-eight hours before following up with me.

I shook my head at Grace, who was grinning like a kid on Christmas morning. If she hadn’t given the wedding flower consult to me yesterday, she might have been the one in Maria’s little matchmaking book, and she knew it. Nobody should be that gloaty about dodging a bullet. “This could have been you,” I mouthed.

“I don’t date,” Grace mouthed back, tilting her head towards Piper, her one true love and top priority.

“I bet this lady could make you change your mind.” I took the phone from her hands and cleared my throat. “This is Isaac.”

“Ah, Isaac. This is Maria. I have not gotten Dessie on the phone, and she wasn’t at her work, but Carmen is a yes. I showed her your picture. What did I tell you? You are one lucky man because she said no more after this. Just you.”

“Wow, that is lucky.” She said yes? I turned away so Grace and Piper

wouldn't see me smiling at the news. I was supposed to be grumpy about being trapped this woman. If they knew how much I was doing an internal tap dance, they'd both want to know why. There was a chance Carmen was plotting my death right now, but that didn't change the fact that, for whatever reason, she'd agreed to go out with me.

"So, you will meet her on Friday at seven-thirty? You can do this?"

I realized that in all my daydreaming I'd missed half of what Maria said. "Where am I meeting her?"

"At Steamers. You know this place?"

I pulled up a new tab on the computer in front of me and quickly Googled it. I wasn't much of a coffee guy. If I wanted a cup, which wasn't very often, I wasn't picky about where it came from.

Steamers was four miles from the flower shop. "Yes, I know where it is, and I'll be there Friday at seven-thirty."

"Oh, good. Tell me everything. I call again, okay?" She hung up before I could respond, probably because the only answer she was willing to accept was yes. Tell her everything? No wonder she wanted to play matchmaker. We were like her own little *telenovela* brought to life.

"You have a date already?" Grace asked, rocking back on her heels in excitement. "She works fast."

"You have no idea."

"So, who is it with?"

"Someone Maria knows." I would not be divulging Carmen's name in case Grace remembered her. Not yet, anyway. There were too many possible outcomes, and the fewer details I gave out, the better. For all I knew, Carmen might take great pleasure in standing me up.

Another call came in and Grace took it, so I snagged the opportunity to return to the back and finish my work. Piper came to help. I had her sweep up floral cuttings with her little broom and dustpan while I prepped tomorrow morning's orders. Once I had everything organized and in the refrigerator cases, I checked on Piper.

"How's it going over there, Fruity Pebbles?"

Piper turned to smile at me. "Good. You guys make such a mess."

"We sure do. Ready to go up front and help your mom? It's cold back here."

"Yep." She dumped the contents of her dustpan in the trash and came to stand next to me. "Is a date like romance?"



“Um, sometimes it leads to romance. A date is where you go spend time with someone and see if you like each other.”

“And romance is kissing, right?”

I turned to stare at her. She did way too much listening when we didn't think she was paying attention. She probably also watched too many Hallmark movies with Grace on the weekends. Grace could say whatever she wanted about never dating again, but we both knew deep down she was a hopeless romantic. I was glad her idiot ex-husband hadn't robbed her of that.

“I feel like you should be asking your mom these questions.” I was a constant presence in her life, but I still wasn't her dad. This wasn't my turf. I took Piper's hand and led her towards the front of the shop. “Grace, Piper's asking about kissing and dates.”

Grace turned and looked at the two of us, hands on her hips. “Sometimes kissing happens on dates. Is that what you're asking?”

“Like Uncle Isaac's date?” Piper asked.

Grace met my eyes for half a second before focusing back on her daughter and putting on a serious face. “I don't think he'll be kissing someone he just met.”

“Correct.” I'd be lucky to coax a smile out of Carmen. Kissing her was... not something I'd allow myself to think about.

Grace picked up Piper and set her on the counter so they were eye to eye. “Kisses are special, little one. Both people should want the kiss. And they should care about each other. And they should be at least thirty-five.”

Piper giggled. “Thirty-five? That's a lot.”

“Exactly.”

“Is Uncle Isaac thirty-five?”

“Nope. No kissing allowed for like eight more years. He's out of luck.”

I threw my hands up in mock annoyance. “This is terrible news. I didn't know I needed to be thirty-five.”

Piper was used to our teasing, and I listened to the two of them talk about what the real rules were and what was Grace's wishful thinking while I pulled all the shades down and swept, preparing to close up for the night. Just before I locked the front door, a familiar Audi A6 pulled up and parked out front.

“Dean's here.”

My sister groaned. “Tell him we're closed. I want to go home and eat spaghetti and meatballs in my pajamas while Piper and I watch cartoons.”

I turned and raised my eyebrows at her. “Don’t tell him that. He’d follow you home. He loves spaghetti *and* cartoons.” Not that he needed a reason. He’d follow her home every night if she’d let him.

“He’s not invited.” She looked down at Piper. “Don’t you dare.”

“But it’s spaghetti night. We make Nana’s special breadsticks. I bet he’d love our breadsticks.”

Dean got out and checked his light brown hair in the reflection of his car window, running his fingers through the back where it curled just past his ears and smiling to himself. His natural vanity did not surprise to me in the slightest, and yet he was the most loyal friend you could have. He was almost to the door when Grace, in what must have been a last-minute decision, ran past me and flipped the lock on him.

“Very mature, Grace,” Dean called through the door. He pressed his forearms against the glass and stared her down. “What if I came to buy flowers?”

“Did you come to buy flowers?” she called out.

“No, I’m currently single, and my mother is allergic. However, I could point out I helped start this place—” His words cut off as Grace unlocked the door and pulled it open, causing him to fall forward before he caught himself.

Grace liked to remind him in subtle ways that his golden boy charm didn’t work on her. She waved him forward. “Come in then, shameless investor.”

“Dean!” Piper ran towards him, and he caught her up and gave her a big hug.

“I’ve missed you, pumpkin.”

“We missed you, too. Did you bring me anything from Chicago?”

“Besides lots of pictures of snow?” Dean put her down and looked to Grace, clearly asking for permission on how to answer the question. Knowing Dean, he probably had several gifts for Piper, along with a few for Grace he couldn’t give her because she’d never let him.

Grace gave him a tiny nod of assent, and he turned back to Piper. “I did get you something. Hang on, and I’ll go get it from my car. Help your Uncle Isaac close up, okay? Just don’t let your mom lock me out this time.”

“Okay.” Piper guarded the door and watched for Dean to come back while Grace looked on and sighed.

“You could do worse,” I murmured.

“He’s like a brother to me.”

I wasn't sure I believed that. In her unguarded moments, Grace was not unflappable when it came to him. Yes, our mom had seriously dated his dad back in the day, and I considered Dean and his dad to be family. But that didn't mean they were. "He's our friend. You could at least give him that courtesy."

"I know." She sounded so conflicted that I let the subject drop. It wasn't like I was some love guru who had all the answers. They would probably be a disaster together anyway.

"Are you okay if I go?" I asked. I wasn't in a hurry to leave like I used to be, back when my schedule, and, okay, my life, was run by my former fiancée; but I did have things I wanted to do tonight.

"Yeah, we'll be fine. Get out of here." Grace watched me pick up a leftover bouquet from the counter and gave me an understanding smile. "I'd say you need some new hobbies, but then I'd probably be struck dead. Maybe, I don't know, consider hanging out with ladies under the age of eighty, occasionally?"

"I have a date on Friday," I reminded her.

"Yeah, your social life is really kicking." She turned back to the door as Dean came in again. "As is mine."

## Chapter 5 - Carmen

“Pá, it’s getting dark. Let’s wait for Eddie. He said he’d do it tomorrow.” My hands felt frozen as they clung to the bottom of the ladder, but more importantly, I wasn’t sure I was actually doing much to help. I wouldn’t bet my strength against the momentum of a tall ladder once it decided to lean. And yet I held firm anyway.

“Eddie says lots of things,” Papá called down to me, unclipping another section of the Christmas lights that had lined the rooftop of the house since the day after Thanksgiving. “I love the boy, but I don’t wait on him for anything.”

“Then *I’ll* help you tomorrow. I keep my promises, don’t I?” I’d also insist on being the one at the top of the ladder, no matter how afraid of heights I was.

“Okay, tomorrow.” But he didn’t move to get down. Instead, he reached out a little further and unclipped a new section. Papá would not be swayed from his task by promises, trustworthy or otherwise.

I scrunched my nose, knowing what I was about to say would get him down in a hurry, but would also cost me in unwanted attention. “Pá, I’m supposed to be getting ready for a date. The one Maria set me up on.”

At that he stopped working and peered down at me. “I didn’t think you would go.”

“Well, I could always tell Maria I was helping you and couldn’t make it.” It was a tempting excuse. But I hadn’t been lying when I said I kept my promises. This date, disastrous or not, was happening.

“No, no. You go get ready. I’ll be down in a minute.”

Nice try. I shook my head at him. “Not on your life. I’ll go get ready when your two feet are on the ground. My date can wait for me. And Maria doesn’t have to know I showed up late.”

“Okay, fine. I’m coming down. You’re right. We can do this tomorrow.”

I bit back a smile. He feared Maria just as much as everyone else, and she would never forgive him if he made me late.

As he came down step-by-step in his scuffed old cowboy boots, I wasn’t

sure who was groaning more, him or the ladder. Papá was getting too old for this stuff, but he'd never admit it.

"You are meeting him somewhere, no?" he asked, trying to sound unconcerned. He didn't fool me one bit. Papá's feelings about my dating life were a strange mix of hope and dread. He wanted me to get married someday, but he also couldn't deal with the particulars of getting there. That made two of us.

"We're meeting at Steamers."

His eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "What kind of place is this?"

"It's a coffee shop."

"Oh." He relaxed at that and walked with me to the front door. "And you'll wear at least three cardigans to scare him off?"

"Pá." I put my hands on my hips, trying to appear stern even though I wanted to laugh. "What is wrong with my cardigans?"

"Nothing. It's just all those layers tell a man you'll always be cold. He'll have a lifetime of rubbing your feet and fetching you blankets." He opened the door for me and followed behind as I walked in.

"Well, maybe I want to send that message. This is a man Maria picked out, after all." I would not mention that I knew the guy. That was going in the vault, along with my complicated feelings about him.

"In that case, wear four sweaters. Maybe add some....uh..." He clearly couldn't think of the word, but I knew what he was talking about when he pointed to the collar of his shirt.

"Felted flower pins?"

"Yes. Those. And some heart ones. And the *chupacabras* with the googly eyes."

"The frog pins?"

"Yes. Wear those."

Mamá came around the corner from the hallway and stared us down. "You're giving her fashion advice? No frog pins, *mija*. Wear something *muy* sexy." I wished she was joking. She was not. Making Papá stalk off and grumble to himself was only a bonus.

The women in our family were short and generously curvy. We could slay with the right outfit and a set of stilettos. But this was not a night for something like that.

"Pá," I called out before he left the room. "What do my felt pins tell a man about me?"

He turned around and smiled before winking at Mamá. “They say at least one room in your house will be stuffed with crafts. Maybe two. The ironing board will always be out. And measuring tapes will dangle from the ceiling like onions in a cellar.”

“Eduardo, *por favor*.” Somehow when my mother put her hands on her ample hips, she looked way more formidable than I’d ever hope to be, but Papá only laughed and pointed at the ironing board in the corner where my mother had stacks of material in every color and pattern imaginable. Her craft of choice was aprons. She made them and gave them as gifts. For graduations, welcome home, wedding showers. They worked for every occasion.

“I love your ironing board, Francesca. I love everything about you. Everything.” He enunciated the last word in a way that made her blush.

Those two. I never knew if they were about to start a passionate argument or on their way to passion. Either way, I wasn’t sticking around for it.

I headed for the back door. “*Adios*. I’m sure I will see you both very soon.”

“Why so soon?” Má asked.

“It’s only a coffee date.”

“But it could be more. Stay out late.”

“Maybe.” But really, I meant no.

I went out the kitchen door and strolled over to my place, letting out a sigh as I shut myself in, and then a squeak when I realized my friend Winnie was sitting on my couch, eating Honey Nut Cheerios straight out of the box and flipping through one of my felting magazines. The girl was worse than my brother when it came to making random appearances.

“Winnie, what are you doing?” I never should have told her where I hid my extra key. She lived three doors down in a house she inherited from her grandmother, but she hated being alone in that big house all by herself. I couldn’t say I blamed her. I had toyed with the idea of suggesting we become roommates and dividing all that space, but Winnie talked about selling it all the time, and one of these days she might actually do it. Better to let her come and go as she pleased.

“I put up those floating shelves you bought. The pencil marks you put on the wall are where they were meant to go, right?”

I turned and looked. They were absolutely perfect. Hardware intimidated

me for some reason, and I would gladly exchange all the snacks in my house for a handywoman who could finish my abandoned projects. Only Winnie would listen to me complain, say nothing, and then put the shelves up for me later on a whim.

“Thank you, Winnie. They look awesome.”

“No prob. I was hungry and bored. And also curious. Word on the street is Maria set you up with a florist for tonight. You know he’s going to have soft, pillowy hands and smell like lavender.” She wrinkled her nose. “Ew.”

If she saw Isaac, she’d retract her statement and then some. But it still gave me great satisfaction to hear her assessment of him.

“Word on the street?” I laughed and sat down next to her, ruffling the back of her pink hair. Well, half pink. The blonde was making a comeback. “You mean, Maria has been bragging to everyone who will listen.”

“Yes.”

“Did she happen to show you a photo?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“No. Her phone was dead. But she did say...” Winnie put on her best Maria voice. “The man is incredibly handsome. A ten. *Muy guapo. Bonita chiquita* banana. Something like that. I can’t even imagine what a ten looks like for Maria. Probably a Mexican Nicolas Cage with a luscious head of hair and a bushy mustache.”

Now there was an image I’d never get out of my head. “Winnie, you are excellent at pre-date pep talks.”

“I know, right?”

“I guess it’s time to glam up.” I didn’t need that much time to get ready. I’d already eaten an early dinner with my family, and I knew what I was going to wear—my ankle boots, stretchy jeans with the holes above the knees, my white blouse with tiny palm trees all over it, and of course, a cardigan. Maybe my yellow one. I didn’t like to be cold, even indoors after taking off my jacket. Papá was so right about me. I did sometimes wear my cardigans on top of each other. Someone might need to borrow one, plus, they made fun color combinations. But tonight, I would skip the frog pins, or any pins for that matter.

Thoughts of being too much popped into my head, of not looking the way a date would expect me to, and I had to take in a deep breath and push them back out. There was nothing wrong with being a little bit different. People shouldn’t have to outgrow their quirks and blend in unless they wanted to.

I didn't worry about things like that very often, but thinking about Zac was one way to bring those insecurities to the forefront of my mind. I had been too much for him. I wondered what he thought of me now. Guess I'd finally get to find out.

Winnie, still thinking my date was a lavender scented, pillowy-handed florist, had no input on my outfit. She finished off my box of Cheerios while cracking jokes about the romantic night ahead of me.

"Well, you look gorgeous, doll," she said when I declared myself ready. She dug my key out of her pocket. "I'll go put this back, and then maybe I'll go see what my cat is up to."

"You know, Maria has lots of men on that list."

"I'm sure. And yet none of them would appreciate all of *this*." She struck a pose in her Bob-Ross-Is-My-Spirit-Animal T-shirt, neon green soccer shorts, and combat boots. "Which is why Maria lets me tell her no. Also, none of the men in her little notebook would fit my requirements."

"Which are?"

Winnie counted them off on her fingers. "Incredibly smart, yet humble. Teddy-bear bod, but strong. And broad. I like broad shoulders. Doesn't mind a mess but likes to clean. Funny. A bit mouthy, but also tender. Loves his job and gets to boss people around, but they adore him for it. He needs a great set of calves, but he can't be a gym guy. More like a garage gym guy who's also good with cats. Especially rescue cats."

I laughed. "Is that all?"

"No, but you don't have time to listen to the rest of my list and neither does Maria. Good luck on your date tonight."

"Thanks. I'll need it." I waved goodbye and moved to lock up, but at the last second, I ran in and added one of my felt flower pins to the collar of my yellow cardigan. The hot pink against the sunny yellow made my heart sing. It felt like me, and I had no reason to hide that, especially from Isaac.



## Chapter 6 - Isaac

*Zac! Zaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaac! I'm so glad my mom let me set up this email address because now I can bother you whenever I want. Like it's 6:30 a.m. and I'm so bored because everyone else is still asleep. It's Saturday! It's a day for doing things! I'm sending a picture of Luchador my cat. He caught another bird and a gopher yesterday. I don't know when he hunts because all he does is sit on our back porch all day napping and making mean faces when you try to talk to him. My brother says it's because he's a million years old. He's just an old grump.*

*Oh, I'm back. I forgot to hit send, but that's okay because I have to tell you that my neighbor had a yard sale, and because I helped her so much, she let me have all her vintage Barbie dolls. Like, they would be worth \$\$\$\$ , except her daughter drew on them with marker when she was little and cut all their hair off. I'm giving them a makeover. I think someone should invent Barbie hair extensions because everyone cuts their doll's hair off and then later they're like noooooooooo and there's nothing they can do to bring it back. Or maybe I'll invent Barbie wigs and get rich. I'm going to try. Okay, bye!*

*Your bestest pen pal bud for four years, FOUR YEARS!*

*Carmen*

*Dear Carmen,*

*You should make Barbie wigs from all the hair my dog sheds. I'll send you some in a bag, but then I'm taking half the money when you make millions. That gives me an idea for a movie. Not the wig thing. But picture this— Some creepy guy sends bags of hair in the mail to people. Just hair. And if they get it, they only have seven days to live. I call it: Hairy Omen. Good, right?*

*From,  
Zac*

Steamers was a happening place on a Friday night. Every table was filled with loud, caffeinated people, and they had a small stage set up with a guitar on a stand, speakers, and a microphone ready to go. This was not exactly an ideal setup for a serious conversation like the one I'd hoped to have with Carmen tonight.

I eyed a couple who looked like they were almost done with their table, ready to pounce as soon as they vacated it. Unfortunately, once they realized I was lurking, they were suddenly in much less of a hurry. Jerks. I had no choice but to get in line to avoid their glares.

Ordering for both of us ahead of time was not actually a bad idea, but I had no idea how Carmen would feel about that, and even less of an idea of what she'd want. Last time I checked, her drink of choice was a grape slush from Sonic. But that was the thirteen-year-old version of Carmen. They started adding Nerds candy to their slushes the summer after we stopped being friends, and I instinctively knew it was something she would've really loved. The old Carmen was like a ghost that haunted my teen and college years.

To say seeing her again last year had been a shock was not putting it strongly enough. I had panicked, and in that panic, I let myself believe it was better to pretend I didn't remember her.

I seemed to make mistake after mistake when it came to her. My nerves were not giving me a lot of confidence that I was about to break my losing streak. I heard a lot of people in the line around me raving about the cold coffee brew, so I ordered that when I reached the front and took it back with me to a table the second I managed to grab one. I didn't dare order for Carmen.

The first sip was delicious, and I was just congratulating myself on picking something awesome when the aftertaste hit and I almost gagged. Carmen walked up in time to see me push it away with a grimace.

"That bad, huh?"

"I think it's me. They said it's their most popular drink."

She leaned over and took a sip, tucking her straight, dark hair behind one ear to keep it from falling forward. I hid my shock that despite calling me a flat tire the last time we talked, she was fine with putting her lips where mine had been.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Too sugary. But also bitter. And not in a good way.”

Our eyes met and we stared at each other for several seconds. Carmen’s gaze challenged me to say something, though what, I wasn’t sure. That I was happy she came? That she looked beautiful? That last one seemed like something she wouldn’t welcome hearing from me, but despite her cool gaze, I sensed uncertainty. *Just say it, man. Tell her.*

“You look... nice.” I scratched the back of my neck, feeling like an idiot. That hadn’t been very specific. She always dressed colorfully and had a smile that was like pure sunshine, but she wasn’t smiling right now so I added, “I like your... everything.” Wow, I was really hitting it out of the park.

“My everything?” Her eyes widened.

“That didn’t come out right.”

And yet she smiled, looking pleased and embarrassed and amused, and that was so much better than aloof and distant. It reminded me of the Carmen I once knew. The one who reveled in ridiculous things. Our messages back and forth had never been serious. Although, thinking back, maybe we should have been occasionally serious, or as serious as two tweens can be. It might have led me to confide in her more.

I stood up and gestured to the snaking line leading up to the front counter. “Should we get you something?”

“Oh, sure. Sorry I’m late. Parking was a bear.” She took off her puffy purple jacket and put it on the back of her chair before following me. We joined the end of the line and stared up at the menu board listing all the available drinks. “I think I’ll go with hot chocolate,” she finally said. “Can’t go wrong there.”

She had a point. I decided to get one, too and toss my other drink.

When she stepped up to order, I whipped out my credit card and went to hand it to the barista, but quick as lightning, Carmen plucked it out of my hand and slid it into the back pocket of my jeans. The little pickpocket was so slick I barely felt it go in.

She smiled. “I’ll have a hot chocolate, please. And I’m paying with cash.”

“She’s not paying. This is a date. A very romantic one. And I’ll have a hot chocolate, as well.”

Carmen put her hands on her hips. “It’s a blind date set up by my nosy

neighbor. Which makes it my fault, so I'll pay, thank you very much."

"It's not that blind. We've known each other since we were kids."

She pointed at me. "Aha! Now you admit it."

"Um." The barista, trying not to laugh, glanced between the two of us. "I have a solution for you two. The hot chocolates are on the house. But..." She slid their tip jar closer. "We do accept generous tips."

"Thank you. That's very kind." Carmen pulled a twenty out of her wallet and dropped it in the jar.

Not to be outdone, I put my card back in my wallet, took out a twenty, and put it in after hers.

The barista's eyes widened. "Well, that worked better than I expected. Thank you both. I'll bring the hot chocolates out to you in a few. Whipped cream on top okay?"

Carmen and I both nodded. At least we had one thing we agreed on.

The barista handed us a number to put on our table. "Feel free to come back and argue about money any time."

I followed Carmen back to the table. She took the seat across from me and eyed me silently, so I reached my hands out and rested them on the table in front of her, showing I was unarmed. "Maria would kill me if I let you pay. You know she would."

"Are you planning to give her a play-by-play of our date then?"

"She did ask for one. But I guess it depends on what happens."

Carmen's eyes widened. She had the most beautiful dark-brown eyes, framed in dark lashes. I wasn't kidding when I said I liked her everything. I couldn't have designed a person more perfectly apt to make me lose my mind. I already knew she was funny, adventurous, friendly, and goofy. But adding attraction to that was like pouring lighter fluid on a campfire. Carmen had been a cute girl. Now she was gorgeous.

As if she could read my thoughts and didn't approve, she crossed her arms, looking distrustful. "Go ahead and report back to Maria. She doesn't scare me."

"Well, she scares everyone else."

"You have no idea." Carmen's smile turned into a frown, as if she'd suddenly thought of something unpleasant. "Why did you set this up? I've seen Maria's matchmaking book. There are lots of women in there, ones who would probably be much happier to go out with you."

Ouch.

She sighed, rubbing her forehead. "I'm sorry. Holy cow, this is exhausting. I don't know how Sadie manages to be grumpy all the time. It's making my stomach hurt."

"Sadie doesn't have to try. Grumpy is her default."

"And yet she makes a good friend."

"She does." I couldn't disagree there. I'd met her the night I ran into Carmen last year. Despite so obviously chatting her up because she was friends with Carmen, we became friends, too.

"I don't know why I'm still so mad at you," Carmen admitted.

"Because I was the jerk who ruined everything."

"You were thirteen. Thirteen-year-olds are naturally jerks."

"*You weren't.*"

"No, I was weird." She said it like that was a bad thing. It was not. Carmen had been the weirdest weirdo ever. Which was why she'd made the best pen pal, and the best friend I'd ever had. But of course, she didn't know any of that because I'd cut off our friendship in the rudest way possible. Like only a hurting thirteen-year-old kid could.

Before I could explain any of that, the barista came over with our drinks, looking apologetic. "Here you go." She set our drinks down carefully.

"Would you mind if we put a few more chairs around your table and let some people join you?" Another employee was already heading our way with a chair under each arm, so it was clearly more of a warning than a request.

"That's fine, I guess." I looked to Carmen and she nodded.

The barista looked relieved. "Great. Thank you. The show is about to begin and we're trying to accommodate everyone." She turned and crooked her finger at a few people standing at the door, and they eagerly came to take the seats being added to our table.

I scooted my chair closer to Carmen, careful not to bump her elbow while she was swirling her whipped cream into her drink. This close, even above the coffee and chocolate-scented haze, I could pick out soft notes of apple blossom that must have come from her shampoo.

I'd toyed with the idea of bringing her flowers tonight. A small, sweet-smelling bouquet full of the bright colors I knew she loved. I was an expert at saying with flowers what couldn't be said with words, but on a date like this, she wouldn't have had anywhere to put them, so practicality won out. Besides, there were no flowers that could properly convey, 'hey this is super awkward, but I'm happy you showed up.'

“Carmen.” I waited until she was looking at me again. “I’m sorry. For so many things. I—” I was suddenly drowned out by loud taps on a microphone as the stage lights popped on and everyone around us began politely clapping. Timing was not my friend tonight.

“It’s okay,” Carmen shouted into my ear. “Later.”

A lady in a fedora and a long flannel dress pressed her lips against the microphone. “Hello, my friends.” Her voice managed to be both soulful and pretentious. “I’m Zillary.” The man next to her with a long beard and a straw hat leaned forward. “And I’m Kip.”

“And together we are...” They paused for dramatic effect. “The Zippers.”

Carmen’s eyes met mine and silently we dared each other to laugh first. I would not let her win. Even when Kip got out his tambourine and lost himself in the first few notes of Zillary’s song on the guitar. Not even when the first words out of Zillary’s mouth were, “An asteroid hit my love for you, and now I’m on fire.”

“Put me out,” Kip crooned in response. “Put me out.”

## Chapter 7 - Carmen

*Carmen: Did you ask your mom if we can do a playdate again? It's been like forever. You might have facial hair now. I need to see this up close.*

*Zac: You can't call it a playdate. We're twelve. It's a hang.*

*Carmen: Did you ask your mom if we can do a hang?*

*Zac: She's got this new job and the hours are weird. Plus we're moving soon.*

*Carmen: Sure. Sure. Is it because she tried to speak Spanish to my mom last time?*

*Zac: Ummmmm....*

*Zac: It might be because of that. Soon Carmen.*

*Zac: P.S. I do have facial hair. My mustache is the sauce.*

*Carmen: Sure it's not actual sauce? Like leftover spaghetti sauce?*

*Zac: Guess you'll have to wait and see.*

*Carmen: Noooooo!*

The good news? I was pretty sure I'd found a new date night place for GoWithFriends. Take that, Freddy Kruger's snooty restaurant. This coffee house was perfect. Perfect! The Zippers sure knew how to whip up an audience. They were so bad they were good. And even better, Steamers could

handle a crowd. They welcomed crowds.

The bad news? My entire body instinctively wanted to lean into Isaac and get nice and comfortable. I wanted his arm around me, warming me up. I liked being friendly and flirty and getting to know my dates. Not too deeply, but just below the surface where you found out things like his preference for cats over dogs, or that he had a long-running text thread with his grandma. But this was not a typical date, and I had no idea what to do with myself.

Instead of leaning into him, I pulled my cardigan tighter around me and let the soft material caress my cheek. Zillary was singing about lost love and caterpillar nights. I had no idea what her metaphors were supposed to mean, but it sounded cool.

Isaac's arm went around the top of my chair and brushed against my back. Ah, he was going for it. I pretended not to notice, even though I noticed everything about him. I noticed his gray canvas sneakers, the way his knee bounced with the music almost subconsciously. He'd recently cut his hair, and his hairline had the perfect edges around his nicely formed ears. Ear ogling. This is what I'd come to.

I focused back on the music, ignoring the ridiculous curiosity I felt when his arm dropped and he took a sip of his hot chocolate. Instead of putting his arm around my chair again, he leaned closer, letting his shoulder rest against mine. It was just a shoulder touch, but I couldn't help wondering what he would try next. Isaac did not smell like lavender, and I highly doubted he had soft, pillowy hands.

Maybe this could be like any other date, after all, including the necessary brush off when it was time. I'd friend-zoned a lot of guys after a date or two, to the point where my girlfriends cracked jokes about it. They thought I was harsh. I wasn't trying to be. If anything, I was being merciful. If I didn't do it, one of us would catch real feelings, only to be sideswiped later when the other person decided they were done.

"You okay?" Isaac whispered.

I nodded. I was fine. Totally fine. A little too in-my-head, but he didn't need to know that. "What do you think?" I asked. "Are you a Zipper fan?"

"I prefer buttons, actually."

"Wow, I walked right into that one, didn't I?" I elbowed him lightly, which earned me a smile.

"On caterpillar nights," Isaac sang softly into my ear on the last chorus. "Your memory tickles like little feet across my skin. The memories are fuzzy,



but they won't go away."

Tingles erupted all over me. The man could sing. I hadn't known that. And he was singing for me. Probably in an attempt to make me laugh, but all the same.

Why did he have to be both awkward and smooth? It was my kryptonite. I liked a guy I could make nervous. But not too nervous. Clearly, I had issues.

During a break between songs, my phone rang in my purse, and I grappled to hit the side button and silence it before it could disturb everyone. Once silenced, I turned it over and checked the screen. Gia. She never called. What could my sister possibly want that she couldn't text about?

As if reading my mind, a text from her popped up.

***Gia: Call me.***

Something was wrong. I put on my jacket and slid off my stool. Thankfully, Isaac jumped up and followed without me having to ask.

"What is it?" he studied my face once we were outside and away from the noise of the café.

"I don't know yet. Maybe nothing."

We leaned against the brick façade while I called my sister back. A thousand possibilities were running through my head. Gia usually went out on Friday nights, but after breaking up with her boyfriend, she hadn't felt like it tonight.

She answered on the second ring. "Carmen, it's Papá. He fell."

"I'm fine," he growled, letting me know I was on speaker. I also knew he was lying, because I could hear the pain in his voice. "I twisted my ankle. It's nothing."

"He *broke* his ankle, and he should let us call an ambulance."

"*Ambulancia*. Says the girl with the Coach backpack. Too expensive." Papá groaned. "*¡Caray!* Maybe I should have bought a Cadillac, though. More legroom."

"We're not taking your little truck. You'll have plenty of legroom in the back of the van, Pá."

"Where did he fall?" I started digging for my keys, but like always, they were playing hide-and-go-seek somewhere in the bottom of my purse.

"In the front yard. He hurt his knee, too."

"My knee is fine."

“Papá,” I sighed. “Did you go up on the ladder after I left?”

“No.” He sounded highly offended. “I ran into the ladder while I was taking the garbage out. Knocked it over and then tripped over it in the dark. Maybe save your lectures for when I’m not...in...so...much pain.”

“Carmen,” my mother called out. “Gia’s going to drive us to the hospital. Don’t worry about any of this, *mija*. Just stay on your date. That’s what’s important. I told you not to call her, Gia.”

“Ay, when I’m old like Carmen, are you going to hold back the killer zombies every time I’m out with a man? Oh look, the city’s on fire. Don’t tell Gia. She might meet her soulmate tonight at the movies.”

I glanced at Isaac, who was staring straight ahead, pretending he couldn’t hear my loud family through the phone. But he couldn’t hide his amusement from me any better than I could hide my embarrassment. I had to look away so he could smile without feeling guilty. Ah, my family. They were the best and the worst, all at the same time.

“I’ll be there in a minute, Gia.”

“Good. Bring your guy. I hope he has muscles, because Papá is like dead weight with this foot.”

I ended the call as both my parents began to protest that plan. It wasn’t their decision to make. This was going to be hard enough without their opinions on the matter. “Isaac,” I breathed out. I couldn’t believe I was asking him for help.

“Yeah.”

“Ready to meet my parents?”

He clutched his chest. “This is so sudden.”

We grinned at each other, and then he took my purse out of my useless hands, reached in, and found my keys out on his first try. “Where are you parked?”

“About a mile that way,” I said, pointing. I was only slightly exaggerating. The area was packed. I’d had to parallel park in a tight spot, and even in my little cherry red VW Beetle, it still made me feel like I was attempting an Olympic feat. I just hoped no one had boxed me in since then. I didn’t want to need Isaac right now, but even getting out of here would be easier with help.

He pointed to the white Ford across the road from us. “That’s me. Hop in. I’ll drive you to your car, and then I’ll follow you to your parents. Does that work?”

“Yes.” Whatever would get me home the fastest without making me abandon my car here sounded like a great plan. Maybe a neighbor would help before we got there, but that might be worse. There would be talk. Even Winnie couldn’t keep her mouth shut when it came to all the neighborhood gossip, and Papá, like any man, would take his pride over his health any day. Men.

Eddie really should be here for things like this. I wished my brother hadn’t moved so far away for work. He came back to visit on the odd weekend, but that was it.

The traffic in front of us was zooming by at a steady clip. Isaac took my hand, and we darted across the street together, his grip warm and sure. He opened the passenger door of his truck for me before running around to get in. My hurry was his hurry. Some part of my brain that wasn’t focused on my family was keeping track of these things, and I wished it would stop gathering evidence in a court battle against my old grudge. I didn’t want to rearrange all my old thinking yet, despite knowing deep down it was time. It would cause me to stretch, and that sounded highly uncomfortable.

Once we backed out, I directed Isaac towards my car that was thankfully not trapped, and then I led the way as fast as semi-legally possible back to my parents’ house. Isaac had no problem keeping up with me.

On our front lawn under the porch lights, Papá sat with his legs out, looking helpless and irritated, but I noticed the preparations that must have happened while they waited on us. They’d cut off his boot with a pair of metal shears. Poor Papá would mourn the loss of his favorite pair of cowboy boots. The offending ladder had been put away. Someone put a thick blanket under him so he wouldn’t get cold and wet from the grass. His foot didn’t look right. It was swollen and turned funny. My mother stood with an overnight bag ready, fussing over him, and the old fifteen-passenger van was running in the driveway with the sliding door opened. Papá would be able to stretch across the bench seat on the way to the hospital.

Well, if we could get him in the van.

An ambulance was not off the table yet, but we’d do our best. Isaac walked over to my parents and leaned down, putting out his hand for Papá to shake. “Hi, I’m Isaac, Carmen’s date.”

Papá reached up and shook his hand. “Eduardo. This is Francesca.”

Isaac shook her hand as well.

Gia sidled up to me. “Well, isn’t this nice. Meeting the *familia*.”

“I can’t believe this is my life.”

“Me either. But *hermana*, he is a treat. I hate Maria ten percent less now. Maybe twenty. Where did she find him?”

I hushed her, which only made Gia laugh.

“Stop it. He’s too old for you.”

“But not too old for *you*.”

Isaac turned around and looked at us, and we both stood up straighter, as if we could shake off the evidence of what we’d just been saying about him. Or at least what Gia had been saying about him. I was innocent, despite secretly agreeing with her about the treat part.

He walked over and held out his hand palm up. “Okay, so I’ll move the van closer.”

Um, what?

Gia dug in her pocket and handed him the van keys. Apparently, while we had been talking about him, he and my parents had been coming up with a plan.

We watched as Isaac went and got in the driver’s seat, then slowly inched the van onto the grass until the open passenger door was right next to Papá. I should have thought of that.

Together, Gia and I took his good side, while Isaac supported his injured side. Papá hobbled between us, and then practically crawled into the first row of seats on his good knee. He didn’t moan and groan, but he was red-faced and sweating bullets despite the cold. I gave him a careful hug and made sure he was buckled in. “I love you.”

He stroked my hair, practically palming my head with his big hand. “I love you, too, my Carmen. Don’t get old. It’s a trap.”

“Oh, I plan to get very old and fussy. I will terrorize neighborhoods with my cats and unwanted advice.”

He smiled, which was all I wanted. “That’s my girl. Now get back to your date, or your mother will never forgive me.”

I rolled my eyes. Wasn’t that the truth.

Mamá did not drive after dark anymore due to her terrible night vision, so she took shotgun while Gia drove the van off the lawn and towards the hospital, leaving me and Isaac standing there to supposedly finish our date.

## Chapter 8 - Isaac

Once Carmen's family left, I wasn't sure what the plan was. I certainly didn't want Carmen to wish me gone. She had parked her car all the way up against the back fence under the carport in a way that indicated she planned to stay put. Meanwhile, my truck sat at the curb. So, I assumed we'd say our goodbyes here.

Carmen touched my arm. "I ate dinner before our date, but I'm hungry again. You?"

The answer would have been yes whether I had room for a bite of anything or not, and I think she knew that, based on her knowing smile.

"Yeah, I'm a little hungry." I was already considering places close by that were still open, but Carmen walked towards the house.

She turned and looked at me. "Come on. It's time for us to have that talk."

A pang of apprehension hit me, but I pushed it away. This was what I'd been waiting for. And now, we wouldn't be interrupted by tambourines or baristas or anything else.

Once inside, Carmen locked the front door behind us, picked up a remote from off the couch and turned off the TV that had been left on, and then led the way into the kitchen. The space was older, but from the looks of it, well taken care of and well loved. The scent of spices lingered. House plants climbed towards the big open window, bowls with onions and tomatillos sat by the stove, and vibrant colors were everywhere—in the tile at our feet, on the walls, and in the décor.

It was exactly the way I'd pictured Carmen's childhood home looking, though I'd only seen glimpses of it back in the day when we used to video chat.

Carmen flipped the kitchen light off and opened the back door. "My place is out here. I just wanted to lock up everything in the main house."

I followed her onto the back porch, taking in the sound of chickens softly crooning from their hen house and a mournful-sounding moo coming from somewhere off in the distance. "You live at home?"

"I live *near* home." She jabbed a finger into my chest, daring me to

contradict the importance of the distinction. “I rent the casita.”

“I didn’t mean it to sound judgmental. I’m just collecting facts about you.”

She eyed me suspiciously. “Why?”

“Because I like facts.” I smiled down at her until her expression softened into amused exasperation.

“You like facts,” she repeated.

“Yes. Did you know it’s impossible to lick your own elbow?”

She lifted her own jacket-covered elbow and examined it. “I think I knew that one.”

“And yet you still want to try, don’t you?”

“Of course.” She stared me down. “You go first.”

And just like that, we were back to being dumb kids.

The second I had my jacket off and I’d lifted my elbow, she flicked it, sending a tingling, shooting pain up my arm. “Did you know your funny bone is actually a nerve?” she asked, trying not to laugh.

“Well, I do now.” I reached for her and she ducked away, running towards her casita with me on her heels.

The back half of the backyard was lit up by overhanging white lights that crossed overhead like hundreds of tiny stars. I paused to stare, and Carmen followed my gaze. “We just had a New Year’s party.”

“Must have been some party.”

“Always.”

The throwaway comment hit me right in the chest. I could have been a part of this. We could have been lifelong friends.

She unlocked the door to the casita, and once we were inside, she motioned to her old leather couch, and then the tiny two-seater table she had tucked against the wall in her kitchenette. “Sit wherever. I’m getting out of these boots.”

But I couldn’t bring myself to sit because there were so many interesting things to look at. Her fridge was aqua-colored and covered in photos I couldn’t wait to investigate. I walked to her desk where she had the most detailed wooly creations I’d ever seen, all carefully placed into scenes—a line of waddling penguins, a mother bird feeding her babies in a nest, and most intriguing of all, a gang of troublemaking raccoons digging in a set of trash cans. It wasn’t a collection, but ongoing creation, judging by the tufts of material and the needles in a basket next to the desk. She made these.

“Don’t touch anything,” Carmen warned, raising one eyebrow. She hung up both our jackets and then sat and took off her ankle boots, stretching out her legs and wiggling her newly freed toes inside the fuzzy snowflake socks she was wearing.

“But I want to touch everything.”

“Collect your facts later, Isaac.”

That had me smiling, but I stuck my hands behind my back and forced myself to stop my perusal. She’d invited me in here. The least I could do was not gawk.

She looked away as she said, “It’s strange. I feel like I know everything about you, and also like I don’t know you at all.”

“Same.” I sat on the opposite end of the couch, sinking in the perfect amount. Her couch was insanely comfortable, which was a good thing, considering how uncomfortable I was with what I was about to say. “I sweated bullets for a second there during introductions, thinking your family might recognize me. Broken foot or no, your dad would kick my butt.”

“Yes, he would.” Carmen shrugged. “But they don’t know you’re Zac. And that’s probably best. I cried a lot after you said you didn’t want us to be friends anymore. Eddie threatened to hunt you down, but I told him not to bother. I was embarrassed by how important you were to me. Because obviously I wasn’t important to you at all.”

“You were important to me,” I protested, turning my whole body towards her so she could see the sincerity of my words.

She looked unconvinced. “Isaac, we met up for the first time in years, and then right after, you texted and said you were too old for pen pals and this was stupid. You were done. I asked if you were joking, and you didn’t answer. I never heard from you again, even though I begged. All my memories of you had to rewrite themselves. It changed how I felt about you. It changed how I felt about *me*. I was thirteen.” Her gaze dropped, and the vulnerability in her face just about slayed me. That she could think less of herself because of my stupid decision...

Familiar guilt flooded over me with renewed life, so strong it physically hurt. But I welcomed the pain, because it was the push I needed to tell her things I’d been avoiding for way too long.

“I’m sorry I put off meeting up again. It wasn’t because I didn’t want to see you. I did. I just didn’t know how to explain what was going on in my life. My mom remarried a few months before that. My stepdad had this big

personality, and at first I really liked him. He joked and laughed with my mom, and he liked to spend money on fun things. But for some reason, I bugged him. He had this passive-aggressive way of nitpicking everything I said or did. I became anxious all the time. I ate in my room when I could get away with it. I quit soccer so my mom wouldn't worry about getting me to my games on the weekends he had plans."

I hadn't realized how much I'd tensed up until Carmen's warm hand came to rest on my arm, making me jump.

"Zac." She scooted closer and threaded her arm through mine. "You should have said something."

I scrubbed a hand down my face. "It doesn't make what I did to you okay. Stop being all forgiving."

She pressed her forehead into my shoulder. "Don't tell me what to do."

Everywhere she touched me felt like comfort. I craved it, but I also felt unworthy of it. When I was silent for too long, she nudged me. "What happened?"

"That day you came over was the best and worst day of my life. I got to hug you, and it was exactly like when we were little kids, like no time had passed at all. I remember you smelled like peanut butter crackers and pine shavings from your hamster's cage."

"I did not."

"You did, too. You were so excited to see me, and you were talking a mile a minute like you always did, and I loved it. You tried out my skateboard and almost ate it like five times, and you reached in the tank and picked up my pet tarantula, and I about died, thinking he would bite you. You were so fearless."

"More like reckless."

"No." I shook my head. "No, it was perfect. But I could already see the wheels turning in my stepdad's head as he watched us. You were important to me, and everything important to me was fair game. It started as soon as you left. He made little digs at you and things you said. And he wondered aloud at me having a girl for a best friend. He asked when you were coming over again. I just wanted it to end. I didn't want to have anything he could get at. So, I did exactly what he hoped, and I pushed you away. He made me want to change everything about myself."

"Including your name?" Carmen murmured.

"I never thought about it like that. But yeah, I started going by Isaac in



high school.”

“Is your mom still married to him?”

“No. My sister and I begged to go live with my dad, but she didn’t allow it until we both started getting into trouble. My grades had dropped. I picked up some terrible friends. I was really not nice there for a while. I felt like I had done you a favor by cutting you out of my life. I was protecting you from all the anger I had inside. But I took it out on everyone else.”

Carmen shifted next to me, and her chin came to rest against the top of my arm. I sensed she was studying me, but I didn’t dare turn and confirm it. If I met her eyes, she might get self-conscious about being tucked in so close to me, and I liked having her close.

“It’s hard to picture you like that.”

“Why?” I asked.

“You never acted like anything was wrong. I figured you’d gotten too cool for me. You had it all together, and I was the mess who wasn’t ready to be a teenager.”

“Nope. I was definitely the mess.” I sighed.

“How did it go at your dad’s?”

“Much better. He needed to know how much we needed him. And when it went from a temporary thing to my dad petitioning to change their custody agreement, Mom finally woke up to what was happening. My dad never talked badly about her. She didn’t want her second marriage to fail. So, she ignored all the things my stepdad did for a long time. Until she couldn’t ignore them anymore.”

Carmen gave my arm a light squeeze. “I wish you’d told me.”

“I tried calling a couple of times, later on. But I think your number had changed.”

“No. I blocked you.”

“Ah. Only what I deserved, considering I blocked your number right after I told you our friendship was stupid. I never saw your responses. I’m sorry.”

“Small favors.” Carmen groaned. “I’m glad you didn’t see them. I begged. A lot. And then I got angry.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered. I wished my words had more power, but they couldn’t rewrite the past, only soften it.

“I know you’re sorry. And I forgive you for that part. But let’s jump to last year.” Carmen sat up straighter. “You walk into a restaurant. You see

me.”

*I just about trip over my own feet.*

“When did you know it was me?” she asked.

“I suspected right away, but it wasn’t until you said your name that I knew for sure. And then I panicked. What was I supposed to say? ‘Hey, former friend. Remember the jerk pen pal who ghosted you?’”

“That would have been a good start.”

“Yeah, but I could tell you remembered me, and you were not over it. So, I took the coward’s way out by waiting and asking Sadie for your number, hoping we could talk in private. When she said you didn’t want me to have it, I don’t know. I figured I should back off. I’d just gotten out of a serious relationship that messed with my head, and anyways, I wasn’t going to force an apology on you.” I shrugged. “Even though, that’s pretty much what I’m doing now.”

“I’m glad you did. I would have been too stubborn to listen any other way. But don’t tell Maria she did a good thing. She’s a terrible gloater.”

“I’ll bet.” I turned and looked at Carmen, and our gazes held. She’d forgiven me. Just like that. I couldn’t believe it. She was so amazing. And so incredibly pretty.

My gaze dropped to her lips without really thinking about it, and I saw the moment she realized it. We were not dumb kids anymore. I was a guy she’d snuggled up next to in her tiny casita. One she was holding onto quite firmly.

She slid away from me and clasped her hands together in her lap. “Oh, shoot. I promised to feed you. What’s your opinion on leftover enchiladas?”

“I’m a fan.”

“Well good, because that’s what I have.”

She headed into the kitchen and started pulling out food and plates, making enough noise to wake the dead, like every clang was a reminder we were doing normal stuff in here and nothing else was going on.

“Carmen.” I ran my hands over my knees. What we had here felt like fragile friendship, the kind that might shatter if I didn’t tread carefully.

“What?” She turned and stared at me, playing with the ends of her cardigan.

It was her security blanket, I realized. A cute, wearable security blanket. It was so her, it made me smile before I turned serious. Security blankets were for protection, and I hated the thought of her needing protection from

me. “Do you want me to leave? You don’t have to feed me, even if you promised.”

Her hesitation was answer enough, and I got up and pulled my jacket on, trying not to feel crushed. Maybe we could try again another time. Like, when we were eighty, and my libido wouldn’t be an issue. Nah, I’d probably still be looking at her like she might set me on fire at any moment. And now I had Zipper song lyrics stuck in my head. *Put me out. Put me out.*

“Isaac, stop. Of course, I don’t want you to leave.” Carmen hurried over, reaching up on her tip toes and tugging my jacket from off of my shoulders before throwing it down on the couch.

*Okay then.* Apparently, I was staying.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

She nodded, looking nervous. “Yes. It’s just... This is usually easier for me to say. I don’t go out with guys more than a few times unless we go as friends. I’m not interested in dating anyone right now. Are you okay with being friends? Maybe I’m reading this wrong. I mean, if you really need to leave, I’m good with that, too.”

She would not be good with it. It was written all over her face and in her body language, every part of her fighting to appear casual and unconcerned, all while waiting for me to reject her again.

Not happening.

“Yes, of course I want us to be friends again.” I’d never wanted anything more in my entire life. I mean, I wanted other things too, but I’d keep that part to myself. In fact, if she knew how *not* platonic my feelings were, she’d throw me out of here faster than I could say ‘enchiladas.’ So, friendship it would be.

She looked so relieved and happy that I couldn’t be disappointed. After all, her friendship was more than I deserved.

“Okay. Then let’s eat.” She led me back into the kitchen with a hop in her step.

Fact: Reconciliation made her happy. So did food. Probably feeding people, too. I added cardigan sweaters to the list, remembering her in the red one from work the other day layered over a black lacy top. The combination of black and red looked incredible against her golden-brown skin. No wonder the water guy made a beeline for her desk.

I shook those thoughts away. Being only friends was going to take some serious focus. Starting now. I could do this.

Carmen handed me a large serving of leftover enchiladas and motioned for me to warm them up in the microwave. “You good with splitting that?”

“Sounds great.”

I put it in and hit warm, watching the plate spin behind the microwave door, the cheese on top getting gooey and delicious. Carmen handed me a clean plate, and I pulled the food out and divided it evenly. We both took Coke cans from the fridge.

I brought my food over to the tiny table, but Carmen took hers straight to the couch and sat down, setting her drink on the coffee table on top of a bright green coaster with an octopus painted across the top. “Don’t tell my mother. I eat most of my meals here while watching trashy television.” She settled back, crossing her legs and resting her plate on her lap. “You’re allowed to join me, you know.”

“Oh, okay.”

And then we just stared at each other.

## Chapter 9 - Carmen

People didn't normally describe me as intimidating. In fifth grade, I played The Big Bad Wolf in the school play. For weeks, I practiced skulking around looking menacing and growling so fiercely, I worried babies might cry at my performance.

No, sir. Everyone laughed. They called me adorable. They patted my head. Grr.

Nobody getting patted on the head can be considered a threat, no matter how grouchy it makes them. I got patted on the head a lot. Less as an adult, but it still happened, a hazard of being shorter than everyone around me. Mostly, I got titles like 'cute' and 'fun.'

Staring at Isaac, I'd finally found someone to intimidate. And now I didn't even want it.

Why had I spent years wishing I could make him sorry? He'd obviously been punishing himself without any help from me. What a waste. My grudge had died, once and for all, and in its place was a fierce longing to make up for lost time.

"Sit," I prompted, patting the seat cushion next to me.

He sat, leaving plenty of space so we could eat our food without bumping into each other. And to maintain the friendly distance I'd insisted on. I would not allow myself to be sorry about that last part. It was for the best. Chemistry had a way of complicating things. Friendship was easier. Less chance of being one-sided, more meaningful, and most importantly, friendships could last forever.

"Any updates from your family?" he asked.

Gia had texted when they arrived, but I hadn't heard a peep since. I picked up my phone and checked again. "Nothing. I'll ask my sister how it's going." I sent her a quick text, asking about Papá.

"What does your dad do for work?" Isaac asked, looking worried.

"He's retired. He sold his business a couple years ago. They install security gates for schools and HOAs. Things like that. Being off his feet is still going to drive him crazy, but we'll get through it."

"That's good."

“Yeah.” I was already rearranging my schedule in my mind so I could help Mamá.

“Okay, so define ‘trashy TV’ for me.” Isaac picked up the remote from off the couch and handed it to me. “Are we talking telenovelas? *Game of Thrones*? *Married at First Sight*?”

I snorted. “None of those. I like the heavily-scripted cooking shows where they have interviews every five seconds, even though they only get thirty minutes to make a gourmet meal out of day-old takeout, while blindfolded.” I found one in my queue called *Cooking Crunch Time* and started episode one so he could see how little I was exaggerating.

And also, because it would give me a moment to breathe, and eat, and think. That was hard. Way hard. Some guys bristled when I told them about my dating rules. Some laughed and accepted it. They never called again. Isaac? He chose friendship over losing me, and I would not forget it. I would be the best old/new friend he ever had.

“You going to eat that?”

Isaac had finished his serving of enchiladas and eyed mine like it might be up for grabs. I held my plate protectively. Even the best friendships had limits, right? “I’m working on it.”

My phone buzzed on the couch arm next to me, and I paused the TV and picked up my phone, putting it down between us so I could eat while I read my sister’s text.

***Gia: The man is throwing a fit. They’re saying he’ll need surgery. And then he can’t drive for six to nine weeks! Maybe longer, but nobody wants to say it. Mamá is ranting about bingo night tomorrow. I can’t do it, Carmina. I’ll drive them to every appointment, but I’m not volunteering for bingo night. I don’t enjoy it the way you do.***

In my distracted state, I missed Isaac’s fork coming in for an attack and stealing a bite of my enchiladas.

“I will kill you.”

He only laughed. “Well, I would never steal food from a date, but since we’re just friends, I thought it was allowed.”

“You know what friends do?” I pointed to the fridge. “They go get a second serving and warm it up, and *true* friends ask if they can bring any back for me.”

He got up. “Would you like some more while I’m up?”

“I’ll take a corner of yours, if that’s okay.”

“Sure.” He got up with his plate and headed into the kitchen. I did *not* watch him lean into my fridge, however, because friends do not check out each other’s backsides.

“Is your name really Carmina?” he called over his shoulder.

“You were reading my text?”

“I would never read a date’s texts. That’s just rude. But since it was right there and we’re friends and all—”

“Okay, okay,” I interrupted. “I get it.” He was so irritating, and yet I couldn’t stop smiling. After laying down the law, perhaps I deserved a bit of teasing. “My family calls me Carmina as a pet name. I’m just Carmen.”

“And what’s this about bingo?”

“Isaac!”

“I’m sorry. I promise I don’t make a habit of reading other people’s texts. But seriously, what’s this about volunteering?”

“Don’t worry about it.” I’d be worrying enough for the both of us. My parents bought that fifteen-passenger van specifically so they could pick up *Abuelita*’s senior friends and get them to church events. Like bingo night.

I texted Gia back while I could do it without Isaac leaning in.

***Carmen: I’ll take care of bingo pickups tomorrow. We’ll figure out the rest later. Is Papá in a lot of pain?***

***Gia: No. They gave him some pain meds.***

Well, that was a relief. I un-paused the TV after Isaac sat down next to me with his second helping of food. Before he took a bite, he held his plate out for me to steal back a portion. Which I did. I made my enchiladas with the exact amount of kick to please my palate. The leftovers were something I shamelessly looked forward to.

“So, is bingo an every Saturday night thing?”

I stared at the ceiling. For me it was. The man was not going to let this go. “Perhaps. But it’s messy, and you don’t need to get involved.”

“Carmen.” Isaac’s large, warm hand came to rest on my knee, and I looked down at it, frowning. Mostly because I liked having his hand there, and that went against everything I’d just told him.

He sighed and took his hand back before crossing his arms. “Messy doesn’t scare me. I want to help, but I can’t because I don’t know anything.”

“You don’t need to help. I forgive you. There’s nothing to make up to me, I promise.”

I made the mistake of taking a big bite of enchilada right before he leaned in. I probably looked like a cornered chipmunk.

“Is it so hard to believe I want to spend time with you?” Isaac had the audacity to pull out the smolder and use it on me while I was still panic-chewing. I had never considered eyebrows sexy until that moment. But they perfectly set off the twinkling in his eyes and that little cocky half-smile he was throwing my way. Outrageous.

I was melting again, dang it. But I refused to let his pretty words or his pretty face get to me. He wanted details? Fine.

“Yes, it’s a little hard to believe you’re good with picking up a bunch of senior citizens on a Saturday night and then paying for most of them to get into bingo because the mean lady at the door makes no exceptions for people on fixed incomes. Also, she refuses to quit her volunteer position, so my parents help with the rest of it, and try to make it as fun and exciting as possible. Isaac, you have no idea what you’re getting into.”

His smile only got bigger. “I’m in.”



## Chapter 10 - Isaac

After working all day, my wait was almost over. In a few hours, I'd be rolling in a fifteen-passenger van with a bunch of senior citizens and Carmen. I. Could. Not. Wait.

"Okay, either stop smiling like that, or give me some details about your date last night. Did you kiss her?" Grace swept past me with an arrangement and set it carefully on the counter next to the register, already smug in her assumptions.

Not that I could blame her. Every time I thought about Carmen I smiled. Even when I thought about the awkward moments. Especially the awkward moments. Carmen had given me a fist bump and a playful shove in parting. I could work from there.

Before I answered Grace, I glanced over at my niece, but she wasn't paying us any attention. Piper was busy working at the tiny desk we'd set up for her. A few months back, I had suggested Piper try designing cards for us as a way to stay busy. She loved art, and she studied our customers so carefully. Little did I know how successful she'd be for something that was meant to be a fun activity. The bestseller so far? A greeting card featuring her drawing of a man leaning down to look at flower bouquets. We put the words, *Picked with Love*, across the top.

Grace nudged me again. "Well?"

"I didn't kiss her." I pulled out a box of floral tape and ripped each roll free of its tight plastic wrapping. I swear, the manufacturer packed them to withstand a nuclear blast. "But we have plans for tonight."

"Already? That's great news." Grace leaned into me, as if sensing what I wasn't saying. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter. The date went great. It's just complicated."

"You say that like it will make me less interested. I love complicated."

I raised an eyebrow. Grace's life had been a series of complications, and she was a person who craved control.

"Okay, I love complicated when it's not me."

There was the truth. Now it was time for me to share mine. "She's not

interested in dating anyone right now.”

Grace’s eyes widened. “Oh.”

“What do you mean, ‘oh?’”

“Hold on. I have one more arrangement to bring up for this customer. It’s a set for a bridal shower table.” She jogged to the back. Grace had a sense for these things. Four seconds after she brought out the second arrangement, the customer pulled into the small parking lot in front of our store and rushed in.

After listening to the woman gush over the excellent job Grace did and helping her out to her car with the flowers, I came back in and stared down Grace. “What are you not telling me? What does ‘oh,’ mean?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re a liar.”

Grace cringed. “Sorry. It’s just, when women say they’re not interested in dating anyone, what they really mean is, they’re not interested in dating *you*. Well, that, or they’re hung up on someone else and need to stay available, just in case. Or maybe they have other priorities in their life. Like a Piper. So, I guess there could be lots of reasons. But most likely, she was letting you down easy.”

“No, that’s not…” Okay, she wasn’t wrong in theory, but Grace was working off of limited information. Continuing to pretend I’d gone out with a complete stranger would only lead to bad advice from her, and I desperately needed good advice. “She’s Carmen. The girl I used to write to as a kid.”

“You went out with Carmen? Pen pal girl?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. What are the odds?”

“Better than you would think. I saw her name in Maria’s little book and asked for her.”

Grace clutched her chest. “You little scoundrel. I’m dying. You two are like a cute little Lifetime Christmas movie come to life. Except, in the movie version, you’re secretly Kris Kringle’s long-lost son with amnesia.”

“Isn’t that more of a Hallmark thing?”

“The Lifetime Channel’s Christmas movies are better. But back to Carmen. Did she remember you?”

“Oh yeah. And not fondly. I hurt her, Grace. I don’t know how much you remember, but we used to talk almost every day, and then I up and cut ties without telling her why.”

“I remember you being testy about it, the couple times I asked about her.”

“Yeah.”

“Then why do you look... I don’t know. So hopeful. So dreamy?”

“I look dreamy?” I teased.

“Shut up. Never mind. I don’t want to know about your date anymore.”

Grace took the floral tape rolls out of my hand and shoved them into a drawer. Then she woke up the computer and studied our upcoming orders.

“Oh, come on.” I drummed my fingers across the counter. “If I’m acting hopeful and dreamy, it’s because Carmen and I are friends again. That’s the reason I can’t stop smiling.”

Grace reached over and ruffled my hair. “Aw, that’s adorable. So, what are you two doing tonight?”

“We’re volunteering at a church bingo night.”

“Of course you are. So... if I’m hearing this right, if you pursue her, you might lose her.”

That was one way to put it. “Yes. She specifically said she wants us to be friends. And only friends.”

“And you’re good with that?” Grace’s eyes narrowed while she scanned my face. I had never been good at hiding things from her. “Be careful, Isaac.”

“I’m careful,” I protested. Okay, so maybe I’d teased Carmen a little bit too much about her rules last night, but if we couldn’t talk openly about things, what kind of friendship was it? Teasing didn’t mean I thought I had any chance of changing her mind. I would not hurt Carmen. Even if it meant a lot of hurt for me in the end.

As if sensing what I was willing to sacrifice, Grace frowned. “I don’t want to see you pour yourself into someone for another three years.”

“Carmen is not Toni.” I knew Grace held a lot of resentment towards my ex-fiancée for breaking off our engagement, but I didn’t anymore. We’d both known it wasn’t working. Toni was just the first to say it. And we had never been friends. Not in the comfortable, effortless way I knew Carmen and I could be again.

Grace was still frowning at me, so I put my hand to my heart. “I promise I will keep my hopes in check.”

“Good.”

Piper ran up with a paper fluttering in her hands, and Grace leaned down to have a look. “What did you draw, Pipercorn?”

“They’re having a party.” Piper explained. She’d drawn a bunch of happy flowers with all their leaf “hands” up in the air. Like they were celebrating.

I leaned over and studied it. “I don’t know how you do it, Piper. This is incredible.” I could picture it sized down to fit on the tiny cards we tucked into our bouquets.

“You like it?” she looked so pleased.

“Of course, I like it.” Over her head I muttered to Grace, “She’s going to be running her own empire before you know it.”

Grace smiled at me. “She’ll have plenty of time for that. For now, I want her to focus on being a kid.”

Like she couldn’t have both. I hoped I wasn’t projecting too much with this card endeavor. Anywhere I saw potential, I wanted to feed it.

Grace looked down at Piper. “I agree with Uncle Isaac. This one is a winner. I’m going to put it in my folder, and we’ll take it home and scan it, okay?”

“Okay.” Piper bit her lip. “Can you text a picture of it to Dean?”

“Um.” Grace pressed her lips together and glanced at me, as if I could save her from her daughter’s adoration of Dean. I could not, nor did I necessarily want to. He was a solid guy.

Grace sighed. “He’s busy with work right now. But he’ll see it on the cards when he comes in the shop, and I bet he buys one to keep. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah. I bet he will.” Piper ran back to her desk, satisfied in the way only a five-year-old could be, because she didn’t understand subtext yet.

“How did your spaghetti night go?” I asked Grace.

“It was delicious, as always.”

“Oh, come on. I told you about Carmen.”

“Yeah, but I’m just realizing you knew your date was going to be her all week. And you said nothing until I forced it out of you!” She dropped the last part to a whisper as a guy in his thirties came in and stopped to look at our display of balloon bouquets.

“Can I help you find something?” Grace asked, all sweetness in her hurry to ignore me.

Unsurprisingly, the guy had no idea what he wanted, but he needed it today, which was her favorite kind of customer. Mine too, actually. I got to play someone’s hero multiple times a day.

There was more than one way to get my answer, though, so while Grace was occupied, I went and checked on Piper, picking up the crayons that had rolled under the desk and listening to her ideas for new cards.

When there was a natural lull, I asked. “Did you guys make breadsticks last night?”

“Yes, and they were so good. We dropped some off to Dean with a plate of spaghetti.”

“Oh, really.” So my sister, in an effort to please Piper while keeping her own firm boundaries in place, had found a middle-ground solution. How very Grace. “That was nice of you two.”

“Dean said it looked delicious and he’d be sure to return the plate, but Mom said he should keep it. Why would she want him to keep our plate? It’s one of our good ones.”

“That is a mystery. I think he’ll find a way to get it back to you guys, though.”

“I think so, too.” Piper giggled. Maybe she understood subtext better than I gave her credit for.

## Chapter 11 - Carmen

“Why would he do this?” Mamá asked for what felt like the millionth time. “Are you sure this is a good idea? You just met the man last night.”

“He wants to help.” It was a true statement, and the only one she needed right now with everything else going on.

As it was, Mamá kept flitting back and forth with all the bingo prizes, putting them in the back of the van and then changing her mind on which ones to send with me. Papá had repeatedly told her she should go with us, but she didn’t want to leave him, just as I had suspected.

“Má, I’ll be the one driving the van. Isaac is coming along to be my charming errand boy.” I smiled, knowing the exact look Isaac would give me if he heard me say such things.

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

I shared a knowing glance with Papá. He knew it all. Unlike Mamá, what he needed was distraction and lots of it. So yes, I’d told him Isaac was Zac, my old friend, the one I used to print out pictures of after he ghosted me just so I could stick pins through his eyes on my bulletin board. We all grieve in our own way.

Despite Isaac’s worry that Papá would stomp him into the ground if he knew his secret identity, Papá had only laughed. “Fate has given you two a second chance,” he’d said.

“To be friends,” I’d added firmly.

“He’s a very handsome friend,” was all Papá added.

The doorbell rang, and I hurried over before anyone else thought about getting the door. Eddie was lurking around here somewhere. He’d gotten all the Christmas lights down as promised, including the ones in the backyard from the New Year’s Eve party, but I didn’t need him trying to go all macho and interviewing my date.

Not my date, I immediately corrected. My friend. What was wrong with me?

I opened the door and immediately knew what was wrong with me. Because I almost stopped breathing at the sight of Isaac in a soft-looking

blue-gray jacket over a fitted white T-shirt—one that outlined his muscles way too well. When our eyes met, he broke into a smile that had my mother behind me sighing. I could literally hear her worries melting into hopes. To be honest, I preferred her worry.

“Let him in, *mija*. Isaac, so good to see you again.”

“Hello, Francesca.” He reached in and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, and then from behind his back he pulled out a half-dozen gerbera daisies for her in colors so vibrant, neither of us could look away.

“Oh, Isaac.” She took them and lovingly stroked one of the petals. “*Gracias.*”

I gave her a hug goodbye, being careful not to squish her flowers. *He brought my mother flowers.* Rather than feeling like a friendship gesture, it seemed like the most boyfriend move ever, and that had me dying to get him out the door before I thought about it too hard. “We have to get going, *Má*. So many people to pick up.”

“I’m gonna say hi to your dad really quick,” Isaac murmured as he brushed past me, his fingers dancing over mine for the barest of seconds. He was asking forgiveness and permission with a touch. Mostly forgiveness, because he was already leaning over Papá in his armchair, asking him about his ankle. A surge of pure affection for Isaac hit me, and I took in a fortifying breath. We were going to be fine. More than fine. Reacting to the sight of him was a casualty of having such a pretty, pretty man friend. After a while, I wouldn’t even notice.

The back door squeaked open before closing with a slam, followed by the sound of whistling, and I ran over and grabbed Isaac mere seconds before Eddie would clomp in here in his heavy work boots, most likely holding a sandwich. Eddie might look like a Neanderthal, but he had a memory like a steel trap. Especially for faces. “Bye, everyone. *Los quiero*. Be good, Papá.”

Isaac let me drag him out the door. I held up the van keys. “I promised my mom I’d drive. You good with being my navigator?”

“Of course.” He opened my driver door for me and then went around and got in, pulling his phone out. “Do you have a list of stops?”

“Yes. I’m going to forward you the list from *Abuelita*.” I pulled it up on my phone and hit send. We’d re-exchanged numbers last night, which seemed almost ceremonial after our weird history. This list would be the first text I’d sent him in... oh, thirteen years.

His phone dinged, and he pulled up the image and squinted at it.

*Abuelita* wrote in tiny cursive. Which was why I couldn't be looking at it while driving.

"Carmen, these aren't addresses."

"I know. Don't worry. I know where everyone lives. I just need you to read off the names for me a few times so I don't miss anyone." I backed us out of the driveway and headed towards the assisted living community where most of the bingo players lived. After such a cold day, the van was like an icebox, and I realized I'd forgotten my jacket. Cold seeped right through my sweater. But going back for a jacket now would take too long.

"Okay, the first line says, Don Arelio and G. Davis. Or maybe E. Otis?" Isaac rubbed his jaw. "Is this a cursive test? Because I am failing, and my third-grade teacher is going to be extremely disappointed in me."

"Mrs. Maldono? She could never be disappointed in you. You're the only kid who brought her flowers on her birthday." I gasped. "Is that why you became a florist?"

I could feel Isaac's eyes on me, and I didn't even try to hide my glee in knowing lots of tiny random things about him.

"I became a florist because it was my sister's dream to open her own shop, and I had a business degree and a trust fund I definitely didn't deserve, and no idea what to do with it."

"You have a trust fund?"

Isaac turned towards me in his seat and rested his chin on his hand. "Oh, someone finds that part interesting. Am I more appealing now? You rethinking the whole friend thing?"

"No." If Isaac's one goal in life was to make me blush, he was making awesome progress. I stared straight ahead because that cocky half-smile of his would be my undoing. The worst part? He was right to tease me. "I'm sorry. I was just curious about your parents, but it's none of my business."

"My trust fund is a long and weird story I promise to tell you another time. Back to these names." He stared down at his phone again. "Maybe it's Davies?"

"You were correct the first time. It's G. Davis. I have no idea what the G stands for. Every time I ask, he tells me a man needs a little bit of mystery in his life, so I just call him Uncle G. He and Don are roommates."

"Can't wait to meet them. Is this bingo night only for people who go to your church?"

"No, it's for anyone." I glanced over at him. "Why?"



Isaac shrugged. "I have some neighbors who might like to come. I should probably see if it's their type of scene first, though."

"Oh yeah, what's their scene?"

"*Golden Girls* reruns. Maybe some *Gilligan's Island* to shake things up."

I opened my mouth to ask about these neighbors, but Isaac shook his head. "Another story for later."

"Isaac, are you trying to be a man of mystery?" I smiled to myself. "You're going to make Uncle G jealous."

"I'm trying to be a good navigator. You are awfully chill for someone about to pick up..." he counted to himself, "...nine senior citizens."

"Isaac, they all live in two assisted living communities on the same street. This is just the list of who planned to come this week."

Isaac rested his head back. "So, you don't need a navigator. How dare you, Carmen? I was almost important there for a moment."

I started laughing. "I do. I do need you."

"Sure." He reached over and toyed with the braided bracelet around my wrist while I was driving with my hands at ten and two. "Thanks for letting me come anyway."

"Thanks for coming." I ignored the pleasant shiver that ran all through me at his touch. It was a good thing we were almost there. Without my grudge to wrap around myself, interacting with Isaac felt different. Easy and light, but also charged with possibility. The problem was, he still held the power to hurt me. My grudge was gone, but my fear of being hurt by him hadn't left. I pulled into the parking lot of the first pickup location, relieved we were about to be inundated with nosy chaperones.

## Chapter 12 - Isaac

“Who is this chump?” They were the first words out of Uncle G’s mouth when he answered the door, but he had so much twinkly mischief in his light blue eyes, I immediately liked him. What hair he had left stuck straight up in the back, and he had his shirt collar popped. I wasn’t sure if his look was intentional or not, but it only added to the devil-may-care attitude he clearly took so much delight in.

Carmen threaded her arm through mine. Her sweater was a pale pink tonight, and as soft against my skin as it looked. “This is my friend, Isaac. Be nice to him. He’s very sensitive.” She glanced up at me and winked, knowing she’d just thrown down the gauntlet.

“Sensitive, huh? Do you hear this, Don? We have to watch what we say around Carmen’s *friend*.”

Don shuffled up behind Uncle G, jacket in hand. “Thank you for coming, *bonita*. How is Eduardo?”

Carmen let go of my arm and went to escort Don instead, telling him about her dad’s ankle and the upcoming surgery. They were nearly the same height and gave off the same vibe of happy contentment. Uncle G and I let them lead the way back to the van, and I didn’t realize how much I was staring at the charming picture they made together until I got a sharp jab from Uncle G’s bony elbow.

“What’s this friend business?” he asked in what he probably thought was a conspiratorial tone. Pigeons flew off the railing, he was so loud. “Does she not like you or something?”

“Or something,” I said, watching the change in Carmen’s body language, telling me everything I couldn’t see in her face. She was embarrassed but determined not to show it.

“Are you good enough for her?” Uncle G asked.

“Most definitely not.”

“Good answer. Good answer.”

We stopped at a door about seven down from his, and Carmen knocked,

only to find out the guy inside had family visiting and wouldn't be joining us. We collected a few older ladies who were excited to come along, and then headed back to the van.

"Are we picking up your grandmother?" I asked Carmen.

"No. She lives with my *tía* Linda, and she'll get a ride with her. But be prepared. When I introduce you, she'll have questions." Carmen gripped the console between us so she could lean in and lower her voice. Her nails were painted a bright yellow today. "Uncle G was a warmup. I'm not going to even bother arguing the friend thing with her. As far as she's concerned, you're my boyfriend, and you're already overdue for popping the question. You can't win her over, so don't worry about trying."

"You're saying she won't like me, but she also expects me to marry in?"

"Yes."

"Anything else I should know?" I turned my head so I could whisper in Carmen's ear, letting her silky hair brush against my nose. It was madness, this line I toed between flirtation and friendship. "Does she carry around a *chancla* and whack people with it?"

Carmen softly scoffed. "Such a stereotype. How dare you, Isaac." Our eyes met, and her smile grew. "She uses a fly swatter. More range."

"Are we going or are we canoodling?" Uncle G called out from the back seat, ever-so-tactfully.

"We're going," Carmen assured him, straightening in her seat. I did the same. Back to business. Carmen put the van in drive and we cruised on over to the next location, occasionally sharing amused glances when the conversation in the back got interesting.

Uncle G was quite the flirt himself. The women pretended to hate it, all while egging him on and giggling.

When we picked up the last three seniors, I gave up my shotgun position and chatted in the back with Uncle G, Don, and the rest of the crew, getting the lowdown on bingo. It wasn't just for seniors, although they made up the majority. With snowbird season in full swing, it was jam-packed right now.

"They're all from Minnesota," Uncle G complained. "Stealing our nice weather and packing the line at Golden Corral. Their grandkiddies dip their fries in the chocolate fountain."

"You dip your fries in the chocolate fountain," Don added quietly, smiling to himself.

We reached the church on the corner, and after Carmen pulled into a

parking spot, I lent my shoulder and arm as support where needed until we got everyone out. I sensed Carmen watching me, but I wasn't sure what was going through her mind. Hopefully, she knew this wasn't me trying to show off or prove myself to her. I just wanted to be helpful. Although, if she did like what she saw, that wouldn't be terrible either.

"Oh, I forgot to grab the bingo prizes." Carmen ran around to the back of the van, and I went to help her get the items out and handed off to a volunteer. She had everything from dollar store prizes to boxes of cereal and cocoa mixes in mugs.

"Ah, it's the old bat," Don muttered, shuffling alongside me as we came through the doors of the fellowship hall and waited in line to get in. It was the first truly unpleasant thing I'd heard the man say. "I have my five dollars this time, though."

He reached into his pocket, but I put my hand up. "Don't worry about that. I've never been. New guy pays, right?"

"New guy pays," he repeated, like it was a real rule, and not something I'd made up on the spot. "New guy pays." He turned and repeated it a little louder to the rest of the group.

Uncle G clapped me on the shoulder. "All right. That's very sensitive of you, Isaac. I love it."

When we reached the front of the line, the lady I'd been warned about peered up at us with unguarded contempt from the table where she was sitting with a money box and stacks of bingo cards. A man I assumed was her security guard stood behind her, but I doubted there was a thief alive who would cross this woman and live to tell about it.

"Cash only," she said, eyeing Don like he might be a chronic check bouncer. "There are no child or senior discounts. No student discounts. No refunds will be given. No swapping out bingo cards."

"No fun allowed," Uncle G murmured.

She glared up at him and kept going. "No guarantees of winning. No cheating will be tolerated. No..." She paused, as if trying to think up more rules, and I quickly pulled out my wallet and dropped two twenties.

"I'm not playing. Carmen and I are volunteers. This is for the rest of our group, and they promise to follow all the rules."

"I don't," Uncle G said, grinning as he picked up his set of bingo cards from the table and fanned them in his face. "You forgot to mention the one-cookie-per-guest rule. But I'm taking two from the refreshment table, Edna.

Maybe three. Try and stop me.”

“Honestly, Uncle G.” Carmen herded our group away from the check-in table. “Go get good seats before they’re gone.” She turned back to Edna.

“Isaac and I are manning the refreshment table tonight. Don’t worry about a thing.”

Her expression instantly softened, much to my surprise. “Thank you, Carmen.” Edna reached out and squeezed Carmen’s hand. “You’ve grown into such a lovely girl. You know, my grandson is helping out tonight. Titan’s the strapping young man who will be reading off the bingo numbers. Right over there. I’d love for you to meet him.”

The direction she pointed was clogged with people, but they parted as if she had telepathic powers, revealing a short, average-looking dude with neatly combed hair testing out the microphone by tapping it gently. Well, that was anti-climactic. I had been expecting someone more... imposing. Maybe someone who could take his grandmother in an arm-wrestling contest. My money was on Edna. She was wiry and would have no qualms about cheating.

“That’s so sweet, Edna.” Carmen took a step towards me and put her hand on my chest. “Actually, I’m...”

Oh, heck no. If we were friends with a capital F, that meant everywhere. Even though my hand of its own accord came to rest over hers.

“She’s extremely single,” I finished for her. “She is single and ready to mingle. Aren’t you, Carmen?”

“Thank you, Isaac,” Carmen said, stealing her hand back. “I am single. And I’d be happy to say hello to your grandson.”

“Is there a senior discount?” The man behind us asked. He moved around me and pulled out his wallet.

“No discounts,” Edna snapped. “No refunds. No guarantee of winning. No...”

“Come on.” Carmen tugged on the end of my jacket and led me away before we had to hear all the rules again. “I’m putting you to work before you can cause me any more trouble.”

“Me, trouble?” I blinked down at her with as much innocence as I could feign.

“Yes.” She tried so hard to look stern, but the girl was made for smiling. Ah, there it was. She grinned and shook her head. “By the end of tonight, you’re so going to hate me.”

“Not possible. Even the mistress of evil back there thinks you’re pretty great. What did you do to win her over?”

“I have no idea.”

I had a few. Carmen was goodness personified. I was just the lucky guy who got to tag along.

## Chapter 13 - Carmen

Our job was to fill tiny paper cups with watery punch and open up clam shell containers of sugar cookies and set them out on napkins. They looked a lot prettier than they tasted. Yes, I was a cookie snob. But in this case, I was glad, because I couldn't hand out extra cookies to rule-breakers like Uncle G if I was eating them all myself.

"Did you see Maria come in?" Isaac murmured. He handed a woman a cup of punch, and she giggled under the weight of his manifold charms. It probably worked well for him in the flower business.

"I saw her." Thankfully, Maria's love of bingo slightly outweighed her matchmaking interests, but eventually she'd spot us and come over here. So would *Abuelita*. And probably Edna with her grandson in a headlock. I should have felt stress over it all, but strangely, I didn't. Isaac didn't seem to care how weird this all was, and since we weren't together (which he'd so kindly emphasized to Edna a few minutes ago) there was no need to shield him. Actually, I'd go out of my way to *not* shield him. Two could play at that game.

"What are you smiling about?" Isaac asked. He moved behind me to get another package of cookies and gave the knot in the back of my apron a tug. We were wearing matching checkered aprons, thanks to my mother's sewing.

"Do I need a specific reason to smile?"

"No, but right now, you look like you're secretly plotting something."

I would not give him the satisfaction of being right, so I just shrugged and continued to fill cups. "I like smiling. Just like you enjoy collecting facts."

"I do enjoy collecting facts. Tell me about GoWithFriends. How long have you been there? What do you do?"

I was out of cups to fill, and nobody was visiting the refreshment table while bingo numbers were being called, so I leaned against the wall. Isaac did the same, his arm brushing against mine and his eyes intent on me. I could get lost in his smile if I wasn't careful, so I focused on our height difference. I hadn't grown an inch since middle school, but Isaac sure had. He was

probably six-feet tall, if I had to guess. He wore it well. He wore everything well, even that ridiculous checkered apron.

What were we doing? Right, he'd asked about my job. "I don't know if Sadie told you, but we both used to work at a greeting card and gift company called Connecting Hearts. That's where we met. We mostly did web design for them, but it was mind-numbing and there was no chance of moving up. So, about a year ago, I defected, and to my surprise, she did too."

"I didn't know you and Sadie had known each other that long. Do you both do web design for GoWithFriends?"

"She works with the matching algorithm that puts people together, and my official title is Corporate Account Concierge. I work with a lot of spreadsheets behind the scenes, making sure we know where and when people are meeting up using our app. I also scout locations for GoWithFriends for their group dates, and when it works out, I get an ongoing reservation."

"So, you visit a lot of places."

"Yes."

"Does anyone go with you on these scouting trips?"

"Yes. I rarely go alone."

"That's good. It's good to have people."

Oh, I knew exactly where he was leading me. And he knew that I knew. Which was why he was the one now smiling like he was secretly plotting something. The awful man. I tilted my head. "I think you've collected enough facts, Isaac."

"I have a thirst for knowledge that can't be quenched."

Somewhere in our conversation we'd turned our bodies to face each other. Maybe to hear better or maybe because despite my best efforts, I kept falling into his orbit. Isaac reached out and tucked his fingers under the ties of my apron where I'd looped them around in the front. He gave a tug, bringing me even closer. I swallowed, reminding my hands to stay at my sides. No touching. We were just friends. It solved everything. It made everything manageable.

"Ah, *preciosos*." Maria's voice announced her presence before she was reaching across the table for our hands and clasping them in together in her surprisingly strong grip. "Look at you two." She beamed at us before letting go and leaning back. Which was a good thing. She was about to topple into the cookies.



She winked at Isaac. “I won’t hold you to that other date, *jovencito*. Not when you’re clearly so taken with this one.”

Isaac looked embarrassed for a moment before he smiled. “Guilty as charged.” He put his arm around my waist and tugged me closer. As if he could pull the same move I’d tried and get away with it.

“What’s this about another date?” I asked, sliding out of his reach. I straightened a few napkins and smiled back at him innocently.

Isaac almost imperceptibly shook his head at me. This wasn’t over. That’s what he was saying, but he’d started this war, and I wasn’t about to back down now.

Maria took a cookie and picked off the sprinkles, depositing each one in the little trash can next to the table. “Isaac agreed to two dates. Dessie will be so disappointed. She even took Friday night off so she could be available. I was coming to tell you, Isaac. But I will find her someone else.” She took a bite of her now sprinkle-free cookie.

“Oh, there’s no need,” I reassured her. “I don’t mind if he goes out with Dessie.”

Maria looked confused. “¿*No manches?*”

“Isaac and I barely know one another. He’ll need lots of dates to see if someone is the one.”

“This is true,” Maria murmured. “There are many fish in the sea. Maybe Dessie is your fish?”

I had Isaac trapped, and he knew it. He looked at the two of us, both determined in our own ways, before finally nodding. “You two are so wise. My one true love could be anywhere. So could Carmen’s.” He glanced around, as if the idea had just occurred to him, but I knew exactly where his finger would land before he pointed across the room. “Like that bingo caller. He could be perfect for Carmen. Wasn’t Edna just saying how perfect the two of you would be together? I bet Maria could make it happen. You could do that, couldn’t you?”

“Well, I’m sure I could...”

I braced my hands on the table. “Maria. You promised me. No more dates after Isaac. Just the one.”

Thankfully, Maria was a woman of her word, and she deflated at my reminder. “But Friday with Dessie, yes?” She looked up at Isaac hopefully.

Isaac nodded. “Friday. You’ll send me the details?”

Maria held her phone up. “*Sí. Mañana. Tomorrow.*”

After she left, Isaac rounded on me, looking both irritated and amused. “You are truly evil.”

“No more than you,” my voice came out breathy, but I couldn’t help it. Isaac was creeping closer, and though I wanted to hate it, I really didn’t.

He leaned in to whisper in my ear. “I don’t need Maria to make your special love connection with Titan happen. You know that, right?”

“Go ahead and try.”

Famous last words. Before we left bingo, Isaac had a little man-to-man chat with Titan, and right after, the guy practically tossed aside chairs to get to me. It must have been some pep-talk. I had no choice but to agree to go out with him, with the understanding I wasn’t looking for anything serious right now. Titan was undeterred. We, too, were going out on Friday. I was tempted to make it a double date with Isaac and Dessie, but that would have been truly flirting with disaster, and I’d had my fill.

## Chapter 14 - Isaac

“You’re shivering.” I unbuttoned my gray jacket and put it around Carmen, tucking her arms inside. That she didn’t protest told me exactly how cold she was. The sleeves draped past her fingertips and the ends hit her mid-thigh.

She buried her face in it. “Thanks.”

We had dropped off the last of the seniors, and the only thing left was to return the van to Carmen’s parents. What a night. Carmen was probably exhausted. I knew I was.

“Race ya,” she called out, taking off towards the van. Okay, apparently, Carmen was not tired. My coat billowed up behind her, making her look like a very cute, very short superhero. I let her have the head start, and then I ran after her, slapping the van seconds before she did.

“You cheated,” she protested.

“By having longer legs than you?”

She head-butted my chest. “Yes. But that’s okay. I just wanted to be warm, and now I am.” She backed up and started searching her bag, presumably for the van keys, giving me a chance to admire her without having to make jokes about it—her messy, windblown hair, her bright cheeks, her pert lips pursing and twisting as she searched.

She finally gave up and handed the bag to me, looking embarrassed. I dug my hand in, giving the bag a light shake to stir up the bottom contents before I closed my fingers around the tiny metal keys she’d attached to her VW Bug key fob. This girl needed a key chain, something bold and sparkly, and too big to get lost in a bag. We had a display of keychains in our shop. Heart ones and blinged-out gigantic first name initials. We found customers often would buy one as a last-minute addition to their gift when they came to pick up flowers.

I’d give her a C for Carmen the next time we met. Or even better, I’d slip it onto her keychain when she wasn’t looking and pretend I had no idea what she was talking about when she mentioned it. I was getting good at pretending. I didn’t have much of a choice. I needed to be around her. I craved it. Every moment spent with her only made that clearer.

After getting her door, I went around and got in on the passenger side. “When is your hot date with Titan?”

She groaned. “Friday at eight. What the heck did you say to him?”

“Not a whole lot.” I’d spent most of the conversation vetting him, making sure I wasn’t setting Carmen up with an ax-murderer, or a player, or a grouch like his grandmother. Fortunately, Titan was none of those things. He was about the most pleasant—if a little bit boring—dude I’d ever met. His personality completely matched the tucked-in-polo-shirt-with-a-woven-belt-and-khakis look he had going on.

Carmen put on her blinker and pulled out of the parking lot. “You guys talked for like fifteen minutes. I know, because that’s how long I got the third degree from *Abuelita*. By the way, she thinks we’ll make beautiful babies, and she wants to know when I’m bringing you to dinner.”

“Beautiful babies, huh?”

“Don’t change the subject. What did you say to Titan?”

“I said, much to my disappointment, Carmen’s not interested in me, but she’d like to know more about you, and if you’re not afraid of her extremely dangerous and protective older brother, she would be open to a date. Somewhere well-lit, out in public, and regularly patrolled by cops. Oh, and I said you were funny and sweet, and way out of his league, but he’d been called up to bat, and this was his moment.”

Carmen blushed. “Isaac, you didn’t.”

“What? It’s all true. Although, I may have fibbed a little about your interest in him.” I’d been borderline inspirational. The guy couldn’t resist. Not that Carmen needed someone to talk her up. All I did was lean on the gas pedal a little bit to make it happen on the same night Carmen forced me to accept a date with Dessie.

Carmen stared straight ahead, but I saw the way her lips resisted the urge to smile. “It’s true. My brother is protective of me. When he’s around. You got that part right.”

“Where does he live now?”

“Tucson. He does freeway construction.”

“And to think he used to steal your phone and send me lines and lines of hearts followed by vomit emojis.”

Carmen laughed. “I forgot about those. He really thought he was going to catch us being mushy or something, but all we ever talked about was your conspiracies about those lunch ladies. Or the probability of my grandparent’s

house being haunted.”

“I’m still holding to my theory that they purposely ran out of pie on Fridays to make us sad. And nobody has that bad of aim. They covered my fruit salad in gravy *every day*.”

Once we started down memory lane, we couldn’t stop, and the bubbly feeling in my chest only grew as I watched Carmen laugh.

She pulled into her parents’ driveway and put the van in park. “We did it. Bingo night is in the books. Never again.”

“Until next week.”

“Isaac, no.” She turned and draped her arms across the console, resting her chin on them and looking up at me with her big brown eyes. “I have to because I’m family. Next time I’ll take Winnie with me. She lives a couple doors down, and she needs stuff to do. Plus, she owes me for eating all my snacks.”

I ran my thumb over one of her brightly colored nails. “If that’s better for you, take Winnie. Or go with Titan, although I have a feeling he actually is sensitive and Uncle G would eat him alive. But just know, you wouldn’t be inconveniencing me if you asked.”

Carmen buried her face in my jacket sleeves and mumbled something I couldn’t quite make out.

“What was that?”

She lifted her head. “I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Make you feel obligated to help me with stuff. Tell you how things should be between us. Make you feel like you have to tread lightly.” With every word she got a little quieter. “I’ve just been burned before. I tend to jump in without...” She trailed off, and no matter how much I wanted to know what was at the end of that sentence, I couldn’t let her continue.

“Carmen, you don’t have to explain your boundaries to me. It’s enough for me that you have them. And if my teasing makes you uncomfortable, I’ll tone it down.” Though, that would be easier said than done. Teasing sort of spilled out of me when I was around her. It was the only way I had to express how I really felt.

She reached out a little further and poked my arm. “I don’t hate your teasing. In fact, I think every friendship needs a little bit, don’t you?”

Bless her. “Oh, I agree.” I lightly ruffled her hair and then jumped out, knowing I’d never leave if I didn’t do it now. “Text me when you get inside.”

I shut the passenger door, and seconds later, Carmen slammed hers and ran after me, throwing her arms around my waist and burying her face in my chest. She was not helping me grow less attached. No, she was not.

After a few seconds, she let go and stuck her hands on her hips. “Bye, Isaac.”

“Bye, *Princesa*.”

“Oh, your jacket.” She started to shimmy out of it, but I tucked it back around her shoulders. “I’ll get it later. It looks better on you anyway.”

“What, this old thing?” She did a twirl and a half curtsy and then ran into her parents’ house, waving to me before shutting the door.

I stood there a long time, getting way too comfortable with the impending sense of doom settling in my heart. Carmen was going to be the death of me.

## Chapter 15 - Carmen

I slept in Isaac's jacket. It smelled that good. I may also have lounged around in it most of Sunday. But by Monday morning, I was ready to get back to my normal routine and stop doing things I couldn't tell anyone about.

Brandon came in with our water delivery first thing, and I gave him my full attention without a particular florist hanging around in the background to distract me. Okay, so Isaac might have been hanging around in the background of my mind, but at least this time, I looked like I was paying attention. Brandon gave me the lowdown on micro-workouts, his new favorite hobby, and I made a promise to try to fit them into my day.

I sort of already did. My company encouraged dodgeball breaks, where we took fifteen minutes to stretch, occasionally throw balls at people, and catch up on all the workplace gossip. Since we were strictly banned from talking about the GoWithFriends app users, we compensated by getting in each other's business. Case in point, the printout of Freddy Kruger in a chef hat taped to my computer when I came in this morning. Someone had supersonic hearing, and if that was the case, I did not want to know what they overheard when Isaac came over to my desk.

After lunch, I found Sadie in the dodgeball room and used her body as a shield while I buttoned up my teal sweater over my newly acquired mustard stain. Cardigans were endlessly useful like that.

"Are you and Denver stirring up trouble in data management again?" I asked her. "I heard a rumor you're pregnant with twins, and one of them was holding up a peace sign in the ultrasound."

Sadie snorted. "A peace sign? That's how you know it's a lie. I won't have any peace-loving children. Only hellions like me and Denver." She caught a low ball bouncing our way and threw it hard towards the marketing staff. Sadie had always reminded me of a Viking—strong, tall, blonde, and lethal.

"Pregnancy rumors, huh?" Sadie smiled. "Maybe you should rub my food baby, just to make things interesting. It won't be hard. I had a burrito the size of a truck at lunch." She smoothed her black T-shirt over her abdomen

and stuck it out.

“This is weird, Sadie.”

“You’re making it weird. Just rub my belly.”

“Um, what is going on?” Denver walked up right as I placed my hand over his wife’s belly button. Through her shirt, I could tell she had an outie, which I had not needed to know.

“We’re spreading gossip,” Sadie informed him cheerfully. “Did you know I’m fake pregnant?”

He put his arm up and blocked a ball about to hit the back of Sadie’s head. “Whatever you say, love. Do you mind if I go dominate in dodgeball?”

“Not at all.”

He leaned down and kissed her quickly before running off. We watched him palm two balls and take out two people simultaneously.

Sadie sighed. “He’s the dreamiest. Don’t tell him I said that.”

“I wouldn’t dare.” The two of them were made for each other, whether they openly admitted it or not. “So, um…” How could I word this so Sadie wouldn’t know what I was up to? I wasn’t worried about her divining my secrets from a gossip standpoint. I just didn’t want her advice. She was awfully blunt when she thought she was right about something. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Shoot.”

“I was just wondering. What was the tipping point, when you and Denver went from being friends to being, like, okay, we’ve reached the point of no return?”

Sadie’s eyes narrowed, and her forehead wrinkled. Great, she was already suspicious. But these were the things I needed to know. Where was my point of no return with Isaac? I wanted to stay as far back from it as possible, but also, see him as often as possible. As it was, I was itching to text him and see what he was up to. There had been a flower delivery right before lunch, most definitely from Beautiful Blooms, but they weren’t brought in by Isaac.

Sadie tilted her head. “The point of no return?”

“Well, you two worked together. And yet, you went for it.”

“I didn’t mean to. It’s just, we were hugging, and I accidentally kissed his neck.”

Okay, I was definitely going to avoid doing that. “His neck happened to be in the way of your lips?”



“That’s the story I’m going with. Anyway, I was embarrassed, but he made us talk it out, and he admitted he really liked me.” Sadie smiled and looked over at her husband. “Then I admitted I really liked him.”

I’d avoid doing that, too. This was all very helpful. There would be no talk about feelings other than my appreciation for him as a friend, and Isaac had already promised to behave. I felt way more confident in texting him already. “Thanks, Sadie. I’ll see you later. There’s this explosion in food truck group date requests, and I need to research options.”

Sadie crossed her arms. “You’re not going to tell me what this is about?”

“No.”

“Okay.” That was the nice thing about Sadie. She’d accept an answer like that. For now. I turned to go, but she added in a teasing voice, “I heard a rumor about you, too.”

“Oh?”

“You and a certain florist sat and talked at your desk last week?”

“I talk to all the delivery people.”

“I know. That’s what I told all those busy-body gossips. But I have to ask. Was it Isaac?” She looked so smug that I laughed aloud when a ball smacked her upside the head right then. I knew from experience it didn’t hurt, but it still looked pretty awesome. That’s what she got for asking me about a subject I had just declared off-limits.

“Okay, bye!” I called out, using the distraction to run off without answering the question.

“I’m taking your non-answer as a yes!” she called back.

I figured she would, but that was all the info she’d be getting, and I really did need to get work done. Once at my desk, I finished tracking the group dates that happened over the weekend, plugging in their locations, projected numbers, and actual turnout. It helped me predict how much space I’d need for new locations.

Trends changed on a dime, especially in our online groups, where those with the strongest opinions determined where they’d meet up next. As I’d told Sadie, it looked like food truck meetups were going to be the next big thing. The online chat groups called it BYOC. Bring-Your-Own-Chair. After getting food, they could sit in a big circle and get to know one another. Which meant my job was to find out where the trucks would be and find them the places with the best food, the most variety for all their diverse

palates, and the quickest service. I threw my focus into checking street food apps, reading reviews, emailing places, and making calls until I had a list of locations to check out, and an approved budget for my search.

I had two adventurous friends I knew would want to come with, and as soon as I had a plan, I texted them.

Ally and Kimber were roommates, so they usually drove together to join me in whatever insane plan I had cooked up at the moment. Which I appreciated. My work took care of any cover charges or entrance fees, but beyond that, it was just us trying things out on our own dime, some of which turned out pretty terrible. I was shocked they'd still talk to me after the Fondue in the Dark experience that came to Phoenix last October. My relationship with liquid cheese had never recovered.

As if sensing he was being left out of something, a text from Isaac popped up.

***Isaac: What are you doing right now?***

***Carmen: Staring at my phone.***

***Isaac: What a coincidence. Me too.***

Holy cow, I'd missed this. Why had I waited for him to text me first? Friends didn't do things like that.

***Carmen: It wasn't you bringing in flowers today.***

***Isaac: I can see you whenever I want. I don't have to invent reasons anymore.***

My jaw dropped at his admission. Not that I hadn't suspected he'd brought flowers in here on purpose before. But what an Isaac answer. Friendly, bordering on impertinent. Outrageously honest. Bold, but also cute.

Not knowing what else to do, I sent him a line of hearts followed by vomit emojis. It just felt appropriate.

***Isaac: Okay, I might have deserved that.***

Dang skippy. We'd never been mushy, and we sure as heck weren't starting now.

***Isaac: Let me try this again. Are you interested in eating dinner in the same vicinity as me?***

***Carmen: How close are we talking?***

***Isaac: We could share a couch or a kitchen table. I have both of those. Or we could go somewhere. Maybe show up at the same time? Or we could stagger it. Wave in passing?***

EEK. I needed to stop smiling so big. And while I was dying to know what Isaac's place looked like and sit on his couch eating whatever he had in mind, I already had plans. While Isaac and I had been texting back and forth, Ally and Kimber had already said yes to food truck night.

***Carmen: So, I wasn't lying when I said I have people who go with me to check out places. How do you feel about crashing girls' night tonight?***

***Isaac: I feel good about it.***

***Carmen: Good. Because we're talking multiple food trucks. Where do you live?***

He sent me his address, and I wasn't proud of it, but I totally Google-Earthed it. Isaac lived in a tiny 1950s era house with a carport and a little, well-kept front yard. He had a kidney-shaped pool in the backyard with a hot tub next to it. I could even see where he parked his trash and recycle cans. He was in a cul-de-sac at the end of a street in what looked like a gentrified area of Phoenix, behind a hospital and a Starbucks. And now I was reaching stalker level. Wow. All I'd needed to know was the distance from his house to mine.

The food truck hotspot I wanted to check out had a Thank-Goodness-It's-Monday-Night event, with coupons for a free dessert. I loved snarky marketing. Isaac would have to drive past my house to get to it, though. It would make more sense to drive together. Then I wouldn't be wandering

around trying to find him and the girls on my own.

***Carmen: Do you want to meet at my place at seven?***

I'd have to cut my online felting group short tonight, but sometimes these things couldn't be helped.

***Isaac: Will do.***

I put my phone away and finished up work. Every Monday afternoon when the reports updated, I checked the Maricopa County restaurant inspection database to make sure we weren't sending people to unsafe restaurants. The food trucks were no exception.

Once home, I looked in on Papá, but he was asleep after ankle surgery, and Mamá assured me it had gone well. That hadn't stopped her from cooking everything in the fridge to keep her hands and mind busy. She had enough food made to feed an army and no one to eat it, despite having her meals and mine planned for the week. By the time Gia and I got dinner delivered to all the people in the neighborhood who wanted it, I was twenty minutes late for my felting meeting I'd already be cutting short, and definitely ready to stab something repeatedly with needles. It always amazed me that something so violent ended in the cutest creations on earth.

I signed on just in time to catch the tail end of an argument that, of course, had nothing to do with felting.

Belinda saw me on screen and waved before getting back to grilling Tawny. "Let me get this straight. Tom Cruise was in line behind you at the Kum & Go gas station?"

"It was him!" Tawny insisted. "I swear it. He even gave me a little salute when I turned around, and then, *and then...*" She paused dramatically, completely ignoring all the eye rolls from the rest of us. "He put his finger up to his lips. Like this. I about died."

I got up and grabbed Isaac's jacket off the hook and put it on before settling back in my chair with my needle and a tuft of white material. This was exactly the mind candy I'd been needing—felting and ridiculous conversation. Tonight, I was adding little white stars to a navy cardigan. The pins I wore sometimes left holes in my sweaters. But that was okay, because it gave me an excuse to give them a makeover.

Tawny spotting celebrities was nothing new, even though she lived in a tiny town in Oklahoma where people took pictures if a tumbleweed blew by.

“What was he buying?” Belinda asked. “And more importantly, what was he wearing?”

“He was buying a box of Junior Mints and one of those fancy Voss waters. And as for what he was wearing?” Tawny giggled. “Aviator sunglasses. Tight jeans. A black v-neck T-shirt under a brown leather jacket. His dimples. Those little smile lines around his eyes.” She dropped her felting project and clapped her hands together. “And brown loafers without socks. Very expensive-looking ones. You know, where they’re so ugly you know they cost a pretty penny.”

“I’m sold,” I admitted. “Maybe he owns land there.”

This was met with groans, but I couldn’t help myself. I loved Tawny’s stories. I loved her wild optimism.

She beamed at me, and I smiled right back. Anything was possible, right? Why not Tom Cruise hanging out in rural Oklahoma?

I kept an eye on the time while we worked, knowing I needed to say goodbye and get ready, even though I’d just gotten on. I couldn’t exactly go in what I was wearing. I still had a mustard stain on my shirt, and I’d grown tired of having my hair down in my mother’s hot kitchen, so I’d thrown it into a bun on the top of my head. But then Winnie texted, saying she was coming over in a few, so I’d just wait until she arrived. By then, I’d be done with this last star.

## Chapter 16 - Isaac

After college, when I got my own apartment, I went years without meeting most of my neighbors. The second I moved into the historic Craftsman bungalow I decided to buy last year, all my neighbors found me. They came as a small horde and inspected the moving truck, welcomed themselves to a walk-through, instructed me on how to care for the bushes in my front yard, and invited me to their monthly neighborhood watch meetings. These days, I couldn't pull my truck into the driveway without being accosted by at least one of them. Usually, it was the kids playing street hockey with little skill and a lot of noise, or one of the many retirees patrolling the neighborhood. I sort of loved it.

It took me a while to realize there was one set of neighbors who never came out. Mimi and Beebee were elderly sisters who lived next door and watched TV all day. I assumed their reclusiveness was out of choice, so it wasn't until the neighbor kids tossed my soccer ball over their fence that I introduced myself. Turns out, they liked visitors to join them in their TV watching. It took three episodes of *The Golden Girls* to get my ball back. And a promise to come the next day.

Mimi and Beebee had come to expect my visits after work, including the flowers I brought for the vase they kept on their kitchen table.

Today, I brought vivid pink peonies to match the color of Beebee's hot pink lipstick. The woman gasped in mock horror when I mentioned it and called me a cad. She'd probably get along famously with Uncle G, but that match wasn't likely to happen. Mimi and Beebee gave me blank stares when I mentioned maybe bringing them along to bingo night. They had no intention of going anywhere. But they did want to know about Carmen. All it took was one little mention of her.

I'd moved in right after my breakup with Toni, and I'd purposely avoided any discussion of my love life. Until now.

Beebee launched into me the moment I sat down between them on their ancient couch. "Isaac, did you call your girl yet?"

“She’s not my girl. But yeah, I texted her today.”

“And?” Beebee’s eyes were so large behind her glasses. I was convinced she could successfully interrogate anyone.

“And I’m meeting her in a bit to go to dinner.”

Mimi put her hand up for a high-five. She was a woman of few words unless we were on a commercial break.

“Where are you going? Is it somewhere nice?” Beebee asked.

“It’s not anything formal. We’re going to check out some food trucks with her friends.”

“Why would you eat food in your truck?” Mimi asked. As usual, she was only half listening. On screen, Dorothy was dishing out a deep burn to Blanche for staying out all night with her date.

“It’s not food *in* a truck, Mimi. It’s one of those Oscar Meyer Wiener trucks shaped like a giant hot dog,” Beebee explained.

“I had a boyfriend named Oscar once,” Mimi mused. “Remember him?”

“Oh yeah.” Beebee glanced at me. “He had hands like a short order cook.” At my confused look she added, “Busy. And everywhere.”

“Got it.”

“I should know. I dated him after Mimi.”

“What was that?” Mimi asked, tearing her gaze away from the screen.

“Nothing, dear.”

“Hmph.” Mimi leaned around me so she could glare at her sister. Her show had gone to commercial break. “I remember perfectly. Oscar’s eyes were as wandering as his hands.”

“Well, it’s a good thing neither of us married him then.”

“Darn right.”

I got up so they could argue unobstructed and picked up their dishes, taking them to the sink and rinsing them before sticking them in the dishwasher. They had a once-a-week cleaning lady who came, but she wouldn’t be back until Saturday.

“I better get going, ladies. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Let us know how it goes.” Beebee groaned as she got up from her seat and followed me to the door so she could lock it behind me. “My doctor says I’m not allowed to eat hot dogs anymore. Have two or three for me.”

“Will do.” Maybe someday I’d explain what a real food truck experience was like these days, but what did I know? Maybe I would be eating hot dogs. I wasn’t really thinking about the food. I was thinking about

seeing Carmen again.

I showered and changed, made sure I had plenty of cash, and then locked up my place and headed to Carmen's a little earlier than we'd planned, thanks to hitting all green lights on the way there.

A girl with pink hair was walking up the Ortega's driveway when I pulled up, but when she saw me put the truck in park, she turned and headed my way.

Okay, then. I lowered my window, not sure what to expect.

"Who are you?" she asked, leaning in and resting her elbows on my door frame. She was wearing a letterman jacket from an era she'd never lived in, cut-off shorts, and combat boots.

"Isaac. I'm a friend of Carmen's."

"I'm a friend of Carmen's, too. And her neighbor." She looked me over and then inspected the inside of my truck. "Are you a new friend or an old friend?"

"Both, actually."

"That's not a thing." But she stepped back and crossed her arms. I took that as permission to raise the window, turn the truck off, and get out. She fell in step with me across the lawn, waiting while I reached up and unlatched the gate to the backyard. I held it open so she could pass through first.

"Who was her last date with?" she asked.

"Is this a quiz?"

"Yes."

"Her last date was with me. Maria set us up."

"You're the florist?" Now she was really studying me. "Why don't you have flowers with you?"

"Well, I don't exactly carry them on me at all times." I patted my pockets for effect.

"I meant for Carmen. Why don't you have flowers for Carmen?"

I couldn't decide if I really hated this girl or really liked her, but either way, this conversation was going places that were none of her business. Apparently, I was not the only one with nosy neighbors, although I much preferred Beebee and Mimi's interrogations to this one.

"Are you here for girls' night?" I asked.

The pause and the little wrinkle in her forehead told me everything I needed to know. And now I felt bad, even though I knew Carmen would invite her along when we went in.



Rather than answering, she countered with, “What are you here for?”

“I was invited to crash girls’ night.”

“Interesting. I’m Winnie, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you.”

I went to knock on Carmen’s door, but Winnie went right in and plopped on the couch. Carmen, unruffled by this, was at her desk with her legs propped up, using her feet to roll back and forth in her desk chair while someone on her computer screen gabbed on about the latest episode of *The Bachelor*. I needed to make my presence known, because she clearly hadn’t realized I was lurking in the doorway. But was she wearing my jacket?

She totally was. With the sleeves rolled up and out of the way so she could continue to methodically stab fluffy material into whatever she was working on.

“Did you see his face when she made him hold her cat?” the woman on screen asked.

Carmen laughed. “Yes. You know that was so staged, though. Why would her cat be wearing a glitter bow tie? I can’t believe you guys make me watch that garbage.”

“Yes, the hot tub makeouts are such a trial for you.”

“They are!” Carmen insisted. “I can’t watch. That’s usually when I get up and go see if my fridge has anything interesting in it.”

“Your fridge never has anything interesting in it,” Winnie said. “By the way, you have a friend who followed me in here.”

“What?” Carmen turned her head towards the door and her eyes locked on mine. And then her feet came down abruptly and she reached up to touch the lopsided bun/ponytail thing she had going on, as if she had something to be embarrassed about. She did not. This was Carmen in her element.

I smiled. “You look great,” I mouthed, making her blush. “I like the jacket.”

“Who’s there?” a woman from her screen asked.

“Um,” Carmen pulled her gaze from mine and turned back to her group. “So, you all know Winnie. Well, now you guys get to meet my friend, Isaac. Come here and say hi.” She put whatever she was working on into the basket next to her desk and pulled me in view of her camera. I ducked down so they could see me.

“Isaac, this is Belinda.” She pointed to the top left corner of her screen. “She’s like the mother hen of our felting group, and we’re her barely

manageable wards.”

I waved to Belinda.

“And this is Tawny. She keeps us entertained.”

“Guilty as charged. Hi, gorgeous.” The older blonde woman gave me a little wave and a wink.

“Hi, Tawny.”

“This is Jeanie. She never stops smiling, and she makes the most realistic cat faces you’ve ever seen and sells them for a bazillion dollars.”

Jeanie beamed under her praise, but it was totally deserved. Her cat creations were spot on. It was a little creepy, considering they were cat heads mounted into frames, but if there was a market for fake taxidermy, all power to her.

Carmen went through the rest of the group, introducing me to each person. When she told them we had to go, she got a chorus of whines in response like first graders finding out there would be no recess. They obviously loved her.

Once her computer was off, she turned and frowned. “Thanks for the surprise, Winnie. Now they’re going to pester me about Isaac until I give them all the juicy details.”

“There are juicy details?” Winnie asked, looking back and forth between the two of us.

“No. I was being dramatic.”

“We’re just friends,” I added.

“After one date?” Winnie got up and ducked into the pantry. She was the friend who ate all of Carmen’s snacks, I realized. “And how come he gets to crash girls’ night and I don’t?”

“We’re going to hit some food trucks.”

“Oh, gross. Never mind.” Winnie came out of the pantry with a bag of cheddar popcorn. “I had a bad experience with a taco truck once, and it’s ruined me forever. Carmen’s heard this story already, so I’ll spare you.” She cocked her head. “Are you going like that, though? That coat is way too big for you, dearie.” She studied my jacket on Carmen before turning to size me up, suddenly smiling. This girl was way too observant for her own good.

She reached out and gave Carmen a quick hug. “If you’re not staying, I’m going. But just know, I am extremely dissatisfied with the lack of honesty going on around here.” She glanced over at me. “I still think you should have brought her flowers. Just saying.”

And with that, she left. With the entire bag of popcorn.

“So, she’s... interesting.”

Carmen gave me a playful shove. “Winnie is the best. She’ll grow on you.” She shrugged out of my jacket and handed it to me. “I’m gonna go change. I promise I’ll be fast.” Next came the pearl buttons of her bright colored cardigan, opening one by one.

Yeah, no. Even though the logical side of my brain knew she was about to go in her bedroom and shut the door, the other side of my brain was stuck on buttons, and that dumb joke I’d told about being a button fan rather than a zipper fan. “You know what? I’m—I’ll be out there. Your parents. See you in a minute.”

Carmen looked at me funny, but I didn’t stop to explain. I just fled.

## Chapter 17 - Carmen

So, that was embarrassing. All my time management strategies went out the window when it came to felting. Well, felting, and talking to my felting group. Of course, Isaac casually leaning against my doorframe had looked like a million bucks while I was using my foot to move my computer mouse around and admitting steamy makeouts in TV shows made me so uncomfortable I felt compelled to go in search of snacks.

But that was why we were friends, right? So we could be our true selves and not worry about stuff like that. The compulsion to hide the quirky things about my personality was a hard habit to break, even now. I had to remind myself that Isaac already knew all the embarrassing stories about me and didn't care.

I fixed my hair and makeup on hyper-speed, and then went to the main house to find him. He'd probably taken one look at that mustard stain under my sweater and decided to give me all the time and space I needed to clean up.

I found Isaac in the living room sitting with Papá, and when I heard my name, I quickly retreated into the hallway before they saw me. Yes, this made me the world's biggest hypocrite when I'd just been irritated with Isaac for doing the exact same thing to me, but I'd worry about self-improvement later.

"What sort of things does Carmen like?" I heard Isaac ask. "I know your wife is a fan of flowers if your yard is any indication, but does Carmen, um, like flowers?"

I was going to kill Winnie. She'd put these thoughts in Isaac's head. Now he thought he wasn't doing his job as a florist or something.

Papá chuckled. "You're lucky I'm not a jealous man. My wife loved those flowers. I keep hearing her talk on the phone to her friends about them. But Carmen... she doesn't like flowers so much. There was a boy. I won't call him a man, he doesn't deserve that title. He brought many flowers to Carmen. But he didn't love her. Even though he said he did. Many times."

I rubbed my chest. Papá had a way of getting right to the heart of things. I didn't like to think about my last ex and his cutting words. Thinking about

him gave him power to hurt me all over again. It was true. I didn't like flower gifts anymore, especially long-stemmed red roses, though I'd never planned to admit as much to Isaac.

Papá continued. "Carmen has a sweet tooth. For sweet things and sweet words. But you have to mean them."

"I don't think she'll accept sweet words from me."

"Ah, you'll find a way."

And now I was going in. That was enough Team Isaac talk to last a lifetime. I made a loud zipping noise with my coat and shuffled into the room, looking up at the two of them with award-winning surprise. "There you are. Sorry I took so long. You ready to go?"

"Of course." Isaac stood up and touched Papá's shoulder. "Should we bring you back anything?"

"I couldn't eat a single bite. Francesca doesn't know what else to do for me, so she keeps bringing me food." As if afraid she overheard, he added louder, "Which I love. *Te adoro*, Francesca."

"*Te quiero*, Eduardo," Mamá called back from the kitchen. "*Mucho, mucho.*"

"Come on." I tugged on Isaac's arm. I didn't like the dreamy half-smile that came over his face, like he was gathering inspiration from my goofy parents. "I'll even let you play navigator for real this time."

"We're taking your Bug?" he asked.

"*Sí, señor*. I just need to text my girlfriends real quick and let them know you're coming along." I'd meant to do it earlier, but it was another thing I'd neglected with my one-track felting mind. I texted them while we walked outside and over to my car.

***Carmen: Ladies, I'm bringing a guy friend along. We'll be a few minutes late.***

***Ally: Who's this now?***

***Kimber: Yeah, is this like a friendzone thing or a real guy friend, where the thought of kissing him makes you throw up in your mouth a little?***

***Carmen: Very funny.***

No, the thought of kissing Isaac did not make me queasy, at least not in the way they were talking about. But I wasn't going to admit that.

***Carmen: We both have dates with other people this weekend if that tells you anything.***

I couldn't help glancing up at Isaac, who was opening my driver door for me, fearing he might be reading along again, but he was oblivious. At least, until he noticed me staring at him with my phone clutched in my hands. And then he smiled. Curse my lack of a poker face.

"What are they saying about me?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Mm hmm. They're asking if I'm hot, aren't they? Tell them I'm hideous."

"Whatever. That's not what they're asking." Not exactly. But yeah. That was information they'd definitely want. And it made me uncomfortable in ways I didn't care to think about.

I left my messages app and opened up Maps, handing my phone over to Isaac once he was done folding himself into my tiny car. Next time we'd take his truck, but there was no denying my Beetle was great for tight parking situations.

Of course, right then, a text from Kimber popped up.

***Kimber: Is he good-looking?***

Isaac laughed.

I reached over and swiped the message away so only the map showed. "We're heading for the north side of Heritage Park."

"Yes, ma'am. He zoomed out on the map, studying it for a moment before setting up turn-by-turn directions. "We'll let the computer voice lady do the navigation. Tell me about your workday."

So, I did. We swapped stories for the rest of the drive. I found out Isaac was an uncle, and a doting one at that. His sister was a single mom, and her ex showed up from time to time to be the fun parent. I wanted to know more about his and Grace's floral business and what had brought that about, but we ran out of time. My red Beetle was recognizable enough for Kimber and Ally

to find us approximately three seconds after we parked.

The two of them had enough combined energy to power a city at all times. They yanked open my door and pulled me into a three-person hug like we hadn't seen each other in years. I was the shorty in the middle between the two tall and gorgeous redheads. Ally was more of a strawberry blonde, and Kimber's hair was a fire-red auburn.

"This is so great," Kimber gushed. "They're celebrating the end of Monday over there with mini chocolate lava cakes. They're free when you buy a meal and show them your receipt. If they run out before we get over there, Carmen, you're dead to me."

"Well, let's go then." I glanced behind me to where Isaac had come around the car, waiting on our little lovefest. "Hey, come here." I reached for him, taking hold of his upper wrist after thinking better of grabbing his hand. "This is my friend, Isaac." I felt all sorts of proud and awkward as he came to stand next to me and slid an arm around my waist. He shook Kimber and Ally's hands, and it was smiles all around, but I didn't miss Ally and Kimber exchanging sly glances. I knew what they were thinking. Isaac and I looked like a couple. We *felt* like a couple, dang it. My focus was on his hand resting on my hip, and I missed Ally's question about what type of food I wanted for dinner until she repeated it.

I hated doing it, but the second it felt natural, I walked forward so his arm would drop and put some natural distance between us. After that, we were just a group walking together to eat more than we should.

## Chapter 18 - Isaac

Eduardo was not kidding when he said Carmen had a sweet tooth. She reverently ate every bite of her chocolate lava cake and then swiped her finger over the tiny plate to get the remnants of the dark chocolate filling when she thought no one was looking. Man, I wanted to be Carmen's chocolate lava cake. Desired. Irresistible. The focus of her attention. But thinking like that would only get me in trouble.

I was simply her buddy tonight, and she was so convincing, her friends stopped watching the two of us and got comfortable with me as a permanent member of the group. Which was not a bad thing, when I could set aside my lava cake aspirations. Like Carmen, they were funny, warm, and welcoming. Kimber chatted up all the food vendors, giving them a hard time, only to lavish them with praise once she got her meal. Ally was quieter, content to listen and laugh along.

"How did you two meet Carmen?" I asked them. Having had our fill of walking around, we were sitting at a picnic table with the remnants of everything we'd tried. Ally and Carmen sat across from me, and Kimber was at my side. Like Carmen, Ally had devoured every bite of her dessert, but Kimber continued to toy with hers until it was a gloopy consistency real lava would be proud of.

"Oh," Ally clapped her hands together. "Let me tell it."

Kimber waved her arm in acquiesce.

"We were sixteen." Ally turned to Carmen. "Actually, you might have been seventeen."

Carmen nodded. "Just turned."

"Anyway, Kimber and I got invited to go cliff diving at Canyon Lake with a bunch of guys, and Carmen was there with her brother. They took us up to the highest cliff, and I was so scared, but I really wanted to impress this older guy I was crushing on. So, I walked to the edge all confident, and then froze. I didn't want to do it, and I was so afraid someone was about to push me from behind." Ally gave Carmen a side hug. "Carmen was my hero. She announced she was too scared to jump, and wanted to try one of the lower



cliffs, and asked if anyone would go with her. Which earned her a bunch of groans from everyone, but she didn't care at all. She looked right at me, and I knew she was giving me an out. We did the walk of shame back down the trail, went to the lowest cliff, and jumped off together a bunch of times. Friends ever since."

Carmen shrugged. "I hate heights too. We saved each other."

"And they still love me, even though I stayed up top with the boys." Kimber turned to me. "What about you, tough-guy? What would you have done in that situation?"

"Teenage me? I'd like to think I'd go walk Carmen and Ally down to where they wanted to go. That's like guy move 101."

"Girl-crazy Isaac." Kimber leaned into me. Her vanilla bean scent was a little too strong for my liking, but I'd gotten used to it since she had no sense of personal space. "Are you still that way?"

I glanced at Carmen, but she was looking off toward the food trucks, probably counting the number of people lined up. She'd been dutifully taking notes all night, going through her list of requirements, noting things like access to bathrooms, handwashing stations, noise level, parking, and a million other things I never would have considered.

"I'm a normal guy."

"Oh, I don't know about that. You and Carmen met on a blind date set up by this Maria lady. And now you have another blind date, also set up by Maria, this weekend?"

"Yeah, I agreed to two."

"Most guys don't even know what a date is. I think it's refreshing you're actively looking for someone."

Carmen was paying attention to us now, her brown eyes locked on mine, but I couldn't read her expression. It was amused, but almost fake-amused? Pleasantly neutral? Whatever it was, it sent a thread of stress through me. Carmen was usually easy to read, not one to mask her feelings. But our stare-off was drawing attention to us, so I turned back to Kimber.

"I was actually coerced into both dates, but yeah. I guess you could say I'm open to love." I purposely didn't look back at Carmen this time. Teasing her was for when it was just the two of us. Adding Kimber and Ally had created this weird dimension where I didn't know what came off as too flirty or who it was aimed at.

Could you miss someone who was right there with you? Because that's

what it felt like, sitting across from Carmen, but not being able to reach her.

“Who are you going out with on Friday?” Ally asked Carmen.

“Um, his name is Titan. I met him at bingo night.” Carmen’s lips lifted into a half smile. “Isaac told him to ask me out.”

“Ooh, that’s fun.” Kimber clapped her hands together. “So, Isaac’s like your wingman now.”

“Not exactly.” Carmen glanced at me, looking embarrassed. I was not her wingman, not by any stretch of the word, and now she’d have to explain. “It was more of a dare. Isaac had an awkward date coming up, so he decided to make things even.”

“Not that there’s anything wrong with the guy,” I added. “He seemed nice.”

“Yeah, he was nice,” Carmen added, fiddling with her soda straw. “Maybe we’ll end up as friends.”

Kimber groaned. “Nice? Friends? This again?” Kimber turned back to me. “Unlike you, Carmen is very afraid of love. She only goes out with bland guys she’s not interested in. No offense to you or anything.”

Ally’s eyes widened. “Kimber Marie Johansson! Did you just call Isaac bland?”

“What? No.” Kimber sputtered. “I said, ‘no offense.’”

“That doesn’t negate the bland comment.”

“Yes, it does. It means, not including him.”

“That’s not what it means. Not even a little bit.” Ally smiled wickedly. “No offense.”

Kimber crossed her arms. “Oh, offense taken.”

We all laughed, but I grasped for a new subject that had nothing to do with me, Carmen, or dating. “Are you planning on eating that?” I asked Kimber, pointing to the sludge cake she was still absently stirring with her little plastic spoon.

“Why, do you want some?”

“No thanks. It looks like it might rise up and create an Orc army. No offense.”

Kimber’s eyes narrowed, and she picked up a spoonful, aiming it at my mouth. “It won’t kill you. It’s not acid.”

“You sure about that?” I said, dodging and trying not to laugh.

“Oh, come on.” She nudged it closer and managed to get a dollop on my lips, making Ally giggle.

“Nice.” I wiped it off with the back of my hand and took the napkin Carmen handed across so I could get the rest.

“You missed a spot,” Kimber said, smiling big. She licked her thumb and cleaned off my upper lip with it, laughing at the face I made. “You’re so squirmy. Hold still.” She took my chin and turned my face from side to side, examining me.

“Am I good?” I asked.

“You’re perfect.”

I glanced up as Carmen got to her feet, calmly gathering up her trash and ours without making eye contact. I moved to take the paper goods from her, but she ignored me and plopped Kimber’s plate of disgusting cake on top. “No more food fights, Kimber. You’re gonna scare the poor kid.” She turned away, leisurely walking to the nearest trashcan, only when she dropped everything in, she kept going.

I jumped up and followed on instinct.

“Carmen,” I called softly, once I got close enough.

“What’s up?” She turned, and her face was all curious innocence, which was not convincing at all.

I knew that look, and I didn’t like seeing it on Carmen. *Everything is fine. I’m fine. This is fun. I will make this fun if I have to die trying.* I wished it hadn’t taken me so long to recognize it. My sister used to get that look when there was tension in the house growing up. Sometimes I thought her grumpy demeanor now was an act of rebellion.

“Walk with me. I’m going to take your hand. I don’t want to lose you in this crowd.” I laced my fingers with hers and had to ignore the instant surge of affection that hit me like a laser beam to the chest. Holding her hand didn’t feel casual or even utilitarian. It was more than keeping her with me in this moment. I wanted to keep her. Period.

Once we reached the sidewalk at the outer edge of the park, Carmen let go of my hand and ran her fingers through her hair, playing with the ends. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make things awkward. We should head back to Kimber and Ally.”

“You’re not making anything awkward. You seemed like you needed a moment.”

“I did. I do.” She took in a deep breath. “I’m messing this all up. I didn’t think about all the dynamics. And Kimber—”

“I like Kimber.”

Carmen paused before looking away, her forehead wrinkling. “That’s good, because I can tell she likes you.”

The wistfulness in her voice had me rethinking everything. Wait, was she jealous? I’d been trying so hard to please her friends. To get them to like me. It hadn’t even occurred to me that Carmen’s anxiety was anything other than embarrassment over Kimber’s brash way of speaking. In all my eagerness to smooth things over, I’d been basically flirting right back. Knowing it made Carmen jealous was... awesome, but I couldn’t focus on that right now, and I certainly wouldn’t knowingly do it again.

I gave a light tug on her coat until she had to look up at me. The wind had picked up, and I tucked a flyaway strand of her dark hair back into place. “Let me rephrase. I like Ally and Kimber because they’re your friends. And I like their teasing, except for the part where they think you’re okay with them flirting with me. When we go back there, you need to call dibs on me.”

Carmen immediately balked. “I can’t call dibs. Why would I do that? It’s unfair. And unnecessary.”

“Says you.”

“Says everyone.” She rubbed her neck and turned to look at a group of teenagers throwing food at each other. “Actually, I’m fine. I don’t even know why I walked off.”

But she wasn’t fine, so I waited until she looked at me again, which she was clearly reluctant to do. She was red all over and blinking hard.

“Carmen.”

She shook her head and looked away, hugging her middle. “Okay, here’s the truth. I don’t want to lose you again. You’ve become very important to me in a ridiculously short amount of time, and it’s scaring me.”

“I feel the same way.”

“Then how do we do this?” Carmen whispered.

“We don’t lose each other. And you call dibs.”

“No dibs. I promise I’d be okay if you were actually interested in Kimber.”

I tamped down my frustration. Whatever attraction she held for me didn’t matter. Because for whatever reason, she didn’t want to give into it, and I certainly wouldn’t try to tempt her into thinking otherwise. Nope. Captain Friend. That was me.

“Well, thanks for your permission. But the reality is, I’m not going to date any of your friends whether you’re okay with it or not. Not Kimber. Not

Ally. Not your coworkers. Not your strange neighbor with the pink hair. Not the ladies in your felting group. None of them. I have no interest. In them.”

Carmen sighed, and I couldn't tell if it was out of relief or frustration. Maybe it was both. I didn't miss the smile that ghosted over her lips before she hid it. “You can't talk like that, Isaac.”

I leaned in, cupping her elbows with my hands. I certainly would. I'd tease her until the end of time. I just wouldn't take her in my arms and kiss her senseless. Even though I thought about it every moment, including right then, taking in her rosy cheeks and her slightly pouty mouth and her brown eyes that watched me so carefully. “Carmen, you're going to call provisional, I'm-confused-and-this-doesn't-make-sense dibs. It's not selfish. It's information they need. Are they your friends or not?”

“They're my friends.” Her hands squeezed my forearms before she released me and pulled away. “And you're right, they deserve better.”

“Okay then. I'll wait here and look busy for a few minutes while you explain.”

“Gee, thanks.” Carmen looked flustered and overwhelmed, but also relieved. She liked having a plan in place. I added it to the mental list.

She seemed to gather herself, and then she marched away from me, muttering to herself, but in the direction of Ally and Kimber waiting for us at the picnic bench.

## Chapter 19 - Carmen

“You’ve liked him all this time?” Ally gaped at me.

I rubbed my eyes. “No. We were just friends as kids. And we’re still just friends.”

“Except he’s way hotter now.” Kimber grinned. “Hence the dibs.”

“It wasn’t my idea,” I muttered. “I’m just a little bit more territorial than I thought I’d be over our friendship.” I was ninety-nine percent sure Kimber and Ally were exchanging looks over my head, but I was doing really well with my mix of denial and honesty. It allowed my mind to not explode. Confusing emotional reactions were not allowed to drive the bus. *I* drove the bus. And the bus was a mature friendship with rules and boundaries and mutual respect.

“Holy crap, he’s coming back. Everyone act natural.” Kimber shook her hands out and then pressed them flat against the picnic table before changing course and tucking them into her armpits. Ally just laughed at the panicked look on my face. Yep, we were doomed.

“It’s no use. There’s no way to make this natural, ladies. He already knows I’m a jealous idiot.” I snuck a glance at Isaac for myself, dying inside at his knowing smile.

“At least you weren’t the one practically licking his face.” Kimber sighed. “Again, I’m sorry about that. He was insulting my cake’s honor and I needed to defend it. And, okay, I was being a little bit flirty. He has a really nice mouth. I wanted to touch it.”

She was not wrong there. I leaned over and gave her a side hug. “I’m sorry, too. From now on, I will be upfront and perfectly honest about any guy I bring along with me. I won’t skate around the how-do-I-feel-about-kissing-him question. It’s a good measuring stick.”

“Yeah it is. Look at his gaze trained on you. I never had a chance.” Kimber poked my side. “For my sake, lick his face for real. And soon.”

My face flamed, just in time for Isaac to sit down on the bench next to me.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” we all responded.

Isaac’s knee bumped mine under the table. “Everything’s good now?”

“Yep. We’re fine,” I said.

“Sisters before misters has been in force a long time,” Kimber added, ever so helpfully.

The silence that followed only broke when Ally couldn’t hold her laughter in another second.

“Anyone want gum?” I asked, pulling my purse onto my lap and desperately searching for my pack of mint gum, and something else to focus on for the moment. I found my pack of bubble mint in one of the pockets and handed pieces around. “So, um. I told them we were pen pals as kids.”

“That’s good.” I could tell he meant it, but I saw the way his expression turned troubled for a moment. He was thinking about his regrets.

I hadn’t mentioned any of that to Kimber and Ally, nor did I intend to. Lots of people lost contact with old friends. I stole the gum wrapper out of his hand and smoothed it out against the edge of the table. “Isaac didn’t want to be pen pals with a girl at first.”

Just as I expected, he immediately took offense. “That is not true. You assumed I didn’t want to be pen pals with a girl because of that whiny kid in your class. I just wanted to know if you had any cool scars.”

“Which I didn’t.”

Isaac picked up my hand and examined it. “What’s this one then?” He traced a faint line going down my thumb from my nail line into my first knuckle, and I concentrated on not letting my face react to his touch.

“I lost a fight with an apple I was cutting in half. I was fourteen or fifteen.”

“Ouch.” Isaac’s fingers continued to trace over it, and I met Ally’s raised eyebrows across the table with a look of nonchalance.

“What was Carmen like as a little kid?” she asked.

Isaac glanced up and smiled. “How much time do we have?”

I took my hand back and crossed my arms. “Remember, I have dirt on you, too.” But we both knew it was an empty threat. For every story I had on Isaac, he had two better stories about me. My childhood misadventures were numerous and well-documented, thanks to all the letters, emails, and texts we’d sent back and forth.

Isaac rubbed his jaw as he thought. “Carmen’s a big fan of April Fool’s Day. Did you know that?”

Knowing exactly where he was going with this, I pinched his arm, but he scooted out of my reach. “One year, she wet the front of her pants with water from the bathroom sink right before school and walked into class. Only...” Isaac started laughing, and suddenly I could picture him again at thirteen, his braces flashing as he laughed so hard he cried. “Only, it was March thirty-first.”

“I was never good with calendars. Or waiting.”

Ally reached out and squeezed my hand. “Oh no, Carmen. What did you do?”

“What could I do? I waited for it to dry. And, um, it sort of caught on, because most of the boys showed up the next day with wet pants. My poor fourth-grade teacher. And then it was every time they came back from the bathroom.”

“Carmen’s a trendsetter.” Isaac jumped up before I could come after him. “And she accepts gummy worms as currency.”

“I do not.” I stalked him around the table, much to Ally and Kimber’s delight. “I wasn’t allowed to accept money for my drawings. What was I supposed to do?”

“Ask for a candy that doesn’t get stuck in your pockets on a warm day?”

“You’re dead, Zac.” But the words came out between fits of laughter, and every time I moved, he counter-moved, staying directly across from me.

“I have so many questions.” Kimber’s gaze ping-ponged between the two of us. “What drawings?”

“Pokémon characters,” I answered before he could. “And zombified Disney princesses.”

“I still have the ones you sent me.” Isaac slowly walked towards me with his hands up in surrender. When he was sure I wasn’t going to attack, he wrapped his arms around me in a hug. “No one’s as awesome as you, Carmen,” he murmured into the top of my hair. “No one.”



## Chapter 20 - Isaac

On Friday, I got a text from Dessie about our blind date while I was finishing up the bouquet and basket orders for morning delivery.

***So hey, this is Dessie. Thought you'd want to add me as a contact. See you tonight at 8. This is Isaac, right?***

Darn, she sounded nervous and excited. And I was neither. My mood could be better described as resigned with a healthy dollop of caution. I wanted Dessie to have a good time on our date, but not such a good time that she expected me to call her again.

I kept circling back to what Carmen said, about how I'd become important to her in a ridiculously short amount of time, and how scary that was. Dang right. Her feelings and expectations were the ones on my mind, even though she'd be on a date tonight, too.

***Hi Dessie. Yep, this is Isaac. I'll see you at Café Chai at 8.***

I did not add her as a contact. In fact, I pushed her from my thoughts entirely as the bell over the door rang out and a middle-aged woman and a teenager came in with two boxes and hopeful faces. I heard a small sigh from Grace somewhere behind me. I fully expected her to push me out of the way any second and shut down whatever sales pitch they had planned.

Sometimes it was as simple as people hoping we'd put their business cards on the counter in case someone was looking for a personal masseuse or an insurance broker. We'd have a million of those to hand out if we started down that road. But I was a sucker for the plucky entrepreneur, and these two had that look.

"Don't do it," Grace muttered.

"This is how we got the balloon bouquet deal," I reminded Grace as she came to join me at the front counter. We didn't even have to do any work. They changed out the display once a week. We just took a cut from the orders

that came in through us.

“Hi,” the woman said, setting down her boxes on the floor next to her. “I make one-of-a-kind marshmallow candies, and I had an idea to put them on long bamboo sticks so they could be added to floral arrangements. We can do different shapes and colors to match. Would you like to see?”

“I’d love to see,” I said. “I’m Isaac.” I held out my hand for her to shake.

“I’m Evette,” she said, “And this is Finch, my son and business partner.”

I shook Finch’s hand as well. He looked scared to death. “You visit other floral shops today?” I asked him.

“A ton. Most wouldn’t even talk to us,” he admitted.

“Finch.” Evette scolded, looking embarrassed that he’d admitted as much.

I knew right then I was every bit the softie Grace feared. I already planned to buy a few for myself even if they weren’t right for the shop.

Evette handed me three candy skewers from the box and I slowly twirled them, looking at the layers of bright color in each marshmallow creation and examining the clear, cellophane wrapping with their company name, Cactus Flower. It made them look a little like old-timey lollipops. Everything was air-tight, professional, and pretty. I lightly pressed on one shaped like a heart, and it gave a little, exactly like a fresh marshmallow would. I handed it to Grace and could tell she was reluctantly impressed with the presentation.

“This is what they taste like.” Evette placed a small gold tray on the counter and opened a package with ten bite-size pieces, pouring them out for us to try. I took a white speckled piece and let it melt on my tongue. It tasted like a toasted s’more with a soft creamy texture. Grace, after watching me, picked up a pink one and popped it in her mouth.

“What does it taste like?” I asked her.

“Strawberries. But like real strawberries, not strawberry flavoring. It’s delicious.” She shook herself out of her momentary lapse in suspicion and frowned. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I thought marshmallow candies had to stay at room temperature.”

“They do.” Evette nodded. “These would need to be added to a bouquet last. The texture would change if they were refrigerated with the flowers overnight. I also have chocolate truffles which, of course, can be refrigerated. I’m sorry I didn’t bring any with me. I’m still perfecting the recipe.”

“Where do you make them?” I asked. Arizona was pretty lax when it came to their cottage food laws, but these two weren’t looking to sell these out of their home or at a table on the side of the road.

“We have a catering kitchen.” She pulled out her business card and business registration paperwork. “I’ve been in the catering business for fifteen years, but we simplified to just treats this year. I’d like to slow down and have more dependable hours. Right now, I only do bridal and baby shower catering, and I take less and less of those now that our online shop is up and running. If we paired with you, this would be Finch’s responsibility. He would be your point of contact.”

Finch stood taller and tried to look important, so I directed my next question to him. “What’s your wholesale price? How much does it cost to make them, and what are you selling them for?”

Finch took a folded-up piece of paper out of his pocket and smoothed it out against the counter. And then he dropped it and bonked his head reaching down to retrieve it. “I have all that. Just a sec.”

“I’m getting order notifications,” Grace said, pulling out her phone. She gave me a look. “Remember, you’re not Dean, and this is not a candy shop. Or a balloon shop. Or a…” she waved her hand out, looking for something else to make her point. Her gaze stopped on Piper’s small corner where she made cards. Piper was with our mother today. “Or a card shop.”

“Noted.”

Grace headed into the back to start on incoming orders. This was the continuation of a fight we’d been having, or maybe not having, for the past four years. Grace wanted a simple, stylish shop where she could express her creativity through flowers. I wanted the shop to make money. Sometimes those two goals complimented each other, and sometimes they did not.

I was impressed with the way Evette just waited, looking unruffled both by Grace’s dismissal and her son’s fumbling. She didn’t jump in to rescue him while he looked through the numbers with me, although she added information he didn’t have.

I bought three dozen marshmallow sticks to try out, with a promise to follow up if they sold well and if Grace agreed to it. I was curious to see what else Evette could create and what her process was. Ideas populated in my mind, including an all-candy bouquet that would be the perfect impulse buy item for walk-ins during the Valentine’s Day rush. Using a local company would make it all the more appealing.

“Do you have more of those sample packs?” I asked Evette as she was putting her things away. I didn’t think anything could beat the s’mores flavor, but her take on cotton candy was even better.

“Of course.”

I smiled. “This is a strange favor to ask, but could I pay you to deliver one to a friend around the corner at GoWithFriends corporate?”

## Chapter 21 - Carmen

Winnie once again crashed my pre-date prep and helped herself to my snack cupboard. Which is why I kept the half-eaten package of marshmallow candies tucked deep in my purse. Those were for me. Every delicious tiny bite.

Also for me? The tiny card that came with it.

*Carmen,*

*You gotta try these. Post-date huddle later?*

*-Zac*

Not exactly the most romantic note ever, which made it all the more perfect. Despite what my dad said, I didn't want sweet words. I just wanted Isaac's genuine friendship with no games or pretense.

"You're being so quiet. What are you thinking about?" Winnie asked. She set aside her popcorn bowl and picked up a green cardigan I'd discarded on the end of the couch, studying it. "This would be more interesting if it had alligators."

I'd never felted an alligator, but there was a first time for everything. "I'll take that under consideration."

I was glad she was distracted by my sweater because the answer to what I'd been thinking about? Isaac, of course. And I didn't want to admit that. I would not admit I was more excited about the possibility of seeing him after my date than I was about going on the date. Not that I didn't plan to have a good time. Maybe Titan would surprise me. Maybe we'd stay out so late, I wouldn't even remember to check in with Isaac later. It could happen.

Although, if anything could happen, there was always the reverse of that. What if Isaac and this Dessie person hit it off and their date was the one that went long? Okay, so maybe I'd let him be the one to reach out tonight, just in case. I'd hate to put pressure on him to end early. And if he didn't call, and I went to bed early in an oversized T-shirt, my comfy yoga pants, and fuzzy socks, I'd be okay with that. Yep, totally okay.

I took in a deep breath, channeling okay-ness before focusing back on

Winnie. “You’re being quiet, too. No jokes about Titan?”

Winnie stopped eating her bowl of microwave popcorn and sat up taller. “Wait, his name is Titan?”

“Yeah.” I thought I’d mentioned that, but maybe I hadn’t. “Why?”

“Titan what?”

It took me several seconds to remember, not helped by Winnie’s expectant gaze. “Vanderbilt. Titan Vanderbilt.”

“I was afraid of that.” She took another handful of popcorn and ate thoughtfully while studying me like she wasn’t sure how much to say.

“Winnie.”

“What?”

I swiped the popcorn bowl and hugged it. No more snacking for her until she came back from whatever trip down memory lane she was currently on and told me how she knew this guy. “Winnie, if he secretly collects doll heads or keeps an icepick under his pillow, now would be a great time to start talking. He’s coming here in fifteen minutes.”

“No dolls or icepicks that I’m aware of. Sorry, I was just... surprised.” She smiled at me. “I went to high school with him. He was my math tutor.”

“So, you two dated? And I should call and cancel so you can rekindle this little tutor-tutee romance?”

“Gross. No. He was into me, but there was nothing on my end. He wrote me a lot of bad poetry and bought me some terrible body spray for my birthday. Very musky with a hint of cinnamon. Blech. Oh, and one time he showed up at my work and sat in his car in the parking lot staring at me through the front window for a long time.”

“So, he’s a stalker. Great.” I would need to move. Immediately. And also move my family who had been here for thirty years. Just perfect.

“No, he left the second I stepped outside. He was terrified of me, really. In fact, he never planned to give me the poetry. I found it in the back of a notebook he left on the desk.”

“You sure it was on accident?”

“Yes. The first hundred pages had math notes, and he knows that’s the last thing I would purposely read. I was looking for a scratch piece of paper and saw my name. And the first poem was all about how he’d never tell a soul he loved me.” Winnie rubbed her collarbone. “I hate poetry more than I hate math. But his wasn’t the worst.”

Holy guacamole, she had feelings for the guy. Maybe just nostalgic,

happy-to-be-noticed kind of feelings. But that wasn't nothing.

"Do you want to come out when he picks me up and say hi?" I asked, trying to sound casual. I handed back the popcorn bowl and took a few pieces for myself. "I'm heading over to the main house in a minute. I don't want any random dudes back here. Especially if they write poetry."

Winnie threw a piece of popcorn at me. "I shouldn't have said anything. And no, I don't want to come say hello. He probably wouldn't even remember me."

"Okay, but if I casually work it into the conversation, am I allowed to find out if he remembers you?"

Winnie stared at me for a long time. I stared back. She raised one eyebrow. I raised mine.

"It would have to be very casual, Carmen."

"Super casual. I would be the queen of stealth."

"Speaking of stealth, would you mind if I come with and take a peek through the blinds at him?"

"I would be shocked if you didn't." I glanced around and grabbed up my purse from the end of the couch. "Any popcorn in my teeth?" I flashed her my smile.

"Nope. You look great. Knock him dead."

I didn't know about that. I was wearing a comfortable pair of jeans with a red and white striped chunky sweater—an outfit for going out, but almost as comfy as staying in. "Hat or no hat?" I asked. I stuck on the red knit hat Gia had talked me into buying three winters ago, telling me it looked, quote, 'adorbs.' It did match my sweater perfectly, but I wasn't normally a hat person.

Winnie pursed her lips. "Where are you going?"

"To a Friends of the Library mixer. We'll be out in their courtyard, but maybe they'll have space heaters."

"Carmen, wear the hat. Wear a parka if you have one, you poor, cold-blooded thing."

I smiled. "Okay." I could always stick it in my pocket later.

Sensing Titan would be the punctual type, I headed outside with Winnie, entered my parents' house through the back door and shut it behind us. My parents were watching TikTok videos with Gia at the kitchen table and barely acknowledged us with a small wave. I reached the front room right as the doorbell rang.

“I’ll do my best to pause right in front of the window so you can get a good long look at him, Winnie.”

“Stop thinking about me and go have fun.” She ducked back into the hallway and shooed me away with her hand.

I opened the door and smiled at Titan. Just like the last time I’d seen him, his shirt was crisp and tucked in, and his hair was neatly combed. Not a hair out of place. “Hey, you ready to go?” I asked.

“Sure thing. Um, you do know this library event isn’t doing cosplay, right?”

“What?” I looked down at myself and then back at him.

“Where’s Waldo?”

Son of a gun. I took off my knit hat and tossed it onto the couch, hearing a snort from the hallway on my way out.



## Chapter 22 - Isaac

Dessie looked exactly like the picture Maria showed me, except for her hair, which was now platinum blonde and bobbed instead of shoulder-length and brown with blonde highlights. I got the feeling she changed it a lot, like many hairdressers. There was an air of high maintenance around her, like she always had perfect hair and makeup and expected to be noticed for it.

“You look great.”

She beamed. “Well, thank you. You’re not too bad yourself.” She went in for a hug, so I gave her one, and then we sat across from each other at a high-topped table inside the café, and she rested her chin on her fists and stared at me. “You are exactly as cute in person as your picture.”

“Thanks.”

“I like your dimples. You have one in your chin, too. That’s fun.”

I nodded, trying not to laugh. She was messing with me, but that was okay. I could deal with spunky. It meant things would be less awkward than I imagined.

Our small talk went great right up until the server came over while Dessie was telling me about a particularly difficult client she had. Café Chai had a takeout counter, but the tables were manned by waitstaff in wine-colored aprons.

“We’re not ready,” Dessie said, giving her a shooing motion with her hand. “Go.”

The girl, probably sixteen or seventeen, smiled until she realized Dessie was not messing with her.

“Go,” she repeated.

“Okay.” The girl gave an eye roll as she retreated, which Dessie did not miss.

“Did you just roll your eyes?” she asked loudly, turning to raise her eyebrows at me like we were in total solidarity on the audacity of the situation. Except there was no solidarity. Heads were turning our way, and Dessie seemed to draw power from the attention we were getting.

When the girl ignored her question and continued to walk off, my greatest fear came to life as Dessie jumped up to follow her. *No, please don’t*

*do this, strange date of mine.*

“I’d like to speak with your manager,” Dessie demanded, now at the counter. “I have never been treated so rudely in my life.”

“Of course,” the barista at the register said. She and the eye-roller headed to the back, while the line of customers left behind stared at Dessie and waited for things to go back to normal.

After a minute, Dessie tapped the bell on the counter. “How long does it take to get a manager, people?” She gave a passive-aggressive laugh. “Am I right?”

She got a few pained smiles in return before people dropped eye contact. One dude stealthily held up his phone and began recording her.

I rubbed the back of my neck where beads of sweat were beginning to gather. What was my role here? I was neither spectator nor participant, but somewhere in between, like a passenger in a car when the driver decides to cut across oncoming traffic.

A harried-looking woman hurried out and put her hands together, looking apologetic. “I’m so sorry for the wait, what can I do for you?”

Dessie clutched her chest. “My date and I were in the middle of a conversation.” Dessie pointed to me, and fifteen heads turned my way. “Your employee interrupted us, and when I politely asked her for more time, she rolled her eyes at me.”

There was a long silence while the two women stared at each other. We hadn’t ordered yet. There was nothing to comp, and clearly no reason to, since there was a more truthful side to this story, and no doubt, the manager heard it before coming out.

“Well?” Dessie demanded.

I couldn’t sit and watch a fellow business owner apologize for nothing. Or worse, have to back her employee and endure the wrath sure to come. Nope. We were getting out of here without being asked to leave. Both of us.

I jumped up and went to Dessie’s side. “Hey, beautiful. I need some air. It’s such a nice night. Why don’t we ditch this place and go for a stroll?”

Somewhere, someone was backing over an Academy Award with their Land Rover based on my smarmy performance, but Dessie ate it up.

She smiled at me before turning to glare at the manager. “Absolutely. I can’t stand to be in here another minute.” She tucked her purse straps higher on her shoulder and marched out with me hurrying after her once I’d stuffed the last of my cash in their tip jar. “Sorry,” I mouthed.

Once I had her out of the café, I turned and threw everyone a double thumbs up at the door and got a smattering of cheers and whistles in return.

“Good luck with that,” one guy called out.

“Why are they cheering?” Dessie asked, trying to look back in over my shoulder.

I took her hand and coaxed her away, using more persuasive smiles I would stay awake thinking about later tonight. Who was this person who had taken over my body?

“They’re cheering because we chose the high road. The high road being walking out of there and finding somewhere else to be. Making a scene is overrated.” The café was in a small shopping center, and I turned us to the left with no destination in mind except away.

My dad and I used to watch the TV show 24, and that’s what this felt like, living minute to minute with my heart pumping and my mind working in overtime just so no one would die. Yep, that was me—seducing terrorists for the greater good. Kiefer Sutherland, eat your heart out.

We passed an insurance office and a dry-cleaners before we reached a frozen yogurt shop. I picked up my pace, hoping to pass it up. Dessie did not.

She smiled and tugged on my hand. “I love frozen yogurt. It’s so much better than ice cream, don’t you think?”

Yep. Definitely a terrorist.

The monster who had taken over my body wanted me to agree with her, but I resisted. “If it’s as good as ice cream, why does it need so many toppings?”

Dessie eyed me, not sure if I was joking or not. “You’re so funny,” she finally said, nudging my shoulder. “The toppings are the best part, silly.”

“No argument there.”

Again, Dessie looked confused for a moment, but then she smiled and headed inside, making the bell over the door ring merrily. Thankfully, we were the only customers on this cold evening. All the smart people were two doors down getting warm drinks. Dessie walked straight to the counter and clapped her hands together in excitement. “I’d like to try all the flavors. I’ll need twelve sample cups, please.”

The bored-looking teen manning the counter glanced over at the machines. “One of them is a non-flavored treat for dogs, ma’am.”

“Twelve cups,” she repeated, holding out her hand palm up.

He handed over the sample cups before staring me down. I sighed and

pulled out my wallet, shaking it back and forth. Yes, we'd be paying customers. I knew how this worked. Frozen yogurt shops were a total racket. You paid by the ounce, and oh, did you pay.

"Aren't you going to get anything?" Dessie asked me. She was on her second sample. Peach Razmataz, no sugar added and fat free.

"Let me know what's good." At least there were no spectators in here. I pulled out my phone and stared at it, wondering if I should bail. People did it all the time in movies. They asked a friend to call them with a fake emergency. It would be so easy, and then there would be no hard feelings, and I'd never have to see or talk to Dessie again.

I avoided conflict so regularly, it was hard to tell anymore if it was for the greater good, or just for my good. But if I left now, she'd still be in here wreaking havoc. I put my phone away and waited until Dessie had tried every flavor before deciding on a small cup of vanilla.

She covered her treat in various toppings, sneakily munching on handfuls of those before taking her creation to the scale by the counter.

The kid sighed, already giving up the fight. "Eight dollars and fifty-three cents."

Dessie scoffed. "Eight dollars! For this little cup? That's ridiculous. Yours is going to cost a million dollars, Isaac. Better make sure you try all the flavors first. Can we get some more of those little cups? Now, please." She snapped her fingers.

I moved to stand next to her and pulled out my credit card. "I'm good, but I think we need to pay extra for all the M&Ms and marshmallows you snuck. How much do you think?" I asked the cashier. "Six extra ounces? Does that sound fair?"

His eyes went wide. "No, you're good, man."

"Add it. I insist."

He shrugged and rang up the extra. Dessie turned to me, looking murderous. "You know what I think? I think this date is over. And I think I'm not hungry anymore. She picked up her frozen yogurt cup from the scale and dumped it into my shirt, where it stuck before falling to the floor, raining M&Ms everywhere. And then she stalked out.

I'd known before I intervened there was no way of doing the right thing *and* having the date end well, but still. That was, hands-down, the worst date I'd ever had. And the shortest.

"Dude, she's fire and all, but wow." The kid behind the counter flipped

back his hair and motioned to my ruined shirt. “Harsh.”

“Yeah.” After picking up the cup from the floor and tossing it out, I took the handful of napkins he handed me and leaned over the trash, scraping frozen yogurt off of me. “If you ever find yourself interested in someone like her, run the other direction and don’t look back. She might be fire, but attraction is more than what you see with your eyes. It’s those little quirks that make her fun to be around. The way she smells, or sighs, or the feel of her next to you. It’s the things she worries about that you wish you could fix. It’s all of her. And the more you get to know her, the more you’re dying for her time, her attention, hoping to make her laugh. She makes everything better. Not worse.”

I looked up to realize I was monologuing to nobody. The kid walked back in a minute later pushing a mop bucket, intent on cleaning up the mess on the floor. I apologized again, and with more relief than I’d ever felt in my life, drove home smelling like chocolate sauce and maraschino cherries.

## Chapter 23 - Carmen

***Isaac: How's your date going?***

His text was like a cup of water at the end of a marathon, and I mentally took a long drink before pouring the rest over the top of my head. Yes! Isaac remembered to check in for our after-date recap. *Be cool, Carmen.*

***Carmen: Um, how is yours?***

I would not show my cards first. Maybe his date was going great. Maybe she was taking a short jaunt to the ladies' room before they headed out for drinks and dancing. Maybe they'd be eloping in Vegas tomorrow. Thankfully, Isaac ended my mind spiral with a text back.

***Isaac: Let's just say it was short. You doing okay?***

I glanced around before spotting Titan laughing it up with the same two ladies he'd been talking to most of the night.

***Carmen: My date pretty much ended when Titan ditched me to talk to some leggy "intellectuals," but there are a lot of interesting people here, so I'm working. Yep, this is a work date. Did you know there's a place called Wrangler's Roost that was originally a stage-coach stop not far from here? Now it's a little resort with a ten-person hot tub. I was thinking GoWithFriends could start doing little day trips. WDYT?***

***Isaac: I think I'm going to murder Titan.***

***Carmen: That would be bad because he's my ride.***

***Isaac: Was your ride. I'm coming to get you. Send me an address.***

I sighed with relief. Although I'd toyed with the idea of using a ride

share app or calling my sister to save me from my date of shame, I couldn't bring myself to do it. It would be admitting what a farce of a date this was. Titan brought me solely so he could show up with someone. I wasn't even arm candy. I was street cred.

Also, Titan was a liar, because on the way here when I asked if he remembered Winnie, he denied ever knowing anyone by that name, promptly missed his turn, swore, did a five-point turn *in a Civic*, and almost backed us into a Bentley. He definitely remembered her.

***Isaac: Oh, and the stagecoach resort thing sounds amazing.***

That was it. Decision made.

***Carmen: Pick me up. I'll love you forever.***

***Isaac: Promise?***

I sighed. Of course I'd love him forever. As my bestest guy friend. I sent him a pin drop, and he sent me back a thumbs up and said he was twenty minutes out.

I walked over to the appetizer table and waited on two ladies in evening gowns to move before taking a few tiny almond cookies from a gold tray. Apparently, nobody knew how to dress for this thing because we had everything from dressy to business casual, to well, me. Yes, I was the only person in jeans, but that was fine. At least no one else had accused me of dressing like an extra from a *Where's Waldo* book. I considered hitting Titan in the back of the head with one of my cookies, but that would be a waste of perfectly good food. Plus, I'd met some very nice people tonight, and there was no need to make a scene. I walked over with my plate and chatted with the couple who had told me about the stage coach place, and before I knew it, my phone was buzzing with a text from Isaac saying he'd arrived.

I said my goodbyes and looked around for Titan. Sigh. He looked so happy and pleased with himself for being a part of a conversation with beautiful women. Maybe I could send him a text instead.

I turned to go and saw Isaac leaning in the doorway, his gaze on me steady and affectionate. He could take two strides and be at Titan's side if he wanted to, but he was waiting for me to make my move or ask him to make

his, and there was literally nothing hotter.

I could admit that. I blew out a breath. He was wearing his leather jacket again. I wasn't tempted to steal this one. I liked it just fine on his fine arms.

Carmen! Focus.

Right. Friendship for the win. Maturity. I was the master of my own destiny.

I put up my hand in a staying motion and strode over to Titan myself. I was a beautiful woman, too. Not leggy, not runway material, nor could I wax long about Faust or Emily Dickinson. But I had my own beauty, and more importantly, I was the person he'd invited to this thing.

When Titan saw me coming, he stopped midsentence, his mouth gaping open like a fish. He had literally forgotten about me. What a doofus.

I let the moment of awkward silence drag out long enough to feed my sense of justice, and then I said, "Thank you for inviting me tonight. I've found a ride home. Enjoy your evening."

I practically skipped to Isaac and didn't hesitate a second to fill his arms when he opened them. Even with my face against the cold leather of his jacket, it was a good hug.

"Ready to get out of here?" he asked.

"Yes, please."

"Where do you want to go?" He pulled his keys out of his pocket and put an arm around my shoulders as we walked out. He was parked just outside, and he opened the passenger side of his truck for me before going around and getting in.

It was just past eight o'clock. I wasn't all that hungry, but I wasn't dying to go home and call it a night either.

"What about that date recap?" I asked. "You want to hang out on my couch?"

Isaac shrugged. "Or we could hang out on mine. My place isn't far from here."

"Sure. If that's easier." I said it calmly, but inside I was doing a little happy dance. Okay, maybe on the outside too, because Isaac reached out and squeezed my bouncing knee. Oops.

"What's up with you?"

"Would it be weird if I said I've been dying to see where you live?"

"Um." He raised an eyebrow. "I don't live in a secret lair or anything."

"I know that. I just haven't seen it yet. And you do have a pool, which is



more than I have.”

“How do you know I have a pool?” He pulled up to the stop sign just past the library and turned to study me.

“I may have Google-Earthed you.”

Isaac laughed. “I never took you for a stalker, Carmen. Good for you. Any secret cameras I should know about?”

“Just in the bathroom.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

It felt so good to laugh together. I rested my head back and closed my eyes. “Why was your date so short?”

“She turned out to be a terrorist.”

“Ah, one of those.” I rested for a few minutes, feeling totally relaxed knowing I didn’t have to put up a single pretense for the rest of the night. But once we reached Isaac’s neighborhood, I sat up and started paying better attention because I truly was curious. The houses on each side of us were so cute, each a little bungalow with its own personality.

Isaac turned down a street that ended in a cul-de-sac and pulled into the carport of a sky-blue house. “This is me. It’s a little shabby. I haven’t done anything with it except take out the carpet and refurbish the hardwood underneath.”

“I think it’s great. Which side has the neighbors you were thinking of inviting to bingo?” Winnie was less than enthusiastic about helping me with bingo night, so I let her off the hook with the promise she would figure out why my computer kept rattling like a ghost lived inside. It would be me and Isaac doing pickup again.

He pointed to the house on our right where we could see the flicker of a TV behind a set of white lacy curtains. “Those ladies. Come on. Maybe you can talk them into it.” He went to open his driver door, and I reached across and touched his arm.

“Wait, right now?”

Isaac smiled and leaned towards me across the console. “I know you’re dying to get me all to yourself, but I promise they’re not the type to hold us hostage. They go to bed in like ten minutes anyway.”

“You’re assuming things.” I crossed my arms and leaned in as well, closing the distance between us until we were practically nose to nose. “I was not even thinking about getting you all to myself.”

Isaac’s eyes darted to my lips, making my stomach swoop. “Well, that’s

a bummer.”

This man. How did he bait me into flirting with him so easily? I’d much prefer his talents were of the showy variety. Tap dancing. Water glass music. Anything but competitive flirting.

I got out and shut my door, taking in a cleansing breath that didn’t have the scent of Isaac in it. The man smelled as good as he looked. And yes, I’d been super looking forward to having him all to myself. Not for any nefarious reasons. It just seemed like there were always other people around, and we hadn’t had a real heart-to-heart since that night on my couch when we ate leftover enchiladas together and promised to be friends again.

I heard his driver door open and shut, and then he came around to my side looking apologetic. “It’s been a night. If you want to plop on my couch with your shoes off and have me raid the pantry for you, we can do that instead.”

I reached out and fiddled with the edge of his leather jacket. “There’s no reason we can’t do both. I’d love to meet your neighbors.”

“If it makes you feel better, there’s a ninety-nine percent chance they’ll say something embarrassing about me.”

“Then I’m definitely in.” We walked across his lawn to theirs, both mowed short with distinct cut lines that indicated the same lawn mower took care of them. A neighborhood landscaping service, perhaps? Their porch steps squeaked as we walked up, but I doubt they heard us over the blaring of the TV. Isaac knocked, a series of quick raps with his knuckles followed by four longer taps.

“Is that so they know it’s you?” I whispered.

“Yep.”

“We should make a special tap for my door.”

“We have that. It’s called me sending you a text saying, ‘hey, I’m here.’”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“All right, fine. You can get a special knock, too.”

After a minute, the TV volume lowered, the lock turned, and the door creaked open, revealing an elderly lady in a quilted muumuu and matching slippers. “Isaac!” She broke into a huge smile and opened the door wider to let us in. “Who have you brought with you? Is this Carmen? How were the wieners?”

I turned to look at Isaac, who immediately turned a fun shade of red.

The embarrassment part of this visit hadn't taken long at all. I liked this woman already.

"What wieners are we talking about?" I asked.

"On your date the other night. The Oscar Meyer ones."

"She means the food trucks," Isaac said, rubbing his temples.

"Ah. In that case, the wieners were excellent." I'd eaten a loaded baked potato before my chocolate lava cake, and both had been scrumptious.

The woman put her arm around me and led me to the couch, where another lady, slightly smaller and with a snowier puff of white hair, was intent on her show. *I Love Lucy* from the looks of it.

"My doctor says I can't eat hotdogs anymore. But good for you, sweetheart. I'm glad they were excellent. I'm Beebee, by the way."

"Carmen."

She sat, so I did as well, which left only a little bit of room on the end. Older couches were tiny things, and we were not tiny people. I gave a small shake of my head, but Isaac had that darned devious look on his face I was growing to both love and hate, and instead of taking the armchair across from us, he went ahead and squeezed in next to me. It was stay put or snuggle up next to Beebee, which he knew full well I wouldn't do. So, I stared at the TV, ignoring the tingles giving me a tour of everywhere the two of us touched. *And here we have your thigh pressed up nicely against his. Notice the way it feels? Pretty amazing, am I right? Up next, he's tapping the side of your foot, which shouldn't be exciting, but attraction is a weird thing.*

"Mimi, you've seen this episode a hundred times. Say hi to Isaac's girl. He's brought her to see you."

"What?" Mimi turned and looked at us as if she hadn't realized we were in the room. Maybe she hadn't. "Oh, hello there. You must be Carmen."

"I am." I put a hand on Isaac's knee and gave a light squeeze, curious as to how this woman whose eyes hadn't strayed from the TV immediately knew who I was. "Has Isaac said a lot about me?"

Mimi smiled. "Oh yes. He tried not to, but we pestered him good. He said you two were friends as kids. Beebee wanted to know what you looked like, of course, and he admitted you're very pretty, with dark hair and big brown eyes, and only about yay tall," she put her arm up to demonstrate, "And you're the kindest, most fun, and best person to be around, but he doesn't know if you like flowers. You should tell him what you like. Did you know this young man brings us flowers every day? He mows our lawn, too."

We used to wait on my grandson to do it whenever he's in town, but now it looks nice all the time."

Isaac was a hunched over statue next to me, his gaze trained on the floor, but I wasn't tempted to laugh at him this time.

## Chapter 24 - Isaac

As glad as I was to have Carmen see this glimpse into my life, letting Beebee and Mimi talk to her was like having a flashing billboard above my head with ‘BESOTTED IDIOT’ in big red lights, not to mention all the obvious hints they dropped about what a catch I was, like I needed a full marketing campaign to sell myself. It would have been better if Carmen laughed, but she was quiet and wide-eyed, and I fully expected her to make her excuses and leave the moment we left.

As I’d predicted earlier, five minutes into our visit when *I Love Lucy* ended, Mimi gave a big yawn, and Beebee eased herself up from the couch to distribute their nightly medication. I took their trash out and came back in just as Carmen was asking them about bingo. They promised to consider it, but it was like asking Calvin and Hobbes to not torment the babysitter. Or not to throw snowballs at Susie. Never gonna happen.

Once we were outside, Carmen reached her arms out and stared up at the night sky. “It’s Carmen and Isaac time,” she stage-whispered, turning to skip backwards and wiggling her fingers at me. Apparently, I hadn’t scared her off.

“Is this about seeing my lair?” I asked, laughing and jogging to keep up with her.

“Yes, Isaac. Show me your lair.” She said it in a flirty voice, oblivious to the power she wielded over me. Oh, yes. I would absolutely be the Tarzan to her Jane. I might have teased her about wanting to get me all to herself, but I was the one giddy at the thought.

I unlocked my front door and went in first to flip on the living room lights. Then I stepped out of the way so she could see in. “This is it.”

Carmen walked in slowly and perused with her hands behind her back, like this was a museum tour with no touching signs everywhere.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m gathering facts.”

There wasn’t a whole lot to gather. My walls were beige, and I had exactly one piece of art on the living room wall, a desert landscape one of my neighbors painted. Her daughter’s fingerprint smudges were in the upper left

corner. Rather than fix it, my neighbor thought I might like the painting as is. I did. It made me smile every time I looked at it.

I had bought pretty much everything else with Grace at a going-out-of-business sale at a furniture store, immediately donating the throw pillows from the tan couch set because anything floral patterned gave me hives after spending my entire day with flowers. I had a big screen TV, a couch and loveseat, an oversized navy throw rug, and two long end tables to make the space look less bare.

Carmen stopped to examine the picture frames on top of the end tables.

“Grace and Piper?” she asked, pointing to a picture of them from Knott’s Berry Farm a few years back.

“Yep.”

“Who are these guys with you in this one?”

She was studying my college graduation photo. “That’s Dean and his dad Henry. Longtime family friends.” There was a lot more I could say about that, but I hesitated, and she moved on, looking at a picture of my mom and me at Thanksgiving, and a picture of my dad and stepmom with their three dogs.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

“Not really. I’m a little thirsty.”

She pulled down the sleeves of her oversized sweater onto her hands and shivered.

“You’re cold.”

“We were just outside. Don’t worry about it. I’ll warm up.” She sank into my couch, and I jogged back to a hallway closet and grabbed the coziest blanket I could find, tossing it so it landed right on top of her. Then I went to the kitchen and got her a glass of water.

She took the glass from me and drank it down in two long gulps before placing it on one of the coasters on the end table behind the couch. “You’re the best, Isaac. Come share.”

I shrugged out of my jacket and sat down next to her, and she immediately scooted closer and draped the blanket over both of us. It was what a good friend would do, but it was also torturous, because she smelled great, and she was soft and warm, and so very Carmen.

“Tell me about the terrorist you went out with,” she whispered. Her hands came around my bicep in my long-sleeved tee, and she looked up at me with her big brown eyes, swirls of chocolate I could get lost in. I longed to

bury my face in the sweet curve of her neck and breathe her in. If there was ever a test of the friendship boundaries I'd promised, it was right now with her on my couch.

"She's one of those people who gets offended easily and needs the world to know. Also, she thinks frozen yogurt is better than ice cream."

"That is a food crime, but then, I think yellow mustard should go on just about everything, so who am I to judge?"

"Define everything." I was a mustard fan myself, but I had my limits.

"Grilled cheese? Um, sometimes tacos. Oh, I really like it on Ritz crackers with avocado and a slice of cheddar cheese."

"We can't be friends anymore."

Carmen shook her head. "Too bad. I'm like the pesky neighbor on a sitcom. Can't get rid of me."

"Okay, fine. You can stay, Urkel."

"Who?"

"He's the king of pesky neighbors. You forget, I've watched every old sitcom there is, thanks to my lady friends next door. Kimmy Gibler ring a bell?"

"Yes, but back to this easily offended thing. Is that why your date was so short? She got offended?" Carmen's fingers followed the curve of my muscles on my arm in ways that were highly distracting, but she stopped abruptly and tucked her hands back into her lap. I didn't dare call her out on it, secretly hoping she might forget and do it again. If there was ever a workout reward, this was it.

"Yeah, she got offended. The date ended when she dumped her frozen yogurt into my chest."

Carmen stared at me. "Okay, start at the beginning."

So, I told her everything, and she told me how Titan thought she was into cosplay, and somehow that led into me telling her about the Phoenix Comic Con convention I went to with Dean when we were seniors in high school. We had agreed to come up with costumes to embarrass each other, and I won with elf ears and a silky blond wig. He wouldn't even stand next to me. Bonus? It got me several girls' numbers.

"When did you meet Dean?" she asked.

I paused.

"There's a story there."

"Yes."

“I like stories.”

Somehow, her feet had drifted to rest on top of mine. She had on fuzzy socks; I could feel the softness of them through my plain white athletic ones. We’d both ditched our shoes to get fully under the blanket, and our heads were tilted together, but I focused my thoughts on what she was asking and not how good it felt to have her so close and cuddly.

“My mom almost married Dean’s dad.”

“Henry?”

“Yes. This was after her divorce from my stepdad. But she was skittish, and so was he.”

“Do you wish she’d have married him?”

I shook my head. “It wouldn’t have worked. They weren’t good for each other. But he became like a godfather to me and Grace. He set up trust funds for us, a monthly stipend starting when we turned eighteen, plus paying for our college. We told him not to do it, but he didn’t listen. He said he only invested in good things, and that included us.”

“That’s amazing.”

“It is. And it’s amazing Dean didn’t resent us for taking part of his inheritance. In fact, he invested in Grace’s flower shop, too. She needed a lot upfront, plus we had some growing pains, finding the right wholesalers, learning what to charge for Grace’s floral arrangements. We changed locations after the first year because the lease was too high.”

“But you stuck with it and made it work.”

“Yeah.” And then we got comfortable. Too comfortable for a market with year-by-year rising costs. My mind flitted to all the current things I wanted to change. But pivoting in business was like pushing down a wall with your bare hands, especially when you didn’t have a united effort.

“Zac.”

I realized Carmen had been studying me while I was lost in thought.

“You can tell me the hard stuff and not just the amazing parts. That’s what friends are for. Sometimes it’s nice to have a sounding board, someone who’s not involved and can just listen.”

I pressed my fingers into the couch. She wasn’t wrong, but it was hard to talk about. There were things I kept from my parents because, understandably, it made them uncomfortable to know someone else had provided for us in ways they couldn’t. Then there were things I only told Dean, and things I only told Grace. And on top of that were the things I kept



all to myself.

“That’s the part I like,” I finally admitted. “The learning curve. Fixing the money leaks and finding new streams of income. But it bothers Grace when I make suggestions. The shop is her baby.”

“Is it in trouble?”

“Yes and no.” I took in a deep breath and let it out. “I haven’t taken a salary in two years.”

Carmen’s mouth dropped open, but obviously not wanting to make me feel bad, she quickly recovered.

“What about Grace?”

“She’s fine. She’s making a comfortable income. It’s just, a shop our size isn’t meant to support multiple owners. We could scale up, but we’d have to charge more first, be more careful about purchases and not pad the arrangements so we keep our costs in check. It would mean being busier, hiring more, advertising more.”

“And she isn’t willing to do those things?”

“In her defense, she doesn’t know I’m not taking a salary.”

“Isaac.” Carmen groaned and pressed her forehead into my chest. I could feel her taking on my stress, and I hated that.

“It’s fine. I make money from investments, enough to pay my bills. I don’t need more.”

“That’s not the point. You’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

She looked up at me, cupping the side of my face with her hand. As if I wasn’t already listening. Right now, the whole world was just the two of us in this cozy cocoon. Time and space didn’t exist. Again, I felt that push and pull. A craving for more of her touch, and the familiar unworthiness of it.

“Isaac, you’re trying to solve a problem all by yourself. Being a martyr when you don’t have to. We lost our friendship all those years ago because you had a problem that was too big for you to solve. Because you wanted to protect me no matter the cost.”

“And not telling you hurt you.” I felt utterly gutted. She was right. I was an idiot. My relationship with Grace was nothing like my relationship with Carmen, but it all came down to the same result. In order to avoid conflict with Grace, I’d taken on what I thought I needed to, and kept it to myself. But I wasn’t noble in either instance. Just thinking about the way Grace would react to the news was all the confirmation I needed.

“What about Dean?” Carmen asked. She tucked her hands away again, which was for the best.

“He’s not involved in the day-to-day workings of the business. He got his initial investment back with interest once the shop took off. But because he was an angel investor, she feels like she owes him forever. It shouldn’t feel so personal. It’s what he does. He’s a small business consultant who invests where he knows it could make a difference.”

“And where it makes him money?”

“Yeah. A win-win.”

Carmen studied my face. “That’s what you’d like to do, too. Isn’t it?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Yes. And I think you’d be amazing at it. Don’t think I haven’t noticed the way you instinctively help your neighbors. You see things. You pay attention to what people need, and you care.”

“I think you’re a little biased.”

“I’m not.” She frowned at me, daring me to disagree again.

“Dean’s offered to take me on as a partner, but I can’t do that to Grace.”

“Maybe you should let her decide that.”

“It won’t be much of a decision once she knows I’m working for her for free. Of course she’d tell me to go do something else.”

“And that guilt leads you to stay. And hide the truth.”

“Yeah.” I’d justified it by not out-and-out lying to Grace about it. I didn’t hide the bookkeeping. Grace just hadn’t noticed that particular detail. Which was probably worse. She’d be mad at me, but she’d be furious with herself.

Carmen’s hands went back to my bicep, smoothing out the lines of my long sleeve tee before her hands settled. “I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t stir up anything that wasn’t meant to be stirred.”

“You didn’t. That definitely needed to be stirred. Although now I feel like I might hurl.”

“Me too.”

“In that case, give me back my blanket.”

Carmen gathered the blanket up around her with a death grip on it. “Not a chance.”

When she was convinced I wasn’t actually going to steal the blanket from her, she spread it back over the two of us, but we were both quiet, lost in thought. Gloomy, if I was being honest. It never felt good to realize what a

screw-up you were.

“We should do something,” Carmen whispered.

“Like what?”

She leaned forward and glanced down at my floors, pursing her lips.

“I’ll be right back. Hold on.”

She got up and walked through the entryway and around the corner to my kitchen, and I assumed she was giving herself a tour, maybe checking out my snacks, Winnie-style. But when I didn’t hear the fridge or cupboards open, I got up to follow, just in time to hear the quick padding of feet before Carmen was coming at me full speed, thanks to the slide of her socks on my smooth hardwood floors.

“Zac, move!” Her arms wind-milled out in a futile attempt to slow down.

All I had time to do was catch her before we both slid straight into the wall and fell to the floor with a resounding thump.

“Ow.”

## Chapter 25 - Carmen

This was it. I'd crushed Isaac to death under my richly-blessed body. I went to slide off, and his hands tightened on my hips. Okay, maybe not dead, then.

"You were doing a Tom Cruise slide, I take it?" he croaked.

"Yes. But with pants on."

"That's a bummer." He cracked one eye open, then two, and smiled at me. "When you said we should do something, I had no idea this was what you had in mind."

"You've never slid across your floor in your socks? I do it at my place all the time."

"I believe that." He reached up and carefully tucked a wayward strand of my hair back into place, one finger lingering to trace a path through my hair and down, trailing fire across my neck, his eyes never leaving mine.

And just like that, I felt less worried about his impending death, and a lot more worried about what else was impending. I shouldn't have been touching him earlier. It was like kindergarten all over again. *Hands to yourself, Carmen!*

Our breaths, a little shallow with our lungs pressed together, came and went in sync. Somewhere a clock ticked. But he didn't make a move, and I convinced myself all I felt was sweet relief.

I slid off and knelt next to him. "How's your head? You banged it pretty hard."

He rubbed the back of it. "I'm fine. A little bruised. You know what would help?"

"What?" I sensed a joke coming, and his smile brightened, knowing I was waiting for it.

"I have a hot tub out back that's great for aches and pains if you want to get in with me. And if things heat up too much, you can always check and see if my fridge has anything interesting in it."

I smacked his chest.

"What? I was talking about the temperature of the water." He jumped to his feet and made a run for it before sliding towards the opposite wall and bracing himself with his hands for a perfect landing. I didn't believe for one

second he'd never slid around in his socks before.

"I don't have a swimsuit," I called out. *Or the guts. There was cozy time with him all to myself, and then there was the two of us half-dressed in the moonlight with relaxing bubbles. I respected the difference. Yes, ma'am.*

"Grace and Piper always leave suits here, and I throw them in the wash after we swim. Grace wouldn't mind if you borrowed one."

"She would totally mind." Not to mention my girls would need adequate coverage, and not that I'd been checking out his sister in pictures, but I was pretty sure we were not the same size.

"We'll call and ask if it's okay. As it is, I'm not sure she believes you're real since I don't have any pictures of you on my phone."

"Pics or it didn't happen?"

"Exactly."

"I will absolutely take selfies of us with your phone. But we're not asking her for a suit. That's putting Grace in a position where she has to say yes. I'm not about to mess with another woman's wardrobe."

"She told me it's old and threadbare, and the only reason she hasn't tossed it out is because it's convenient to leave it here. She would never let me wash my jeans with one of her good swimsuits."

I put my hands on my hips. "In that case, I'm offended, but I accept, contingent on her saying yes and it fitting. And I'll take a big T-shirt to go over it. Please and thank you."

He seemed shocked that I'd agreed, and honestly, I was, too, but a dip in a hot tub sounded divine. I hadn't been in one in way too long. Besides, I'd be all covered up.

Isaac went to grab towels and a shirt for me, and it wasn't until he'd already texted his sister and gotten a yes that I realized he'd still be half-dressed even if I was not. Which was fine. Totally fine. I wouldn't even notice.

"You okay?" he asked, reading me too well.

"Yeah. I'm great. Super-duper."

"Okay. The suit is in the top drawer in the guest bedroom. Just holler if it works, and then I'll go get changed, too."

I took the towel and shirt and locked myself in the guest bedroom. Sure enough, Grace's swimsuit was inside the top drawer of the dresser. It was a stretched-out one-piece that had probably seen a lot of fun in its day, but needed retirement desperately. Despite it being a size smaller than what I

usually wore, I stretched into it okay. I put on the forest-green xl tee Isaac had brought me, and was happy to see it hit mid-thigh. Booty coverage and not see-through to boot. Five gold stars for Isaac.

“Let’s do this!” I hollered through the door. *Hot heavenly water with jets, here I come.*

I got an answering whoop before Isaac’s heavy footfalls ran down the hall to his bedroom. The dork.

## Chapter 26 - Isaac

Carmen was just as curious about my backyard as she was about seeing the inside of my house. I turned on the outside lights, and she inspected the weight set on my porch, and then walked over to see what was growing in the raised garden beds I had against the wall separating my property from Beebee's and Mimi's. She looked like absolute perfection in my shirt with her shapely legs on display, going on tiptoe and leaning over to inspect the carrots and onion growing in one corner, and the snapdragon flowers in the other. *Rein it in, Romano.*

I turned to face the other direction and studied my pool, watching the suction sweeper slowly creep around, doing its thing. A cold dip in the pool didn't sound all that terrible at the moment. Even if it was January.

"When do you have time to garden?" she asked.

"The raised beds were here when I moved in. I mentioned it to Beebee once, and she said she used to garden all the time. So, we do it together. It gets her out of the house. Sometimes Mimi comes over, too." I glanced back. "You're shivering."

"I'm storing up all the coldness before I get in the hot tub." She rubbed her arms. "Okay, I'm ready to get in now."

I took one side on the hot tub with my arms outstretched, and Carmen took the other, the only contact being an occasional brush of our feet in the middle. Talking to her was the most comfortable thing in the world with the stars above in an inky sky and curls of steam rising up lazily between us. I turned on the jets, but the shirt on Carmen ballooned up over and over again, and we finally turned off the jets so we could hear each other better and stop laughing at the hump where her neck was supposed to be.

We were just two friends killing time. Well, except for the part where I'd stripped off my shirt before getting in and had to pretend I didn't see her blatantly checking me out. I'd never wanted to pass a test more. Did I get extra points for making her lose her train of thought? Because that pause mid-sentence was going on my list of accomplishments, along with being able to cut my own hair, landing a flip with a wakeboard, and knowing every word to the theme song for *The Prince of Bel-Air*. As far as nineties sitcoms went,

that one was Mimi's favorite.

We stayed in until we were prunes and probably risking our health and safety. Climbing out was torture with the cold that overtook us immediately.

"Let's get you inside before you freeze." I put a hand to the back of Carmen's towel-clad body and ushered us into the house. She tiptoe-jogged straight into the guest bedroom and shut the door. It had an ensuite bathroom, so she'd be able to shower and change back into her clothes.

I came out after getting cleaned up to find Carmen had beat me. She was on my couch in her jeans and red and white oversized sweater, her wet hair shiny and parted down the middle.

She picked up the blanket from the side and dropped it on her lap in one heap before spreading it out like wings. "Come climb in with me."

"It's late." The words came out in self-preservation. As much as I wanted to keep her forever, it probably wasn't a good idea. She'd fall asleep on me, and I'd lose my will to be anything but a pillow.

"Oh, of course. I should get home." She jumped up, looking self-conscious and embarrassed, and I about kicked myself.

"Carmen." I took a flying leap onto the couch and tugged her back down, reluctantly letting go of her hands and smoothing the blanket over us instead. "What I'm saying is don't sleep over. I'll never give you back if you do."

"Oh." She smiled. "I didn't take you for a thief."

"Well, I am one. Or I'm thinking about it. How about this?" I pulled my phone out. "We take some goofy selfies so my sister will stop pestering me. And then we agree I'm getting you home before two."

"Two?" Carmen took the phone out of my hands and looked at the time. "Isaac, you are a thief. A time thief. I'm going to be dead tomorrow."

"I know." I rubbed my face and groaned. "Me too."

"And we have bingo tomorrow night. Or I guess tonight. It's already the next day."

All the more reason to get her home. I was looking forward to bingo, even if I'd be outrageously tired after working all day. I held up the phone and opened the camera app. "Okay, say cheese."

"Not yet," Carmen squawked, putting her hands up to cover her face. "This is not exactly my best look. We should have done this before the hot tub. My hair is all wet and my makeup is washed off."

"You're still a ten. You'd be a ten with the stomach flu wearing a



hotdog suit.”

She rolled her eyes. “Flattery will get you nowhere.”

“I’m not posting these. Are you planning to post these anywhere?”

“No.”

“Neither is my sister. She hates social media. I think the last thing she posted was a picture of Piper as a baby.”

Carmen took in a deep breath. “Okay, then. Sorry. It’s just, my *abuelita* would absolutely die. She thinks it’s a sin to leave the house without makeup.”

“Then we’ll save the glamour shots for her. You can pose with your hand on my chest. Full makeup. For both of us. We’ll do pouty faces, and I’ll have my puffy shirt slightly open with a fan billowing...”

Carmen took the phone out of my hands, trying not to laugh at my stupid joke and failing. “Never mind, I’m taking over.”

The first few were of her giving me side eye while I smiled big, but then she smiled big, too, and we smushed our faces together. Her reach wasn’t as good, so I took the phone from her, and after we checked what we had, I held it out, adjusting the angle. “A silly one?”

“K.” Carmen rested her head against mine and closed her eyes. “Right after my catnap.”

I snapped a picture of us just like that and then put the phone down. “Definitely time to take you home.”

“No, I’m getting my second wind.” She opened her eyes and yawned, stretching her arms out. “One more.”

“Okay.”

She picked up the phone, opened back up the camera, and held it up. And then she turned and kissed my cheek, capturing my look of surprise to go with it. “Okay, now we’re all done.” She turned the phone and checked it. “Ah, darn, It’s kind of blurry. Look.”

I looked, but also didn’t. My mind was stuck on the warmth of her lips against my cheek, the sound of a perfect pucker playing on repeat like my new favorite song.

“Should we redo it?” I found myself asking. Because I was an idiot, or I was too tired to keep my guard up like I should, or because I did want a picture of it. It was a cute idea. Cheek kisses were cute between platonic friends, or whatever the line was we were telling ourselves these days.

## Chapter 27 - Carmen

“Oh, darn. This one’s blurry, too.” I wasn’t lying. I was a terrible photographer. Always had been. But I still felt like a liar because we didn’t need this particular pose after all the other pictures we’d already taken. I just wanted a reason to put my lips on him again. I’d done it the first time on a whim, not prepared for how much I liked kissing his face.

I held the phone up, feeling a little jolty and hot and cold all over. This was a very bad idea, like when you tell yourself not to read another page of a good book, and the next thing you know it’s three a.m. and your eyes feel like they’re bleeding.

“I’ll hold it.” Isaac took the phone from me, giving me free hands. His mistake. I took his face in my hands again, another thing I found I liked very much, and leaned in.

I smiled at the camera before turning and breathing in the clean soap smell that lingered on his skin, pressing my lips to Isaac’s sandpaper cheek. The texture was intoxicating, both rough and soft. I closed my eyes and pressed another kiss a little lower, then one more a little closer to his mouth, and that’s when I knew I’d taken this way too far.

I took a giant scoot back and ran my hands through my hair, so completely mortified. Isaac, for all his flirting, had never been so bold. He also hadn’t exactly reciprocated. In fact, I was dying to know what those pictures would tell me if I ever dared to look at them.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It’s fine.” Isaac sighed. His expression made me want to hide beneath the pillows, because he seemed to see right into my soul without giving me a glimpse into his. In other words, he had on the perfect poker face, meant to protect me from whatever he was really feeling. He turned and crisscrossed his legs, facing me. “Carmen, talk to me.”

I shook my head. What could I say? That I was the world’s biggest hypocrite? That I didn’t know what I wanted? How great for him.

“Here’s what I see,” he continued, as if he was teaching a class, and I was the student being coaxed into participation. “I see a lot of fear and embarrassment, and I want to understand it. You said it yourself. We can

share the hard stuff with each other.”

He put his hands down between us on the couch, and I reached out and covered them with mine, letting my breathing slow. He was treating me like a frightened deer, but I didn't have to be one. I had to stop doing this.

“Yeah, I'm scared,” I admitted. “I'm a little rusty, and for good reason. I took a break, and it's been... freeing.”

“A break from what?”

That was the question, wasn't it? I'd lost myself there for a while. My real personality with all its quirks, dressing in whatever I felt like, telling jokes that had the potential to totally bomb. But I didn't say any of that, because suppressing those things about myself had their roots in something Isaac was already sorry for. He didn't need to spend another second feeling sorry about it. He might have been the first guy to make me question my worth, but he certainly wasn't the last.

“I've been taking a break from relationships,” I finally said. “I got a little boy crazy in college. Okay, a lot boy crazy. I left all those dumb high school boys behind who had never noticed me, and it was time to find love like my parents had, and my grandparents, and my *tias* and *tios*. So, I went all in, and I did everything I could to be this perfect girlfriend because I just knew this guy was going to love me forever. And then it didn't work out.” I shuddered. “Wash, rinse, repeat.”

“Been there,” Isaac whispered.

“Yeah.” I believed him. I knew I wasn't unique in getting my heart broken by people with commitment issues. That's why I stopped. It wasn't them or me. It was the situation, setting us up to have wildly different expectations. “It was just... a lot. I was ready to be happy again. Comfortable in my own skin.” I rubbed my eyes. “I know I sound like the most jaded person ever, it's just the last guy who broke my heart chased me hard. I hadn't wanted to date anyone, but he was persistent.”

“When was this?”

“Mm. Almost two years ago.”

“He's the one who brought you flowers?”

I nodded. *Thanks, Papá.* “Yeah. He was very good at the romance stuff, and he was so complimentary. But I look back, and I'm not sure any of it was sincere. He got frustrated one day and told me...” I didn't want to repeat what he'd told me. “Basically, he said he thought I was pretty, but annoying, and he'd been hoping to end things a long time ago. It was like, poof. Mask

off.”

Isaac groaned. “Why are there people like that in the world?”

“I don’t know. All I know is, there’s a lot less pettiness and fakery that goes on between friends. And when you tell a guy you’re only interested in friendship, and you mean it…”

“It protects you from getting hurt again. Makes sense.” Isaac’s fingers left mine and he sat back, looking contemplative.

He was right. I did feel better telling him, but also not. Mostly, I felt hollow inside. Guilty. I knew with all my heart Isaac was not fake, that he liked me for me. And yet, the thought of another romantic relationship still made me itchy. I had asked for friendship and then made everything confusing again. Any other guy I’d ever gone out with would have turned his head and taken advantage of the moment, letting our lips meet like it was a happy accident. But not Isaac. He’d promised he wouldn’t do something like that. And what had I done? Tempted him to break his promise to me, creating all this awkwardness between us.

“Let’s get you home.”

“Okay.” I picked up my things and put my shoes back on.

On the drive home, Isaac looked like he was a million miles away. I didn’t know if he was gathering his thoughts or preparing how best to distance himself from me. And I couldn’t ask. It wouldn’t be right.

We’d almost reached my house when he reached out and touched my shoulder. “Hey.”

“Mm?”

“You look wired.”

“I do?”

“Yeah. I was trying to be all mature and let us sleep on this, but maybe we should just say it.”

I turned and looked at his profile, so serious and handsome. I cared about him so much, and I wanted our friendship to last. But in all my fretting about not wrecking it, maybe I’d done just that. “You need space.”

“No.” Isaac turned and frowned at me. “Dang it, Carmen. It’s not your fault this is messy. We’re attracted to each other. I’m not going to say how much I’m attracted to you because I don’t want to make this weird. Just know, I’m really, really attracted to you.” His gaze softened into a knowing smile.

Whatever, he totally wanted to make this weird. Anything to make me

laugh.

I rubbed my forehead, smiling big despite my stress. “Yeah, mutual attraction. I think that’s obvious by now.”

His brow furrowed again. “You were right to slow my roll that night of our date. I’m glad you told me we should just be friends. Because I don’t want to chase you. I just want to be here.”

Tears stung the back of my eyes, and I blinked furiously. This guy. What did I do to ever deserve him?

“You were smart to be cautious, Carmen. So, stop thinking you’ve done something terrible because you got a little less than platonic on me there for a second. I’m pretty hard to resist. Or so I’ve been told.”

“Ugh.” I groaned. “Thank you, Isaac.”

“Anytime.” He laughed. “Ah, I think I might actually sleep now.”

“Me too.”

He pulled up to the curb. “Let me walk you up.” He went around and got my door, putting his arm around me while we walked back to my casita. The chickens clucked in their hen house. I’d promised Gia I’d feed them tomorrow since she had an early swim meet. I’d have to set two alarms. One for getting up and feeding them, and one for after I fell face-first back into bed.

I hugged him tightly once we reached my door, not able to put into words yet what the relief he’d offered meant to me.

“Good night, Carmen.” He kissed the top of my head and let me go.

I unlocked my door and stepped in before turning to look at him. Ah, what the heck. I should say it. “You make me... lighter. All the time. Like there’s nothing we can’t figure out. How do you do that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I feel the same way about you.”

## Chapter 28 - Isaac

I flipped through the images of Carmen and me from two weeks ago, stopping on my favorite. Carmen had her eyes closed with her head against mine. She had a slightly mischievous smile on her face, foretelling that several seconds later, she'd open her eyes, turn, and kiss my cheek. I still didn't quite understand what had prompted her to do that. We didn't really talk about it, although it came up in teasing every now and then. Considering how careful she'd been with affection ever since, a repeat seemed unlikely. I was still holding out hope for an accidental makeout. Maybe I'd tell her that tonight. I hadn't seen her truly flustered in a while, and I was having withdrawals.

The shop was slow today, giving me too much time to think about things like that. In a few hours I'd be riding with Uncle G and the gang for bingo night again, sneaking extra cookies to senior citizens just for the fun of it with Carmen by my side. Her father was starting to use crutches and a knee scooter, a big improvement from sitting all day with his foot propped up, but it would still be weeks before he could drive the van. I wouldn't wish his injury on anyone, but I wasn't the least bit sorry I'd gotten roped into helping with bingo week after week.

"She know how often you stare at these?" Dean asked from over my shoulder.

"I hope not." I closed up my phone and slid it into my back pocket. "Do you think it's possible to have a flirty, yet platonic, friendship with someone?"

Dean looked thoughtful for a moment. "Yes. Madge at the Shell gas station. She calls me sweet cheeks and catcalls every time I walk out. I threaten to steal her from her husband at least once a week. It's a beautiful thing."

"I'm not sure her husband feels that way."

Dean laughed. "True, and to be honest, I don't think what you have going on with this girl is manageable. You're like a level-ten puppy dog face. I still can't believe you won't tell me her name. Grace won't either. Why all the secrecy?"

“Her name is Carmen.”

“Well, you should tell *Carmen* how you feel about her.”

“She’s not ready to hear it, and until she is, I’m fine being her friend. Besides, airing all my truths tends not to work out for me.” I nodded towards the front of the shop where Grace was attacking the windows with Windex and a microfiber cloth. She tended to rage-clean, and the shop had never looked better.

When I admitted to her I hadn’t been taking a salary, Grace’s immediate reaction had been shock, followed by a meekness that scared me more than anything else. She told me I should do whatever I wanted with the shop, and then she walked out, leaving me to close up. I couldn’t do it. I was not about to pounce on that like I’d set this whole thing up, hoping to make her feel bad enough to let me win. So, I just worked like normal and changed nothing.

This week, I was met with anger. How could I work for free like this? I should leave immediately, go make big plans with Dean, and she’d be fine. She’d figure it out on her own. That’s what she always did anyway. She didn’t mention her ex by name, but I hated that the comparison was there in her mind.

I told her it was a little more complicated than that. My name was on everything, for one. And then Dean showed up today. It was best if I gave her some space.

“She’s never going to forgive me.”

Dean and I watched Grace attack the blinds next. No dust speck would live to tell the tale. Next to her, Piper had a feather duster, being much gentler as she swept over the walls in big swirls.

“It’s only been two weeks,” Dean pointed out.

“Okay, but how long has she been mad at you for lending us money when she asked you not to?” I inspected one of the delivery boxes that had just come in before putting it on the counter and cutting it open.

“Going on four years. But I have faith she’ll get over it sometime in the next decade.”

Grace turned and glared at both of us.

“Good luck with that.” I opened the box of floral kraft paper and sorted through the various rolls. Grace had a thing for using customized wraps around her birthday bouquets. Beyond the hearts and birthday messages, we also bought Harry Potter prints, various Disney, even some with intricate skull heads done by a famous tattoo artist. The customers loved it, and many

knew to ask for this personalized touch when they ordered. But it also cut our margins razor thin. Licensed prints were a hundred times more expensive than plain tan kraft paper, but we didn't charge extra, even though I'd suggested it.

I had a whole list of things like this. Grace called it the no-fun list. She used to say it with a laugh. Now she scowled at it, poring over the numbers, and every time I'd caught her studying my old list with her brow furrowed this week, something inside me died. This wasn't what I wanted. I didn't want to take everything that was special and unique about her talents and slash it like a budget item.

I'd hoped to compromise, working as a team until we found creative solutions that made us money *and* made our customers over-the-top happy. But Grace didn't want to talk about any of it.

Dean picked up one of the rolls and laughed to himself. The paper was covered in ninjas mid jump-kick and the words, 'Hoping for some action.'

"Not exactly subtle."

"This is husband-wife goals right here. I love this." He took in a deep breath and put the paper roll down. "Grace is so talented, but she has a blind spot that hangs out with her stubborn streak. Isaac, you know exactly what you need to do, and I know you think you need Grace's permission for everything. But you don't. Just do it. Don't wait for her to bluster about it and then wait you out. You know that's what she's doing. This is your business, too. I'm telling you, do everything you've ever known has to be done. Now. Today." He slashed his hand through the air. "Like you're about to walk out tonight and there's a good chance you'll be hit by a bus. Stop waiting for the right moment. The moment is now."

"This sounds like terrible advice."

Dean folded his arms and stared me down, his feet spread apart. It was his power stance, and it was ridiculous of him to use it on me. I was there the day he came up with it. "It's not terrible advice. You're an idea guy. I can't tell you how many ways you've helped me come up with solutions for people when I had nothing. It was just us, shooting the breeze, talking business. But if you can't take charge and make things happen when you know you should, you can't do this with me. Nobody is going to be happy about it in the moment. Get over it. If you do this right, Grace will get involved, because the other option is this train moving on without her. I think she'll take the first option."



I took in a deep breath, knowing he was right.

“Nothing done in secret. It’s all out in the open. Changes don’t stick unless everybody knows about them and gets to yell about them.” He picked up his backpack from under the counter and slung it over his shoulder. “Good luck.”

“Where are you going?”

“Um, I’m gonna try to stay on Grace’s good side. By the way, we never had this conversation. If she asks, she’s amazing, and I wouldn’t change a thing about her.”

“Thanks a lot, hypocrite.”

“Anytime.” He gave me a good-luck wave on the way out. “You should tell Carmen how you feel,” he called over his shoulder.

This is why I shouldn’t have told him her name. Even though Grace wasn’t currently speaking to me, her head turned upon hearing him mention Carmen, and she smirked. Whatever. I wasn’t involving either of them in my perfectly great friendship that was fine the way it was.

*Okay, seize the day like I’m about to be hit by a bus.* Before I thought better of it, I went over to the computer and changed all our prices. Specialty bouquets were now a dollar more. Wedding flowers, twenty percent more. It wouldn’t affect anyone who’d already booked with us, but if I left, Grace could be choosier about doing weddings. I lowered the price on a few smaller arrangements so people could buy within their budget. Then, done with that, I pulled up the draft I’d made of a recycling program for glass containers and made it live on our website. Anything that would bring people into the shop was a good thing, especially if we handed them a discount coupon for their next arrangement.

Grace had a succulent collection along one wall in interesting containers. Now she could get those containers for free, handed to her by potential customers.

“Natalie!” I called out. I jogged to the back and peeked my head around the corner just in time to see our part-time employee scramble off the counter where she’d been scrolling on her phone. She wasn’t lazy, she just didn’t have enough to do. She was going to school for marketing, and yet, all we ever had her do around here was work the counter if it was busy, and sometimes put together flower arrangements.

“Get on TikTok. Or stay on TikTok. Whatever. I’ll give you the login information for our account. I want us to feature a spring mix bouquet

wrapped in the ninja paper.”

“The get-it-on paper?” Natalie’s eyes went wide.

“Yeah. I trust you to pick the right music. Make it the funniest thing you’ve ever seen. I’ll dance around with the bouquet if I have to.”

She eyed me up and down. “Nah, that’s alright. I think I’ve got this.”

Sometimes I felt a million years old and not twenty-seven. “Okay. Whatever you think is best. Tell them the first person who comes in and asks for it, gets the bouquet to take home tonight for five dollars. Anyone after that gets ten percent off with the code word ‘Dean.’” Grace would love that.

“And then I repost and remix to Insta?” Natalie asked.

“Yes.” I clapped my hands together. “Now I have to go tell Grace.”

Natalie was already back into phone-land, although now with a purpose. “Login,” she called after me when I turned to go.

“Right.” I helped her get into our social media, and then I headed to the front, my adrenaline burst starting to wear off at the thought of defending what I’d done. Grace wouldn’t yell at me in front of Piper, but she’d make sure I knew she wanted to.

“Grace.” I touched her elbow, and she turned away from the window.

“We need to talk.”

She looked like she was about to brush me off and continue with the silent treatment, but then she gazed down at Piper, and her shoulders dropped. “We do. I’m sorry. For everything. I’m sorry I haven’t appreciated what a sacrifice it’s been for you to do this with me. You’ve done everything from help me with Piper to bookkeeping, and I’ve been a total jerk.”

Grace was not a hugger, but I patted her arm, and she reluctantly pulled me in and held on, resting her chin on my shoulder. “If we’re going to hug, let’s hug, loser.”

“Don’t call him a loser, Mom.” Piper joined our hug, and I reached down and stroked her head.

“Sorry, Pipes,” Grace murmured. “You’re right. He’s not a loser.”

Grace was squeezing my neck, which had me worried about the first thing I needed to tell her. “Um, before we hug too long, you should know I made some changes.” I prepared myself to get put in a headlock, but Grace only sighed and released me.

“I know. Dean was here. There’s no way he didn’t goad you into doing something. So just tell me, how many somethings did you change?”

I glanced back at the front counter. “A lot. Ready to come see?”

“I guess.” Grumpy Grace was back, but that was okay. I needed some pushback on things. Feedback. Maybe even payback. All the backs. By the time Piper went to school in the fall and we had a strategic exit for me, the shop would be in good hands. We’d make sure of it.

## Chapter 29 - Carmen

*Isaac: I'm leaving in five mins.*

*Carmen: Yaaaaasssss. I'm actually ready this time.*

*Isaac: What? You're not felting right now?*

*Carmen: Whatever. I do other things. Sometimes. Do you think Titan will show?*

*Isaac: He better show after I asked Edna two weeks in a row if her grandson ever planned to volunteer again.*

*Carmen: That was evil of you.*

*Isaac: Was it, though?*

“Ha! Carmen is texting with Isaac again. I can tell by that goofy smile on her face.”

I quickly dropped my phone in my lap and picked up the poor half-finished penguin I'd abandoned. “Thanks a lot, Tawny.”

She gave me a little wave. “You're welcome. Dare I ask? Is tonight... *bingo night*?” She said the last part in a suggestive voice that had the rest of the women giggling. We didn't usually meet on Saturday evenings, but I'd jumped on in the hope of chatting with friends, and luckily so had everyone else.

“Yes, it's bingo night. And yes, that was him texting me.”

I glanced over at my door to make sure it was locked. If Isaac hadn't left his house yet, I had a good twenty minutes before he got here, but I didn't want anyone overhearing what was about to go down. They loved to tease me about him. Nobody was buying my flimsy excuses that nothing was going on with us. Not even me.

But what did that mean? Didn't lifelong friends mean just that? Staying friends? I didn't want to mess up something that was already wonderful. But I also didn't want to miss out on what could be even better. And I definitely didn't want to lose both. Drat. Somehow, this internal debate always ended in a draw, with no winning or losing side. *Same time tomorrow, guys. No awards will be handed out. As usual.*

Tawny broke out in her big booming laugh, startling me and making me realize the conversation had moved on while I'd been lost in thought. I looked down and saw that my hands had moved on as well. Somehow, I'd added an extra eye to my penguin. You know what? I was going with it. Maybe somewhere out there, a penguin with three eyes would finally get his own action figure. I picked through shades of black and dark grey wool to blend together for the penguin's sides, listening to Jeanie reminisce in that soft voice she had.

"When my James came to pick me up for dates, I'd get so nervous I'd make my sister get the door for me. Until I realized he thought I was trying to set him up with her."

"Did you two fight over him?" Tawny asked.

"Oh, no. My sister had her own boyfriend. He drove a motorcycle, and he had a tattoo on his arm of a sea creature taking down a ship. He worked in the dockyards, you see. And his name was Jazz. Spelled just like the music. My parents hated him. I thought he was great." Jeanie looked scandalized at her own admission. "He was nice, and he made her happy."

"What's his last name?" Tawny asked. "Jazz what?"

"Tawny," Jeanie scolded. "He's taken. Married a gal from our town years ago and had eight kids. And my sister is happily married, too. It all worked out the way it was supposed to."

Tawny shrugged. "Another dream dies. Carmen, does your man have any tattoos?"

"Not that I know of."

"Have you seen him with his shirt off?"

I paused, and five sets of eyes stared at me while my mind replayed Isaac stripping off his shirt to get in the hot tub. It wasn't just finding out he had a really nice body hiding under there. It was also one more boundary coming down, one that had previously let me keep him in a special box marked 'platonic friend only.'

Their stares turned to grins. Oh, why couldn't I just lie? My face always

gave me away.

“She has seen him! I guessed right.” Tawny threw her hands up. “Oh shoot. My oven timer is going off. Don’t you say a word until I get back.” She jumped out of her chair and ran out of view.

“She’ll be highly disappointed,” I muttered. “He was in swim trunks. This is not life-ending news.” *Although it might have stopped my heart for a second.*

“Ah, gal. We give you way too much grief about that boy.” Belinda gave me a sympathetic smile. “How many more weeks until your parents take over bingo pickups?”

“At least two or three.”

“Well, I bet they appreciate Isaac going with you in the meantime.”

“I wish he didn’t feel obligated to come. Winnie keeps telling me she’s busy.”

Belinda snorted. “She’s not going to volunteer when she knows Isaac will go. True friend right there.”

That had actually never occurred to me. The little stinker. Matchmakers were everywhere. And now that I thought about it, Ally and Kimber suddenly signing up to play volleyball with Saturday night games seemed a little suspect, too. They weren’t sporty at all. Although it was a co-ed thing, and that was definitely their style.

“I’m back!” Tawny sat down out of breath. “What kind of pectoral definition are we talking about? And does he have sexy shoulders?”

“Tawny, if we continue this, first I want to hear about that time you got stuck between the vending machines at work, and your hot janitor had to rescue you. I feel like that topic has not been fully explored. Am I right, ladies?”

It was the perfect distraction, as everyone agreed with me, and Tawny loudly protested.

“What will it be, Tawny?”

She covered her face with her hands. “Oh my. I’d forgotten about that day. He’s been leaving me little sticky notes on my car window since then, wishing me a blessed day. Do you think that means something?”

“Yes, dear,” Belinda said. “It definitely means something.”

Once we got her started, she forgot all about the shirtless Isaac thing. My diabolical plan worked. Plus, I got to hear about Tawny being pulled out of a tight spot by the hands of ‘a real man.’ Her words, not mine.

My phone chimed with a text, and I swiped to read it. No words, just a gif of a guy knocking on a door, followed by the sound of Isaac actually knocking. “Very funny,” I muttered. “Gotta go, ladies. Isaac is here.”

“Wait!” Tawny pointed an accusing finger at me. “You cheated! I want to know about his abs. Are they washboard, or is there a little bit of huggableness to him?”

“Somewhere in between.” I winked and hit end call. That was all she’d get.

Isaac was hanging out with the ladies by their hen house when I stepped out on my porch and locked my door.

“Are they begging for food?” I asked. “They shouldn’t be. It’s almost bedtime. Má will come out and round them up soon.”

“Nah, they’re just circling me. Do I dare try and pet one?”

“Try Pollita, the red lady right there. She likes people.”

I smiled, watching Isaac slowly lower himself into a squatting position and then reach out towards Pollita. It looked like a scene out of Jurassic Park, just with a much lower chance of anyone getting their arm ripped off. Pollita held still like she might allow it, even lowering her head, but then she took off at the last second, making him fall forward empty-handed.

“I feel tricked.”

“She’s like that. A fickle temptress, that one.”

“Pollita. Little chicken.”

“Yep. Or a cute chick. Both definitions fit her. Come on.” I gestured for him to follow me out to the van, but I tossed him the keys at the last second. “I don’t feel like driving, and Má said it was okay.”

He grinned. “I know. I went in and said hello to your parents, and she told me. You sure you don’t want to drive?”

“Extremely sure.”

“Sweet.” His excitement over getting to drive an old fifteen-passenger van was adorable.

I got in the shotgun seat before he could offer to get my door. It was dumb, these barriers I kept putting up while I tried to figure out where we stood with each other. They never lasted long, because being around him was my favorite, and I got comfortable too easily. But every once in a while, that fear would hit me again. That my heart would come out through my words, or worse, my hands, and then my relationship with Isaac would become this new creature I couldn’t predict or control.

I'd only get so many close calls before I hit that point-of-no-return, the thing I'd asked Sadie about. Repeatedly kissing his cheek seemed just as bad as accidentally kissing a neck. And we had definitely talked about our feelings. I had lots of them, and they were scaling over the walls I'd put up like determined contestants on a mud run. Working together. Cheering each other on.

*Keep it together, Carmen.*

On the way to the retirement complex, I asked him about work, and he gave a tired laugh. "Oh, man. It's been a day."

"Don't tell me the hard stuff right now. Tell me something good. Tell me about that lady who sells the delicious marshmallows on a stick. You said you sold out of them on the second day?"

"Yes. And we signed a six-month contract. After that, Grace can see if she wants to keep it going, and Evette and Finch can decide if that selling model works for them. They're also going to meet with Dean."

"For business coaching?"

"Yeah. I think they have a ton of potential. And I love that she's involving her son. I know not every kid wants to go into the family business, but these two make a good team." He paused. "Can I tell you about the hard stuff?"

"Of course." I reached across the console and squeezed his wrist. He flipped it over and just like that, we were holding hands. Magical. There was that word again. I took in a deep breath and let it out, trying to be at one with the zippy feeling bouncing around inside my chest.

He started to pull away, sensing my hesitation, but I held on. I'd offered comfort. Who was I to take it back?

"Tell me about work," I prompted. "How is Grace?"

"She's hanging in there. I made a lot of changes today. Dean called me to task, saying if I can't even stand up to my sister, I'm probably not cut out for business consulting."

"Um, ouch."

"He said it nicer than that, but yeah. He's right. She's gotten comfortable with things a certain way, and when anything threatens that, it's like this wall goes up. Today was the first day we could actually talk about it. We about had a fistfight over the price changes, but I finally feel like everything is going to be okay."

"That's awesome, Isaac." I squeezed his hand, insanely happy for him,



and yet, something he'd said nagged at me. *Comfortable with things a certain way...* I didn't like the way those words resonated deep inside my mind, my control-freakish nature feeling called out. I liked control. Control was comfortable and safe. But I had to remind myself this conversation wasn't about me.

"What changes did you make?" I asked. "Besides pricing?"

Isaac went through each one, telling me his reasoning and how Grace had reacted to it. She thought the recycling program was tacky, with all those random containers potentially cluttering up her beautiful shop, but she was willing to give it a go. And she agreed to start training their employees on wedding consultations, which for her was a big relinquish of control. She'd still be in charge of preparing the flowers for the big day, but she didn't have to be hovering over every little step.

I was way curious about the TikTok thing. "Did anyone come in to claim the bouquet?"

"Yeah. One person, and she was really excited about it. A few people called to see if it was claimed. We have a long way to go with social media, but we're going to give Natalie room to be creative."

Isaac asked me about my work, and by the time I was done telling him about the places I'd added to the GoWithFriends date night location list, we were parking and heading up to Uncle G and Don's apartment. Uncle G must have been standing at the window because he had the door thrown open before we even knocked, a look of fake surprise on his face.

"Oh, it's you two again." He stepped outside and slugged Isaac in the shoulder. "You like bingo that much, huh?"

"Hanging out with you is the highlight of my weekend, Uncle G."

"Sure. Sure." Uncle G turned to me and leaned down to give me a hug. "Let me translate that for ya. What he means is you're the highlight, doll."

"Thanks, Uncle G."

"Anytime." He grinned at the two of us. "An-y-time. Care to rephrase, Isaac, my man?"

Isaac looked at me, his expression amused, before turning serious in a way that sent flutters through me. "Carmen, you are the highlight of my weekend. By far. Not Uncle G. He's way farther down the list."

Uncle G clutched his chest. "Oh, now the truth comes out." He turned to holler into the apartment. "Hey, Don. You done puttin' your shoes on yet?"

Isaac held my gaze, and I stared right back. "You're the highlight for

me, too.” I whispered.

I’d been lying to myself when I said I’d get used to being around all his attractiveness, that it could be ignored. It was never going to happen, because there was way more going on here than mere attraction.

“I’m coming,” Don called from inside. “Not all of us have been ready to go since lunchtime.”

“Just put your shoes on. They’re slip-ons, not calculus.”

Isaac stepped closer and pulled me into him while they squabbled back and forth, and I held on, reveling in the feel of his hands rubbing up and down my back. I gripped the sides of his jacket, not really knowing what was happening, or why it was happening at this particular moment with senior citizens yelling in the background. All I knew was I felt happy, and safe, and scared, all at the same time.

“I really thought friends forever was the way to go here,” I mumbled into the folds of his jacket.

Isaac rested his head on top of mine. “Have you ever considered that maybe what you’ve been looking for is friends first?”

## Chapter 30 - Isaac

I was carpe-diem-ing all over this day. Carmen sat in the back of the van to keep Uncle G and Don from killing each other, but every few seconds she would look up and meet my eyes in the rearview mirror. Her gaze was curious and contemplative, with a little smile I was dying to know the meaning of.

A cold breeze wrapped around us when we got out, and after getting everyone huddled together and assigning people to carry in the bingo prizes, Carmen linked her arm with mine and snuggled in close.

“You cold?” I asked.

“I’m always cold. That’s why I wear layers.”

Under her jacket, she had on a green sweater with a little alligator embroidered or felted or whatever into the collar. I reached out and ran my finger over it. “Did you add this guy?”

“Yep. Winnie’s idea.”

“I like it.”

She looked up at me, as if those three words held extra meaning for her. “Thanks. Um, so after this, I think we should talk.”

I swallowed. “Okay.” And then I smiled. And she smiled. My play-it-cool-o-meter was broken. I had nothing but goofy smiling and a full-on circus going on inside my brain. Something was definitely different with us. I didn’t know what, but whatever it was, I was okay with it.

We stood together in the line to pay and get our bingo cards, and Edna greeted us with her usual list of rules. It didn’t matter that these people had been here every week for years. They needed to know there was no senior discount, no swapping bingo cards, no guarantee of winning, and no calling out and asking for a number to be repeated. That last one was a new rule. Harsh.

“Thank you, Miss Edna,” Carmen said sweetly.

“Of course, dear. Please wait for a moment. Titan has something he’d like to say to you.” She stood up and walked off, leaving the line of people standing there waiting.

Carmen grabbed a stack of bingo cards from the table. “If anyone asks, Uncle G did this.”

“Sure did,” he said, taking a bunch from her and handing them out to our group. They immediately started swapping, some of them taking two cards. They were rebels. The whole bunch.

“Did the new guy pay?” Don asked.

“Sure did.” I would forever be the new guy.

As soon as everyone had their cards, Carmen put the extras back and shooed them out of the line. “Go before Edna gets you. And you can’t have three cards, Uncle G. You’ll get disqualified in front of everyone.”

“Counting on it,” he called back.

She gave up that fight when she spotted Edna making her way back with an irritated Titan by the elbow.

“I am so sorry,” I told her.

Carmen pinched my side. “You should be. You told her to bring him again. This is going to be awful.”

“We could make a run for it.”

“Nah. It will just hold up the line longer while she hunts us down. But for the record, you’re my boyfriend. There’s no getting out of it this time.”

I put my hand to my heart. “I will do whatever is necessary.”

Carmen eyed me. “I was afraid of that.”

Edna took her seat again and elbowed Titan when he didn’t speak right away. She glared up at him. “Well?”

Titan, trying to look as dignified as a person could while being kidnapped by their arthritic grandmother, said, “Gran asked me to come over and apologize for my behavior on our date several weeks ago. I get a bit of tunnel vision when I find people who enjoy discussing Robert Frost poems.”

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and you chose the Robert Frost people?” Carmen asked, smiling in a good-natured way that was too forgiving, in my opinion.

Titan nodded. “Exactly. I’m so glad you get it. But I’d like to give you another chance.”

“You’d like to give *me* another chance?”

“That’s what he said.” Edna frowned at her. “What do you say, Carmen? One more date to see if the two of you hit it off?”

“Actually I’m—”

“She’s taken,” I said, lacing our fingers together and lifting our hands up

to demonstrate.

“Oh.” Titan frowned. “I didn’t realize the two of you were....”

“Oh, not by me.” I gave an airy laugh, as if the idea was preposterous, despite the fact that we were currently holding hands, we were always together, and anyone with eyes knew I had it bad for her. “She’s dating a celebrity. I’m not allowed to name names, of course. I’m just her bodyguard tonight. Come along, Carmen. I must protect you from any other unwanted suitors who think they know more about Robert Frost than you.” I kept her hand and pulled her out of the line, weaving us through the tables until we reached the safety of the refreshment table in the back.

Carmen tugged me into her and stared up at me. “What was that?”

“I call it confusing the enemy. They were so busy taking it all in, they had no time to ask questions.”

“Oh.”

“Also,” I leaned down until our noses touched, and then moved to speak softly in her ear. The shell of it was like velvet. “You don’t owe him a thing, not even a good excuse. He has no idea what he’s missing. Which is sad. For him.”

“Isaac.” She said my name on a whisper that just about undid me.

“Hey, are you gonna open those cookie packs or leave them in the grocery sacks over there?”

We both turned to look at the disgruntled man looming over our empty refreshment table.

Carmen started to apologize, but I put both my hands down flat on the table and leaned in to meet him man-to-man. There was a time to be meek, to deflect, to keep the peace, but this guy hadn’t brought the cookies, and he could find a way to ask nicer. I was starting to feel a little bit like Carmen’s actual bodyguard.

“Sir, we were having a moment here.” I turned to look at Carmen.

“Although, I don’t know that it was working.”

Carmen shook her head at me.

“Nope, it wasn’t working. I guess I’ll have to start setting out cookies. I’ll hand them to anyone who asks nicely. Let me know if you find someone like that.”

The guy actually cracked a smile. “Okay, fair enough. I’ll go find that guy and bring him back here.” He walked off, looking back several times even after he sat down, probably to see if I was ever going to get that

moment, and definitely to see if I'd made any progress on getting the cookies out. I'd do my best with both.

## Chapter 31 - Carmen

I did not need to be this nervous. And yet, my palms were sweaty even though my hands were cold, and my heart was racing like the lights going past us in a blur, reflected in the van windows. I rubbed the alligator on my sweater from tip to tail. Winnie had been right. It did make this sweater more interesting.

Isaac and I had been sitting in silence for a long time. He didn't seem to mind. He was in driving mode, cruising along in the almost-empty fifteen-passenger van and probably enjoying the quiet now that it was just us, and Uncle G wasn't making dumb song requests or pulling contraband cookies out of his coat pockets and passing them around. I'd have to vacuum all the crumbs out tomorrow. Má had enough to do.

"You okay?" Isaac asked.

No, I was certainly not okay, but the one person best equipped to give me comfort was the reason I was so nervous in the first place.

"Just tired," I said. I pulled up my group thread with Kimber and Ally, needing someone to talk me through this. They already knew I was an idiot when it came to Isaac. Plus, Kimber's phone was never more than three feet from her body.

***Carmen: Guys. I've changed my mind. I want to pursue Isaac.***

***Kimber: Odds are good you'll catch him. I don't think he'll run very far.***

Such a Kimber response. Immediate and full of snark.

***Carmen: Thanks a lot.***

***Kimber: Get it, girl.***

***Kimber: In all seriousness, I think this is the best decision you've ever made. Except for that red Prom dress senior year. You looked killer in that.***

***Carmen: Too bad I had to go stag.***

***Ally: That's because guys are stupid. Except yours. Take that luck and run with it.***

They were right, of course. This was the best kind of nervous to feel. I needed to stop waiting for the sky to fall on me and look forward with anticipation instead of fear.

***Carmen: Thanks, ladies. I'm gonna go now.***

***Kimber: Oh, was this like a pep talk? Are you with him RN?***

***Carmen: Byyyeeee!!***

I closed up my phone and silenced it before sneaking a peek at Isaac. "I'm actually not that tired."

"Oh?"

"I'm nervous. Really, really nervous."

"About us talking?" He turned to look at me, his eyes full of understanding, and maybe a bit of the fear I thought was mine alone. "Should I be worried?"

I reached out and gripped his hand. "Yes. Very worried. You should be peeing your pants right now."

Isaac laughed. "I'll wait until I'm out of the van."

"My parents would appreciate that."

We went silent again as Isaac pulled onto my street. He eased the van all the way up into the driveway and parked. "Carmen, if you want to talk another night, it's okay. We'll be okay."

It was a tempting offer. But then he started rubbing his thumb over mine, making lazy circles in a way that was highly distracting, and I didn't want to stay another second in the friendzone with him. "No, I want to invite you in."

Isaac's eyebrows rose.

"Well, not invite you *in in*." My face flamed, and I gave a panicky laugh. "Wow, I am great at this."



Isaac let go of my hand and got out before going around and opening my door for me. “Come on, *princesa*. Let me walk you up.”

“Okay, but you’re coming in with me.”

“Whatever you say.” He took my hand and held it up, doing a couple of twirls with me before we reached the gate, and then he reached up and undid the latch. “It’s Carmen and Isaac time,” he whispered, leading me through. “But just for a minute.”

Heck yes, it was Carmen and Isaac time, and the anticipation was killing me. I felt like my heart was going to beat right out of my chest every time I looked at him. I had never been this nervous about anybody or anything, which, I guess, brought its own rightness to the situation. Isaac wasn’t just anybody.

I pulled out my keys and went to unlock the door, except my hands and eyes seemed to be having a communication error. Also, was this even the right key?

“Carmen.”

I turned and looked up at Isaac, and he smiled and took the keys out of my hand, putting them back into my purse and setting the purse down on the porch. Then he took both my hands and lifted them to his mouth, leaving a kiss on each wrist. The sensation was the most delicious thing, and I think he knew that, based on the way he was looking at me, like my enjoyment was his enjoyment.

My heart was in my throat. I couldn’t move, or even breathe. Until he let go and I realized he was leaving, walking away with his hands in his pockets. “Good night, Carmen,” he called over his shoulder.

“Isaac Romano, get back here.” I jumped off the porch and jogged over to him, blocking his path with my body, my hands up against his chest. “Go sit on my couch. The time for treading lightly is over. This relationship is not that fragile and neither am I. So, we’re going to talk about what’s going on here, and the world is not going to end if we do.”

He stared down at my hands on his chest. Not that they were doing much. He was so much taller and stronger than me. “If that’s what you want.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s what I want.”

I led the way back to the porch, making sure he was following me, and pulled my keys out of my purse once more, only this time, they were noticeably heavier. The van keys were attached to them, but there was also a blinged out keychain shaped in the letter C, and every single crystal sparkled

when it caught the light above my porch.

“What’s this?” I asked. While I’d been losing my mind, he’d been performing magic tricks?

Isaac shrugged. “Looks like a keychain to me.”

“Yeah, I caught that part.”

“Do you not like it?” he asked, scratching the tip of his shoe against the porch.

“I love it. I’ll have to thank whatever wizard snuck this on here.” I glanced around. “Thank you, wizard.”

Isaac shook his head at me. “You are the best kind of strange. You know that, right?”

“I do.”

Once we were inside, I took off my jacket and hung it up next to his on a hook by my door. I got a Coke out of the fridge and cracked the top, taking it over the couch where he was sitting and watching my every move. For a moment there, I’d forgotten to be nervous, but it was all coming back. I took a long drink and then handed it to him, and he did the same.

Isaac cleared his throat. “How is your dad doing with his crutches? He looked grumpy. Or as grumpy as your dad ever gets.”

“You’d think he’d love the freedom of it.” I shook my head. “Má has been giving him tasks to force him to move around. She’ll put the TV remote in weird places so he’ll get up and look. Oh, and he’s the one feeding the chickens now. Normally they adore being fed, but they’re terrified of his crutches. The knee scooter they love. They hop on for rides. But it doesn’t work in the yard well so he mostly uses his crutches. He’s threatening to cover each crutch with oatmeal and carrot circles so the birds will stop freaking out and scattering when he comes out.”

“Oatmeal and carrot circles?”

“Trust me, they would think it was the most scrumptious thing ever.” There was a lull while we both stared at each other. We were talking about chicken feeding habits, and that was not the reason I’d dragged him in here. “I’m sorry I got a little, um, bossy with you earlier.”

Isaac shrugged. “Can’t say I hated it. So, how are we doing this?”

I twisted my hands together. It wasn’t like I had a guide for how to take someone out of the friendzone once you put them in. But I did have a question I’d been wondering about. “Sadie said you were engaged once.”

Isaac set the Coke can down on the coffee table in front of us. “This is

true. Toni and I broke things off a little over a year ago.”

“Have you dated since then?”

He shook his head. “Not really.”

“Why?”

Isaac eyed me for a very long time. “I don’t want to say.”

Shoot. He was still hung up on her. It was totally possible to like me and still hold a candle for someone else. Maybe that’s why he never mentioned her. Guess it was a good thing I asked that question first.

“Carmen.” Isaac scooted closer and picked up my hands, pressing them against the scruff on his cheeks and then kissing my palms. It was sweet torture.

I cupped his face, so very irritated that my eyes were betraying me and tearing up. I ran my finger over that little scar above his eyebrow. “You still love her.”

Isaac growled. “No. That’s not it at all. Okay, I’m just going to say it. That night we re-met in the restaurant, I was feeling quite rebound-y. Toni, my ex, after dumping me only a few months before, was about to marry her boss. Sadie didn’t tell you any of that?”

I shook my head. Poor Isaac.

“When I saw you and didn’t say anything, a big part of that was knowing I was in no condition to be in your world. But life went on, and I got some perspective. I saw that Toni and I had never been right for each other. She was happy, and I could be, too. So, I asked Sadie for your number.”

“Oh.” There had been that weird gap in time, now that I thought about it.

“And when you didn’t want me to have your number... I just waited longer, as pathetic as that sounds. I couldn’t help it.”

“What do you mean?” I thought about all the times he brought in flowers to GoWithFriends and met my eyes. Asking nothing. Expecting nothing.

“I was waiting for you. And I’d still be waiting for you if it wasn’t for Maria’s dumb matchmaking book. I don’t want anyone else, Carmen. Just you. Always you.”

Then what was I waiting for? I was such a dummy. I moved my hands from Isaac’s face and pressed them into his chest, pushing him over and kissing him right on his perfect mouth. And oh, was it perfect. Isaac wrapped his arms around my waist and kissed me right back, slowing things down, his hands calming me, reminding me we had all the time in the world. I guess we

did. He kissed me like I was precious, and fragile, only this time I didn't mind. I had a feeling he'd imagined how this would go many times, and the thought made me brilliantly happy. He ran his hands through my hair, kissing along my jaw before taking my face in his hands and just looking at me. And then he smiled so big.

"What are you smiling about?" I crossed my arms, resting them on his chest. "I've been bossing you around and interrogating you."

"I don't mind. You had things you needed to know about me."

"Because we're getting to know each other? As friends first?"

"Right. As friends first. Friends always, okay?"

I nodded, still afraid we'd mess this up, and then we'd be former friends and seeing him wouldn't be the highlight of my day. But he was worth the risk. He was worth every risk. I bit my lip. "If you change your mind..."

He shook his head. "I won't."

"But if you do, promise you'll be kind about it, okay?"

Isaac sat up and looked at me before pulling me onto his lap and wrapping his arms around me. "I know you would always be kind to me no matter what, and the last thing I'd ever want to do is hurt you." He frowned and pressed his forehead into my shoulder. "Who hurt you? Was it that guy, the one you said talked you into dating him? You said he *basically* said you were annoying. What did he actually say?"

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter."

"It does matter."

I rubbed my thumb into the center of my palm. "He said lots of things. Like it was this big confession he was getting off his chest. He said the way I dressed embarrassed him, and I needed to grow up. He thought my hobbies were weird. He thought I was weird. He didn't even ever go to bingo with me. He just knew about it."

"Well, he's a troll."

"I know." I sighed. "I know that. I didn't lose faith in me. But I did lose a little faith in humanity. Which is not fun, you know?"

Isaac put his head up and looked at me. "How can I make it better?"

"Being you." I smiled and kissed him, and this time he was the one to press me into the couch. It was absolute bliss for about thirty seconds. And then my front door creaked open.

## Chapter 32 - Isaac

“Ah, man, I totally should have knocked.”

“Winnie.” Carmen groaned and slapped her forehead. “Your timing is excellent, as always.”

“What’s wrong?” a second voice, much lower and gruffer asked.

At the sound of the second voice, Carmen scrambled up, pushing me off of her, and then realizing I was about to roll onto the floor, she grabbed for me and came with. Now we were wedged between the couch and the coffee table, looking even more incriminating than before.

“Get him out of here,” Carmen hissed.

But it was no use. A shadow loomed over us. A heavily muscled, irritated shadow, draped in flannel. His belt buckle was half the size of my head. “Get off my sister.”

Ah, Eddie. I was bound to meet him at one point or another. Getting up was a harder matter, as there was nowhere to put my knees, and I didn’t want to leverage myself up with an elbow to Carmen’s rib. Beneath me, Carmen began to giggle, which was not helping matters.

“Would you mind dragging the coffee table over a few feet?” I asked.

“Gladly.” Eddie pulled it way farther away than necessary, making a grinding squeal noise. I had a feeling he was restraining himself from doing the same thing to my limbs.

I got up from the floor and helped Carmen to her feet, and then we both sat on the couch.

“Thanks for interrupting the best kiss of my life,” Carmen said with a huff. “Now can you both leave?”

Eddie crossed his arms and stared at me, his eyebrows drawing together. “You look familiar.”

“He’s got one of those faces,” Carmen said quickly.

“Pá said he was a friend of yours.”

“He is.”

“Then why were you two making out?”

Carmen stood and stalked to her brother. She was so much smaller and softer in every way, but she stuck her finger in his chest, and he looked

rightly intimidated. “I am twenty-six years old. Get out of my house and stop asking questions. And seriously, knock next time.”

“I texted, saying I was on my way. And then I called and left a message.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“I don’t think she was in any position to answer her phone, dude.” Winnie walked past all of us and headed into the pantry. She had on the same style boots as Eddie, but with a very different effect. Being half his size and wearing hot pink argyle socks to the knees tended to do that.

“My phone’s on silent,” Carmen said with a sigh. “But like I said, calling first is not a replacement for knocking.”

Eddie was back to staring at me. “Is he...? Is that Zac?”

Carmen turned and glanced at me with panic in her eyes, and that’s when I knew this situation was so much worse than bad timing.

Eddie’s face flushed an angry red, seeing the confirmation in our faces. “You made her so sad. She had so much confidence before you ditched her like she was nothing. What is wrong with you? How dare you come back here and mess around with her? I don’t care if you are twenty-six, Carm. Not him. Not *him*.”

“Out, Eddie,” Carmen warned, pushing on his chest while he continued pointing at me.

“I’ll leave if he leaves.”

Carmen glared up at her brother. “My place, my rules.”

“No, I’ll go,” I offered. The last thing I wanted to do was drive a wedge between Carmen and her family. Her brother obviously loved her very much. “You stay, Eddie. I’ll call you later, Carmen.”

I retrieved my jacket and jogged out to my truck, jumping in before Eddie got it in his head to follow me out here. Yes, I feared getting my face pounded by someone bigger and angrier than me, but I feared what that would do to Carmen even more, and the last thing I wanted was to cause her an ounce more pain than I’d obviously already brought to her life.

## Chapter 33 - Carmen

“Don’t you dare follow him.”

“I won’t,” Eddie promised. He seemed to deflate now that the object of his anger wasn’t in the room with us. “Why him, Carmen?”

Oh, I was so frustrated. “Sit.” I pointed to my couch, and then to my kitchen table, and then the floor, showing him the options. “Sit and listen for a minute. Winnie, bring us snacks, please, and explain why you and Eddie are even here. I know you know what Isaac’s truck looks like. It was parked right outside.”

Winnie came out of the pantry, holding a bag of pretzels to her chest like it could protect her from us. “Last I checked, you and Isaac were just friends. You told me so like twelve times. How was I supposed to know it wasn’t a good time to come in?”

Darn. That was a good point. I took the bag out of her hands and munched on a pretzel. My Coke had miraculously survived the moving of the coffee table, and I picked it up and took a sweet sip. Great, now it tasted like Isaac, and possibilities, and my night was not ending with a goodnight kiss going non-stop from my couch to Isaac’s truck. Oh, wow. That would have been amazing. I pressed my lips together, trying not to smile.

“We’ve lost her.”

I blinked. “No, I’m right here, Winnie. Don’t worry. I’ll try to rein in my happiness.”

I handed off the bag of pretzels to Eddie, and he took it from me reluctantly, eating several at once. Us Ortegas did better when we snacked. He pulled a chair away from my little kitchen table, turning it so he could sit straddled with his arms resting across the top. Now that I knew he wasn’t about to charge out of here and confront Isaac, I could sit, too. I sank into my couch and let out a big sigh.

“I’m sorry you’re mad at me,” he said.

“That’s not exactly the apology I was hoping for.” It was a start, I’d give him that.

He eyed Winnie. “I agree with Carmen on the recognizing his truck thing. I think you set this up. I was about to knock, and you went right in.”

Winnie glared back at him. “It was an accident. And okay, maybe barging in is also a bad habit I need to fix. I’m sorry, Carmen. Best kiss of your life, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Winnie walked over and gave me a hug. “I’m really sorry. But whatever the history is here with Eddie and you and Isaac, it’s not mine. I’m gonna go home so you two can talk. Call me when you don’t want to punch my face, okay?”

“I’d never want to punch your face. Maybe steal your shirt.” It said, *Team Whoever-Brings-Me-a-Diet-Coke*.

“Well, thank you.” She walked over to Eddie and he stiffened, but all she did was look down her nose at him and then steal a handful of pretzels out of the bag dangling from his hand before walking out.

The silence after she left felt weighty. I knew Eddie had been holding onto anger, but the depth of it shocked me. I wanted him to be free of a grudge he didn’t need to carry, with me or for me. And I wanted Isaac to be free of his past, just like I wanted to be free of mine.

“I am happy, you know. Really, really happy.”

“Yeah, I could see that.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I’m not just talking about the physical aspect. I was happy before that with Isaac as my friend. And by the way, I made a move on him, not the other way around.”

“I did not need to know that. So, he goes by Isaac now?”

“Yep. And he had a lot going on at thirteen. Personal hurts and stress he didn’t feel like he could put on other people. I wish he would have handled it differently, but I can’t change that. *He* can’t change that. You know what didn’t change, though? How comfortable he makes me feel in my own skin. Being around him again only confirms how much I like him as a person. It ended badly, but he was a big part of my childhood for a reason. Papá likes him. Why can’t you?”

Eddie scratched his head, looking uncomfortable. “I didn’t know any of that before right this second, Carmen. Let me process.”

“Okay.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket, wishing I could text Isaac, but I didn’t want to bother him while he was driving. I tapped the phone nervously against my knee.

“I’m glad to hear you use the word ‘like.’”

“What?” I glanced up.



“You said you like him, and Pá likes him, and I should too.”

“True.” I said the word slowly, not sure where Eddie was going with this train of thought, but not loving the way it made me feel.

“What I’m saying is it’s good you’re dating again, I guess. I should probably stop freaking out. It’s not like I’ve never had a girl over—”

I held a hand up. “Stop right there.”

Eddie smirked. “Now you know how I felt when I walked in. I’m sorry. Truly. I’m not just sorry I ruined your night. I’m sorry I jumped all over both of you for something you’ve obviously already worked out. But he’s nice to you?”

“The nicest,” I said with a smile.

“Now you’re just mocking me. It’s a real question, Carmen.”

“But it makes me feel like you don’t trust my judgment at all. I’m—” I stopped myself, suddenly realizing maybe I’d done the same thing to myself. Not trusting my own judgment because of mistakes that happened in the past, things I couldn’t go back and change, only learn from.

I made Isaac promise to be kind to me if things didn’t work out. What kind of trust did that show?

“What is it?” Eddie asked, looking concerned.

I laughed to myself, knowing exactly why Eddie throwing my words back at me bothered me so much. “I’m not casually dating. I’m not dipping my toe in here. I’m serious about him, and he’s serious about me.”

“Carmen. Are you sure about this?”

I shrugged. “Get on board, brother of mine. Isaac’s going to be around. You might even catch us kissing again.”

“Fine.”

“Here. At the main house. By his truck. Next to my Beetle. In the van.”

“Yeah, I get it. Don’t worry, I’m going now.” He stood and put his chair back.

“I was making a point, not trying to drive you away. Are you here for a while then?” Tucson wasn’t that far away, but a two-hour drive was not something you did on a whim.

“I’m sleeping at the house tonight. Má wants me to change out all the air filters tomorrow and do yard work, and about a million other little tasks Pá can’t do right now.”

“He’ll be supervising, I assume.”

“Of course.”

“Then I’ll come and keep you two company.” Eddie and I hadn’t seen a whole lot of each other, and as much as I felt like wringing his neck at the moment, I also wanted to spend time with him.

Eddie rolled up the bag of pretzels and found a chip clip on the counter. “What about Zac? Or Issac, I guess. Sorry, I forgot. Will he be tagging along, too?”

I saw how much it killed him to ask, and it made me feel like the most loved sister in the world. Well, second most. Gia would always be everyone’s favorite.

“Would you be okay with that?” I put my hands up in a plea, and then realizing what I was doing, I stuck them behind my back.

Eddie rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Invite him over.” He gestured to my phone. “And call him so he knows you still loooove him.”

“Thanks, I think I will.”

It wasn’t until Eddie left that I realized his last teasing remark hadn’t fazed me at all. Because I did love Isaac. I always had. First as a friend, and now, I wasn’t quite sure yet. Maybe it was time to find out.

## Chapter 34 - Isaac

I had just changed into comfortable sweats when Carmen called. I sat on the edge of my bed, mentally preparing myself for whatever she needed from me. No matter what, I'd promised to always be her friend, and kissing her tonight hadn't changed that. If we became friends who had once dabbled in becoming more, I would do that for her.

I picked up before it went to voicemail. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself. Your greeting has a downer quality to it I'd like to remedy."

"There's a reason for that, and you know it." I imagined she'd kicked Eddie out of there right after I left, and the thought didn't sit well with me. Everything the guy said was a gut punch of truth, and just because Carmen was over it didn't mean he had to be. I was the reason Carmen gave up on trusting guys. I was the reason she doubted what she had to offer. For *years*. Her brother deserved to feel a little righteous indignation.

"What is it I know?" Carmen asked, a little sauciness entering her voice. I liked it way more than I should, but I wouldn't give in on this.

"That Eddie made some good points."

"Oh, and you're going to problem-solve now? You're going to take yourself out of the equation for the greater good?"

"No." Dang her. She read me too easily. The thought had definitely crossed my mind. "I'm not taking myself out of your life. I promised you I wouldn't do that again, and I'm way too selfish to do that anyway. I'm just thinking maybe we should not blow up your entire family by moving faster than we need to. Backing off is not the same as backing away."

"Mmm-hmm."

There was a pause, and then my phone buzzed with a text from her. A line of vomit emojis. I loved her so much. I put down my phone and rubbed my eyes. Why had I been such an idiot all those years ago?

"Isaac, listen to me."

I picked up the phone again and brought it to my ear. "I'll always listen to you."

“Eddie is fine. He’s staying the night at my parents, and you’re invited to come over tomorrow and help him around the house and with some yardwork.”

“Am I going to end up stuffed in a vent somewhere?”

Carmen laughed. “No, because I’ll be there, too. Also, I have a feeling you and Eddie are going to be great friends. He’s got a hot head, but a really good heart.”

“I’m sorry I told you our friendship was dumb and made you feel like you were anything less than the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“I know that, Isaac. But I’ve moved past it, so you need to as well.”

“Be honest with me, though. Did I... send you on a course where you felt like you needed to prove yourself in a relationship? Where it was hard for you to be yourself?”

Carmen blew a long breath out. “I used to think so, but no. And before you protest, let me explain. I was a really awkward kid, and just because our friendship didn’t last, doesn’t mean it wasn’t there for me when I needed it. You made me feel seen and understood. I was told to shush a lot, especially at school. But that didn’t happen when we talked. You went along with my crazy ideas.

“If I had never met you, I still would’ve been a late bloomer. I still would’ve been like, ‘oh, wow, this is what it’s like to be noticed by boys, and if I do a little more of this and less of that, they’ll notice me even more.’ I still would have stumbled my way through some stupid relationships. I’m not mad at anyone for that. Not even me.

“So, no. You did not wreck anything. But yes, you did make me sad there for a while, and I may have used your face as a dartboard to make myself feel better. Eddie helped. He put some nice extra holes in your nostrils. That’s probably why he knows your face so well.”

“Dare I ask which picture?”

“It was your seventh-grade school picture. You looked pretty smarmy in that one.”

“I bet.” I laughed to myself, and the stress that had been eating me up inside eased in a way only talking to Carmen could do. “So, you’re okay?”

“Yes, but I could use a hug. Which is why I’m on my way to you.”

“You are? Don’t do that. I’ll come to you.” I got up and started looking around for my keys. It didn’t matter that I was in sweats and my hair was

permanently standing on end from running my hands through it. We could meet at Steamers. I'd probably fit right in with the hipster crowd. Stress-casual-chic.

"Don't get in your car. I'm pulling onto your street in just a minute. I'm sneaky like that. Here's how this is going to work. I demand hugs in compensation for all your former mistreatment of me. Lots of them. Then we'll be even forever, and we don't have to dredge all this up again. Do you accept my offer, or would you like to counter?"

"I accept."

I went to my front door and stepped out in my stocking feet, rubbing my hands up and down my arms against the sudden cold. I could see Carmen's VW Bug cruising up my street, and we grinned at each other as she pulled into my driveway, parked, and got out.

"Hey," I called out.

She ran up and hugged me around my middle, burying her face in my chest. "That one was better," she murmured.

"That one what?"

"That 'hey.' It was less angsty."

"I'm glad you approve."

She let go and looked me over, her gaze stopping to linger on my white socks.

"You want to come in and slide on my wooden floors, don't you?"

"Only if you have another pair of these sweats I can borrow. They look really comfortable." She ran her hands over the planes of my chest and up over my shoulders, admiring the Walmart fleece. I'd have to wear sweats more often. Move aside chocolate lava cake. Apparently, all it took was comfort wear to get her attention.

My phone chimed in my pocket.

"That you?" Carmen asked before wrapping her arms up around my neck. I held her close and breathed in the scent of her shampoo. Apple blossoms. I wasn't sure how many hugs were required for our repayment plan, but I was willing to work off this debt for the rest of my life. The word forever kept bouncing around in my mind, this happy secret of exactly how much she meant to me, and how much I looked forward to spoiling her until she knew it without an ounce of doubt. But I didn't say any of that. I just held her.

When my phone chimed again, I reluctantly pulled it out and checked, keeping my free arm around Carmen and resting my face against hers. It made me feel calm, even while reading the frantic text from my sister and knowing tomorrow would be every bit as challenging as today.

“What is it?” Carmen asked, easing away from me so she could read my face.

“Come inside, and I’ll show you.” I took her hand and led her into my house and over to my couch, where she immediately climbed into my lap so we could read the message together.

***Grace: I need you to come with me to dinner tomorrow night. Ex is in town and wants to see Piper, and you know how that goes. Bring Carmen, too. I’m dying to meet her, and what better way to test things out than with the most awkward double date of all time? Not that I’m dating my ex. I’m not. I’m really not. This is for Piper. And my own sanity.***

***Grace: Please :)***

Carmen took my hand and laced my fingers with hers. “It sounds like we have plans tomorrow night.”

I buried my face in her hair, knowing I needed to explain, but not sure where to start. Grace’s ex was a standup comedian who traveled a lot without a ton to show for it. His apartment was a dump, and Grace didn’t love having him over to her house until late. He had a tendency of getting a little too comfortable and trying to stay the night, no matter how many times she turned him down. So, for now, they met up whenever it worked with his schedule. “It’s a mess, Carmen.”

“Messy doesn’t scare me.”

I stared her down when she turned to look at me. “Using my own words against me?”

“It sounded better when you said it to me about bingo, because we both know messy actually scares me a lot. But I’m on board the Isaac train now.” She smiled. “Choo-choo.”

I took her face in my hands and kissed her softly. “You sure you want on this crazy train?”

She nodded, taking in every one of my features before tilting her head

and kissing my right cheek, and then my left. “Assuming Eddie doesn’t kill you tomorrow, I’m looking forward to meeting your sister.”

## Chapter 35 - Carmen

Isaac sent me home at a decent hour, and after smiling at the ceiling for what felt like forever, I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep and woke up recharged and ready to go.

True to his word, when I finished dressing in jeans and sweaters in two different shades of lime green layered over a pink tank top, Eddie was in our parents' kitchen eating eggs covered in hot sauce and frowning over a list in our mother's scrawly handwriting.

"How bad is it?" I asked.

"Tree trimming we can do. And changing out lightbulbs would be a piece of cake if she actually had them, but..." He held up a grocery sack next to him and the contents made a clanking sound. "They're all weird sizes, and she's out."

"Isaac and I can run to the hardware store."

Eddie shook his head. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? Skipping along the aisles and holding hands? I'm thinking Isaac can stay here with me, and you can go. That way the two of us will have plenty of time to get to know each other, just like you want."

"Ed. I promised him he wouldn't end up stuffed in a vent somewhere if he came over today."

"And he won't be. I'll be nice." He gave me a smile that was anything but reassuring. "As long as he answers all my questions."

"I take it back. You're not forgiven for last night, and there will be revenge if anything happens to him."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

I thought long and hard. Eddie didn't embarrass easily, but I had quite a catalog to flip through in my mind. Once upon a time, he'd dreamt of being a popstar. "I'll find that video of you lip-syncing to Shakira and post it on social media."

Eddie tilted his head, looking unimpressed. "I'll post it on social media. I'll even tag Shakira. Oh wait, I don't have any accounts, and I don't care."



My jaw dropped in offense. “Okay, well then... I’ll tell Papá you were the one who put that big scratch on his Cadillac.”

Eddie’s eyes widened. He’d been twelve, and a little too exuberant with the shopping cart. I’d been jogging alongside him when he accidentally rammed it into the side of Papa’s beloved car. “Fine, Carmen. Not a hair on Isaac’s head will be lost. I won’t even offend his precious feelings. Are you happy now?”

“Yes.” I beamed. I was so, so happy. Despite knowing I’d be searching the aisles of a hardware store by myself today, and later I’d meet Grace and Piper for the first time under less-than-ideal circumstances, I was supremely happy.

The doorbell rang, and I jumped up to get it, but Gia dashed down the hall from her room and cut me off on my way to the front door. Curse her longer legs.

She cupped her hands against the glass and peered out. “It’s Isaac.”

“Move,” I hissed.

Instead, she blocked me with her body and yanked the door open. I caught the look of expectation on Isaac’s face before it fell into pleasant-neutral for Gia. He was holding a small bouquet of snapdragons from his garden. I recognized their light purple color. He was dressed for work, with a T-shirt and a tighter long sleeved tee underneath, faded but thick work jeans, and boots.

“Hey, Gia.”

“Hi, Isaac. Good to see you. I heard you and Carmen were making out on her floor last night. Way to go.”

I pinched her side, making her squeal.

“I can’t believe Eddie told you that, Gia. It’s not even true. We were making out on my couch.”

Isaac smiled at me over the top of Gia’s head and mouthed, “Hey.”

“Those flowers for me?” I asked, twisting my hands together.

“If you want them, they’re definitely for you.”

“I do want them.” I wanted my arms around him. I wanted his sweet words, and his gifts, and the steadiness of his character. I wanted him.

Gia sighed and moved out of the way. “Okay, I can read the room. Give her the flowers already.”

The second she left the room, I launched myself into Isaac’s arms,

burying my face in his chest, and loving the way the hand not holding flowers fisted around the back of my sweaters. He smelled so amazingly delicious.

“Hi, *princesa*.”

I lifted my head slowly, dropping a kiss on his neck before working my way up. I kissed his chin, the little indent under his lips, and just when his mouth covered mine, I heard Pá clear his throat right behind my left shoulder. He was getting faster with his crutches. Wonderful.

“I see my daughter has decided to accept your sweet words, Isaac.”

I rested my forehead against Isaac’s neck. “*Sí, Papá. Es mi novio.*”

“I’ve been upgraded to boyfriend?” Isaac whispered.

“Yes. Although I don’t know how much of an upgrade it will be after I hand you off to them.”

“I don’t mind.”

I glanced behind me, and sure enough, Eddie was now lurking in the doorway, his arms crossed, looking as grumpy as I’d imagined he’d be if he ever caught us kissing again. “Put your flowers away, Carmen. We have work to do.”

I looked up at Isaac. “You ready to gather some facts? Today is gonna be a lot.”

He dropped one last kiss on my lips. “Can’t wait.”

## Chapter 36 - Isaac

Work, I could do. The trees in the backyard were overgrown, and as soon as Carmen left for the hardware store, I got volunteered by Eddie to climb to the top of their ladder and saw off branches from the palo verde trees while they were dormant for the winter. Below me, Eddie and Eduardo gathered up the cut pieces and loaded them into a trailer Eddie had backed up to the gate.

The trees sported some wicked spines, so we concentrated on what we were doing, and didn't say much at all. Occasionally, Eddie would tell his father to take it easy, and Eduardo, in that calm but firm voice of his, would tell his son he knew what he could handle.

I had a feeling that was my first test. Could I work without complaint? Without Carmen here to impress? It was almost insulting how low the bar was set. I'd trimmed these same trees in my own yard and in Beebee's and Mimi's last week.

Once everything was cut to Eddie's satisfaction, I came down the ladder and helped them get every branch and twig off the ground and into the trailer so it could be taken as green waste. Eddie would haul it off later.

He didn't speak to me again until Francesca called Eduardo into the house to help her prepare lunch, and then the two of us stared at each other.

"How did you run into Carmen after all these years?" he asked. He picked up his water bottle and took a long sip, never stopping his frank assessment of me while he drank. Carmen said he ran crews of hardened construction guys. I could easily believe it.

I decided to skip over the part where I met her at an afterwork thing, and then low-key stalked her by taking deliveries to her work. It was pretty universal that guys did dumb things when it came to women, but I didn't think that would go over well or be understood by someone who would not want to hear how beautiful, vivacious, or alluring his sister had been to me.

"Maria came into my shop with Amalia, and she strong-armed me into two dates from her little book in return for the honor of getting to prepare Amalia's wedding flowers."

“So, you really are a florist?” There was only curiosity in his voice, and that alone made my estimation of him go up a little.

“I am. I work with my older sister.”

“Hmm. Sounds like something Maria would do. She’s always trying to add names to that thing. She’s not making you do the flowers for free, is she?”

“No.”

“Good. You and Carmen got set up on a date, then?”

“Yeah. Maria told me to pick, and I saw Carmen’s name in there.”

“How did Carmen take it?”

“She was grumpy about it. Suspicious of my motives. Which was fair.”

Eddie nodded. “More than fair. But she showed up for the date.”

“Yep. That was the night your dad fell and broke his ankle. We drove back here to help get him into the van, and Gia drove them to the hospital. Carmen and I stayed and talked through everything, and... we decided to be friends again.”

“And you’ve been going to bingo with her.”

“Yeah.”

“I appreciate that.” Eddie looked away, obviously embarrassed about expressing any gratitude towards someone he’d rather not have around. “Who was the other date with?”

“From Maria’s book? Dessie Hice.”

Eddie’s eyes widened, and he glanced around as if we might summon her with the mere mention of her name. “You went out with Dessie?”

“I take it you know her.”

“Yes. She’s terrifying. I went to school with her. All through my middle grades and high school. She asked me to Winter Formal senior year. My mother threatened to shave my head in the night if I turned her down. So, I said yes because my hair was awesome, and I obviously didn’t value my life enough. You see this scar right here?” He pointed to a small line just below his right eye. “She threw a binder at me. Last day of school.”

“Why?”

“Because I finally broke up with her. After Winter Formal she told everyone we were a couple, and I was too scared to disagree. And also, she was incredibly hot, and I had about three brain cells to rub together every time I was in her presence.” His eyes narrowed. “Did you kiss Dessie?”

I wasn’t sure if he was being protective of Dessie or Carmen, but either

way, he had nothing to worry about. “No. Our date ended with her shoving her frozen yogurt into my shirt. But even if things had gone well... Look, I’m all about your sister. She’s it for me.”

Eddie scrunched his face up, rubbing the side of his neck. “Okay, good. That’s good. Let’s go change some lightbulbs. Assuming Carmen found the right ones.”

“Is she back?” I asked.

Eddie pointed. “She’s watching us through the blinds, making sure I’m being nice to you. We should stage a fight, just for fun. Can you block a punch?”

I laughed. “Only if I get to win.”

“Never mind.”

Easiest fight I’d ever avoided. I winked at Carmen and followed Eddie inside.

## Chapter 37 - Carmen

Not surprisingly, Eddie tried to work Isaac into the ground, and by extension, me. Except for a short lunch break, we tightened the legs of kitchen chairs, climbed up into the attic to put away the boxes of Christmas decorations, painted a bathroom, installed a ceiling fan in my old room that had become the guest bedroom, and did about a million other things I absolutely knew were not on my mother's to-do list.

Eddie would never admit it, but the three of us cracking jokes and giving each other a hard time made the time fly by. Occasionally, I'd look at him as if to say, "see?" and Eddie would roll his eyes. He hated when I was right, and I was so right that he and Isaac would get along if he could let go of his grudge long enough to see it. I was pretty sure the only time Eddie wasn't enjoying himself was when he realized Isaac and I had been 'getting towels out of the hall closet' for a half-hour, and the closet was just big enough for two people to stand inside with the door shut if they tucked in close together. It was perfectly sized, as far as I was concerned.

I put my foot down at four-thirty and stole Isaac away so he could go home and get ready for our double date.

Meanwhile, I showered and dressed in my best jeans and a soft blue sweater with white polka dots. Isaac had assured me we weren't going anywhere fancy, but dressing up to go out with friends did not give me as much pause as dressing up for someone I... loved. I let that word sit there, thinking about how blessed I was to know Isaac would one hundred percent think I looked beautiful no matter what I wore, or what I did with my hair. There was no need to be anxious. I put soft curls in my hair with an oversized curling iron and did my makeup carefully, watching the clock so we could be on time when he came back to pick me up.

He sent me a gif of the beast from Beauty and the Beast banging on Belle's door, followed by polite knocking on mine. Goofball.

"Coming," I called. I threw the door open and took him in from head to toe at the same time that he did the same to me. He was freshly shaved and

his hair looked touchably soft. But it was the expression on his face that had me weak in the knees.

“You look gorgeous, Carmen.” He reached out his hand and I took it, letting him pull me into one of his bone-melting hugs. “I’m not going to mess up your makeup, am I?”

“Not that I’d care, but no.” I sighed in his arms. “Are you ready for this?”

“Not even a little bit. Let’s go before I change my mind and stay here. I’m sure Eddie could find something for me to caulk or scrub. He mentioned sweeping spiderwebs off the north wall of the house before we left. We didn’t get to that.”

“No, we’re definitely going if that sounds tempting to you.”

He hurried us out to his truck, my hand tucked firmly in his.

“You weren’t kidding,” I said, getting into the passenger side. He dropped a fierce kiss against my lips before shutting me in, jogging around to the driver’s side, and getting in.

“Nope, not kidding. I’d rather sweep off spiderwebs.” He started the truck up and gripped the wheel, staring straight ahead. And then his smile dropped, and he looked like the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

“You’re worried about Grace?”

He turned to look at me and nodded. “Her, Piper, us.”

“Us?”

“I’m always disappointed in myself after any interaction with my former brother-in-law, and I’m not loving the thought of you being disappointed in me, too.”

“Why? What happens?”

“Nothing. He’s charming and funny, and Piper has a great time. Grace and I roll our eyes a lot. One of us pays the bill. Never him. And then he leaves, and I stew. I want to tell him what I think of him and his dumb standup comedy. He still tells jokes about Grace, even though she never asks him for anything. She’s the opposite of a nagging ex. I dream of lifting him up and sending him across the bar with drinks flying everywhere. It makes me terrible company after his visits. Because I’m a coward, and I always play along like this is all normal. That he isn’t living way below his potential. I think he knows. I think his jovial attitude is a cover for how much he’s disappointed in himself. So, I say nothing.”

“Then why would I be disappointed in you?” I took my seatbelt off and climbed over the console, kneeling in my seat so I could wrap my arms around him. “You’re forgetting we’re friends first. That means you’re allowed to be terrible company because it’s not your job to entertain me. We can be irritable and morose together. I can even be disappointed in you and still like you.”

He tucked his head against mine. “Promise?”

“Promise. And by the way, it doesn’t make you a coward to say nothing. To create some normalcy for Piper. Sometimes showing restraint is the bravest thing we can do.”

“Thank you, Carmen.”

We stayed like that for a long time, until my knees felt numb and Isaac’s breathing slowed to a pace that felt more like contentment.

He turned and studied my face, his gaze lingering on my lips before he leaned in slowly and kissed just my bottom lip. The whisper of it awoke something inside of me, but we did not have time for kissing right now. No, we did not.

“Isaac, what are you doing?” I murmured against his lips.

“Prioritizing,” he whispered.

“Are you really?”

He shook his head, breaking out into a lazy smile. “I wish.”

“Turn the truck on.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I sat back down and put my seat belt on. “Let’s go meet Grace and Piper. Do they hug? Are they huggers?”

Isaac reached out and took my hand. “Piper will definitely hug you. Grace won’t. But she might need one from you anyway.”



## Chapter 38 - Isaac

Grace latched onto Carmen like a lifeline while we waited for Rob, standing in a sardine huddle with all the other hungry souls waiting for a table at Chili's. Grace wanted to know all about GoWithFriends, as she had several friends who had recommended the dating app to her, and Carmen patiently explained every aspect of how it worked.

"I don't really want to date," Grace assured Carmen for the second time. "I'm just curious about it."

"Of course." Carmen met my eyes for a moment, and we both smiled.

Likely, the thought of meeting up with her ex tonight was driving Grace to think outside her tiny social box. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say this was the closest thing to a date she'd had in a very long time.

I had Piper in my arms, and every few seconds she would crane her neck around, looking for her dad.

"What are you going to eat, Piper?"

Piper stopped her scanning to answer me. "Mandarin oranges, and all your fries."

"Why my fries?" I asked, already knowing the answer to this particular question. We'd been to Chili's together many times.

"Because fries taste better stolen."

"That's right."

We both grinned at Grace's irritated expression. Also, part of the routine. "You shouldn't encourage her to steal other people's food."

"But what if that's what makes it extra delicious?" I asked.

Grace looked to Carmen for help. "This is the kind of company you keep? Fry stealers?"

Piper giggled.

"I may or may not be guilty of the same crime on occasion." Carmen tugged at the front pocket of my jeans with one finger. It was such a small thing, but Grace zeroed in on it with the proficiency of a nosy older sister with years of experience.

"What are your intentions with my brother, Carmen?" She was only half-joking, and I wanted to kill her.

Carmen and I exchanged looks. I felt like we were on the same page, but that page was new, with hardly any writing on it.

“Should I tell her?” Carmen mouthed.

A hand clapped down on my shoulder. “Her intentions are to get free dinner out of him. Duh. Those are my intentions, too, by the way. But don’t worry, I don’t expect a goodnight kiss.”

“Daddy!” Piper launched from my arms to Rob’s, and I handed her off so she could greet her dad.

In this throng, Rob’s cologne hadn’t overwhelmed as much as usual, but I still should have sensed his presence before he descended on us. Carmen stepped closer to me, trying not to be obvious in her study of Rob. I looked him over the way a stranger would. He was handsome in a weaselly sort of way. He kept his hair longer on top and slicked back with industrial strength gel. He had on his signature Hawaiian shirt and loose shorts, something he wore no matter what time of year it was, and while he never grew a beard, he seemed to have a few days growth on his square jaw at all times.

He hugged Piper to him, rubbing his scruff against her cheek and making her laugh. “So, let me get this straight. Isaac brings a date, and the first thing Grace does is worry about her taking advantage of him? That’s like every man’s dream, Grace. The date with bad intentions.” He turned to Carmen. “How bad are your intentions, missy?”

Grr. I did not like him calling her missy. Some caveman part of me wanted to throw her over my shoulder and carry her out of here, far away from his assessing eyes and his never-closing mouth.

Carmen squeezed my arm twice. Oh, she knew. “I’ll keep that between me and Isaac.”

“Good plan.” Rob shook her hand and introduced himself, awkwardly put his free arm around Grace as he did so, which she tolerated. Mercifully, the coaster in my hand buzzed right then, and we got led to our table.

## Chapter 39 - Carmen

Grace looked a lot like her brother with her dark hair and piercing blue eyes, but she was more intense than him. I'd initially been intimidated by the way she studied me so intently, but it was clear my new mission would be getting Grace set up with a GoWithFriends account A.S.A.P. She didn't even need to go on any dates. She just needed interaction with people who were not Rob.

I got that stand-up comedians traveled a lot. But what was with all the airplane jokes?

"And then..." Rob slapped the table, nearly taking out Piper's kiddie cup, which had been full of chocolate milk. She'd guzzled it down first thing. "This guy comes on the plane with this big carrier, and he's like, 'hey, everyone, this is my emotional-support snake. His name's Ted.'"

Piper's eyes widened. "He brought a snake on a plane?"

"Just like the movie, kid. Just like the movie. And Ted has to sit in his lap. The snake can't leave the carrier since he's a boa constrictor, but still. Everyone was freaking out. I'm like, dude. You couldn't find a less lethal friend for emotional support? I know he probably gives great hugs, but nobody needs to be held that tight, you know what I'm saying?"

I had never felt so much pressure to laugh at something, which was a genuinely weird thing to experience. It helped that Isaac was currently reaching his hand out, his face a mask of innocence and good humor. He was going in for one of Rob's fries, and I had no doubt he'd be successful in taking it without getting caught. Isaac was a genuine food stealer if there ever was one. Yep, I'd fallen in love with a food thief. *Abuelita* would never forgive me. Once, when I was ten, I took an olive off a tray before dinner and got my hand whacked with a fly swatter.

Apparently, the key to not getting caught was having relaxed body language and a gaze aimed somewhere else. I'd done it once, just to get a tally mark under my name since we were keeping score on a napkin in front of us. Carmen – one, Isaac – four. Make that five. Isaac brought the latest fry to his mouth, laughing along with the rest of us when Rob told us the snake was a real charmer. Ba-dum-ching!

I took a sip of my lemonade and watched Grace, admiring the way she

accepted things as they were. She had her chin in her hand, and she was watching her daughter's eyes light up at every joke Rob told. She looked relaxed. Not mad. Not bitter. Not even resigned. Maybe that was why she was so hard on Isaac sometimes. Because she could be. Because he was a solid figure in her life that could take it.

I reached over and squeezed Isaac's knee, and he immediately crossed his arm over mine and squeezed my knee in return.

Unsurprisingly, Grace noticed us being handsy and raised her eyebrows.

"We're a thing," I said quietly, pointing from me to Isaac. "My intentions towards him are bad. Or good, depending on who's asking."

"Is that so?" Grace looked way too pleased. She was the opposite of Eddie. While my brother found us nauseating, Grace looked pleased as punch.

"So, what's your schedule like?" I asked, turning to Rob.

He sat back against the bench and rubbed his belly. "It's crazy right now. I did a few radio interviews this morning. I'm flying out to Baltimore later tonight on a redeye. I have a steel-workers convention I'll be at tomorrow. My agent has me booked a few more places around there, and then I'm doing this great gig next weekend at an Improv place in Dallas. They've got me headlining all three days. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday."

"That's a lot," Grace said.

"Yeah. Quite the life. Piper, my little dolly, I'll be back to see you in about a month. Don't grow too big until then, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy."

The waitress stopped at our table, and he got up and reached into his back pocket. "Let me get this one, okay?" He pulled out a worn-out wallet, and suddenly I knew what I had to do.

I pulled my credit card out before he could and slapped it down. "New guy pays. Ask Isaac. It's a rule."

Rob looked stunned for a moment, but I didn't miss the relief that crossed his face, too.

"No way," Isaac said, but I put my hand over his mouth and handed the waitress my card. "New guy, pays. Or new girl. Whatever."

## Chapter 40 - Isaac

Carmen was in the mood for some T-Swift on the way home. Not the angsty, clever, grown-up stuff, but Taylor's early albums. This was not a surprise to me. Our video calls as kids had often ended with Carmen dancing around to Taylor Swift while I gave her a thumbs down and called out, "goodbye!"

The only difference now was I no longer felt the need to pretend I was too cool for it.

When Carmen put her hand up as a microphone for me on the next song's intro, I held onto her fist and revealed I did, in fact, know every word to Taylor Swift's "You Belong With Me." Or at least most of it. I made up lyrics to the lines I couldn't remember, which made Carmen laugh a lot.

"I'm never singing for you again."

"Nooo." She rested her head back. "I love it. You missed you're calling as a pop singer."

"Nope. I can't dance."

She turned and stared at me. "I'm calling that bluff. I've seen your moves."

"When?" I tried to think back to when she might have seen me. I wasn't terrible, but it definitely didn't come naturally to me. I had to follow along with the crowd and copy other people. It was like being able to trace, but not draw. Left to my own devices, I tended to do the only move I could remember, a lawn sprinkler thing that impressed no one but Piper.

"Oh, I don't know." Carmen shrugged and picked up my phone, scrolling through songs. But she had absolutely no poker face.

"Carmen, when did you see me dance?"

She smiled. "Don't kill her. When you went to the bathroom, Grace pulled out some videos of you dancing at her house with Piper. I especially like the hand behind the head while the other hand points out and bobs up and down."

"That's my signature move."

"I could tell." She dodged as I went to tickle her side, laughing to herself. "It looks like fun. Can I come along to your next dance party?"

"You can come to every dance party, Carmen."

Our eyes met, and I knew without a doubt, Carmen was the person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. But that was a lot to put on a person I'd just technically gone on a first date with. For now, I'd focus on making her night as relaxing as possible after a day that was... a lot. Good, but a lot.

I smiled when we reached her house and she asked if I wanted to come in for a few minutes. Not that my plans couldn't wait, but earlier today, I'd planted a few things inside her cupboards for tonight if it worked out. Grace and Rob were always too full to order dessert, and tonight was no exception. I had not missed the way Carmen had set aside the dessert menu and pretended it was not something she was interested in.

I went around and got her door, and we walked hand in hand back to her casita. Carmen unlocked the door and led me in where she kicked off her shoes and sat on the couch, pulling a blanket onto her lap. "I love Grace and Piper."

"They love you, too. Although, if Grace was trying to lock things down by showing you my dancing, she might need a new strategy."

"Come sit." Carmen patted the spot next to her.

"I will in a minute. How do you feel about dessert?"

"I don't think I have anything. Why? Are you still hungry? I might have a cookie mix in a cupboard somewhere."

"I'm only hungry for dessert if you are."

Carmen raised an eyebrow. "Is this some kind of innuendo?"

I laughed. "No." I would always let Carmen set the pace on something like that. Plus, Eddie would carve my insides out.

"Okay, then what's going on with you? You look all mysterious, and I'm usually the one obsessing about dessert around here."

"Come over here and see. Or sit and wait. I need about twenty-five minutes."

Carmen got up and shadowed me while I pulled ingredients out of cupboards, found the ramekins I'd hid in a drawer, and took out the recipe I'd printed.

"Isaac, this recipe page is slightly wrinkled, and it has chocolate smudges on it."

"Don't worry, I'll get you a crisp copy."

She wrapped her arms around my side. "Did you practice making chocolate lava cakes?"

"I wanted to make sure this was in my wheelhouse first."

Carmen went on her tiptoes and kissed me. “That is the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Sorry I had to eat the first batch without you. They don’t really keep. I tried one and I brought the other two over to Beebee and Mimi. They thought they were okay.”

“Just okay?”

“A little too rich, was Beebee’s assessment. She wasn’t sure her doctor would approve.”

Carmen rested her head against my shoulder. “I’ll take dark and rich any day.”

“I bet you would.”

“I meant chocolate, and you know it.”

“Oh, I know how serious you are about your chocolate. When I asked your dad what sort of things you liked, he mentioned you had a sweet tooth.”

“For sweet things and sweet words?” Carmen looked up at me, her face suddenly serious.

“I thought you might have been listening to us talk that day. What else did you hear?”

“That you didn’t think I’d accept sweet words from you.” Carmen picked up the recipe page from the counter and got to work buttering and flouring the ramekins and then starting water to boil so we could melt the chocolate chips. Her sudden focus didn’t fool me. She was thinking about things. Maybe about sweet words, and whether or not she wanted them from me. I reminded myself there was no need to rush her. Her trust in me and her affection were enough. I would never take that for granted again.

“It’s too bad we don’t have vanilla ice cream to go with,” she murmured, pouring the semi-sweet chocolate chips into a metal pan with the butter and placing it over the boiling water.

I opened the freezer and pulled out a fresh carton of ice cream I’d hidden behind the bags of frozen vegetables. “Oh, but we do.” I even had mint leaves stashed away.

Carmen’s eyes widened. “Isaac.” She started to get teary, and I put the ice cream down on the counter and pulled her in for a hug. She sniffed against my shirt.

“You are embarrassingly easy to impress, Carmen.”

“No. You are wonderful, and I love you.”

I froze before tempering my reaction to those three little words. That

was the chocolate lover in her talking. She'd said pretty much the same thing to the guy handing out the chocolate lava cakes at the food truck event.

She pulled back and looked up at me, her eyes assessing but sure. "Does it freak you out to hear me say that? Because I'm not taking it back."

"It doesn't freak me out, and I don't want you to take it back." I leaned down and rested my forehead against hers. Was this real? "I love you so much it hurts sometimes."

"It's not supposed to hurt."

"Well, it does when you keep it to yourself and hope the other person doesn't catch on to what an obsessed fan she has for a friend."

Carmen took my face in her hands. "I want to kiss you so hard right now, but we're about to burn the chocolate."

Shoot. She was right. We both grabbed for the pan, and Carmen stirred while I looked down at the recipe to see what was next. Egg yolks. I swept her hair back and kissed her neck before picking up an egg. This woman had better prepare herself, because I had so many sweet words for her. Sweet everything.



## Epilogue - Carmen (One Year Later)

“You sure you want to inherit this place from me?” I reached into the back of one of my lower cupboards and my fingers brushed against that last bowl that had been hiding back there. I leaned in further, but only managed to push it into the black void from whence it came. “I doubt Winnie will come over and bother you, but then there’s Mamá and Papá asking for this and that, and Gia sometimes hangs out here to avoid them both. Oh, and say goodbye to your underwear. It will be mixed in with Pá’s starting tomorrow since you’ll share a washer and dryer with them.”

“Carmen, you make a terrible realtor.” Eddie grabbed the tape roll from off the counter and closed the flaps on the box he’d been filling.

“I know, right? It’s a shame, too. You should really get paid for honesty. Like, hey, good luck with the swallows that show up in March and build mud nests in your eaves, and your air conditioner will not reach that back bedroom in July, and bonus, the overhead fan in the kids’ room sways like a drunken sailor.”

I stretched my arm into the cupboard again, as if by trying extra hard this time I could somehow make my arm longer.

“I’ll get it.”

I glanced back to see that Isaac had set down the moving box he’d been carrying from the bedroom. He crouched down next to me and reached in, his chest pressed up against my back, and his arm against my arm. What a helpful young man he was. I felt his lips meander from the top of my spine, working their way up, oh, so silently. Thank you, ponytail, for keeping my hair out of the way. I almost forgot to breathe.

We were trying to be respectful of Eddie’s low tolerance for PDA while we helped him move in and me fully out, but being two days off our honeymoon in Cabo did not mean the honeymoon was over. No, it did not.

“My back is turned, but I can still hear your lustful thoughts.” Eddie sighed. “You two are the worst.”

“How would you even know?” I asked, turning to press a kiss to Isaac’s neck before he stood up and got back to work. He’d successfully retrieved the bowl for me, along with a funnel I had no idea was back there.

Eddie grunted. “It’s anytime you’re suddenly quiet, Carmen. Not that hard to figure out.”

“So, I talk too much, and I’m too lustful. Got it.”

Isaac turned and winked at me. “I think you’re the perfect amount of both.” We both grinned like loons while Eddie took out his frustration on the box he was taping up.

“Just wait,” I told Eddie. “You’re going to find someone who will make you so nuts, you’ll do just about anything to get her attention.”

“Pass. But I’m happy for you two. I guess.”

“Thanks, Ed.” There was a softy in there somewhere. He just hated to ever admit it.

I finished up pulling out the rest of my kitchen stuff and boxing it up. Eddie was very particular about the way he liked things. Soon, there wouldn’t be a trace of me in the whole place. Except maybe for the turquoise fridge Winnie helped me paint, and no doubt, Eddie would find a way to replace that eventually, too.

But that was okay, because now it was time for Isaac to blend his style with mine. His life with mine. His heart with mine. And I could not wait to get started.

He pulled me into him after the last of our boxes were loaded into his truck. “Ready to head home, wife?”

I hugged him so tight. “Yes, please. Take me home.”

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