

Falling for Paris



LAURA MARQUEZ DIAMOND

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*This book is dedicated to all willing to
leave what they know to find who they are.*

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About the Book

You know that Netflix show with the size-two, twenty-something woman who has an affair with a handsome, hotshot chef in Paris? Everyone told me to watch it before I left for vacation. Yeah, right! As if that would ever happen.

-Victoria Espinoza, a size-curvy, almost-forty divorcée before having an affair with a handsome, hotshot chef in Paris

Rafael Lyon is a grumpy, jaded culinary celebrity. He will do anything to avoid the two things that history has proven to be disastrous: the public spotlight and long-term relationships.

Victoria Espinoza is a feisty vacationer, ready to conquer Paris one croissant at a time. Since her divorce, she's committed to a successful career and a life of independence...at the other side of the world.

When their attraction burns hotter than a kitchen fire, they start an affair more sensual than their wildest imagination. But other ingredients ruin their recipe for casual sex: affection, laughter, care, understanding, and chocolate. So much chocolate.

Are they ready for love that lasts beyond a vacation fling, or are they just falling for Paris?

Prologue

RAFAEL

Seventeen Years Ago

He noticed her immediately.

The girl with thick black hair that grazed her lower back snagged his attention as soon as Rafael stepped outside to eat his sandwich. He wondered how long she'd been facing the wall of the restaurant's back alley, forehead against a crumbling surface like she needed Montmartre's centuries-old structure to keep her standing.

“Mademoiselle, comment ça va? Puis-je vous aider?” He asked if she needed help. He inquired gently, unsure of how she would respond to a stranger's approach. She turned and lifted her face. He could tell that it took great effort for her to focus on him.

Her eyes were puffy and red rimmed, but even her pleading sadness couldn't hide their stunning effect. He was unprepared for the swirling brown shades and streaks of silver as the remnant of tears reflected light from an overhead balcony. And when she blinked to clear moisture from thick lashes, her features softened with shyness. He had to look away because it was like witnessing something too fragile to be meant for him.

“Oui, je vais bien. Je suis désolé de ne pas être ici.” Her reassurance about being fine wasn't very convincing.

He noticed her American accent. “I speak English, miss. My mother is Canadian. Are you lost?”

“No, I, no.” She wrung her hands before shaking them free. She seemed to will her features into a calmer front: raised chin, unclenched jaw, serene gaze. It was fascinating to watch.

“Our cat died.”

“Your what?” he asked, sounding like an idiot. Rafael reset his composure. “I’m sorry to hear it. Did your cat die right now?” And then a thought struck him. “Here?” He braced himself as he looked down the alley.

“In Seattle, where I’m from. My sister called with news that Sydney died this morning. I knew it was coming; she was fifteen. The cat, I mean.” She shook her head. “Nevermind. I don’t know why I’m rambling so much.”

“You’re not rambling at all,” he assured her.

“I should find my friends. I’m in a study abroad trip for French majors. But I just got the call and I need to be alone when I’m sad.”

He was quietly watching her, captivated by the trust that percolated under her display of vulnerability. “Why? Why do you need to be alone when you’re sad?” Rafael was surprised to realize he was more than a little interested.

“I don’t like it when people... when people see me that way,” she blurted with exasperation. She sighed before her eyes fell on the sandwich sitting on a paper plate made soft by melted butter and oozing cheese.

“Is that a *Croque Monsieur*? It’s really what French people eat?” she asked incredulously.

That’s when he noticed her mouth, the lower lip plump as if in a pout. But she wasn’t pouting at all. She was, suddenly, no longer sad about her dead cat.

This shift in her mood affected Rafael in ways he couldn’t articulate. Because if Rafael *had* to describe his dream girl, it might be one with long dark hair, large pleading eyes, and genuine affection for a great sandwich.

“*Oui*,” he said automatically, fascinated by how she stared at his food. “I’m on my *travail, um, pause?*” He tilted his head to direct attention behind him, where the backdoor to the kitchen was slightly ajar and the sounds of clanging pans reminded him that his twenty-minute break was now considerably less than twenty minutes.

“Work break.” She gently amended his phrasing.

“Are you hungry?” he asked. “It is a simple ham and cheese sandwich. I can grab something else for you from the kitchen if you are not in a hurry to find your friends.” He gestured towards the wooden crates by the door, inviting her to sit.

“I’m not in a hurry,” she uttered while taking a step closer.

Rafael glanced down her body involuntarily, drawn to strong thighs that strained her denim shorts and sandals that were tied by the ankles with dainty leather bows.

She was very pretty. Maybe a few years older than him if she was travelling as part of a college course. He could stare at her long hair and enormous eyes and pink lips all day. But it was those little bows at the side of her ankle that turned his body from humming with electricity into a live wire.

She sat beside him, leaning against the wall. With outstretched arms, he offered her the untouched food. “Please, take this if you’re hungry. I can get another one later.”

“I can’t eat your dinner,” she uttered with a shy smile.

“Will you have half, then?” It was already split in two, cheese melted like white lava.

“I couldn’t.” She licked a mouth so supple it was impossible to look away.

“It would be a favor to me, mademoiselle. I am, how do you say it? *Expérimenter les saveurs*. I made this myself.”

“Experimenting? How do I know it isn’t poisoned?”

She was teasing now and leaning closer. He got a whiff of her hair, fragrant with hints of flowery shampoo. But it was the undertone of honey on her skin that distracted him.

“After you pick your half, I will take the first bite from my half,” he answered.

She pointed at the portion closest to him. He tilted the plate to give her access. She hesitated. Rafael didn’t want to risk turning his *incredible and hot sandwich* into *cold and boring blob*, so he took the half she didn’t choose and bit into its crisp shell and gooey center.

“It requires more nutmeg,” he declared thoughtfully while chewing.

“When I made this for French class, my teacher never mentioned nutmeg,” the young woman commented before daintily taking her first bite. Rafael waited with bated breath. He had taken the trouble of making it instead of grabbing something from the menu. When the fresh mustard seeds and gruyere were delivered that morning, Rafael knew he wanted to flavor it with the herbs he had dried from the garden. He was terribly interested in what she thought of his simple dinner.

“I don’t taste any nutmeg but this is the absolute best ham and cheese I’ve ever had!” She took another bite and moaned.

“Focus on the tip of your tongue to catch the flavor. Some of the sweetness,” he muttered stupidly about nutmeg and other irrelevant details of the palate. Another moan from her and he certainly could not speak, anyway.

“Oh, I see what you mean. And the herbs are so fresh,” she gushed. Her eyes focused on him again. “Are all the restaurants in Paris run by young people?”

“I’m just a kitchen helper.” Rafael chewed, quite pleased that she noticed the summer flavors he’d layered.

“Maybe for now. One day you’ll be a super fancy chef,” she declared with flair. “And you should open your French restaurant in Seattle so I can have this every day.”

She couldn’t possibly know how much her words affected him. Paris was a city full of talented food connoisseurs with more access to resources and professional skills than Rafael

could hope to have as the son of an elementary school teacher and housewife.

“You cannot have only this simple meal every day,” he retorted because something in him rebelled at the thought that she would eat the same thing repeatedly. He would like to feed her many, many other things, he thought foolishly. Rafael felt a little drunk on her attention and praise.

“Then I’ll have the wife. Crack me an egg, Chef. I’m ready for a *Croque Madame*.”

He raised a brow and even in the faint light he saw her cheeks flush.

“Sorry, that was a terrible joke.”

“What other foods did you make for French class?” He tried to appease her embarrassment by changing the subject.

She smiled and took another bite, making him wait for the response. He didn’t mind. Watching her eat food was its own nourishment.

“The culinary talents of Professor Jorgen were limited, unfortunately. But I enjoy baking,” she stated. “I thought my cookies and brownies were decent, but can you imagine making croissants from scratch?”

In fact, Rafael knew how difficult it was to attempt to make croissants from scratch. And rather expensive if you had to amend your mistakes again and again.

“So you are in Paris for French class?”

“Yes. The class is about to finish but I plan to stay longer. My dad’s a pilot so I can fly on stand-by.”

“Stand. By?”

“When I’m ready to go home, I arrange to take an unsold seat.”

“For free?”

“Not exactly. But much cheaper.”

“And then you will be back in Seattle.”

“That’s right. Where you’ll open a restaurant,” she said, winking. “And the name will be...” She paused, looking at him expectantly.

He was slow to realize that she was asking for his name. “Rafael,” he stated. “That’s my name.”

“Chez Rafael,” she declared. “I’m Victoria.”

“It is nice to meet you, Victoria. And since you are the inspiration for my French restaurant in Seattle, perhaps it is your name that it should be named after.”

Like two squirrels looking very pleased with their acorns, they stuffed the rest of the food into their mouths.

“You can call me—”

“Tori! What the hell, Tori!” Two girls from down the alley jogged their way. The brown-haired one with a long summer dress was waving her phone in the air. “I’ve been trying to call you for an hour! Why didn’t you answer your phone?”

“It hasn’t been an hour,” Victoria muttered as she grabbed her phone from the back pocket of the shorts. Alarmed by what she saw, she shot up to her feet. He did the same.

“I was so worried! Oh, hi,” the brown-haired girl’s tone shifted when she looked at him. “Bonjour, I mean.”

At that moment, the restaurant’s sous chef, Inez, gave three hard knocks against the steel door, wordlessly indicating Rafael was needed in the kitchen immediately.

“Bonjour,” he addressed the two girls. Rafael sought Victoria’s beautiful eyes before expressing his regret. “I have to go back to work.”

“Thank you, Rafael.”

“Will I...” He didn’t know how to ask but he didn’t have to.

“Are you working tomorrow? Maybe I can come down and try your restaurant with my friends?”

“Yes, I’ll be here after four tomorrow afternoon.” He tried to sound casual but his smile was so broad his cheeks hurt.

“I’ll see you, Rafael.” They were already trotting away since her two friends were on the phone dramatically announcing the retrieval of their lost companion.

“Goodbye, Victoria.”

“All my friends call me Tori!” she stated over her shoulder.

“Sorry about Sydney, Tori,” he called out. He needed her to turn around one more time.

Her friend whined, “Who the hell is Sydney?”

She ignored her companion and turned to Rafael. Walking backward, she mouthed a silent *merci*.

It was past midnight when he came back outside to throw the last of the evening’s garbage. He glanced at the crate and smiled at the thought of tomorrow. Except she didn’t come back the next day. Nor the day after that.

Eventually, he accepted that the pretty girl with the stunning eyes—the very first person who had voiced the deep wish in his heart to be a chef—would not be returning.

Chapter 1

TORI

The last time Tori was in Paris, she was a twenty-one-year-old college student who travelled with classmates for a study abroad program. When the class finished, she didn't just want to major in French; she wanted to *live* in France. What followed was a summer of uncomfortable beds and lost train tickets, cheap food and even cheaper booze, scrambling for cash and loving every minute. Life was itinerant and messy and adventurous.

Eventually, she went back to Seattle broke, exhausted, and only marginally repentant. Tori returned to university to finish her degree and moved across the country, trying to revive a bit of the adventurous spirit of an amazing summer.

Instead of an adventure, she got a job, a husband, and a condo in DC.

Now, in her thirties—OK nearly forty—less itinerant but more exhausted, Tori had accepted a few facts about herself. The very memory of her summer in France made her feel more alive than her demanding job, her mundane condo, or her ex-husband. *Combined.*

Now that she was back in Paris, Tori clung to the most important fact of her current circumstance: she was a divorcée on a month-long vacation with zero fucks to give. In other

words, Victoria Espinoza had every intention of enjoying herself.

Her small loft rental on the outskirts of Montmartre was sparse but clean. It faced an inner courtyard of hanging clothes instead of the atrium garden advertised online, but at least it was centrally located. Before heading out for dinner, she called her sister Katerina, who was a travel expert and worrywart.

“You’ve arrived! How’s the neighborhood? Oh my god, Paris in early summer! It must be heaven,” Kat cooed. “Send me a selfie. I’ll start an album for you. You should blog about your month there.”

“I’m here to escape, not to work for your travel agency.”

It was true that Tori was due for an extended vacation. She deserved a break from the grind of her demanding position as marketing director for a prestigious accounting firm. But this trip was more than an escape.

When Tori divorced more than three years ago, she embarked on what she had come to think of as an overdue emancipation. A freeing from constraints—social, emotional, marital—that held her back for a long time. Exploring her love of cooking while returning to a city she always recalled fondly was high on her list of liberating adventures.

“I’m an international brokerage consultant now, not a travel agent,” Kat reminded her with mock seriousness. “Fine, don’t document your travels. Not like you ever did, anyway.”

The sisters spent their lives travelling as kids of an airline pilot but while Kat reveled in it, Tori was weary of the process. She loved exploring, but she dreaded flying.

“My luggage didn’t make it from Washington, DC to Paris, by the way. The airline called to confirm that *it’s been located*, whatever that means.”

“Look at the bright side, though: shopping in Paris! You’ll have to give me dibs on your finds when you return.”

“I’m a few sizes bigger than you,” Tori corrected. “But don’t worry, I’ve got your taste down pat. You know, for a

truly fancy consultant,” she piped, giving Kat a glimpse of the shirt she bought at the airport when informed her luggage was missing. Kat groaned.

“What’s wrong with my shirt?” Tori didn’t hate the *J’aime Paris* shirt. She wasn’t above cheap and tacky souvenirs if they made her smile.

“Everything. Did they say when your luggage is getting delivered?”

“No. It better get here before the cooking class.” The day after tomorrow was the beginning of her two-week-long fancy cooking course with *Ecole Supérieure de la Gastronomie de Lyon*. Her knives, that she packed with more care than any of her clothes, were irreplaceable.

“I’m starving, so I’ll let you go. Tell Celina I’m fine and will call her this week.” The middle Espinoza sister was busy raising her twin boys though she expected an update too. The three siblings didn’t go a week without virtual face time.

“Will do! Have a blast, Tori.”

“Thanks, Kat.”

“Hey, one last thing.”

“What?”

“I’m glad you’re travelling again.” A world of concern was in her sister’s tone, but Tori kept the conversation light.

“Tell that to my luggage. Gotta go. I love you.”

“Back at ya.”

Travel weary and starving, Tori strolled the neighborhood she would call her own for a while. She was drawn to a bistro that advertised a simple prix fixe dinner. Waiting for her first course, she relaxed and took in her surroundings. She smiled vaguely at anyone who looked her way: the slim hostess with her spiky pink hair, the courteous waiter with a permanent grin, couples by the window, and the guy at the end of the bar.

Returning the man’s attention was tactical error number one. The second misstep was the shirt that announced she was

a foreigner in Paris with no companions and even lesser taste in clothes. The man at the end of the bar barely waited for her to finish her salad before he moseyed over to offer a drink and his company.

Tori still had the entrée and dessert to come. She figured she might as well practice her French. Noel—or was it Nigel?—was pleasant enough. At first.

He was a gallery owner or some kind of acquisition person for rich people. To be honest, the language barrier made it hard to decipher the nuances of his elaborate description of art and assets and whatever. He might have already confessed to money laundering and she'd still be nodding absentmindedly.

He had ordered some canapés as she ate her meal, but mostly he was chugging wine like it was lemonade on a summer day.

“I’m quite tired,” she announced after a bite of an uninspired custard flan. “It was very nice to meet you.”

She gestured for the check, which the studious waiter immediately brought over. The man grabbed it from her and announced, “Victoria, please allow me. You’ve been such a pleasure. Do you have dining plans for tomorrow evening?”

His brows rolled and his words slurred as he continued. “And perhaps we should exchange numbers now, yes? To make arrangements for the Louvre? My friend will need a few days’ notice to accommodate us.”

He had offered to use his “contacts” for her to skip the line at the famous art museum. It would take a lot more than a free meal and a queue jump for her to give her number to a stranger. She was already counting out the euros to put on the table when he went straight for her knee, cupping it and telegraphing his need.

Tori could abide by pretentious pricks and money-laundering gallery owners, but a spoiled brat who didn’t know boundaries? No way.

James, her ex-husband, was that kind of brat. She recognized the signs of his irredeemable selfishness too late.

At some point, she must have found this form of male attention palatable. She'd stayed married for years, after all. Now? It was tiring. Not for the first time, Tori noted that men's needs were *exhausting*.

Tori's deep-set eyes had the effect of making her seem perpetually drowsy. But at the moment, her eyes felt weighted. The need to go to sleep was stronger than even her annoyance, which was a testament to her level of exhaustion.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," she switched to English, glancing at his palm on her knee. He had already expressed his ability to speak in her native language if she preferred.

He squeezed her knee before moving the heavy palm a few inches up her thigh. "*C'est mieux ma chérie?*" Did he just ask if things were better because he was *groping*?

It was truly the stupidest question at the worst time because tonight was the first night of a month-long vacation in which Tori had zero fucks to give.

"No. It is most definitely not better. In fact, Noel—"

"It is Nigel," he interrupted.

"Right. Nigel. In fact, it is exponentially worse to have your unwanted pawing anywhere close to my crotch," she stated blandly. Then, yawning, she slipped off the chair and grabbed the amount of cash she approximated to cover her meal and drink.

"If you'll excuse me, I'm going home to pretend the last hour with you was simply a bland dinner that ended with a misunderstanding, as opposed to an excruciating hour with a man as boring as he is invasive. Next time you buy a woman a drink, *ma chérie*, learn to keep your hands to yourself."

She stood, gave a farewell smile to the bistro's staff, and strolled into the night air having already forgotten the man's name.

Chapter 2

RAFAEL

Rafael should have felt at home amid gleaming surfaces and stocked shelves. There was a time in his life when he would have considered this heaven: a gigantic kitchen and all the time in the world.

Unfortunately, the founder of the renowned cooking school *Ecole Supérieure de la Gastronomie de Lyon* couldn't even remember the last time he'd made dinner that wasn't a poached egg over stir-fried vegetables or a one-pot pasta dish. And even those simple meals he wouldn't dare concoct in front of an attentive audience.

If he had a choice, Rafael would be as far as possible from where he was standing right now: a cooking lab in the middle of Paris assaulted by the admiration of a dozen eager faces, all of them blurred at the edges of his disinterest.

If, once upon a time, he was a restaurateur who successfully leveraged his reputation into a destination cooking school, today he was a man who couldn't even go near a stove without the hair behind his neck prickling. It was excruciating to be reminded that the chef they revered no longer existed. That the man expected to teach these people could hardly recognize himself in the mirror, never mind recall the complicated dishes that had launched his career.

There would be no launching today. Rafael was a man stuck where he stood, trying and failing not to grimace. He was forced to take over from the school's head chef and his oldest friend, Inez, who was having her third grandchild in Marseilles. Since this time of year turned Paris into a tourist hive, everyone else on staff was already booked. Patrice, the assistant, droned on about waivers and safety measures and whatever the lawyers drew up for the beginning of every course.

Shifting on his feet, Rafael had two related thoughts. First, there wasn't a waiver in the world that could cover how dangerous it would be for him to cook in front of people. Second, he recalled the phone call he should *not* have answered.

"Why can't the class be rescheduled for when you return?" Rafael had grumbled to Inez over the phone. "Or get Anton to do it," he'd suggested while rubbing his hand over his face.

"Anton is about to start one of the celebrity catering events. He'll be on a yacht for most of next week. But he can show you the ropes before he leaves. Since you're... rusty."

"Is that what you call a shit like me?"

"C'mon Rafael. There was a time when you could cook a ten-course meal with one hand behind your back. The nerve issues might slow you down, but they don't affect how you cook, how you create, how you *feel* around food."

"I've got the scars to argue otherwise."

"The accident was over a year ago. I'm not saying it wasn't terrible, Raf. But it caught you by surprise at the time. Now that you're prepared, brachial neuritis can be managed if—"

"Enough."

"You aren't your illness, Rafael. You're an amazing chef. Nothing can take that away."

He didn't even bother to dignify the statement with a reaction. "Inez, give everyone a refund."

“Impossible! You know that would be disastrous right now. The competition is fierce. A slew of critical reviews could spell disaster for the rest of the season.”

“We’ll be fine. Give them back their money. It’s just ten people.”

“Nine people. Most are tourists coming to Paris for only this class.”

“They’re in Paris. I’m not fool enough to think the school is their only destination.”

“I don’t have time for this, Rafael. You want to deliver bad news, go ahead and call them all yourself. Or...” She paused for effect. “Come out and do the class. Spend some time in Paris. My apartment is free while I’m away and you can water my plants.”

“And who will water *my* garden?”

“Rain,” she answered deadpan. “Your precious country garden will survive and heaven knows time in the city will do you good, my friend.”

He laughed. It was a cruel, lashing sound. “If you think having cancellations is bad for business, having me in front of a class would be a disaster.”

“That’s not true.” Her kindness was vexing. “How about this? I’ll ask around. Maybe someone freed up. In the meantime, please meet them tomorrow morning. We can say it is a surprise welcome from the renowned head chef Rafael Lyon who returned from having fallen from the face of the earth. They’ll love that.”

“*You’re* the head chef.”

“We’re partners. You’re still the founder, Rafael. Now stop being a shit and get to Paris by morning.” At that, she had hung up.

Which is what landed him in his present dilemma. Hands behind his back, neck itchy from a starched collar, his head pounding, and sandpaper behind his eyes because insomnia didn’t care that he needed some rest before leading a class he

wasn't prepared to teach. Such were his thoughts as he tried not to glare at eager, beaming students.

What were they so happy about? Silly tourists. Thinking that if they splurged a few thousand dollars, they would actually understand food. As if money could buy that feeling of being at home in the kitchen. Of being at home in yourself.

Anton, the associate chef tasked with introducing Rafael, was in his element. The young man was often requested by the celebrity clientele for weddings or vacations. His charm was as good as his skill. Rafael allowed himself some pride in that he'd mentored Anton at the beginning of the young man's career.

"It is a pleasure—truly a privilege—for me to announce that this class will be run by no other than the founding executive chef of *Ecole Supérieure de la Gastronomie de Lyon*. Everyone, please help me welcome the renowned Rafael Baptiste Lyon." A burst of applause made him flinch.

The ruckus was abruptly interrupted by a *clang* and a *crash*. He didn't have to look to know those were the sounds of various utensils spilling over a metal prep table. A woman's curses from the back of the crowd competed with the racket of fallen metal bowls twirling on floor tiles.

People parted, revealing a woman on the floor gathering the mess. She was wearing clingy black pants and a red shirt with gaudy glitter and the unmistakable script of the word *Paris*. Her hair burst out like plumes of black velvet, her bent body gaped the tacky shirt to offer a glimpse of a lacy purple bra.

If her shirt repelled him, that bit of tender skin encased in lace awoke his interest.

"Please, madame, leave it. You mustn't—" Anton reached over to take her hand as Patrice swept in to tidy the clutter.

When she looked up, Rafael was arrested by enormous brown eyes and the amused line of plump lips. It was...

"Rafael? Wow. I can't believe...I, um, hi?!" She cleared her throat and shook her head briskly, layers of shoulder length

hair swishing over her flushed neck.

“It’s so good to see you again,” the woman stated, years too late.

He didn’t know what to say, so he evaded. “Have we met, madame?”

The rush of heat to her face disgraced him. “It was a long time ago,” she mumbled. “I can’t imagine you’d recall our meeting.” Her eyes were more deep-set than he remembered.

It was ages since he’d thought about that pretty college girl in a dark alley sharing his sandwich. Yet having her in front of him made their encounter seem like it was yesterday. For a man whose sense of time had tunneled into when to tend his garden and which medication went with food, the fact that Rafael remembered anything from over a dozen years ago was nothing short of a miracle.

“It’s Victoria,” she stated, and then smiled. “Though of course you wouldn’t remember that either. Anyway, you worked at a restaurant in Montmartre and were very kind to me.” As she spoke, the sparkle in her eyes dimmed and her voice wavered.

“Victoria, welcome to the class. It is very good to see you again.”

He knew he sounded fake and formal. Did he have a choice, really? Was he supposed to match her warmth and cheer when all he thought about was how far he was from that young man she’d enchanted so effortlessly? He was assaulted by a specter of a feeling, almost like a lost limb that nonetheless tingled. The need to surprise. To please. To nourish. But it was a phantom feeling. An echo of another time.

Rafael, during that time of his life, thought of nothing but cooking. He would lie in bed, eager to play with the flavors unearthed by the upcoming season. He’d meticulously documented every new combination of spices. He was the first person to arrive and the last to leave in every class he ever took. He’d steal nights in his boss’s kitchen, long after the

restaurant closed. Hours and hours spent exploring new techniques or improving tested recipes. Entire seasons concocting the thrilling emulsion of food and heat and time and flavor.

The broken man today couldn't be more different from the boy who created with passion and tasted with hope.

“Thank you, Chef,” she mumbled through stiff lips. She retreated into herself and looked to the front of the class, willing him to leave her side. So that's what he did.

Chapter 3

TORI

Well, that was embarrassing.

Tori got carried away; the moment of recognition brought a rush of surprised excitement. The man in front of her was the same kid she recalled fondly from ages ago. Who could forget that name? Rafael was the name of an angel. An angel with the sexiest cleft on his chin and the softest-looking hair.

He still looked ridiculously handsome, although in an entirely different way. She vaguely remembered that his hair had been short on the sides and at the back, while fairly long in front. He had donned dark blond strands with just enough lift and flop and volume to frame the face of a Roman statue—haughty nose, high cheekbones, square jaw, and heavily lashed eyes.

Today, his hair was trimmed to a military precision. Dark blond strands mixed with silver threads, making him look like he was wearing a crown while lordling over his domain. If Tori recalled him as eager and sweet in the past, the man before her exuded detachment and control. He had the confidence cultivated from being skillful and stunning all his life, so he could take admiration for granted.

Gray-green eyes. She'd had a sense, in the darkened alley long ago, that his eyes were light. She had no idea they were the color of a jade stone faded by time and touch. She was

surprised to learn that his thick lashes were so much darker than his hair and that his aroma, when he passed her, reminded her of a garden under a scorching sun. Not flowery, although there was an unmistakable sweetness. He smelled of rich earth and herby greens and lavender traces and citrus notes. And with just the hint of sandalwood soap and salty sweat, he smelled like...like a *man*.

He stood in front of the kitchen lab—features unreadable and hands clasped behind his back—dominating the space without even trying. It was that element of the man that drew her most of all: quiet authority and impenetrable indifference.

She vaguely recalled *Ecole Supérieure de la Gastronomie de Lyon* was named after its founder. There were celebrity chefs she'd recognize as international stars but that's not Rafael. The school's website had pictures of food and amenities, but no people. Certainly no Rafael Baptiste Lyon. She was a marketing director and unconsciously noticed those details. A picture of this man would have caught her attention.

“Victoria is such a pretty name.” A middle-aged man with a trim beard, polo shirt, and cargo shorts turned around to address her.

“Thank you,” she answered warmly. Tori welcomed the distraction away from Rafael's haughty stance and gray-green eyes. There was a pause in class instruction as assistants circulated to prepare different stations.

“I'm Jeff and this is Dominique.” Jeff pointed to his younger companion. “We're on our honeymoon.”

She beamed at the friendly, handsome couple. “Congratulations!” she cheered. “Whose idea was it to spend two weeks in a Paris kitchen?”

They playfully pointed thumbs at each other before bursting into laughter. The sound elicited a grumbling “ahem” from in front of the class and, without even looking, she knew it was Rafael.

Dominique leaned over the prep table and whispered, “He definitely remembered you, darling.” And then winked.

Tori fought down the heat that rushed up her cheeks. She changed the subject. “Where are you both from?” she whispered-asked. “I’m assuming you’re American.” Their accents and mannerisms signaled as much.

She didn’t know why she whispered like a kid in the back of the class. Sure, they *were* at the back of the class but they weren’t kids. Yet something about Rafael’s stern focus affected Tori. Made her want to whisper, to conspire, knowing the mild act of defiance would make him lean closer. Ridiculous, really.

“Denver,” Jeff answered. “And you?”

“DC. I just got here yester—”

“Pardon me. May I get you started here, madame?” the assistant interrupted, showing her how to start the gas stove of her individual station.

Chef Anton was leading them through a simple omelet technique while making light conversation. She followed along, focusing on the task at hand. She never thought of herself as a talented cook, but she loved the way preparing ingredients focused her mind, the way flavors could surprise. And she loved food *a lot*.

But Rafael, with his austere stiffness, flared nostrils, and barrel arms was upsetting her equilibrium and distracting her from the simple task. She dropped a spatula, earning raised brows from classmates. And when she went on her knees to grab the tool that had rolled to the bottom of her worktable, she imagined Rafael’s eyes glued to her lifted ass. Instead of being embarrassed, Tori’s arousal percolated her system—singeing her nerves and tightening her core.

“Get it together,” she mumbled to herself while scrambling to her feet.

“Victoria? Um, Madame Espinoza? How are we doing back here? How did you manage?” Anton urged.

“Yes, quite well, thank you,” she responded cheerily. Because she did, in fact, make a rather fine omelet.

Rafael, scowling like a displeased headmaster beside the amiable Anton, looked down at her offering with disappointment. “You will need to tap next time.”

“Tap?”

“Like this.” He took a fork and lightly tapped the side of the pan. “To remove the...” Instead of finishing his sentence, he made a wiggling motion with his hand that meant *what*, exactly, Tori had no clue.

“It will be better,” he stated. His voice sounded gritty and low, his French accent more pronounced than she remembered. Rafael’s fingers brushed hers when he handed her the fork. “It will be smoother,” he stated through a clenched jaw. “Creamier.”

He might as well have nipped her neck, the effect of his voice was that unexpected. He spoke in a sultry whisper set to a different register. He glanced at her lips which she had involuntarily licked and parted. Had she *ever* been this thirsty? Like literally, her throat was parched as if she was panting in hundred-degree weather.

“Whatever you say, Chef,” she stated jovially to hide her intense reaction. It was difficult to look away from his eyes which were lowered and heavy and dark. “Who wouldn’t want it creamier?”

His eyes flicked up. She didn’t mean to sound sassy but Tori came from a long line of snarky women. If the one-sided recognition surprised her earlier, the energy between them was summoning a different reaction, buoying her to meet the challenge of his curt instruction.

A split second passed as his eyes narrowed and nostrils flared. Then he moved on.

Tori spent the rest of the morning watching from the edges of the cooking lab. Rafael did little teaching at all, merely staying by Chef Anton’s side as the younger man toured through the pantry, demonstrated some equipment, and reviewed the schedule.

By the time Victoria gathered her things at the conclusion of class, Rafael was nowhere to be found.

Chapter 4

RAFAEL

The first day he ran class on his own, a unit pretentiously titled the Refined Art of Sauces was on the agenda. Just the thought of stirring and mixing over a simmering stove made him shudder.

He needed to be outside. Paris was unseasonably warm for early summer, rendering the sunny kitchen lab as searing as a sauna. He didn't think his nerves could survive the rapt stares of his students and the literal heat of the kitchen. On a good day, Rafael was too restless for the confined space. But now that good days were scarce, being in the kitchen lab was unbearable.

Most importantly, his brachial neuritis—what the doctors called the chronic nerve pain that seized his right shoulder, arm, and hand—was brutal and unpredictable. No one needed to watch him make a fool of himself if the sharp lashes of pain sliced into his system.

“Today, there will be a change in our agenda. We are going to the, um, to the...” His voice trailed off when his gaze landed on *her*. She wore her black hair in a low ponytail and a flower dress the exact shade to make her sun-kissed skin glow. Matching his scrutiny, she crossed her arms over her chest. It was a signal of guardedness but one that deepened her cleavage.

Rafael cleared his throat and turned on his heel. With a determined nod he assumed they would all follow. Ridiculously, he imagined he looked like a mother duck leading a line of students on route to *Marche Bastille*. He heard one of the assistants call out to shepherd the group. This reassured Rafael that *someone* was making sure these adults' hands were held.

The collective *oh's* and *ah's* tested his patience. Had these people never seen oysters before? Walking past the fish and meat stalls, Rafael welcomed the familiar pungency of the public market. Past the poultry, the cloying smell of ripening fruit and assertive muskiness of fresh mushrooms overwhelmed his senses. Rafael raised a reluctant wave at Madame Gaudreau, whose nuts and olives stall was a local landmark.

"You might want to slow down," a woman's voice crested over his shoulder. "Mr. and Mrs. Asako are having a hard time keeping up."

He stopped abruptly to face Victoria, whose sweaty irritation made her radiant.

"Patrice will ensure they are not lost."

A disdainful snort from a beautiful woman was no less disdainful, it turned out. "They want to keep up with *you*, chef. That's why we're here. You know...*not* cooking."

"Is that Rafael Lyon or do my eyes deceive me?" A booming voice from the entrance of *Fromagerie Impériale* turned heads.

Rafael's shoulders slumped in resignation. What bad luck that they stopped in front of Luc Savard's cheese shop. Although he had worked with the merchant for more than a decade, Rafael had not seen Luc since the incident last year. The *fromager* was gregarious by nature, his cheer unbearable to the disgruntled chef.

"Deceived. Most certainly deceived." Rafael tried to sound dismissive but there was no dampening the shop owner's merry curiosity. And when Luc and Victoria locked their

amused gazes, Rafael experienced an unusual sensation. Ambient annoyance morphed into sharply focused irritation.

“Hello, I’m Victoria,” she said in response to Luc’s blatant admiration.

“What a pleasure, Victoria. You are here with Rafael?”

“No, not at all! I—I mean not only me,” she stammered. “Chef Rafael is giving us a tour.” She turned to Rafael, chin up as if to pose a challenge. “He’s running a class and was just about to teach us about...well, something. Isn’t that right, Chef?”

Rafael huffed at the ridiculousness of the situation. He was strolling with them in one of the world’s most impressive public markets. *That* was the lesson!

“Rafael giving a tour?” Luc guffawed as he re-tied the bow of his red apron. “This is something I must see for myself. Chef, why not begin right here? I can prepare—”

“*Non, se ne sera pas nécessaire.*” He spoke menacingly in their native language signaling his hostility to the idea and, in fact, his hostility to the man who had stooped to whisper something in Victoria’s ear, making her giggle.

Her pouty mouth transformed into a slow, knowing grin before she turned to Rafael. “It would be so lovely, don’t you think?” Victoria cooed beseechingly. “A tour inside would allow for the others to rest, away from the heat. Please.”

That was the most disorienting thing she could have said. Not her plea for the older Japanese couple, but just the last word. It felt wrong in such a public space. Victoria whispering *please* felt like a secret he didn’t wish to share.

Rafael’s unintended glare made her step back. Before he could amend his reaction, Victoria had already moved on to Luc.

“*Une visite de votre fromagerie serait bien.*” She bypassed Rafael by conveying her desire for a tour.

“In that case, I welcome all of you,” Luc announced loudly.

Rafael was mauled by the rest of the delighted class following Victoria into the cheese shop. Patrice offered a pitiful look of apology when he passed Rafael, forcing him to amend his features. It wasn't the assistant's fault that the woman was so very persuasive. And immensely distracting.

Luc began with what Rafael recognized as the connoisseur's complaint: the importance of AOP certifications of authenticity to assure production requirements and source location of the cheeses.

"The living conditions of animals define the flavor!" Luc exclaimed with passion. "And if they live well, if they live clean, there is no need to pasteurize. Isn't that correct, Chef?"

Everyone turned to Rafael, who shrugged nonchalantly. "Pasteurizing will allow the cheese to keep longer, but will have no..." He paused, looking for the best wording. "No life."

"*Exactement!* Pasteurizing is *murdering* the cheese," Luc added dramatically.

After walking them through the details of *ossau iraty*, a popular sheep cheese, and *comté*, or French aged cheese, Luc led them to the back of the shop where a darkened freezer awaited.

It was a tight fit so Rafael stayed back, watching from the threshold as Victoria smelled the *valençay*, a soft goat cheese of white- and black-speckled rind. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before passing it down for someone else to smell.

She caught him staring so there was no point looking away. Rafael scowled and exclaimed, "Surely a tour will involve more than lectures and sniffing. Make the appropriate arrangements downstairs. I will choose the tasting samples."

If he was getting dragged into this impromptu lesson, Rafael might as well take charge. He tilted his head to instruct Patrice to follow him back to the main shop. Rafael curated a sampling based on region, taste, and texture.

Downstairs was a centuries-old cheese cellar in which Luc occasionally had private tasting tours. When Rafael rejoined the group, Victoria and Luc were deep in conversation about the knives the shop owner prepared.

“Ah, what did our famous connoisseur choose for us today?” Luc’s question echoed in the frigid chamber.

Instead of answering, Rafael unloaded the basket onto the counter-height wooden table. One by one he unwrapped the cheeses and elaborated upon the samplings’ origins. Rafael slipped into the comfortable cloak of culinary knowledge. It felt like a second skin.

“The cow or goat or sheep breed determines the richness of the protein,” he explained. “More than that, the nutrients of the land, the regional practices, these are all important for the development of flavor.”

He carefully decided the sequence of tasting, grumpily correcting one student when the man went off sequence. Do these Americans even know how to listen? And that Swiss couple, with their constant selfies, *mon dieu!* He scowled every time there was a pause to accommodate them. Is this how they spent their days? Documenting every minute as if anyone cared?

Rafael attempted to push past his exasperation—he only grunted a *little*. In fact, he was barely scowling while showing the class how best to cut an aged gouda.

“You must ensure each piece has the perfect proportions of rind and heart,” he instructed.

“Heart?” Victoria’s voice was tinged with amusement. It was very distracting.

“It is the fullest essence of the cheese,” he showed her with the tip of the knife running down the center. It took all his concentration to keep his hand from shaking. Damn his nerves, which worsened with the drastic temperature change in the cellar and the intense attention of the woman leaning closer.

“The heart must be enjoyed with the rind to capture the complexity.”

“The good with the bad, huh,” Victoria teased.

A stray thought entered Rafael’s traitorous brain: that she would be both *very good* and *very bad* indeed. As if she read his mind, her breathing hitched.

“It is cheese, mademoiselle, not a moral lesson. Please pay attention.” Rafael didn’t mean to sound austere but he was bothered. Not by her, exactly. He was aggravated by his body’s reaction when she refused to react appropriately to his frown.

Her eyes were laser points when she spoke. “Oh, I’m paying attention. And you could have fooled me about your moral indictment,” she spat back. “You make it sound like we’re committing an unforgiveable sin if we cut cheese the wrong way, or taste something without your *permission* or, heaven forbid, document this once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

“Perhaps in America sins are so easily allocated.” *Was that the correct word?* He was unsure but refused to falter in the face of her accusation. “You’re in France, now, where it is merely bad taste. Which, some might say, is worse than sinning.”

Her glare was mostly malice with the barest hint of a dare. “I think that depends on the sin.”

His stomach tightened in response to her contempt. Who did this woman think she was, provoking him this way? Not at all like the girl he remembered.

Her initial reaction to seeing him in the kitchen lab was very similar to the sweet, enthusiastic college student from the past. Yet the more she was in his presence, other aspects of her personality emerged. She was still enthusiastic and sweet to everyone else, but to him: defiant when others were intimidated.

Rafael realized the room was utterly quiet, everyone watching their exchange with interest.

“Isn’t this why you came to France?” he sneered derisively. “To learn how to serve cheeses that you can post in your Instagram accounts?” And because he was too strained to speak in English, he blurted under his breath, *Pour tweeter que*

tu es un expert après deux semaines dans une cuisine qui n'est même pas la tienne." He mocked the constant tweeting or posting. Did they think they could be experts after two weeks in a kitchen they didn't even own?

"Chef Rafael, I came to take this class in your kitchen, yes," she said through gritted teeth, her eyes aflame with anger. "Because you are, as you keep reminding us, the expert." She clearly understood his grumbling complaint in French. Victoria wasn't done.

"However, if I had known your superiority complex was part of the program..." Her voice drifted when one of the other students released a loud guffaw and Patrice gasped.

"Please finish your thought, Victoria," Rafael drawled with a detachment he didn't feel. "We all await what you would have done if you knew French chefs were such bastards."

"That's not what I said," she hissed.

"In that case, what a shame," he droned, knowing he was acting very much like a bastard.

In his attempt to ease the tension, Luc offered his usual gregarious cheer. "Alas, enough talk of sins and bastards. Is wine in your budget for the tour, chef?"

He managed one tight nod before turning away and walking upstairs. Patrice would manage the bill and disperse the group. As a bastard accused of a superiority complex, Rafael was in no shape to do either.

Chapter 5

TORI

“Chef Rafael, may I come in?”

She arrived half an hour before class officially began. Tori leaned against an office door that might as well have been a force field, the annoyance emanating from the man within was so palpable. *Stay away* didn't need to be spoken. Yet Tori was determined to clear the air between her and the infuriating man, his force field be damned.

“Who is it?”

“Victoria Espinoza,” she said, pushing past the door to find the chef with his back turned, fastening the buttons on his wrists. She noticed he always wore long-sleeved shirts despite the heat. When he turned around, his face was as hard as a statue's. A glaring and gorgeous statue.

“Why bother knocking if you're not planning to wait for an invitation?”

She had just enough presence of mind to shut the door before snapping back. “I came to apologize but I'm starting to suspect it won't matter.”

There was no avoiding it; he hated her and for no good reason. Sure, she felt compelled to speak up when provoked but it's not like she said anything untrue. He *did* have a superiority complex. Which she supposed he earned being a hotshot chef and all, but did he have to be so condescending?

“Why are you here if you think it doesn’t matter?” he stated scornfully.

She was done with this asshole. Nevermind apologies. Instead, Tori burst, “What is *wrong* with you?!” because that just about summarized every interaction with him. He had the reputation of a culinary genius but, so far, all she could discern was that he was a jerk. Knowledgeable and impressive—which was annoying—but a jerk, nonetheless.

A huff of air left his lungs and Rafael shook his head. “You should leave.”

“Not before we clear the air and you tell me what the hell is your problem with me?!”

Suddenly, his restraint snapped. He spoke with growling intensity. “My problem is that my head chef is in Marseille instead of running this class. My problem is that I haven’t taught in a very long time and every second I’m in front of that kitchen lab I remember exactly why. And to top it all off, climate change is turning the city into a sweltering sewer.”

“So. Many. Problems. Somebody throw a pity party for you,” she droned sarcastically. “Nevermind entire countries suffering from environmental disasters, Rafael Lyon is *uncomfortable*! If you’re so hot, why in the world are you always wearing long sleeves? Seriously, all I hear is that you aren’t getting *exactly* what you want. That doesn’t give you the right to talk down to people.”

He stared at her through the tirade. When she was done, the room was so quiet she could hear the surge of fiery blood that rushed to her head.

And then Rafael Baptiste Lyon walked. No, that wasn’t it. He *stalked*. Slowly and deliberately approached till they were toe to toe. When she looked up, she saw his pupils had darkened. Onyx trapped in jade.

“You didn’t let me finish, Tori,” he growled through an expression she couldn’t read. The lines around his mouth softened yet his eyes glinted with sharp alertness. If she didn’t know any better, he looked like he was enjoying himself.

Suddenly, something at the back of her head dinged with cognizance.

“You remember. You remember our meeting.” Only family and friends from her youth called her Tori. And only once would he have heard it.

“Yes, I remember. Though you’re the farthest thing from a nice college girl now, aren’t you?”

“I haven’t been that for a very long time,” she snickered. “And you”—she emphasized the word with a pointed finger—“you’re no longer the sweet boy who offered me kindness when I needed it.”

Before she could retract her finger, he grabbed her wrist. “You’re right about that. I’m far from kind. And you should know, Tori, you locked yourself in here with a man. Not a boy.”

Tori knew she should wiggle her wrist free. She should walk out that door and never come back. But she was struck by two unavoidable truths: she didn’t want to be free and she didn’t want to walk away. The realization slackened Tori’s resistance, slumping her closer and grazing her breasts against his solid chest.

At the tender contact, he lowered her hand behind her back and grabbed the other wrist so both were trapped in his iron grip. With his other hand, Rafael cradled the back of her neck.

“You want to know what my *biggest* problem is?” he growled.

“I can feel exactly how big your problem is.” She couldn’t help bating him with her sass. His erection felt like a rod against her belly, the hunger of his grasp awakening her body to its own needs.

His chuckle was equal parts malice and amusement. “My biggest problem,” he paused and stared at her parted lips, “is that I want to shut you up by putting my cock in your mouth.”

Holy shit, did he just—

“You do realize you said that out loud.”

“I’m used to getting what I want. Isn’t that what you accused me of? That cannot happen unless I ask for it.”

“This is you *asking*?” she screeched with a defiant shake of her shoulders—a shake not to dislodge his grip but to enhance the feeling of being pressed and shackled and owned.

“Would you prefer I didn’t?” He loosened his hold though didn’t let her go completely. His manhood pressed relentlessly, making her throb with anticipation. The air turned brittle, every second exposing the precipice of danger and drawing her closer to the edge.

“What *will* you let me do to you?” he rasped, moving his palm to the front of her throat so her pulse hammered against large, confident fingers.

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly. Tori’s voice was ground in glass and mired in desperation. She realized her body ached for his weight. He would do that so well, wouldn’t he? Look at her harshly and pin her under those muscular arms.

Abruptly, *tragically*, he released her instead. Rafael stepped back and squared his shoulders. “Class is about to begin. I’ll see you in the kitchen. It’s about time you learned to make croissants.”

Chapter 6

TORI

He stood in front of the class with hands behind his back and jaw so clenched he might crack a molar. Rafael had introduced their guest teacher, a famous pastry chef from one of Paris's most renowned bakeries. But the details were a blur to Tori.

Everything remained muddled except what happened in his office. Nothing could push past the remnants of that thrill: his hand around her throat and his hardness demanding her pliancy. Did she really fail to tell him to stop? She said *I don't know* when what she wanted to say was *more*.

The thought of her begging should have flooded her with shame. And it did. But it wasn't the kind of shame that made her feel small. It was the kind that made her feel *seen*. Wanted. Conquered.

Through the years, Tori had understood her sexual preferences. She liked the feeling of being confined, of surrendering control. Although she had never pursued her interest fully, she had visited sex clubs to watch. The first time was with her ex-husband. It was, she knew now, their failed attempt to spice up what was already a poisonous brew of resentment, distrust, and scorn. Submitting didn't work out well with James because there was always something missing. His demands were needs that fulfilled *him*, and not her.

What she found herself most attracted to, more than any singular sexual experience, was the way the dominant was the one taking care of the submissive, and not the other way around. A sub could be the recipient of unimaginable pleasure by simply and completely surrendering to another's command.

To give up control sounded enticing. After all, she was always in control of every aspect of her life: as the older sister, as the head of her department, and as the reliable friend who smoothed things over with calm competence.

On vacation, those responsibilities fell away. Is that why she was so alert to Rafael's masculine authority? Her guard was down. The thrill of exploring a vibrant city and immersing herself in new experiences amidst strangers excited her. She didn't need to know what tomorrow would bring, she simply had to let it happen. She need only submit.

Though Rafael taking control in his office was a fantasy of submission she didn't expect. Now that's all she could think about.

"That's right, now it must fold over itself. With confidence you must lay it on top!" The pastry chef instructed with flourish, dragging her to the present. He was talking about the dough in front of her but that's not the image that flashed in her mind. *On top* spiraled her thoughts in all kinds of directions.

What was wrong with her? She was here in this kitchen lab to cook! She wasn't here to bend over the kitchen counter as Rafael pushed her head down and spanked her bottom. Holy shit, where did *that* image come from?

A sound between a choke and a moan escaped her lips, making everyone turn around. She cleared her throat and lifted her chin. Unfortunately, she also raised her gaze and caught his unwavering attention. The glint in his eyes told her he wasn't fooled. Rafael knew exactly what caused her choked moan.

With a deep breath, Tori focused on the ingredients laid out on the prep table. Cooking at home was no substitute for the delight of baking with experts who could anticipate your

mistakes or amend them if necessary. She was in Paris, for goodness' sake. That's what she needed to focus on: baking and cooking, learning and exploring. In the kitchen and *only* in the kitchen.

Despite being an avid baker, Tori never learned how to make such an exquisite pastry with the basic ingredients of milk, sugar, flour, salt, yeast, egg, and butter. But that's what croissants were: perfect in their simple layers of buttery softness.

In the recesses of her mind she recalled that maybe she had mentioned this years ago? Something about the way he ejected her from his office—*it's about time you learned to make croissants*—was uncannily familiar.

She finally registered that the pastry chef's name was Frederick and he worked with Rafael in one of the hotel restaurants before they both branched out. One to open a pastry shop and the other to be an executive chef in some fancy place. She knew it was fancy because of the gasps of adoration from her classmates. Throughout the week, she got more hints about what a big deal Rafael was in the world of fine cuisine. To her everlasting embarrassment, she was the only one who didn't know who Rafael Baptiste Lyon was before signing up for his school.

But she knew some things her classmates didn't.

She knew the sensation of his hand around her throat: warm and precise and right. So right. She knew his wrist gave off a scent of sweet sandalwood. His body's aroma was tinged with a hint of earthy sweat but it didn't repel her. He was just so damn *manly*.

Most of all, Tori knew, without logic or reason, how much more she would let him do to her. *For her*. That excited her most of all: that in giving him what he demanded, she experienced the fantasy she could hardly articulate.

What would you let me do to you? he had asked her. Her body screamed *So. Much. More.*

The thought of relinquishing everything to him made her heady. The fantasy of offering herself to a man who knew precisely what she needed to hear, to feel, to *do* created an anticipation that bloomed from her middle and spread to every corner of her body.

Stop. Get it together and make the damn croissants.

She trained her eyes forward to the smiling pastry chef. The stern chef with the scorching glare, however, she would avoid for as long as she could.

Chapter 7

RAFAEL

For the rest of the week, Rafael felt Victoria Espinoza's avoidance like a cloud—thick and amorphous and oppressive—looming over them. Throughout the pastry demonstration, she skirted around the kitchen to avoid his path. During yesterday's foray into the world of sauces, she chatted with every person in the room but didn't once look in his direction. He knew because he couldn't stop staring.

Good. She *should* avoid him. Rafael had been a second away from devouring her when they were in his office. Plunging his tongue deep, where his cock ached to be. And the sight of her panting with excitement when he pinned her arms back...fuck, she was sexy. He couldn't remember when a woman stirred him this way, awaking possessiveness, and risk, and lust. So much lust.

Although she kept out of his way, his mornings felt like a kaleidoscope of thick hair and full lips, grabbable breasts and ample hips. And why did she smell like the very essence of summer? Flowery and savory and *honeyed*.

Rafael told himself all this tension and torture would pass soon enough. It was Friday; they were halfway finished with the cursed class. The woman would be a distant memory in a few weeks, just like the girl years ago.

And with some clever scheduling by Patrice, the two-week session might conclude with him never having to cook in front of anyone. Instead, he gathered experts from all over Paris to display their culinary skills.

When Inez made calls on his behalf, almost everyone was too busy to take over the class but wanted to connect in some way. Probably out of curiosity. Rafael had been a recluse for a while, but that accident just over a year ago made his illness the stuff of gossip. Well, curious or not, his colleagues came: chefs, servers, merchants, restaurateurs called *him* when they heard he was back in Paris. It was, after all, an industry in which he had worked with or helped many people.

Before the nerve damage got so bad, Rafael was a mentor to many. And prior to the accident that had riddled his right forearm with the angry slashes and reddened patterns of burns, he had opened opportunities to young chefs and went out of his way to support new shop owners. He knew firsthand what it was to break into the business without the support of a wealthy family or the background of the most esteemed schools. If you weren't born into privilege, finding one's footing in the world of fine cuisine was nearly impossible without some insider assistance.

To Rafael's surprise, people didn't just call him, they offered to help. Plus, there was some kind of YouTube channel or whatever that Patrice had started. Apparently if you had enough views, people wanted to be in the videos you posted. Surprising, really, that anyone found value in such silliness.

The last few days went smoothly with him imparting his knowledge and his guests demonstrating their talents. The most important part of this arrangement was that Rafael wouldn't have to battle the seizing of his limbs while in the middle of a baking technique or a cooking demonstration. Humiliating breakdown of body versus unapologetic YouTube drivél—he'd take the latter any day.

"I told you it would work out," Inez harped from a video call he propped on her kitchen counter. She insisted that he show her around to prove that her plants were still alive. Rafael stayed in her apartment, within walking distance of the

school. But as soon as class was dismissed today, he would head outside the city to his house for the weekend.

“If by *worked out* you mean we’re halfway through and no one has been maimed or traumatized, then yes, you’re right.”

“The videos are fantastic. We’ve been active on that channel for years but the second your cheese demonstration went viral, the subscription numbers skyrocketed.”

“The only word that made sense in your statement is *cheese*.”

“So...Victoria Espinoza. She’s getting a lot of buzz too. That fiery exchange you had when she scolded you started a massive debate about culinary snobbery.”

“You know my background, Inez. I’m far from being a snob.”

“I know you clawed your way to the top. Scholarships in the best schools, winning every competition you entered, being the executive chef in some of the best establishments in the city. You can’t tell me all of that blood, sweat, and tears didn’t change you.”

She was correct that his life dedicated to his craft changed him as a person. But it was always about the skills of the trade and never about gatekeeping snobbish notions of food. He believed that some culinary experiences—if one enlightened oneself while preparing or consuming—were a privilege and a responsibility. If that meant he was somewhat controlling, well, so be it. His expertise earned him that right.

That is, until his body reminded him of its limits. Limits that were always there, deceitfully dormant until they detonated his life as he knew it.

“I heard Helena is doing the chocolate demonstration today,” Inez interrupted his righteous self-pity. He welcomed the reminder.

“I should get things ready. We’ll be making a three-course meal.”

“Are you now?”

“What?” He didn’t like the mischievous tone of his friend.

“It seems the more you depart from the original syllabus, the more creative you’re getting.”

“A three-course meal is hardly the height of creativity. And it is mostly the basics.”

“If you say so.”

Chapter 8

RAFAEL

Chocolate everywhere: from cocoa powder labeled by region of origin, to shaved milk chocolate of assorted infusions, to different blocks of dark chocolate at various levels of bitterness and density. Rafael offered an abbreviated version of chocolate's varied properties.

“Chocolate is a flavor, a medium, a filling, a carrier,” he stated from in front of the class. “Today we will push beyond expected desserts and use chocolate in various dining experiences by making a vinaigrette, a dry rub for tenderloin, a classic French ganache tart, and a cocktail with cocoa bitters.”

The guest chef, Helena Chang, was the owner of a successful fusion restaurant recently featured in a Parisian magazine. But Rafael and Inez knew her when she was the kid helping with the family's restaurant laundry business. Rafael's letters of recommendation gained her entry in an elite culinary school.

The young woman began the process of gathering balsamic vinegar, pomegranate juice, garlic, Dijon mustard, avocado oil, and shaved dark chocolate while Rafael spoke.

“A basic vinaigrette pairs well with chocolate, picking up on the depths of the balsamic. It is all bound together—emulsified—by a good French Dijon mustard.”

“You’ll want to use darker chocolate, although I see Chef Rafael prepared quite a range,” Helena added conversationally.

“I wanted to show them the variety for when we make the ganache. But for the vinaigrette, there is no better choice,” Rafael confirmed. “We’re adding fresh strawberries which pairs best with darker chocolate,” he added.

“Of course, Chef,” Helena said pleasantly while demonstrating the emulsifying technique.

The class moved on to the dry rub for the tenderloin. Rafael lectured on how to choose the cut, how to test the pan for the right heat, and how to gauge the readiness depending on their cooking preference. And by *preference* he meant rare or medium rare.

He walked around the classroom while Helena demonstrated from up front. When he reached Victoria’s station, he watched her focusing on the pan like it was the carrier of age-old secrets. Her face was so serious, lips puckered just shy of a full pout.

“Wait for the smoke,” he said, stepping closer before she lay the meat. She kept the cut of meat suspended by tongs.

“You know the pan is ready when the butter bubbles, all the water evaporating. And when the olive oil reaches—”

“Like now?” she asked breathlessly.

“Yes. Now,” he agreed.

She proceeded with searing the meat, setting her timer, and busying herself with tidying up her workstation instead of looking at him.

Rafael moved on. Like a decent teacher should. Instead of wanting to push back the tendrils that escaped her ponytail, black wisps clinging to her sweat-moistened neck. Her aroma mixed with the complex layers of flavors in the kitchen. And yet Rafael was sure that all the chocolate in the world wouldn’t erase the taste of honey on her skin.

He distracted himself by helping the Swedish couple arrange their station for the customary selfie. Since his tirade

at Luc's cheese shop, admonishing them for their social media obsession, Rafael tried to be more cooperative. After all, his own staff was recording the session. He was a grumpy bastard, but he was no hypocrite.

The kitchen was sweltering despite the air conditioning. Everyone cheered when he announced that they would move on to the chocolate cocktails. He showed them how to prepare chocolate bitters on their own, although today they were using his own stock.

“You'll want to infuse cacao nibs with wild cherry bark, cardamom, vanilla beans, and cinnamon. We'll be making a version of the Adonis cocktail made of sherry, vermouth, and bitters. But the depth of the chocolate will be quite unique, you'll see.”

A party atmosphere descended on the kitchen lab as the cold drinks were shaken and served. The stations all had paired students, except for Victoria's, but she made enough for two and offered the drink to Helena.

The guest teacher looked at Rafael for permission. He nodded his approval. It wasn't customary for staff to imbibe but this class was as unconventional as could be. They were nowhere near the syllabus originally posted on the website. But with the enhanced menu, the world class chefs, and the experimental offerings including alcohol, no one was complaining.

“How about joining us for a drink, Chef Rafael?” the American man asked jovially.

Rafael refused the offer, not only because he already knew what it tasted like—he invented the drink after all—but because he never drank in front of anyone, not since his diagnosis. Alcohol would only diminish his control. When his dull, aching nerves turned to sharp points of torture, mental control was essential.

“Perhaps before another round, we might begin the ganache.” His voice rose over the chatter.

Rafael gave the cultural history of the simple French dessert, while providing an overview of the recipe. He could rattle instructions about this ganache tart while half asleep, having been one of the first desserts he regularly made for birthdays or special occasions. He had been making it since he was nine years old.

Helena demonstrated the basics of cream, sugar, butter, and chocolate. But for this recipe, he encouraged students to choose from a variety of options of chocolate and from any part of the kitchen's offerings. Some planned to flavor it with berries, some with cognac. He was a little appalled by the couple that created a mint version but Rafael kept his shudder to himself.

Victoria, however, was nowhere close to deciding. She had used three small pots with minuscule versions of the ganache to test flavors. Every few minutes, she would dip her finger in chocolate before putting it in her mouth and sucking so hard, her cheeks hollowed.

She couldn't possibly know how she reduced a man to a lust-deranged version of himself. He didn't think about how that finger would taste, dipped in chocolate. *No*. Because he was too busy thinking about *his* finger dipped in chocolate before he told her to lick it.

"What is the issue," he said gruffly.

She shook her head and pursed her tempting lips. "I can't decide. I love salted caramel but there's something about the dark chocolate that's different from what I buy in the US."

"Of course. This is from one of the best chocolatiers in Paris."

She sighed and looked at him askance. "You think I should do the dark chocolate, don't you? Simple and classic."

"You can do whatever you want," he said. "But yes, sometimes simple and classic is best."

"But what if...what if I made my tart crust with the salted caramel? That would work, right?" She looked flushed and happy, which made it impossible for him to disagree. She

could have suggested adding soup bones and he might have conceded.

Without waiting for him, she rushed to the back pantry to begin her salted caramel crust. By the time she put it in the oven to bake, everyone's tarts were cooled and ganache poured. Students took turns putting their dessert in the flash chiller to set. All of them were cleaning up and packing their prized tarts to enjoy over the weekend. Except for Victoria, who was still waiting for the crust in the oven as she made a batch of dark chocolate ganache from scratch.

"I'm sorry I can't stay," Helena said. "I have some errands before the weekend. Are you coming to Frederick's party tomorrow?" she asked Rafael.

"No, I'll be taking the last train and staying home till Monday."

"But you should come over tomorrow! What is another weekend in Paris? C'mon, Rafael, you owe me. And Frederick! Didn't he help with your pastry lesson?"

It was true. Their friend was turning forty and when news spread that Rafael was back, Frederick's party was one of the invitations that stood out.

"We'll see," he mumbled absentmindedly.

Patrice exited the storage room and headed to Victoria's station. Without thinking, Rafael stopped the assistant.

"I'll help her clean up. Go home. I appreciate how very flexible you've been, Patrice. This has been a hard week for you."

"Are you sure, Chef?" Patrice asked hopefully.

"Have I taught you nothing, Patrice? When things go in your favor, no need to question."

With a smile and a quick goodbye to Victoria, the young man left the building.

Chapter 9

TORI

Ears perked and her eyes askance, Tori didn't miss Patrice's quick goodbye and Rafael's footsteps when he locked the front door. She expected him to come to the kitchen with a scowl, but he simply...disappeared.

She worked quietly, focusing on pouring the ganache and putting away perishable ingredients. When it was time to put the tart in the chiller to set, Tori was rather annoyed. Rafael didn't need to help her, but some final instructions would have been useful. She recalled what her classmates did and appreciated that she wasn't rushed, but where the hell was he?

She walked to the hallway and peeked into his empty office. Had he left?

And then she heard it: the hint of gruff breathing coming from deeper down the hallway. Approaching a closed door she recognized as the employees-only lounge, Tori realized the rumbling sound had morphed into shallow, pained breaths.

In a flash of panic, she burst in. "Um, hello?!" The sight of him made the hair at the back of her neck raise. "Rafael, are you hurt?"

His back was to the door because he was crouched over a cabinet, his left arm lifted to hold his body up and his right arm stiff and angled wrong, like it was seizing up without his control.

“Leave,” he gritted without turning around. “Let yourself...” he paused to take a pained breath. “You can let yourself out.”

“What can I do? Please let me help.” Her voice came out in worried spurts. She couldn’t leave him like this.

“Just”—he used his left hand to point to the microwave—“the compress was heating up, but I didn’t get to it on time.”

Tori opened the microwave and took out a long, narrow compress that seemed to have something grainy inside. Rice maybe? She held the warmed object like an offering and walked to where Rafael had managed to sit. His right arm was still stiff and his face was a mask of discomfort.

“Thank you. Just place it over my...yes, that’s it.”

She had positioned it over the injured shoulder, letting the length drape over his upper arm. They were quiet for a while, only the sound of her heartbeat and the rush of her blood filling her head. Rafael’s eyes were closed, lashes seeming thicker and darker over paled skin. She watched, amazed, as his shallow and panting breaths deepened, his features easing. When his eyes opened, his gaze was a blaze of frustration.

“I’ll get you water,” she said.

Turning away from him, she sorted through her concern and confusion. What was wrong and, perhaps more importantly, why was he so *weird* about it? A hot pack was hardly the height of emergency care. A bit of aging muscles was nothing to be ashamed of. Fumbling with a glass, Victoria watched as he flexed and unflexed his hand, then put his head to the back of the chair like he’d been stabbed.

“Rafael, drink this.” She added, skittish and nervous, “My mom always said most things can be solved with a glass of water or a walk outside. Or both.”

He lifted his head and narrowed his eyes at her. “Tell me about your mom. Distract me.” His voice was made choppy by distress yet sounded surprisingly warm.

“Take this first,” she ordered gently, wrapping his good hand around the glass and waiting for him to drink. He was

sitting in an individual armchair, so if she sat with him it would have been on his lap. So she knelt at the side of his injured arm.

“Is it a muscle spasm? An old injury?”

“The condition is brachial neuritis. I have what’s called Parsonage Turner Syndrome.” His voice was tight with restrained resentment. “It is basically the envious cocktail of nerve pain, muscle seizures, and the sudden loss of use of my entire limb. Inconvenient, but it will pass. Don’t look so worried.”

“Do you take medicine for it?”

“Yes, throughout the day. Before class and right after. We went over today so I took it too late.”

“That’s my fault.”

Rafael shook his head. “It is no one’s fault, *mon ange*,” he whispered. Tori’s heart quickened when he called her *his angel*.

“You asked about my mom...” She faltered.

His head was back and eyes closed again, forehead creased, but he managed to tilt his lips to indicate *yes, go on*.

“She raised three girls. Despite having a graduate degree in English, she was a stay-at-home mom because my dad was away so much, being a pilot. And she also wanted us to travel which made it hard for her to keep a typical work schedule.”

“Three girls?” he said in disbelief. “Three girls just like you?” His teasing was so unexpected at the moment, it made Tori chuckle.

“They are so much worse than me. I’m the responsible oldest sister, I’ll have you know.”

Rafael lifted his head. A grunt escaped his throat.

“Will it help if I massage your shoulder? Your arm?” she asked.

At the question, he managed to tilt his head and grimaced a curt response. “Don’t touch my arm.”

“How about your hand?” she asked, looking down at the fingers lain over the armchair, breast level with her because she was kneeling. “You wanted to know about my mom, right? When I was scared of flying, she would do this thing with my hand and it always helped me.”

He didn’t pull away so she ran a finger over the back of his hand, following the crevices of muscles and veins. Tori wrapped his long fingers between her two chilly hands, feeling the roughness of old cuts and a large callus at the base of his forefinger. He moaned. She looked up to check if it was a sound of relief or discomfort.

“Does it feel good? May I continue, Rafael?”

His voice was low and coarse. “You cannot ask me that while you’re on your knees, Tori.”

She rolled her eyes. “I just did. Now stop distracting me. Does it hurt when I do this?” She began a gentle massage over his hand, finding knots in his palm and tension between his fingers.

“No, it doesn’t hurt.”

“Anyway, when I used to be nervous about flying—and we flew *a lot*—my mom would do this to my hand and just focusing on it took my mind away from other things. Close your eyes and focus.”

He grumbled while reluctantly following her directions. Soon his breathing evened out and she could feel the moment his hand softened to near normal. She looked at him, that gorgeous cleft at the center of a masculine jawline, the rosy color of his lips returning so they looked full and lush and—

“Thank you, Victoria,” he said softly. His face had softened as well and she realized he had caught her staring at his mouth. “It feels very good. Your hands, I mean. And the medicine is beginning to work so I must ask you to stop.”

“But if it’s helping you...”

“Tori, *stop*,” His strained voice had a distinct quality to it. Her eyes landed on his face before dropping. To his lap.

“Oh, um,” she stammered at the sight of his tented pants.

“I suppose I should apologize for my body’s reaction to your touch.”

“It would be the gentlemanly thing to do,” she answered breathlessly.

“Except if I apologize every time you make me hard, I’d spend all day doing it. It seems I could lose control at the touch of a breeze when I’m around you.” The words were gruff, spoken through tight lips and a cement jaw.

If she was initially taken aback, something about his crassness bristled Tori. It was a version of his petulance, meant to intimidate or repel her. Too bad she had no intention of being intimidated. She wouldn’t back down from this man, even when—perhaps especially when—she was on her knees and touching him.

“Yeah, well, I get that all the time,” she snarked.

His chuckle made her light-headed. Rafael turned his hand over and gripped both of hers in the hot, large palm. “The problem is you’re not a breeze. You’re a fucking storm.”

Rafael was clearly better now. She should stand up and leave. Instead, Tori couldn’t help but lean in. She moaned at the whiff of his enticingly decadent scent.

“That’s not my problem now is it, Chef?” she muttered instead.

“You’re right.” He spoke with an affectionate smile, drawing her attention to his pillowy lips and that damn sexy cleft on his chin. “Watching you beside a pot of melted chocolate will be the end of me and you wouldn’t even know you were to blame.”

She didn’t have a snarky comeback because *chocolate!* Tori abruptly ran out of the room, calling behind her. “I left the ganache in there too long. Oh, no, I hope it isn’t ruined?!”

Her head was deep in the chiller when she heard him follow into the kitchen lab.

“As long as there’s no freezer burn at the top, it should be fine.” His voice was steady once again, no trace of the man in pain.

“It’s fine, then. I think.” Relieved, she looked at her surroundings and realized she had left a mess. “I came looking for you so I didn’t quite finish cleaning. I’ll do that and get out of your way. If you think you’re alright.”

“Thank you, I’m more than fine. No need to clean up. If you have plans for the rest of the day, you should go.”

“I don’t. I mean, I don’t have any plans.”

His smile was knowing. “Surely some of the afternoon will entail consuming your creation. It looks quite lovely. Well done, Victoria.”

That was the first compliment she received about her cooking from him. Maybe he was just being nice because she’d helped him. Still, she had to ask.

“Would you, well, would you like to try it? Just a small piece?”

The truth was, she didn’t want to leave. Not yet. And this was way too much chocolate, even for her.

“I would love to,” was an answer she did not expect.

Chapter 10

RAFAEL

He watched as she bustled about the kitchen, grabbing two plates on which she lathered a pretty swirl of caramel as backdrop. On it, Tori placed a sliver of the tart.

Looking adorably serious, a small line creased between her brows. He wanted to reach out and smooth it. And then she would sigh, maybe, and lean into him so he could get his fill of her honeyed scent.

Rafael slammed the fantasy shut along with all the other images that flooded his brain when she was close. Shut them in a sturdy box—a trunk even—impenetrable and solid. Then wrapped that lidded container in rope before throwing it into the River Seine never to be opened again. Au revoir inappropriate fantasies of honeyed skin and sweet lips.

He had expected their sexual tension to evaporate after she'd seen him helpless and delirious with pain. After all, disgust at his weakness was an understandable reaction. Maybe she hadn't run away at the first instance of seeing his illness, but it would be inevitable.

Wasn't that what history showed him?

Rafael had been dating Allison when the initial inklings of the pain began. When the illness took hold, it was swift. She had a front row seat to his decline. He had been grateful for her loyalty and, despite the physical challenges, believed the

painful attacks would be manageable with effort and patience. The majority of people with Parsonage Turner Syndrome had symptoms disappear in time. But not Rafael. In fact, since being diagnosed with brachial neuritis two years ago, the attacks hadn't lessened. He just got better at controlling the pain and anticipating the outcomes.

He knew he wasn't what Allison signed up for. When Rafael could no longer function at celebrity culinary events—the scrutiny and pressure were too much for his nerves—the first signs of his girlfriend's frustration showed through the cracks of fake smiles and curt responses. And when his arm was ravaged by the burns of his intolerable clumsiness and sheer stupidity, well, what did he think would happen? He couldn't blame Allison for leaving.

You can't expect this kind of sacrifice from anyone, Rafael. It's too much.

The voice of his past echoed, shutting out the image of Victoria's concerned eyes and gentle hands. The care of the woman in front of him was aching beautiful because Rafael sensed, but could never trust, her sincerity.

She timidly placed her offering in front of him. He took a bite and focused on the flavors instead of on her irresistible mix of pride and shyness, defiance and reserve.

“Smooth. Balanced.” His voice was steady. It was impossible to look away from her doe-eyed anticipation. “You were right to keep the salted caramel with the crust. It provides just the right...” He struggled to find the word. “*Contradiction*. What matters, however, is what *you* think.”

She took a bite and closed her eyes. “I've never had chocolate like this.”

“Yes, me too,” he said blandly and mostly to himself. She didn't need to know that watching her enjoy food was his new favorite thing. She would be a delight to feed, wouldn't she? So responsive, so enthusiastic, so—

“I, um, I bought your cookbook.” Her statement was a welcome interruption.

“Ah,” he said vaguely.

“Don’t you want to know which one?”

He shrugged, though it wasn’t from disinterest. If anything, he couldn’t help feeling smug. If there’s one thing he didn’t need to be insecure about, it was how well his cookbooks were received. He was proud of them, which reminded him of her earlier reprimand.

“I don’t want to be accused of having a superiority complex.”

“Maybe I don’t mind a superiority complex if it’s in a book.” She ran her tongue over her lower lip to capture a sliver of chocolate. The sheen on her lips made them look even fuller.

“I’ll remember that,” he croaked.

“Anyway, I haven’t decided how useful it is yet, so there’s no need to be flattered.” She hid her grin behind a sip of iced tea.

Her haughty reprimand, softened by a sweet tone, made him chuckle. Before he could stop himself, Rafael blurted out, “You do a lot of things to me, Tori, but flattery isn’t one of them.”

Tori sputtered on her drink. “Jesus, warn a woman when you come on to her like that.”

“Is that what I’m doing?” Rafael was asking a serious question. What the hell was he doing alone with this dangerously distracting woman? A student, of all things. A woman whose opinion of him meant more to Rafael than it should. Who also happened to live in another continent.

The thought reminded him of something he was curious about. He doubted there would be a better time to ask. “Why are you in Paris, Victoria? Why a cooking school? Why here and now?”

She sighed before taking another bite. He waited, enjoying the way her breasts moved as she wiggled in her seat. No rush on his end.

“I needed a change of pace.”

“Why here? Why now?”

“Why not? No, seriously, that’s the extent of my logic. I love cooking, I love Paris. Signing up for a cooking school that had excellent reviews and located near my rental seemed as good a choice as any. I figured I could do worse.”

It was Rafael’s turn to choke on his drink. *She could do worse?* It took great effort to let that damning praise go but he managed. His silence invited her to continue.

“Maybe I’m going through a typical midlife crisis.” Her tone was self-deprecating, making him scowl.

“I doubt it. There’s certainly nothing typical about you. And you’re too young for that kind of crisis.”

“I couldn’t stand it, Rafael,” she blurted with exasperation. “I’m in charge of marketing resources in a prominent DC accounting firm and my team depends on me. I don’t want to let anyone down, but if I’m honest, nothing from my job comes close to wanting to make perfect scones.”

“What kind of scones?” He was easily distracted that way.

“I have this lemon cranberry recipe that’s just—”

“Rhubarb. Try rhubarb next time,” he stated tersely. “And if you like lavender...” As soon as the words left his mouth, he was mortified by his rude interruption. “I’m sorry. You were saying.”

“I took a month off. A few weeks in Paris and a few weeks...well, I haven’t decided yet. Which is kind of nuts for me. I usually plan everything. This time, I’m going to let things happen and hope for the best.”

“So, you’re letting serendipity lead you to your next destination.”

“Exactly! The last time I did that, I was a college student. That’s when we met, by the way.” Her eyes were alight with excitement.

“Can I ask you something?” she ventured. And then seemed to change her mind. “You know what, it doesn’t matter.”

“Evasion is not a look I’ve ever seen you wear.”

Exasperated, she continued. “Why didn’t you call me back?”

“What?”

“All those years ago. I left my number with a server in your restaurant during lunch because I couldn’t make it for dinner. When you never called, I just assumed—”

“I never got it.”

“Oh, OK. Not that it matters.”

They were quiet for a beat, both seeming to consider the possibilities and the perils of leaving things to fate.

“Is that what you think?” he asked cautiously. “Do you really think it wouldn’t have mattered if I’d called?”

“How would it have mattered?” she said in a half whisper. Rafael’s lungs seized at the sight of her. So beautiful, so trusting, so happy. She took his breath away.

“It feels like a story that started and hasn’t quite finished,” he found himself saying.

“Or a cautionary tale.” She smiled candidly.

“Or that,” he agreed before continuing his interrogation. “So you drop everything for one month to escape. That’s what Paris is for you, then? An escape from every day. From responsibilities. From plans.”

She nodded. Rummaging through her comment, however, Rafael didn’t know how he felt about the information she offered. She was escaping from responsibilities. Aside from the time she spent in this kitchen, her next few weeks were unplanned.

Rafael couldn’t help wondering, *What does it take to escape responsibilities in a way that felt like a celebration, instead of a cowardly act?* Because that’s what he’d been

doing: shirking responsibilities by depending on Inez to run the school, spending meaningless days proverbially licking his wounds and literally hating his body. Returning to Paris wasn't an escape for Rafael. It was a reckoning.

"I think I've upset you," she mumbled regretfully, her full lips pressed together in a tight line. Yet her eyes glowed before she added, "Or you've changed your mind about the tart."

Her attempt at humor shook him out of self-pity.

"I am jealous, that's all. To see Paris through your eyes. A city full of promise and beauty and freedom."

"What's stopping you?" she asked while resting her forearms on the table. He was momentarily distracted when she leaned over slightly, her cleavage deepening by the movement and giving him a whiff of her sweet skin.

"*Pardon moi?*" Stupid, really, how he couldn't keep up with a simple conversation when she distracted him.

"See it through my eyes. I don't have plans today. Why don't we take a walk after this?"

"I, well," he was about to reject the idea but he couldn't come up with a reason.

"It's part two of my mother's advice, remember?"

"A glass of water or a walk outside. Or both," he stated fondly.

"Exactly! Let's go." She gathered their plates quickly and was already halfway through tidying up before he jostled himself into action. At some point, while cleaning, he realized he was looking forward to this walk to...wherever.

Rafael braced himself. He hadn't spent an afternoon alone with a woman in a while. But she was so strikingly unique. Brazen one moment, sweet the next. And endlessly enticing to be with. He didn't mean physically, although that was undeniable, as his constant semi-hardness reminded him. He couldn't remember fantasizing this much about anyone. And the way she yielded to his grip and blushed at his words made him want to hold her more and tell her every fantasy he had.

So much for semi-hardness. He shifted uncomfortably, moving to hide his erection under the worktable.

Still, despite the intense reaction she drew from him, it was more than surface attraction. She *altered* him. He was a gruff and serious man, made worse by his lack of socializing. But with her, he wanted to be different. Not to socialize, exactly; that still made his skin crawl. With her, it was more like moving through the day without dread.

I'm going to let things happen and hope for the best.

Rafael wasn't convinced that this was possible for him but, surprisingly, he found himself willing to try.

Chapter 11

TORI

He insisted on waiting in the street while she placed the dessert in the apartment fridge. Tori rushed, changing her sweaty shirt for a nicer blouse and dabbing a bit of lip gloss. She found herself fussing with her hair in front of the mirror before being startled into a renewed sense of hurry. What if he left because she took too long? Tori was upset just thinking about it, which made her feel silly.

She forced herself to slow down. One thing she promised herself after the divorce was that she would no longer be on a man's schedule. If he left, he left.

She didn't dwell on the rush of relief when she saw him casually leaning by a streetlight. Handsome and confident, Rafael drew tons of attention from people. It was like walking with a celebrity. They wandered side by side, his long strides almost languid in order for her to keep up. He pointed to a few landmarks before they entered a garden, the oppressive swelter of the city tempered by lush grass.

"*Jardin des Plantes* is beautiful this time of year." Rafael pointed down a path flanked by wildflowers. "It houses the Natural History Museum, if you're interested."

"Maybe next time. I'd like to stay outside. I can't get enough of these flowers," she gushed. It was stunning, the lanes of color surrounding her with an explosion of pinks and

yellow and oranges. The sound of rustling leaves and laughing children. The feel of grass between her toes when she removed her shoes. Everything around her felt new and exhilarating. And the man who walked beside her? He was the most exhilarating of all.

Now that they were alone, more of his personality peeked through. She knew about his sex appeal and haughty demeanor, his obvious brilliance and famous reputation. But now he was sort of sweet and maybe a little reserved, like he had a secret he was thinking of sharing. She craved that secret for herself.

“I miss my garden,” Rafael stated wistfully. “My house is in the country.”

“I heard you mention it to Helena; that you were spending the weekend away from Paris. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

“It is public knowledge that I have been away from Paris for a while.”

“Why is that?” she asked as they continued to stroll between fragrant shrubs, passing a family laying out a picnic. “Every guest chef mentioned a version of *glad to have you back, Rafael*. Like you were a long-lost friend.”

He didn’t answer right away. It was clear that she treaded on sensitive ground. “You don’t have to answer that. I don’t mean to be nosy.”

“When I was diagnosed, I stopped cooking for people.” He spoke blandly. “I don’t know why I said that, since you didn’t ask. Ridiculous, really.”

She halted half step, forcing him to face her. “I’m sorry for your diagnosis. But even I know you can’t lose a skill like cooking, no matter the illness. You stopped cooking for people? That’s not ridiculous. It’s a tragedy.”

She refused to regret her impassioned statement. This must be why he lectured and interviewed and instructed but never cooked in front of the class. The knowledge made her heart

ache a little. A man who dedicated his life to a craft he could no longer perform? It was heartbreaking.

His face contorted as if he was about to say something, but a second later, Rafael was as impenetrable as a stone. She realized that whatever she said right now would be construed as intrusion into his personal life.

“Where should we go next?” she asked, hoping to lessen the unease that darkened their sunny stroll.

“Have you seen the Pantheon? We aren’t far from the Latin Quarter.” He offered his shoulder to lean on while she slipped back into her flats. Tori tried not to think about the muscular ridges under her fingertips.

They continued through city streets. They passed by Pantheon-Sorbonne University, where young people gathered on patios with their coffees and books and chatter.

“Some of the most famous French authors and thinkers are buried here,” Rafael said while they stood outside the Pantheon’s impressive facade. “Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Marie Curie.”

“I love how French people honor their authors and intellectuals like they’re celebrities.”

“This is not the case in the United States?”

“There’s no shortage of brilliant authors and thinkers, obviously, but most of our celebrities are just that—famous for being famous.”

“Ah, that explains some of the references of my younger colleagues. I’m not certain what our YouTube videos are offering, but they insist on its value. As if we are making something tangible when, at least for me, I’m making nothing at all.”

They walked along the Seine aimlessly, Tori gathering her thoughts while rushing locals and bustling tourists passed them. She attempted to formulate her mixed reaction into a coherent argument. Because his statement—*I’m making nothing at all*—was unacceptable.

“You’re not making *nothing*. You’re bringing people together, you’re sharing your expertise, you’re...you’re helping your audience *understand* the food they love. In my condo at the other side of the world, I learned about cooking from videos like these.”

Tori glanced at him to catch the slight narrowing of his eyes as if he was trying to focus. He opened his mouth but nothing came out. His only ostensible response was a thoughtful tilt of his head and a mumbled, “I see.”

When they approached a grand square, Rafael did a dramatic sweep of his arm as he announced, “The *Place de la Concorde*, mademoiselle. This is where one decides whether or not a Ferris wheel is in one’s future.”

She shivered at the thought. “I can barely fly in an airplane. I’d love to see the city from that view but there’s no way I’m swinging hundreds of feet in the air with nothing but a flimsy floor to keep me from pummeling to my death.”

“I can massage your hand,” he said while reaching over and placing her hand in his hot palm. The glint in his eyes was golden. “If you want to give it a try.”

He likely meant it as a comforting joke. Rafael moved to release her fingers but she stopped him. “We don’t have to be hundreds of feet in the air for you to hold my hand,” she whispered.

Looking down at their connection and entangling their fingers, Rafael smiled. But it was tinged with discomfort.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I want to do more than hold your hand, Tori. You must know that by now. So,” he paused, his other hand tilting her chin so she was arrested by his jade eyes, so light they reflected the blues of a cloudless summer sky. “So you’ll need to decide.”

“Wha—what do I need to decide?”

“I could walk you home now. Then I’d catch the train to my home in Le Vésinet, or...”

He didn't continue his sentence because that was the exact moment Tori eliminated the space between them and wrapped her free arm around his waist. She let her fingers strum the deep ridges of his lower back muscles. The closeness pushed her alert nipples against his wide chest. His heart thud against hers, as fast and furious as her own.

She didn't bother waiting for whatever he was going to say because she already knew her choice. "I'll take the *or*, thank you very much."

His chuckle warmed her cheek. She relished the bittersweet trace of chocolate lingering in his breath.

"In that case," he whispered as his hand skimmed her hip. "Will you have dinner with me, *mon ange*?"

Chapter 12

RAFAEL

He wasn't sure if dinner with Victoria Espinoza was the best or the worst idea he ever had. He arranged to pick her up in a few hours, giving them both a chance to freshen up. He used the opportunity to gather his thoughts, tame his nerves (not missing his medication window this time), and bolster some control which slipped every minute he spent with her.

Today, her fierce declaration shook him. *You're bringing people together, you're sharing your expertise, you're helping your audience understand the food they love.* Abruptly, a flash of the young Victoria Espinoza blazed his consciousness. She was the first to announce to Rafael that, one day, he would be a "super fancy chef." He always recalled that moment fondly. The string that connected the past to the present tugged, making him feel vulnerable and nostalgic. He needed a shower.

Once shaved and dressed, Rafael acknowledged the now-familiar tingling in his lower body at the thought of seeing her soon. No longer nostalgic, he was instead exceedingly horny.

He had frequently enjoyed the company of women, but personal matters were always second to his career. Allison was his one attempt at a relationship. When that blew up, Rafael confirmed that no one would want to be with a grumpy, frustrated, incapacitated man.

But something in Rafael whispered, *You'll regret shutting Tori out. She'll leave eventually but not tonight. Tonight she's still here, waiting for you. Willing to be with you.*

And so he found himself outside her building's entrance, like an inexperienced teenager on a first date, embarrassingly eager and completely out of his element.

Rafael: I'm outside whenever you're ready.

Victoria: I'm sorry! I'm running late.

Rafael was about to text that she could take her time but another text pinged. **Do you mind coming upstairs? I'll buzz you in.**

Of course he would come upstairs. He shouldn't, but he would. Rafael found himself at the landing outside her door, which was left slightly ajar. Worry surged past his eagerness.

"You cannot leave your door op—" He lost his voice once he stepped through the threshold because the scene before him knocked him on his ass. Not literally, but close.

Victoria wore a strapless, body-skimming, knee-length, black dress. He could see her breasts brimming up. Her chest pushed out because her hands were clasped behind her back.

"It won't close!" she said in a panic. "I'm sorry, just please make yourself comfortable and I'll figure something out..."

"You are stunning," he declared, because the truth should erase her insecurities.

She snorted and exclaimed, "Maybe from the front!" At that, she turned around to give him a glimpse of her smooth back and the gaping zipper. Knots tangled in his stomach at the sight of her supple body peeking through the roughly bunched fabric.

Looking over her shoulder and blissfully unaware of Rafael's rampant arousal, she explained, "I went to the boutique down the street and grabbed a size bigger than what I usually buy at home. Either the sizes are that much smaller in France or I gained two sizes in a week!"

At that, she scurried into a narrow hallway. He followed and stood outside what he assumed was the bedroom door. “You can wear whatever you want, Tori. I’m not saying dinner with me is altogether pleasant, but it isn’t meant to be stressful either, *mon ange*.”

When did he start thinking about her as his angel?

“Yeah, but look at you!” Her voice was muffled but he caught most of her protests. “I’m the tacky American with my dresses and flats, or my shorts and sneakers. While you’re... you!”

He looked down at his gray slacks and blue button-up shirt. “I’ll wear a dress and flats if that makes you feel better,” he harped in response to her puzzling statements, hoping for a laugh.

He got a light snicker, which was enough to lessen the awkwardness. She cracked the door and stuck her head out. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be dramatic. I just...”

“You’re beautiful. It doesn’t matter what you wear.”

She offered two small blinks before saying, “I just wanted tonight to be special.”

“It already is,” he stated while leaning his shoulder against the door to urge it open. She let him. He couldn’t believe she let him.

“It doesn’t matter what you wear because you’re the most beautiful woman in any room you enter. But if you don’t wear something soon”—he raked her body still trapped in the inadequate dress—“I’m rather inclined to keep you here for myself.”

Her breath shallowed. “What if...”

When she didn’t continue, he reached over to brush her jaw with his fingers. “What?”

“What if that’s what I want? To be kept here.” She spoke in stops and starts.

“You cannot mean that.”

A fiery glare took over her features. “Don’t tell me what I mean,” she said curtly. “I’m a grown woman. I know what I want.”

Rafael eliminated the distance between them, clamping his hand around the wrist that held her dress up. He looked down at her copious breasts pressed against his chest and groaned. She was so damn soft, honeyed skin flushed with arousal. She wasn’t wearing a bra and the slightest hint of her dusty pink nipple was right at the edge of the loosened garment. Her breasts strained, her hair tickled his nose, and there was no longer any use hiding his excruciating erection when it grazed her squirming body.

“If you knew what it meant for me to stay...” he muttered. She melted somewhat, her stiff back collapsing against his hand as she captured his blistering gaze.

She straightened and raised her chin. “What would it mean for you to stay?”

He grinned at the question because where would he begin? The list of fantasies he harbored for this woman was so long and elaborate, it was laughable.

“You’re toying with me, I think,” she stated petulantly.

Unable to restrain his chuckle, Rafael uttered, “If I was doing anything close to toying with you, you wouldn’t be thinking at all.” The muscles in his neck tensed, his jaw tight enough to grind down his molars.

“Oh my god, Rafael, I’ll never understand you! And it has nothing to do with the language barrier. It’s like you have this...this part of you that needs to come out and you won’t let it. What secret are you hiding, Rafael? *Why* are you holding back? It’s not like I’ve pushed you away,” she sputtered.

When Victoria continued, her furor hadn’t waned. “You’re holding back one second and then, out of nowhere, saying these mysterious and sexy things. Or am I imagining it? Maybe you’re truly driving me crazy. What’s in that brain of yours, dammit!”

He couldn't let himself be swayed by this brazen challenge, this display of passion. *Could he?*

"Get dressed, Victoria. I'll wait outside."

"No," she declared. "I don't know why everything just... just *prickles* around you but I'm done wondering."

"Prickles? What is this word?" He was equal parts annoyed and intrigued by the statement.

"It means, like, ugh. I don't know?! Like there's a current between us and it makes my stomach ache and my hair stand and my body...my body...dammit I—" She stopped herself.

"What do you want? Tell me straight. None of these vague words. I must hear you clearly. You *must* be clear." He couldn't afford the language barrier to get in the way of their understanding.

"When you talk to me a certain way, when you touch me and hold me a certain way, it feels like you're giving me something I didn't know I needed. Something I didn't realize I craved."

"When I tell you how beautiful you are?"

"No. I mean yes, but also when you...when you tell me you want your cock in my mouth. When you talk dirty."

"*Fuck*, my angel likes the devil in her ear," he said in a half whisper, indulging in a nuzzle of his nose against her fragrant skin.

"And when you hold me a certain way."

"Like this?" he asked, shackling her hand behind her with one grip while slowly grazing his other hand along her outer hip before clenching his fist rough and hard. Her sigh was relief and excitement together.

"Have you ever played this game, my angel? Have you ever submitted?"

"I've seen it. I've been to a sex club. To...to watch."

He groaned at the thought of this woman hot and bothered and aroused as she watched the ebb and flow of domination

and submission play out between two people.

“How about you? Are you, um, experienced?”

He paused because this was not a topic one spoke about frequently. How to explain what he had learned about himself through the years? Rafael admitted that certain situations between him and women had excited him enough to push the intensity, to bring their encounter to the brink of danger. Not with every woman, but to some extent with his ex-girlfriend.

He loved the power of it, but also the responsibility. It was a dance that required unyielding scrutiny and consensual trust.

The difference with Victoria, however, was that every time she was in his presence, the inclination towards control sharpened, his sexual need coming out in frank, unfiltered harshness. And his desire to own her and give her pleasure—that was off the charts. With her, Rafael’s demands were his gifts. And her vulnerability was his reward.

“It has never felt like this,” he said honestly. “I spend my days obsessed by all of the ways you tempt me. Then spend my nights thinking of how to punish you for it.”

“Oh, god, that’s so hot,” she gushed.

He gritted through the acuteness of desire flooding his body. “You have no idea how much I’m on fire for you. But you’ll have to say it clearly. Tell me what you want. *Now.*” He wasn’t sure if his loud, thumping heart was drowning out the words.

“You. I want you.”

Two burdened seconds passed before their mouths slammed together. Without restraint, the kiss tore through his consciousness. Her soft lips yielded to his firm demands. The clash was full of paradox: a violent caress and controlled chaos. Rafael grabbed the back of her neck and tugged her hair. Moans of arousal drove him crazy.

He needed to be closer, to taste deeper. Her sweet breath urged him forward. Rafael lifted Victoria to press her against a wall. That was better. He could grind their bodies without constraint, without mercy.

“When you want to stop you’ll have to say it,” Rafael uttered through the fog of lust. “Even if stopping is the last thing I want to do, I will.” He managed to pull away in order to hear her response.

She didn’t speak, but instead surged forward to entangle their tongues. The dress gaped open, releasing the creamy orbs of her full breasts. God she was beautiful. Luminous and soft and pliant—taking his hungry kisses and greedy hands as if she wanted him as much as he needed her.

He pulled back long enough to let the dress fall to her feet and then pulled her body tight again, grabbing her full bottom to angle himself deeper against her wet heat. His tongue found a delicious path down her neck, over a perfumed collarbone, and at the top of those tempting breasts. He was about to capture a puckered nipple in his hungry mouth when he felt it. Resting between her ample bottom cheeks, he grazed the fabric. Not even a thong but a fucking g-string. At the moment, the discovery was sexier than nakedness.

Rafael was undone. He pulled away from her kisses because he had to see. Their foreheads resting against each other, labored breaths mingling, Rafael looked down and groaned at the sight of a strip of black lace covering her mound held up by flimsy straps.

“You wanted to know what’s in this brain of mine, did you not?” He growled the question.

She nodded. His eyes drew downward, mesmerized by the bulk in his pants grazing the scant cloth he wanted to rip off.

“Yes. Don’t hold back. I want to know what you’re thinking.”

Gruff desperation left his lips as he pulled the g-string and let it slap sharply between her cheeks. “I’m thinking of you putting this on tonight before I came upstairs. How it slid up your legs and nestled against your sweet pussy. Do you think that was very nice, Tori? To have your wet cunt rub against it when it should be my face between these thighs? Answer me.”

Her mouth gaped open for a second, but his angel recovered quickly. “No, it isn’t very nice,” she mumbled. Her brown eyes were so heavily lidded she looked dazed.

“I think you should be punished,” he stated as his hand travelled between them. “Do you want to be punished?” Rafael’s fingers rubbed the edge of her silky folds. “Here?” He offered a firm tap on her cunt with three stiff fingers.

The sharp inhale and excited moans told him what he needed to know. She wiggled for more but he swirled his fingers instead, spreading her juices languidly. And then he did it again, tapped her slickness three times.

“More. Dammit, Rafael. *More.*”

At her insistence, he tilted his hand to deliver a series of tight spansks against her pussy. A steady rhythm as she bucked and moaned, offering herself up with each contact. Increasing his speed, Rafael offered fleeting yet relentless pressure against her clit. Her nails scraped up and down his neck as her hips surged to meet his hand.

When her grip clawed on his shoulders, threatening to tear his shirt, he plunged his fingers into her channel, curling them up and pressing his palm against her swollen clit.

Her cry of ecstasy filled the room and Rafael knew it was now the soundtrack to his every erotic dream.

Chapter 13

TORI

The orgasm that stormed through her body left her limp and dizzy. She had never experienced anything so...so...

It took her a moment to realize Rafael was carrying her across the bedroom to place her on the bed. From that vantage point, Tori looked up at the man whose punishment felt like being worshipped. She took her fill of his wide shoulders, shapely chest, and the impressive bulge between thick thighs.

“Why am I the only one naked?” she whined.

Rafael came closer, kneeling between her legs. His warm chuckle travelled through her spine, intensifying her shivers of sensual awareness. “Patience, *mon ange*. I’m far from done punishing you.”

“If that’s what you mean by punishment, by all means, continue.” Her voice was steady but a desperate refrain coursed through Tori: *Please don’t stop. Never stop.*

As if he read her thoughts, Rafael’s dark smirk filled her vision. “You’ve chosen an excellent time to cooperate.” He moved deeper between her legs, forcing her knees open to accommodate his bulky shoulders. “Perhaps it is time for your reward.”

At that, Rafael trailed fervent kisses along her hip, following the path of the g-string. She had bought it in the

same boutique as her too-tight dress. Two impulsive purchases she couldn't regret.

He removed her scant underwear. "I'm keeping this."

"Wh-why?"

"It's *my* reward," he grunted before delving into her throbbing folds. And wow, he *delved*. With slow, slick passes of his tongue, Rafael made their contact the center of Tori's entire universe. There was nothing except the press of his lips, the titillation of his tongue, the vibration that travelled into her body as he moaned and sighed against her wet channel.

"Rafael, Rafael," she chanted.

"I'm here, angel." His reply was somehow both shaky and smug. And then he paused before asking, "Are you alright, Tori?"

"I'm so good," she gushed, too enraptured to be embarrassed by how much he affected her. "And...and you?"

"Suffering every second my cock isn't buried in you, thank you for asking."

Tori had to smile because everything about the night was unexpectedly thrilling yet, somehow, inevitable too. He was going to be gentle and indulgent, crass and demanding. Rafael would surprise her yet give her exactly what she always needed. That was her last thought before he gripped her ass hard and lifted her apex to his searching tongue.

"Yes. Yes. Yes." Her chants interspersed with helpless moans. *Please don't stop. Never stop.* She didn't have to say it because, apparently, he had no intention of coming up for air.

Something about witnessing his ravenous desire for her broke through all of Tori's reservations. She let her calves fall heavy on his impossibly wide shoulders and writhed her hips to the rhythm of his torrid kisses. The relentless strikes of his tongue quickened, her body wildly chasing more of his heat, more of his pressure. Then it happened, the shift from achingly tight sensitivity to a blooming, expansive pleasure. Her climax pulsed in strong spasms down her back and then clenched her

deepest muscles till she was nothing but a light-headed, gasping mess.

When her pleasure abated long enough to understand that her hands had been roughly gripping Rafael's hair, Tori tenderly rubbed her fingers on his shoulders. Then, she gripped his shirt and pulled, urging him to face level. He allowed himself to be guided upward but didn't fall over her body like she wanted.

Planked on his elbows, Rafael gave her gentle kisses on her nose, the side of her mouth, her jawline. It was confusing because she wanted to nestle into his coddling affection while also raging at its insufficiency.

"What happened to suffering every second you're not, you know, in me." She couldn't believe the words left her mouth but this is what she'd been reduced to. A blundering beggar of anything and everything Rafael had to offer.

"I, um, I didn't bring any protection. I had no idea we would..."

"Oh," she managed, her disappointment coming out of her in waves.

And then brilliance.

She pushed him on his back and straddled his solid hips, intrigued by the ridge that strained his pants.

"I wonder if the famous chef tastes as good as he looks." She crawled lower, all the while watching his clenched jaw slacken at the implication.

He ran his hands through her hair. "You don't need to—"

The steady sound of the zipper, the heat that emanated from Rafael's rigid thickness, and his helpless groans overtook her senses. Tori tugged down pants and boxers, wrapping her fist around his shaft and tasting the bud of moisture at its tip.

"I want to. I want to choke on this long cock. And I want you to watch me choke as I make you come." *Holy hell, who was talking right now?* Tori couldn't believe she said those

words out loud. Yet something about Rafael's licentious orders, his frank authority, urged her on.

As soon as his rounded tip filled her mouth, she stopped holding back. Tori wrapped around his manhood, stretching more than ever and sucking with abandon. The aroma of his soap mixed with the earthy fragrance uniquely his. She couldn't get enough.

"*Mon ange*, slow down," he ground out. "I don't want this to end quickly. It's too good."

She smiled up after a slow, languid swirl of her tongue up the column that, unbelievably, had gotten larger and harder. Fondling his heavy balls, she licked and sucked at the top half, teasing him a bit. He growled through panting breaths.

"That's it, just like that. Look at your beautiful mouth around my cock. It's too pretty, Tori. It's too fucking pretty I want to ruin it by shoving deep. Will you let me, *mon ange*? Will you let me wreck that pretty mouth?"

"Yes," she managed to exhale as her rhythm intensified and her arousal sharpened. "Ruin me already."

He jerked his hips up, his fingers in her hair holding her head steady. He fucked her mouth, somehow riding her but from beneath. This impossibly sexy man controlling even what *she* did to *him*. Halfway at first and then deeper, every thrust knocking against the back of her throat. Her eyes watered and her breathing struggled, but her discomfort was nothing compared to the thrill of Rafael's rapture.

"It was torture to watch you suck the chocolate off your fingers today." He spoke in gritty, labored spurts. "Making me crazy every time I saw that pink tongue. Turning me into a madman when I imagined my cock just like this. Fucking your face. Ruining your too-pretty mouth."

Thick and scorching in her mouth, growing impossibly thicker, he filled her with his words, his grunts, his passion. Pleasing him and surrendering to the moment made her feel alive and empowered. She *wanted* to be wrecked.

He was as deep as she could take him. Rafael's hips pumped upward and Tori felt the inevitable explosion on her tongue before it hit her throat. Throbbing in her mouth, his dick filled all of her senses, his roar invaded the room. She kept up as much as she could, but it was impossible. He was just so big, so intense, so *much*.

She pulled back as they both panted through the aftermath of his explosion. Her hand on his torso, Tori felt his abdominal muscles clench when he began to sit up. Rafael ran his palm down her back before flipping her over. Pressed into the mattress, she accepted his weight while Rafael rubbed his thumb over her lower lip.

“Was I too rough, Tori? I shouldn't have.”

“I wanted you to.” His regret was unacceptable. “You were perfect rough.”

Rafael exhaled and shook his head. “How are you the most determined, defiant woman *and* the sweetest, sexiest vixen, Tori. Explain.” She heard the amusement beneath the comment and clung to it. Because wasn't he right, after all?

She didn't back down to challenges in her everyday life. Yet, sexually, she recognized her need to submit. It was surrender enabled by consent. Binding her body yet freeing her sensuality. Degrading her with words while letting her fantasies soar. Tori wanted to nestle against him as she let her thoughts roam. But suddenly, he groaned and jumped out of bed.

“Rafael, what's wrong?” she called to his back as he retreated into the bathroom. She heard water run and then nothing. Worry flooded her veins. “Are you hurt? Do you need my help—”

“No!” he barked. “Tori, I...No. Just no. Leave me alone, please. I'll be fine in a few minutes.” His gruffness sounded like begging and scorning combined.

She huffed away. Stubborn man. How could he dismiss her when all she wanted to do was help? She was great at helping! Ask her sisters whose lives intertwined with hers although

they were spread across the country. Ask her work team and her good friends. Fuck, ask James, her ex-husband, who very much depended on her helpfulness. The jerk turned her goodwill bitter by forcing *his* needs into the center of *her* life.

The thought sobered Tori up. Having James and Rafael in the same train of thought was singularly upsetting. She shut it down immediately and focused on finding clothes that were neither too tight nor too frumpy. She settled on the least-wrinkled summer dress.

Eventually, he came out fully clothed and infuriatingly poised. Her mind stuttered because she was still roiling in the aftermath of having swallowed what felt like a pint of this man's cum. Meanwhile, Rafael stood there with his shirt tucked into immaculate slacks. She realized he had never even undressed. She was buck naked and writhing in bed while he stayed in control of his faculties and of the situation. Somehow, Rafael appearing unaffected stung more than any rough demands he made of her body.

Tori was confused and embarrassed. Which is why she refused to be anything but pleasant.

“Where shall we grab dinner, Chef?”

Chapter 14

RAFAEL

He woke in his bed the next morning with a dream of his angel moaning her pleasure and pumping his cock. Lurid and perfect and immensely frustrating, every moment thinking about Tori was now laced with a truth he couldn't deny. He wanted her but couldn't, *shouldn't* have her.

Last night was too much. It scorched his nerves. Confused his senses. It was dangerous to continue, to indulge in the deep, aching desire to hold and to be held. By her.

He didn't last two minutes in an embrace before the adrenaline singed through his medication and seized his right limb. He barely made it into the bathroom before the contortions began. He had sunk his teeth into his knuckles to keep from whimpering like a wounded animal. Because that's what he was. A creature unworthy of his angel.

When last night's attack passed, he had shored up his control to face Victoria's ire. She had sounded insulted when he rejected her assistance. But when he approached, she was the picture of nonchalance. The casualness with which she ignored his embarrassing episode and launched straight to dinner plans left him disoriented. Discreetly, he took his medication and hoped the worst had passed.

The rest of the evening with Victoria was pleasant. So much so he wasn't sure if he'd imagined the heat of their

passion. Because whatever happened in bed did not continue outside the apartment. They didn't touch while they walked. They chose dinner at a casual bistro instead of a romantic restaurant. She sat across from him.

Still, he found himself riveted by the stories of her travels. He talked about his garden in Le Vésinet which was rare, even with old friends. Rafael had to admit he enjoyed himself. He had forgotten the contentment of being with a woman easy to talk to, whose opinions were confident without being conceited.

He was also made more conscious of his own condescending tendencies. He liked that she made him aware of them. Too many people tiptoed around Rafael, increasing rather than appeasing his irritation.

Waking up that morning and thinking of his residence outside of Paris, he decided he must return home for the rest of the weekend. He needed, more than anything, the comfort of familiar environments in which he didn't have to hide from his own limitations. He no longer feared the pain. Rafael *managed* pain. But exerting that effort in front of people? No one had to witness his struggle.

Also, an hour train ride separating Paris from Le Vésinet ensured he wouldn't accidentally-on-purpose stroll into Victoria's neighborhood.

His musings were interrupted by a sharp ring. He tried not to be disappointed to see that it was Frederick instead of...

"*Salut,*" he answered before finishing his thought.

"*Helena m'a dit que tu venais ce soir. C'est merveilleux!*" The birthday boy imparted the false news that Rafael was attending that night's party. Helena's fault.

"*Non, je ne serai pas la,*" he corrected before continuing in French, "Sorry to miss the celebration, my friend, but Helena is mistaken."

"That's unfortunate," Frederick mused. "I hope she's not wrong about Victoria coming, however."

"Victoria?" *His* Victoria?

“Your student! You know Helena. When she learned the lovely woman was alone in the city, she gave her the details tonight. I hope she makes it.”

A growl accompanied Rafael’s words as he pushed past gritted teeth. “Send me the information again.”

Frederick’s snicker would have infuriated Rafael had he heard it.

In the middle of Montmartre, at the foot of Sacré-Cœur Basilica, the restaurant *Incendie du Château* was closed but full. That is, closed to the public but filled to capacity with the social elite of Paris’s culinary scene. After the usual greetings and handshakes and air kisses, Rafael settled on an uncomfortable bar stool as far from the music as possible. Facing the front door, he waited.

He called Tori that afternoon, thinking to chat about the evening’s event and maybe offer to share a ride with her. She hadn’t answered her phone and he hadn’t left a message. It was normal for him to call, right? After all, she was *his* student.

And your angel, the devil on his shoulder prodded. *Mon ange*.

Then, Victoria Espinoza entered wearing *the* black dress. For a stupid moment, Rafael’s brain wondered: *is it closed at the back?!*

When she hugged Helena by the door, he confirmed with relief that the dress was zipped up. She must have exchanged it for the right size. The perfect size to hug her curves, skim her thighs, and cradle her full breasts.

Another stupid thought: why didn’t he bury his head between her tits last night? *Because your head was between her legs*, the devil on his shoulder reminded him. His erection reached painful proportions.

It was agony, watching Victoria draw the attention of everyone in the restaurant. Curiosity for the American? Admiration for the woman? Lust? The hors d'oeuvres he tasted earlier churned in his stomach.

He gripped his sparkling water when Frederick led her into a throng of people. More than one of the men pulled her too close while kissing her cheeks, three times as was French custom. A ridiculous and unnecessary convention, he now realized.

He didn't even remember launching himself at her direction. It wasn't until he captured a whiff of her honeyed aroma that Rafael realized he was hovering.

"Hi, Chef!" she said cheerily. When he leaned over to kiss her cheeks, a live current sizzled between them. He placed his hands on her hips. He craved to haul her against his chest. *Show these bastards who she belongs to*, the devil prodded. *Mon. Ange.*

"You look beautiful," he said. "I'm glad you could make it."

"You too. I mean you look beautiful, um, great as well," she stammered with a baffled expression. "I was under the impression you were heading home today."

"He was, until he found out you were coming!" Helena's slurred drivel carried over the sound of chatter. That drew the attention of everyone in their circle.

"I needed to prepare the kitchen before the final week of our course. Might as well be here." No one bought the lame lie, least of all the intelligent woman wrapped in a black dress.

Graciously, she let it go and changed the subject. "It has been such a wonderful experience. My understanding is that it is unusual to have so many guest chefs?"

"Why haven't you asked me to come to do a wine tasting, Rafael?" The food critic and wine connoisseur, Marcus Sol, complained. "We can organize pairings and—"

"Next time," Rafael interrupted because he didn't have time for the man's bullshit. In fact, Marcus had declined

Patrice's invitation when they finalized the rushed arrangements. There was no doubt as to why Marcus was suddenly interested in showing off his expertise.

“In that case, I'll have to prepare a private demonstration tonight for Mademoiselle Victoria.” The asshole had the nerve to cradle her elbow and urge her to a nearby table. “Will you join me?”

Victoria looked surprised, her flushed cheeks radiant despite the dimly lit room. Her eyes flashed towards Rafael and to his everlasting shame, he shrugged. The disappointment on her face was like a punch in the gut. Meanwhile, Marcus had pulled back a chair and called a server in one smooth, sweeping gesture. Rafael realized that the only thing worse than *not* spending the night with her was watching her spend it with someone else.

Forcing a tight smile to go with his curt nod, Rafael retreated to the bar. The rare times he drank alcohol, it was never in public. Tonight, he would.

Chapter 15

TORI

Her heart dropped in disappointment when Rafael walked away.

She didn't take his call today because she didn't think she could be casual on the phone. Her body felt raw from the memory of his touch. Hearing his voice on the phone would have broken down her walls. She couldn't be sure she wouldn't beg him to come over. After sending him to pick up condoms.

Tori looked around the elegant restaurant with its tastefully paneled walls and sparkling chandeliers. Marcus picked a table smack in the middle of the establishment, giving her a comprehensive view of the jazz ensemble on one end and the bar on the other. Where Rafael was headed.

She willed herself not to care. If he would rather be with his friends than with her, who could blame him? They all gushed at every word he said. Each step towards his destination was impeded by one guest after another giving him a hug. More than one woman pressed herself against his solid frame. Everyone was in their element, moving through the sophisticated atmosphere as if it was their birthright. And perhaps it was.

She, on the other hand, struggled to register Marcus's lecture on wine regions and cherry tints and summer

undertones. *Taste this, savor that, sip slowly,* went the sommelier. Tori needed something to settle her nerves so she tasted alright. And savored and sipped some more.

She conquered her nerves but lost a different kind of battle. The lies she told herself refused to hold up.

She did *not* want Rafael to look at her like he did last night. What a terrible idea to approach him at the bar and slip between his legs, her arms around his neck. Tori was *not* longing to taste his lips. It did *not* occur to her to massage his hand under the excuse of providing comfort. There was absolutely zero—*less than zero*—yearning to touch him, smell him, feel him.

Lies, lies, lies.

“Let’s dance,” she blurted out to Marcus, refusing to give in to the magnetic pull of Rafael across the room.

A wolfish grin accompanied the man’s practiced movements. She allowed herself to be led farther away from Rafael. Marcus inched closer when they approached the impromptu dance floor where a handful of couples swayed. The moment the man wrapped his arm around her back, Tori stiffened. Because this wasn’t the arm she wanted, or the body she craved, or the man she belonged to. *Wait, what?!*

Alcohol shoved reason aside and made room for foolish thoughts. Foolishness that masqueraded as truth slammed into her, blurring her vision but sharpening her sense of the situation. *Only Rafael could make this right.*

It took all of her power to resist seeking him out, calling his name, and running into his arms. His dominating certainty and crude demands, his undeniable power and complete attention. She wanted all of it. She wanted him to Make. This. Right.

Where are you, dammit? How can you easily turn away when you should claim me? Take me away and call me your angel.

A sultrier song began and Marcus pulled her closer. She tried to find pleasure in his heat. He was gently holding her hip

but their chests began the grazing that awakened two people to each other. Yet it was the memory of Rafael that made her nipples harden.

How could Rafael possess Tori so completely last night and watch another man hold her? And she just *knew* Rafael was watching. Fine, let him watch.

Marcus's breath fell on her neck, the hand on her hip moving languidly. It would have been so easy to melt into a night of dancing and drinking in Paris. She closed her eyes and tried to go through the motions. Tried not to obsess about how quickly Rafael could go from searing heat to cold indifference.

Moving distractedly, Tori recalled all the moments that Rafael had left her feeling confused and disappointed: when the chef claimed not to recognize her, when he reprimanded her in class, when he shut her out last night. And tonight, when he turned his back. *It was so easy for him to turn his back.*

But then she thought about Rafael dancing with another woman, the way she was dancing now, and something in her screamed: *Cheating! This was cheating!* She pushed Marcus's chest abruptly to extricate herself from his grasp.

"I'm sorry, I forgot I need to, um, make a call."

The man looked surprised but shrugged good naturedly. "It was a pleasure, Victoria. Come find me later, if you are not busy."

"I will," she answered politely.

Marcus's eyes flicked over her shoulder. She spun around knowing what she would find. Rafael.

"She'll be busy," the man announced, dismissing Marcus with a glance while glaring at her. Like a scorned god, Rafael looked down, full of authority and judgment. Fireworks awoke under Tori's skin at the sight of his anger. Rafael's neck muscles were strained, his nostrils flared, and his lips pressed in a hard line. He was angry and it was fucking hot.

So was her temper. She prepared to launch into all of the ways he had no right to speak for her. In fact, she was so mad, she was even angry about the fact that she *imagined* him with

another woman. She took a deep breath, ready to unload her wrath, but then his features changed. There were traces of exasperation that matched hers. Yet more than anything, Rafael looked miserable. Pained.

“Are you OK? Are you hurting?” She couldn’t help it. If he was feeling the onrush of his illness, she needed to know.

“Yes, *mon ange*. But not because of my limbs. It is everything else that hurts.”

Hope surged. Did he feel it too? The sensation that only being together mattered. That everything about the night was wrong and only his arms around her would make things right. It was exhilarating. And terrifying, too.

Rafael rasped against her ear. “Maybe I don’t have the right to take you in my arms, especially since I foolishly walked away from the only person I want to be with tonight. But will you? Will you dance with me, Tori?”

“I—I don’t know.” The statement was a placeholder for composure. If she didn’t catch her breath, she might actually swoon.

“I want you to dance with me and only me.”

“Then why did you leave? Why do you always leave, Rafael?”

“I thought it was what you wanted.”

“For a brilliant man, you are occasionally very stupid,” she blurted out.

“Is that a yes?”

At the same time, they stepped into each other’s space. His arms wrapped around her and she let her chest graze over his torso. A moment of suspended anticipation before he bunched her dress in his grip and pulled her body against his. Hips grinding, they swayed to the edges of the floor, moving towards a darkened corner.

“What took you so long?” she asked, breathlessly.

He groaned while tightening his grip up her back, nestling a palm at her nape and tilting her lips closer to his. His thick cock pressed against her abdomen. Her breasts felt so heavy and achy and supple, the thought of his lips around her nipple made her eyes roll back. Enthralled by the muscles under her fingertips and the delicious heat of his breath, Tori mumbled, “I thought you were going to let me dance with every man in this room before you came over.”

He grunted and bit her neck. Brutal and swift. “I barely made it through one song, Tori. I wouldn’t have been able to take another man’s hands on you.”

She didn’t realize she’d been holding her breath until she exhaled relief. His anguish, his jealousy, even his harshness, were a salve. God help her, she wanted all of it.

“I didn’t want to dance with anyone else, Rafael. But I did, didn’t I?” She was playing with fire and it felt amazing. “That wasn’t very nice. To be touched by another man. Will I be punished for it?”

The hand at her nape lifted to grab her hair. Massaging at first, Rafael tugged. The pain wasn’t acute but it was *there*. Making her feel desired and conquered. She closed her eyes and sighed just as he smoothed out her ruffled hair.

“If you let me, I’d fucking punish you right here and now, in front of everyone. Hike your sexy legs around me and claim your hot body. I’d pin you to the wall with my cock, Tori. And I’d make you say my name, loud and clear, so everyone knows you’re mine.”

Her heart was a gong, pumping hot, noisy blood to her head. “M-might not be very, um, very not good idea. Birthday. Your friends, and...” She was a mumbling mess of delirious hormones.

“I’m taking you with me and putting you on your knees tonight.” Rafael spoke with a strained voice. But she heard his pleasure, too. His satisfaction at turning her into a puddle of wet need. “First you’ll have to give me a minute. My cock is goddamn indecent, Tori. What are you going to do about it?”

She rubbed her stomach against his ridge and chuckled. “Maybe not this?”

He squeezed her ass hard and licked her ear. “Vixen,” he hissed. “Fuck waiting. Let’s use the back door.”

Chapter 16

RAFAEL

They walked into the alley, hand in hand. He expected the cooler outdoor air to tamp his arousal. It didn't. His body remained hard and heavy. He needed her tonight; nothing else mattered. But her apartment was too far and Inez's place was too...Inez.

Looking down the familiar streets, he wove their entwined bodies through the weekend crowd. He stopped in front of *Hotel Artiste* and looked at Victoria, whose eyes offered a glimmer of excitement and whose nod was all the permission he needed. He led her into the building and secured a suite, sidestepping the concierge's friendly chatter.

Finally, they were alone. The spacious room was illuminated by streetlights and by the night sky's reflection on glass surfaces.

"I'd like to use the bathroom."

"Of course. Would you like some more wine? I can call room service."

"But you don't drink," she said concernedly.

"True. There's some sparkling water and soda in the bar but we can order a Beaujolais, perhaps?"

"Well, actually..."

“Victoria Espinoza, would you like me to order dinner for us? I don’t think Marcus stopped talking long enough for you to have a bite.”

“You don’t mind?”

He stepped closer and gave her a gentle kiss. “I want to feed you all night. We can start with food.” Feeling brazen, he smacked her lush backside and said, “Do what you need to do. I’ll order.”

And he did. He wasn’t sure what she wanted, but Rafael was familiar with the hotel’s restaurant and felt comfortable ordering a little of everything. Filet mignon, seared chicken, and lemon butter cod. And crepes for dessert.

When she came out, he handed her a Perrier before opening the balcony’s glass doors. The patio was tiny but the view was expansive. The basilica shone like a beacon, and the sounds of the bustling city rose with the evening breeze.

“That’s incredible,” she said. “Do you realize you live in one of the best cities in the world?”

“Well, officially, my home is elsewhere. But yes, there are nights when Paris is stunning. Though I suspect that has more to do with being with you than with being in the city.”

He watched her take a sip from the bottle. They sat quietly as he offered his hand. “Your hands are cold,” he observed.

“I’m, um, I’m nervous.”

His gut twisted. “Victoria, nothing needs to happen tonight. I’m just happy to have you for myself, selfish bastard that I am. We can eat and sleep or leave. Anything you want. Please don’t be nervous about, well, about making love. I don’t expect anything.”

He watched her profile against the city’s glare, her features catching stray reflections, her lips shimmering after she licked them anxiously. She sighed and finally squared her body with his.

“I’m not nervous about being with you, Rafael. I’m nervous about *after*. I didn’t like how I felt yesterday when

you shut me out. And as attracted as I am to you, I don't think I want to feel that way again. I'm sorry, but if you think I'm only good for *that*, you know, I'm not sure what the point is. Well...that's not entirely true. The point is sexual satisfaction I guess, but—”

He swooped her in his arms and deposited her on his lap. While in the cradle of his arms, Rafael trapped her shimmering lips in a passionate kiss.

“I'm sorry about yesterday. I don't know how to be this way with you. For most of my illness, I've managed things alone. I can't stand myself when the attack comes, I can't imagine anyone wanting to be around me.”

He didn't add that he knew for a fact people didn't want to be around him when he was unwell. History and all that.

“I understand. And I don't know how to help unless you tell me. *If* that's what you want,” she uttered. “It's OK if you don't. I just wish, I don't know, you would trust me a little. Or at least don't completely shut me out. All of a sudden, we're strangers. I can't stand it.”

“For you, I will try not to be so...distant, yes?”

She smiled just as room service knocked. He opened the door and enjoyed her gasps of delight as plate after plate was revealed. The evening opened up like a present he never expected. He looked forward to feeding her, kissing her, holding her. It was more than enough to *be* with her.

They feasted. Passed plates across the small bistro table. She let him feed her perfect bites. That pink tongue peeking out enticed him. Her moans of bliss when the crepe's smooth sweetness melted into her mouth travelled straight to his cock.

“Don't you want any of this?” she asked, offering him dessert.

Rafael shook his head. “I don't think I'll ever have to eat another crepe in my life, to be honest. Though that chocolate is making me think of your ganache. Which is better than anything we had tonight, by the way.”

Her eyes widened. “I don’t think you could have said anything sexier than that compliment.”

Laughing, he gave in to his newest obsession. “I think lathering this chocolate on your nipples and licking it off is sexier but, sure, if you say so.”

Her shock registered in glistening eyes. “Chef Rafael, are you suggesting a health code violation?”

“Only if you want me to.”

“I do. Dammit, I really do,” she sighed, standing to walk between his legs, her breasts aligned with his mouth.

“I love this dress, but I think I preferred the smaller one yesterday.”

“Shut up,” she cooed. “What were you saying about chocolate?” She unzipped the black garment and it pooled at her feet. Her skin was creamy smooth, her areola puckered and dusty pink. Rafael relished her breasts filling his hands. Her back arched, inviting him to do more.

He placed a finger in the swirl of chocolate and then lathered it on one nipple, fascinated by her shallow pants. Then he licked it, pressed his tongue against flawless silk. His lips sucked and nibbled sweet skin and pert arousal. He did it to the other side. Taking his time to draw the chocolate along a wider circle, painting the path his tongue was about to take. He wrapped his lips around her perfect breast before grazing his teeth at its sensitive tip.

Victoria’s head splayed back at the intensity. Whining gasps of bliss escaped her lips. By now, Rafael’s erection had broken through the top of his boxers, rubbing painfully against his pants. He remembered her mouth around his cock and almost lost all control.

“On the bed,” he ordered.

“Yes, Chef,” she cooed and turned around. Her ass swayed as he gripped his hardness. She went on her knees and crawled to the middle of the bed.

He didn't hold back his growl of need at the sight of her looking over her shoulder. "We'll need a safe word, Tori. One gasp of that word and I'll stop. Till then, you need to know I'll do as much with you as you'll let me. Do you understand?"

She whined and wiggled. "How about...red?"

"Red," he repeated firmly. "If you say red at any time, *any time at all*, we will stop. Promise me that you'll use it."

"I-I promise," she said, turning around to show him her serious expression. "I need to see you naked, Rafael. I've been dreaming about it all day."

"I've been dreaming of you naked all *week*," he commented.

Full nakedness in front of another person might never be in Rafael's future. When he left the house, he always wore a compression sleeve on his right arm, ostensibly for blood circulation. Truth was, he felt better when his wounds had an extra layer of protection. Although his skin graft was considered successful, the gashes and dips of his right forearm made for an ugly sight.

He undid his shirt and watched her eyes glaze over. "You're so...you're so built," she said. She sprung up so her hands could splay over his chest. "How are you this hot?" Her hands roamed over his shoulders, over biceps, and up again before going down the center of his body, strumming fingers over his abs. Fitness was a crucial part of his pain management for a while now.

"What is this?" She grazed his compression sleeve.

"Before I fully managed my medication and implemented exercise, I had much harsher and more sporadic nerve attacks. This is the result of my limbs failing just as I lifted a pot of boiling sugar. I needed skin grafts for the burns."

"Oh my god, Rafael! This is why you always wear long sleeves. I'm sorry that I've been so insensitive about it."

"You've never been insensitive. Unrelentingly frank, yes, but insensitive, never. You had no way of knowing."

She flung her body forward, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and burying her flushed face in his neck.

“Does that hurt too, then?” she asked.

“Not at all. Not even close to how much my dick hurts at the moment.”

“I can do something about that,” his angel promised. And he had every intention of holding her to that promise.

Chapter 17

TORI

She unfastened his belt and worked the zipper, her hand lovingly caressing Rafael's ridge. Tori tugged his pants and boxers down. Naked but for his forearm sleeve, Rafael crawled over her, pushing her on her back and rubbing his hardness against the inside of her thigh.

Both groaned as he rocked over her. "Condom. Please tell me you have condoms," she pleaded.

She felt him push away and scramble with his pants before retrieving the foil wrapper. *Yes, yes, yes.* Her brain was on repeat before it completely shut down. He was sheathed over Tori, his mouth just above hers. And then it started, the inevitable joining of lips and limbs.

Brazened by his blistering kiss, she grabbed his ass. It was hard with muscle. Rubbing that perfect globe, she sank in her nails. His moans of approval were satisfying in ways she couldn't describe. All the while, they were grinding and crashing.

Please don't stop. Never stop.

"I won't, *mon ange*. Not unless you say red." She must have said that out loud. Tori should be embarrassed about her blatant, rampant lust but she wasn't. Not even a little.

"So you thought about me naked all day." It wasn't a question; it was a declaration. "When you think about me

naked, what am I doing to you, Tori?”

His tongue found its way to her neck, the top of her breasts, back to her mouth. When they came up for air, she panted her response. “Sometimes, when we’re in the kitchen lab, I think about you bending me over and using one of the spatulas to...to...”

“To spank you, Tori? Do I turn this lush ass red and raw?”

“Yes. God, yes.”

“And then? What else do I do?”

“My hands, like when you held them in your office.”

He pushed her hands over her head and pinned them with a heavy grip. “Like this?”

She nodded because it felt so good to wiggle and meowl and yet be grounded by the force of his desire. “Yes, yes, I love it just like that.” Rafael’s cock, thick and rigid, provided relentless pressure between them.

“It’s time,” he rasped from the valley between her breasts. “It’s time to take me, Tori. You’re going to love *that* most of all.” He crested her slick entrance and plunged.

At the first push, her walls vibrated and stretched against his deep friction. Her hands were still pinned over her head. The depths of her body thoroughly, deliciously dominated. They rocked steadily. She met each of his powerful thrusts. Meanwhile, the room was filled with the sounds of slapping skin and the unmistakable sucking of her wet channel gripping his bulk.

“Ah, fuck, it’s too good.” He sounded tortured. She opened her eyes to look at him. She could barely comprehend the sight. He was beautiful: lips swollen from kissing, eyes alight, and every muscle on his wide shoulders rippling with the effort to hold her down and fuck her hard. A knotted crease settled between his perfectly shaped brows. Somehow, the wrinkle made his handsomeness more intense, the flaw sharpening his splendor.

With every thrust, her body slid upward. Rafael placed a palm over her head, pulling her down to meet his plunges. That feeling of being crushed and plundered brought her to the edge.

“I’m so close, Rafael. I—” She detonated. Color flashed behind her eyes as she splintered into a million points of pleasure. All through her orgasm, Rafael cooed his praise.

“Your cunt takes me so good. Such a tight pussy. Need more,” he gritted. “Need to be deeper. From behind, *mon ange*.”

At that, he flipped her over. Rafael kissed down her back, licking up her spine and enhancing the aftershocks of her climax. He didn’t enter but his cock prodded and pulsed by her backside. Pushing her head to the pillow and lifting her ass, Rafael grunted his approval.

“I want you to feel me tomorrow, sore and aching.” He massaged her ass before pressing a finger into the tight, sensitive ring around her anus. “Will you take me here one day, my angel? Will you let me ruin you here, too?”

Panting, she said the first word that came to mind. “Yellow?”

He snickered and then smacked her ass before leaning over to fondle her slick folds. “Say you want my cock in your pussy.” he ordered roughly.

“I want you.”

Another smack, this time at the other ass cheek. “Beg for it.”

“I want your cock, Rafael. I *need* your cock in my pussy. Please. Oh god, please.”

With a wild grunt, he thrust into her. “I know you do. *Je sais que tu le sais*.” In both languages he declared his certainty that she needed him. And in both languages, he was right.

With rasping pants, Tori welcomed the intrusion. The steady beat of his body against hers, like a relentless drum with a volume that increased with every smack, Rafael built

her up again. Right at the edge of another orgasm, he changed his rhythm, swirling deeply. The intensity of the unfamiliar sensation made her grab the bed sheets off the bed. It was too much. It wasn't enough.

Please don't stop. Never stop.

“You think I'd let another man take you home tonight?” he hissed while continuing to grind her. “You think someone else could make you feel this good?” Spank, spank, spank.

“No...no one else.”

“That's why you need this cock so bad, isn't it? Because *you fucking know* I'll give you what you need. I've thought of nothing else, Tori. Nothing else but how good we would be together.” Spank, spank, spank.

He rode her hard, slamming into her body in a rough, erratic rhythm. Faster, so fast, so wildly fast it was as if he raced to claim her more and more with every plunge. Blood surged in forceful waves under her skin, his dominance awakening all her senses to the inevitable. She wanted to offer every inch of her body, every atom of her being, to him.

Rafael's powerful ride took her to another level. One plane of pleasure after another, higher and higher and higher until she let go.

With a roar of possessiveness, he joined her. Together, their bodies pulsed and shook through the most exquisite fall. At the tail end of the glorious climax, Rafael swooped her off her knees in order to grind their hips into the mattress and splay his body over her shuddering back. He bit her shoulder, forcing her to turn her head to the side. Their mouths joined in a searing kiss as the aftershocks of her orgasm rippled through her.

When her heart rate settled and her blurred vision refocused, Tori realized he had tucked her under a blanket before he left for the bathroom.

Dread sank in her stomach. Not again?! She couldn't express why it was important that he not shut her out. It simply

was crucial. He needed to trust her with his vulnerabilities in the same way she surrendered to his demands.

Before dread turned to panic, Rafael walked out of the bathroom with a hand towel.

“Lie back.”

She followed his order and, amazed, watched as he passed a warm, wet towel over her mound. “Are you good, Tori? Was I too rough?”

“You were perfect rough,” she eked out. “So perfect.” Her body cooled and she shivered. Rafael pulled her close, warming her neck and massaging her backside.

“I might not be able to hold you all night, *mon ange*. But I’ll try.”

His muted sincerity, less confident than his usual demands, shot straight to the center of her chest and squeezed. Nuzzling into his neck and kissing his jaw, Tori burrowed into his hold and entangled their legs.

“Hold me for as long as you can, Rafael,” she said sleepily. “And when you can’t, *I’ll hold you.*”

Chapter 18

RAFAEL

Hold me for as long as you can, Rafael. And when you can't, I'll hold you.

Her words echoed in his head as he breathed through the aches of the early morning. If he took his medication and performed his usual exercises, there was no need for his illness to take over. That was the key. The pain was always waiting at the edges, ready to attack, but he fought it with a relentless pain management routine.

Sometimes he won, but not always.

“You never take it off?” she said from the bed. He had been looking out of the patio doors, unaware of being watched. A flush of self-consciousness hit him and a small seizure worked up his arm. But he breathed through it before facing her.

“The compression sleeve helps a lot.”

“Are you well today? Are—”

“Stop,” he barked, unable to hold back his irritation. “I’d rather not do a detailed report of my condition, Tori. I’m well aware of how bad it is and would rather not explain myself every time I need to manage it.”

The hurt that flashed across her beautiful face humbled him.

“I’m sorry, Tori.” His voice was a mere glimpse of the deep regret in his heart. Sitting at the edge of the mattress, Rafael reached out to find her hand and clasp their fingers. “I know you are concerned. I will let you know if I need help.”

She nodded while blinking slowly. “You’re right, though. I’ve been told that I overstep. I realized that about myself.”

“Now hold on,” Rafael urged, “that’s not what I meant. I’m just a man with a gorgeous woman in his bed and would rather talk about her.”

Features softening somewhat, Victoria smiled. It wasn’t as open and gleeful as was her custom, but he would take it.

“Now, what should we order for breakfast?”

It was blissful. He could barely trust his luck but he would use the word because it fit. The second week of the course was turning out to be sheer bliss.

He had been staying in her apartment every night. Rafael only returned to Inez’s place to shower in the mornings. Then, he would go to the school where the first sight of Victoria Espinoza stirred him anew, as if he hadn’t just had her hours prior.

They didn’t announce their current circumstances. And he wasn’t the kind of man to grab her in front of everyone. But they didn’t hide their connection either. Sometimes, when he passed her workstation during class, he would allow himself an extra brush of their hands or a playful wink to make her blush. And whenever they found themselves alone, he kissed her as hard and hot as she would let him. Every day, he would wrap up at the school, meet her somewhere, eat in or eat out, and make love to her all night.

The more mundane aspects of the course proceeded much like the first week. All participants—including the guest lecturers—enjoyed the uniqueness of the class. He didn’t have

to cook in front of people yet still felt connected to the experience in a couple of ways. He didn't realize how much his years of cooking had accumulated an immense storehouse of practical tips that people seemed to appreciate. And random trivia, or what Patrice called "content," seemed to receive "positive comments" from "a diverse pool of subscribers." Whatever that meant.

Mostly, he enjoyed talking about his guests. Promoting their businesses. Highlighting their place in the Parisian culinary scene. Each one had been part of his journey at one time or another.

Even Marcus, with his pretentious airs, wiggled into the schedule at the tail end of the Friday session. He convinced Rafael, rightfully, that capping off the experience with a wine pairing event would be appropriate.

When the time came for the students to disperse, the hugs and good wishes gave way to some nostalgic tears. He shook everyone's hand because, well, he didn't do hugs. Rafael stayed at the edges of the kitchen lab and watched her. Everyone embraced and gushed over Victoria in ways that reflected only a fraction of his adoration.

They hadn't discussed what would happen after the course because part of him couldn't think past the perfect rhythm of that blissful week. They'd talk, but he was in no rush to face the inevitable end.

He caught only part of a conversation. "He hasn't brought you there? It's gorgeous. They used to entertain all the time." Marcus was chatting with Victoria while nursing the last of his wine. Most students had left but a few sat around, reluctant to leave.

"They?" Her voice was hitched, alerting Rafael to the questions ahead.

"Oh, I mean, um..." At a loss for words, Marcus deflected. "The Chablis was sublime, was it not? Such a delightful summer drink."

Glancing in Rafael's direction, Tori looked to have swallowed her questions. He hated that she turned timid. Without thinking, he reached over to hold her hand. Patrice's raised brow and the Swedish woman's giggle filtered into his consciousness. His primary attention, however, was focused on the woman whose hand was warm, soft, and *essential*.

"I need a minute with you," he said, pulling her along and not waiting for a reply.

In the pantry, he put his lips to her knuckles before saying, "Go ahead. Ask me."

"Ask you," she mimicked.

"What Marcus said, about my house. My ex-girlfriend Allison lived there. She hasn't for a long time."

"You don't have to explain yourself."

"I've had the most amazing week with you and refuse to end it with even a hint of uncertainty. My explanation is minuscule compared to how much joy you've brought me, Victoria Espinoza." At that, he captured her lips and swallowed her sigh. The lingering flavor of wine mixed with her natural sweetness.

Abruptly, she pushed him away. "About that. About this week, I mean. I'm scheduled to check out in a couple of days and was thinking of exploring outside the city. By the coast or the wine region—"

"Come back with me. Spend your last two weeks in France in my house. We can have day trips. Or overnight, if you wish. Whatever and wherever you want. I'm commissioned for another recipe book which will take up some of my time. But the work won't prevent me from joining you frequently." His voice turned husky. "And bedding you nightly."

"Really?"

"My angel, I want you with me till the very last second you have to leave." The sheer mention of her departure turned his stomach into knots. He rallied. "I was going to ask you tonight, but I don't want another minute of doubt. Stay with

me for the next two weeks. Let me take care of you like you've taken care of me in Paris."

"I didn't do that."

"Yes, you did. I entered this city with nothing but doubt and dread. Seeing Paris through your eyes, walking avenues with you by my side, making love to you. You did more than take care of me."

He wanted to say more. That she made him feel alive in ways he didn't think were possible. That life was more than just managing challenges or enduring the mundane. She made challenges feel small and the everyday details of life extraordinary.

She kissed him sweetly. "Thank you for the invitation, Rafael. But are you sure?"

How could she possibly doubt him? With only two weeks with her, of course he was greedy for every minute.

"Do I need to kidnap you, Tori?"

Her eyes sparkled with interest. "What would that entail, exactly?"

"I have a fairly long list of what that would entail," he teased. He loved their game in which her willingness to submit to him in the bedroom spurred thrilling fantasies. He thought about last night. The way her breasts bounced heavy when he tied her hands behind her back and ordered her to ride his face. Now he was as hard as a rod.

She smiled at his suggestive tone but her voice was serious when she spoke. "I'd love to spend the rest of my time with you, Rafael. That would be perfect."

Being the blissed-out idiot that he was, Rafael believed her. "*Oui, mon ange.* It will be perfect."

Unfortunately, when they both turned out to be wrong, neither saw it coming.

Chapter 19

TORI

As Tori packed her things before checking out of the rental, a stab of guilt slowed her down. She had been avoiding the text thread that connected her to her two best friends, who also happened to be her sisters. As things heated up with Rafael, she was hesitant to answer their demands for updates.

Something about admitting the intensity of her feelings, the surge of relief that he wanted her in his home, and the roiling emotions whenever they touched, something about *all of it* overwhelmed her in ways she couldn't explain to herself. Nevermind to those who knew her the most.

The last inquiry from Kat and Celina about her trip, Tori deflected the questions by asking about her favorite twin nephews—ok, her only twin nephews—Jerome and Jonas.

Celina: The boys are fine. Thanks for asking. Stop changing the subject and tell me what your plans are for the rest of the month. Now that the cooking school is done.

Katerina: Also, what's with that hot chef?

Tori: Actually, yeah, I've got some news.

It was uncharted territory to be the one asking for advice instead of the one giving it, typical oldest sister syndrome. Before she could text a follow up, her video call notification

pinged. A few clicks later, Celina and Kat's faces filled her phone.

"Holy shit, you look amazing!" Celina exclaimed.

"Thanks, I think?" she responded, taken aback. "Though I'm not sure how I feel about being told I was due for a makeover."

"You always look good, silly," her sister amended. "I mean you look rested and happy."

"Everyone needs a vacation makeover," Kat piped in.

"Sorry I haven't been, um, reachable."

"No need to be sorry! We're just happy for you. And besides, we get little snippets of you in that YouTube channel of your school. That head chef, though. He's intense." Kat's teasing tone filtered through.

"You've watched the channel?" Tori inquired. "I didn't know they recorded me. I thought it was just Rafael and his guests."

"Rafael is..." Celina started but didn't continue.

Now or never. "We're together," Tori blurted. "I mean, not together, *together*. At least, I don't think so. We haven't talked about it that way. But we're having, I guess, a fling?"

Kat burst from her chair and entertained them with her twisty celebration dance. "I knew it! You owe me five bucks, Celina!"

"Wait, you had a bet going?"

"For the record, I didn't bet against the affair," Celina clarified. "I just wasn't sure you would tell us at all since you held out for that long."

"Held out? It was just this week!"

"Exactly!" both sisters retorted and they all laughed. They were so close, they often checked in on each other every few days.

“There’s more,” Tori said. “I’m spending the next two weeks in his home outside of Paris. He invited me and I...I can’t imagine wanting to be anywhere else.” The words spilled out without her permission. She didn’t realize it was her deepest wish until she said it out loud. She didn’t want to be anywhere else. And it had nothing to do with being in his home, or in France, or on vacation. It was about being with him.

Her sisters were quiet for a moment. “That sounds like heaven,” Celina gushed. “And it also sounds a bit more serious than a fling. If you’re staying with him.”

Was it more serious than a fling? Her mind floated beyond the next two weeks. For the life of her, she couldn’t imagine where things would lead. But her sister could.

“Are you moving to France for him?!” Kat burst out.

“What? No! We’re spending time together while we can. That’s it.”

“Whew,” Kat said “We know what happened last time you moved for a man.”

“Kat!” Celina shrieked. “That’s too much.”

“Kat’s right, though,” Tori conceded. After James and her got engaged, Tori moved across the country for him. DC wasn’t her choice but his job as a political pundit required them to move. It didn’t seem like a big deal at the time, to move for your fiancé who you eventually married. But looking back? She realized that she placated his needs at the cost of never acknowledging her own. The old Tori accommodated too much and asked too little in return.

And yet, a surge of indignance crept up from her gut to her chest. The comparison wasn’t fair because Rafael was not James.

For one, Rafael never said anything about their future together. Never assumed anything of her. Most importantly, nothing about her time in Paris showed signs of selfishness on her lover’s part. Even in bed, despite their unconventional fantasies, Rafael always *asked*. That is, before he *ordered*. The

thought of his voice against her ear, demanding the most deliciously devious behavior, warmed her body from the inside. Because when it came to Rafael, even his demands were in tune with her needs, with her satisfaction.

Looking back, she could honestly say most of her failed marriage was dedicated to James's needs. James's satisfaction. She moved on from the divorce wiser and freer. And that's how she would approach this adventure.

"You're right that I've moved for a man before. This situation is far from the same thing. I learned my lesson and can smell out a grown brat a mile away. Rafael is nothing like James. This fling is like nothing I've ever had before. We're two adults having fun for as long as possible. Nothing more."

"If you say so," Celina offered before she finally moved on. "Now tell me about his place!"

"My understanding is that he decided to move away from the city and commute only when necessary." Tori didn't say more about the complicated details of his exile from Paris.

"Send us the address. Although, since his school is public knowledge, we know where to find him."

"Guys, I appreciate your concern but there's nothing to worry about. Being with Rafael is the most fun I've had in a long time, that's all."

"Is that why your eyes glow every time you say his name?" Celina teased.

"It does not!" Both her sisters rolled their eyes. "OK, maybe a little," Tori said somewhat bashfully. "But only for two more weeks."

It's not like she could leave her life behind. *Could she?* The question was moot. He had asked her to stay for the remainder of her vacation. No need to think past that.

As she watched the Eiffel Tower recede in the distance, Tori sat back in her seat. The train was as smooth and comfortable as a first-class cabin. Their section was occupied only by them and an elderly couple a few rows behind.

She relished the feeling of embarking on an adventure with Rafael. He might be returning home but this was all new to her. Her stomach filled with the butterflies of anticipation.

“Marcus said you live in a charming village but didn’t offer details. What should I expect?”

Sitting adjacent, Rafael looked down at her face affectionately. His green eyes caught the light from the window, making them sparkle. “Obviously, it’s a sordid lair of the most debauched proportions.”

A burst of laughter escaped her lips, scattering the nervous butterflies. His comment also awakened that prickling awareness at having him so close. “Promises, promises,” she teased back. “But seriously. This is your house and your routine. I don’t want to disrupt anything.”

He shook his head and squeezed her hand. “You should know by now, Tori, that you are the best possible disruption.”

She cuddled closer to him and inhaled his aroma of clean masculinity. “Exactly how long is this train ride?”

“About an hour,” he answered. “Although it will feel much longer if you keep rubbing your tits on my arm.” His voice was a whisper, but the words awoke her body.

Tori turned sideways to wrap her arm around his waist and drag a sweater over his lap. “If I do this, will the ride feel shorter or longer?” She rubbed her palm against his impressive arousal. Reflexively, his hips bucked up. She grabbed his shaft. Was it crazy that she was so eager to explore his body and offer her own? In the few weeks they spent together, she was more attuned to their mutual desires than she had ever thought possible with anyone.

“Definitely longer,” Rafael groaned in frustration. He nuzzled his nose into her hair and inhaled. Then, he bent his

head to drag his tongue and nip at her neck. God, she loved the feel of his teeth, the sense of being coveted.

“What a terrible travel companion I am,” she crooned, turning her head so their faces met. Her lips grazed his muscled jaw. “So disruptive. Making you suffer for an entire hour.” She moved her hand down his thigh and then scraped her nails up to the edge of his groin.

He grabbed her wrist before she found his bulging center. And then, using his other hand to keep the sweater in front of him, Rafael stood up and pulled her behind him. She had no choice but to follow, eager to be led into their next adventure. It was so hot when he took charge, Tori would follow him to any sordid lair, any day.

They walked down the hallway and found a vacant bathroom where he pulled her in, closed the door, and pressed her against it. Leave it to Rafael to turn a train ride into an erotic encounter. He was so close, she could see the fine spikes of his dark lashes.

“I promised myself I would wait till we got home, but you had other things in mind, didn’t you?” His low voice, when he mumbled against her ear, was rich and hypnotic.

“Did I?” she asked coyly, moving one leg along the outside of his calf and pressing her hips against his. “Tell me. What did I have in mind?”

When he smiled, she knew this was trouble. The best kind.

“I think you wanted to drive me crazy. So crazy I would splay you over my lap so it’s your round ass pressing against me, instead of that stray hand.” He grabbed her hips and moved against them in deep, languid circles. “And you wanted to get caught, perhaps.”

Thick blood surged up her face and she found it hard to breathe.

“There it is,” he said smugly. “My angel has a bit of the naughty devil in her, doesn’t she? Wanting everyone to see her sweet cunt impaled on my enormous cock. Needing to be

spanked right here.” He placed a hand between them, tapping three stiff fingers against her apex and setting her on fire.

“Rafael, I—” Her head rolled back when his spanking hand moved her underwear aside in order to stroke her wetness.

Working her clit between two fingers, he groaned into her ear. “You wanted to look at that scenic French countryside while I bent you over. Isn’t that right, Tori? You wanted to get pressed against the window. You wanted me to tilt this lush ass so I’d see all the way to your pink pussy.”

Tori felt lava collect around his fingers. His deep voice enveloped her senses. And then he plunged thick fingers into her channel and pressed her aching clit with his palm. “Then you’d take my hard dick. And I would ride you till you screamed for me to stop.” She exploded around his invasion, her back bucking against the door, her hair whipping against both their faces.

When she came down from her orgasm, Tori opened her eyes to find his gaze over her.

“I’ll never tire of seeing you come. You’re always beautiful, *mon ange*. But when you’re in bliss, it’s like watching an angel relish her fall from grace.”

Speechless, all she could do was kiss him. It was a tender joining of lips. She relished it. The harder he took her, the dirtier his words, the sweeter he cared for Tori after.

“Will you let me take care of you, Rafael? Am I allowed to touch your body, too?” She began the exciting descent of her fingers over his torso’s sculpted terrain.

“Uh-uh,” Rafael said with a grin as he stopped her progress. “Not yet.”

Her whine made him smile. “Why not?” she blurted.

Always unflappable even in the oddest situations—they were, after all, in a public bathroom of a moving train where he molded her body to his will—Rafael washed up and then helped her straighten her clothes.

“I have plans for us tonight. You will most definitely take care of me then.”

Chapter 20

RAFAEL

“How about this?” Victoria asked as she lifted a dark blue bowl. She was looking for a suitable platter while he cooked the *cassoulet*, a classic French stew.

Taking pictures of the dishes he cooked was her idea. He was experimenting with recipes to add to his cookbook. When he sent a few notes and images to his agent, the man wholeheartedly agreed that tracking the process as he prepared meals would help the production team tie everything together. Fine. It was all fine. Because the one thing that mattered to him was that he was cooking for someone he cared for.

He. Cooked. For. Her. Rafael had to slow down the thought because he didn't know when, in the last ten days, this little routine started. They would return from one of the small French towns she wanted to visit. He would cook and Tori would be the cheerful *sous chef*. When dinner was ready, she would carefully arrange the food pictures while he occasionally wrote down notes. He would consult them when ready to create the cookbook's manuscript.

“Yes, that would do,” he answered, focusing on the pot. It was at the crucial point of removing the bundled herbs while adding the beans and vegetables. “In about three minutes, before the beans overcook, it needs a splash of sherry.”

She put the bowl beside the stove, pecked him on the cheek, and smelled the pot. “Can I do the splash?” she asked eagerly.

“Of course. And it will be my turn to take a picture,” he announced. He lifted his camera and captured his angel pouring the liquid into the stew.

“Now take it out of the heat,” he instructed from behind his phone.

She nodded studiously and moved the heavy pot.

“Should I plate it now?”

“A chef tastes frequently. Give it a try first.”

Victoria took a teaspoon from a dresser and daintily lifted the steaming liquid to her lips. Rafael zoomed into her pretty mouth. That’s when it struck him. This video of her cooking was one of a handful of memories he would have of Victoria. His breath hitched as a vise of longing clutched his chest.

Still recording, Rafael managed to ask, “Well? What do you think?”

“The duck offers a lot of flavor. A lot of *weight*,” she said. “But the sherry lightens everything somehow. It’s amazing.”

She plated the dish and added a garnish of fresh herbs. Rafael had to stop the recording so she could take pictures of the dinner before they devoured it. He had to admit, Tori had an eye for finding the right angles and lighting to make the food look like, well, like home.

In the midst of their meal, their conversation meandered to the topic of their families. He loved hearing about her youngest sister’s adventures as a travel expert of some sort. Stories of her other sister raising twin boys were enjoyable as well. He didn’t cling to the details yet thoroughly enjoyed her soothing stories. He loved these conversations because he couldn’t get enough of the way she talked about her family, the affection and pride on her features.

“Do you visit your parents often?” she asked.

“I try to visit them in Montreal once a year,” he answered. And then he surprised himself by admitting, “This house was supposed to be theirs.”

“Really?”

“I bought it as a retirement present but...”

“They went to Montreal instead,” she finished the sentence when he found himself unable to continue. His parents moved to his mother’s hometown after retirement. They insisted that the cost of living in the Canadian city allowed them more flexibility and resources than staying in one of the most expensive cities in the world. He would have happily provided for them. Frugal as always, however, his parents refused to be a burden.

“In truth, it has turned out quite well. She reconnected with some friends from her childhood and my father has become an avid hockey fan,” he added.

“But you kept the house,” she said. “I’m glad you did, Rafael. I can’t imagine this house belonging to anyone but you.”

Certainly, the house was his refuge. Within these walls, he could be himself, even during the worst of his illness when he didn’t know what that meant anymore. It was his shelter from public scrutiny, his rest from hypervigilant anxiety. For a long time, this was the only place he didn’t feel self-conscious. This is the house in which he rebuilt his body with fitness routines and endured his pain in solitude. But, somehow, the woman in front of him tore down those exhausting walls. While she was here, the house turned from a fortress to a home.

She’d seen him work through muscle seizures a few times. Once, after he went for a run. Another time, right in the middle of turning the pasta maker, he felt the pain grab him like an ambush.

Each time, she brought him water, microwaved his weighted hot pack, and sat beside him as if they were just another couple relaxing together. She’d offer chatter, or play on her phone, or read a book. Or simply sit. No hassle. No

pity. He knew because he looked rather closely. A flinch of distaste or a flood of overwrought emotion—he would have seen it. Instead, she offered her company: relaxed and unperturbed. Even earlier today, when he winced after a long walk under the blistering sun in a local vineyard, she suggested they sit under the shaded patio of the town market. The discomfort passed without much fuss at all.

So, even if his illness was kept at bay with planning and effort, it didn't take over his every thought. No. Because the only one living in his mind twenty-four hours a day was his angel.

“Patrice loved the footage of the farm,” she said cheerily. “I’ve worked on marketing products before but we always hired people to capture footage or take pictures. I think I’m getting better at filming.”

He had to agree. “Not just filming. Patrice is asking for more of that footage of you. Apparently, you scowl less,” he was teasing but sincere. “And the people we interview seem to respond better to you than to me.” That was true as well.

During their visits along the countryside and nearby towns, Tori insisted on recording him. She chose the town, the local food specialty or store, and Rafael used his connections to get them special access. He chatted with people they met about cultivating, preparing, cooking, and celebrating food in various ways. These encounters weren't meant to be rehearsed or polished. They were just something Tori enjoyed so he went along with her plans.

Whatever footage they gathered, they'd send to Patrice who would edit snippets as a popular feature in their school's YouTube channel. They were a rather fantastic team, if he said so himself.

“If you're done eating, I have a surprise for you,” she said.

His brow lifted with interest. “Is that so?”

“One of the stalls in the market sold these adorable little marmalades and sauces. I thought they would make the cutest

present for my sisters.” She took a sip of her wine, looking very self-conscious.

“Remember the night in the hotel?” she continued. “The, um, the first time we were together.”

How could he forget? Every moment with her felt like a landmark in his life. He answered with one curt nod.

“I bought a dark chocolate sauce that I thought might be kind of fun to, well, maybe...” She trailed off.

The flash of her dusty nipples smeared with chocolate awakened his body. “Say it, *mon ange*. Tell me what you were thinking when you took that jar from the shelf. What wicked thoughts did you have while you paid for it?” He couldn’t help his grin when her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkled.

“Can I show you?” Victoria stood and walked towards him. He turned his body away from the table so she could nestle between his thighs.

“I will allow it,” he declared with authority. Their game was about to start. Somehow, they could move from easy companionship to this fantasy world where his words were a decree and her body his domain.

She reached into her dress pocket to retrieve a small jelly jar that fit in her palm. She placed the object on the table and removed the cover to release the fragrance of dark chocolate.

Then, she went on her knees between his thighs. He grunted. “Stand up and take your dress off.” His mouth watered at the thought of licking the sweetness off her honeyed skin.

“After,” she whispered while reaching over to unbuckle his belt and work his pants free. To slip off the garment, he stood up. He stayed standing, his erection lined up with her face.

She grabbed his base with one hand while the other dipped a finger into the jar. After slathering the sauce on his tip and pumping him with a strong, steady grip, Tori wrapped her perfect lips around the head of his cock. She swirled her tongue while she went down halfway before sucking her way back up his shaft. After a few languid licks through which

Rafael fought the urge to plunge deeper, she sat back on her heels.

“I was thinking of choking on your cock when I bought it.” She dipped a finger into the chocolate jar again. Tori grazed its sweetness along his shaft, just past where she had initially tasted him. As she looked up at him expectantly, her pliant form intoxicated him. Erotic sensations built between them, igniting him into action.

Rafael dipped his finger in the jar and smeared the sauce lower, at the very root of him. “If you lick this off me like my perfect little angel, I’ll let you come tonight.”

And fuck, she did exactly that. Tori grabbed his thighs and plunged his throbbing arousal past her constricted throat. He felt the strain of her moans and watched the torrid stretch of her mouth as she worked his thick length. It was too good. So fucking perfect.

When he knew he was close to climax, he stilled her head and pulled out. It ached to lose her heat but he needed something else. Needed to have his fill of the liquid evidence of her arousal for him. Only for him.

He kissed her hard while pulling apart the buttons of her dress. When it pooled at her feet, he ended their kiss. The abruptness elicited a desperate moan. It turned into a gasp as Rafael recklessly swiped away his table setting in order to clear half of the dining table. The crash and clang of broken dishes barely registered as Rafael lifted her naked form on the table’s edge.

“Lie down,” he grunted. She obeyed, luxuriously stretching her arms over her head and arching her back.

Rafael took the jar and tilted it until a delicate stream drizzled over her body. Over her creamy breasts and down her soft belly that shivered with the tremors of anticipation. When he reached her apex, he dipped his thumb into the jar before pressing the thumb in tight circles over her clit. She wiggled and whimpered with need.

“Look at you,” he said adoringly. “The perfect dessert I’m about to ruin. Did you think about this too, Tori?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” she panted.

He delved into her breasts, sucking one puckered nipple and then another. The chocolate on her belly rubbed against his chest. Rafael loved the way the slickness shifted into a sweet adhesive that fused his body to hers. He licked lower, lingering by her hips and sucking hard enough to leave marks on her inner thighs. When his lips pressed against her clit, he kissed it thoroughly, greedily seeking her nectar behind a rich layer of chocolate. Her tremors began, and he knew she was close.

“Not yet,” he gritted between slow, firm licks. “You come on my cock, *mon ange*. Or not at all.”

“But...you’re...you’re...”

He continued the measured strokes of his rough tongue against her smooth entrance. Rafael brought her to the edge but withheld the firm and frantic pressure that would push her to climax.

“Please, Rafael,” she begged. “I need to. It’s too much. Please.” She was sobbing at the effort to fulfill his demands.

He stood and rubbed his cock’s plum colored head against her folds. “I’m clean. I haven’t been with anyone since my last health check. And you’re on the pill, yes?” He couldn’t believe he could talk through the haze of lust.

“Yes, I am. And I’ve checked during my last, um, my last...” She seemed unable to find the words but he heard enough.

“Are you ready to take me this way, Tori?”

She whimpered and nodded, bucking her hips up to capture his arousal. He gave it to her hard. Plunged into her channel in one powerful thrust. Their gasps of pleasure filled the room. He pounded into her, relentless and unhinged. He was out of control.

“Come around my cock,” he growled with difficulty. “Do it now.”

Immediately, like a dam that broke, he felt the rush of her liquid climax. Their joined flesh was the sparkling wick of dynamite. It chased along his spine till detonation was inevitable. He exploded into the squeezing pressure of her orgasm. The pleasure was so intense, he blacked out a little.

When his vision realigned, he leaned forward to kiss her, to comfort her, to love her. *To love her?!*

He pulled his head back, seeking her face. She had the look of someone whose body was a mush of satisfaction. Such a pretty mouth. Such a loving spirit. Such an amazing woman. Of course he loved her. There was no choice, really. His love was like a tight knot in his heart that unfurled for only one person. She was the one to unravel him.

The woman he loved. The woman leaving in three days.

“What’s wrong?” Her concern moved him to action. He helped her up and gathered her dress. Once she was covered, Rafael lifted her in his arms and dropped her on the sofa a few steps away.

“There are shards everywhere. Don’t move until I clean up.”

“Let me help you.”

“You brought dessert. The least I can do is make sure you don’t get hurt,” he said, before pecking the tip of her nose.

Although his feelings wreaked havoc inside him, his voice was surprisingly light. He moved quickly, sweeping the worst of the broken plate and shattered glass. Then, he ran a wet Swiffer pad over the area to grab any stray shards. The whole time, her chin was leaning on the back of the sofa so she could watch him.

“Rafael?”

“Yes?” he said while discarding the last of the cleaning products.

“Your sleeve is full of chocolate.”

Indeed, his compression sleeve was a mess. He took it off occasionally, like before showering or when he knew he would wear long sleeves. But never in front of anyone.

In a daze, he watched her walk towards him.

“Let me,” she purred. “Let me see all of you. So you know.”

“So I know what?” His voice was ground in glass.

“So you know that no matter what, you’re the most amazing man I know. There isn’t an injury in the world that could erase what you mean to me. Please, Rafael. Let me see. Let me see so I can show you how beautiful you are to me.”

His heart was a fragile ache in his chest. His body vibrated with the force of everything he held back. In some corner of his consciousness, Rafael reasoned that the best way to mute the intensity of his love was to show her his shame. She would see it and she would flinch. His disgusting arm was a sight impossible to forget. The sooner she understood the extent of his damage, the sooner he might recover from her revulsion. Her rejection.

“OK. Remove it,” he said.

He stood still while her delicate fingers found the end of the sleeve and rolled it down his bicep. Lower and lower as angry gashes of uneven skin unfolded. The whole time, he watched her face. He waited for her to wince. He sought any glimmer of disgust. But it never came.

He didn’t realize that the sleeve was completely off until she bent down to kiss his ruined forearm. Small, sweet presses of her perfect lips on his imperfect body.

“How do you do that?” he asked as if in a daze.

“Do what?”

“Be the best thing that’s ever happened to me when...” He compressed his lips into a hard line before the words were ripped out of him. He fought to keep his pained, desperate emotions from falling on her feet like the shattered glass he’d cleaned up.

“Rafael, please finish what you were going to say.” Tori wrapped one arm around his waist while the other gently ran over his hideous skin.

Wry and wretched, he looked at her. “How are you the best thing that’s ever happened to me, when a broken man like me can never be that for you?”

Chapter 21

TORI

“What?!” She was truly appalled. “You’re not broken, Rafael. You’re human. And even if you were broken or hurt or struggling, a fraction of you is worth more than most men in the world.”

He looked at her unblinkingly, as if she spoke an unknown language. There was so much going on in the slide show of his features. Was that fondness? Hope? Confusion? Yes, definitely confusion.

“I mean it,” Tori insisted, trying to break the tension. “Besides, why shouldn’t I be the best thing that’s ever happened to you?” she piped sassily. “By now you should have noticed how competitive I can be.”

“I love you,” he blurted, face earnest and beseeching. Rafael was always gorgeous, but at the moment, his expression of devotion took her breath away.

“Before you go, you should know,” he continued. “I’ve fallen for you, Victoria Espinoza. And as ridiculous as I might sound giving my heart to someone who’s about to leave, I’ll never regret loving you. Not for a minute and not for the rest of my life.”

Happiness overcame her. His confession blasted all reservations. Tori let herself feel everything. *Everything* she could hardly admit to herself through the last few weeks. All

of her excitement and her concern; all of her admiration and her hopes. Most of all, she let those emotions concentrate to one undeniable truth: love. She loved this man with all her heart.

“It isn’t ridiculous,” she said with a smile so wide it strained her cheeks. “It isn’t ridiculous because I feel the same way. I love you too, Rafael.”

They kissed tenderly. After the heat of their passion, the slow sweep of his lips against hers was a soothing balm. She inhaled his aroma and sank into his heat.

In the last few weeks, she had experienced flashes of lust and excitement that took her breath away. But under all of that attraction was something else: a warm and all-encompassing sense of belonging. The more time they spent together, the easier it was to believe that being together was meant to be. It was a dangerous thought when she didn’t know the extent of his feelings. But now? Tori sank deep into the comfort of belonging to the only man she would ever want.

Even the small amount of help she offered to ease his pain when it attacked him—sitting with him and knowing they would get through it together—even *that* felt like home. If she gave comfort, he gave something more. Something so essential to her happiness and sense of purpose, it was hard to find the right words. Till now.

Love. She was in love. As swift and unlikely as it was, Tori let herself feel all of it. The depth of her feelings and the unbelievable relief that he loved her too. Rafael loved her. Her heart was bursting and happiness scattered from the explosion. Happiness was in their connection, in everything they created in the kitchen, in the adventures they shared.

When they parted reluctantly, Rafael spoke. “Let’s make the most of your time before you leave. Maybe an overnight trip. Burgundy is about a three-hour drive and we wouldn’t have to rush back. Would you like that?”

There wasn’t much she wouldn’t agree to, at this point. “That would be amazing. Yes, let’s do it.”

They kissed again, holding each other while she let her hand roam over the rough terrain of his arm. Rafael stiffened beside her and almost pulled away, but then she entwined their fingers. He relaxed his tense muscles and kissed her knuckles affectionately. It felt like a victory.

Ironically, the injury that he thought would scare her away was what brought them together. It was a sign of his resilience and strength. Most of all, showing her his scars was tangible proof of his trust.

They held each other in bed. Tori relished his warmth and strength. Sleepy satisfaction transformed her bones to mush. As she settled even deeper in his arms, something snagged in the recesses of her brain. Like a pesky whisper before slumber silenced everything.

Let's make the most of your time before you leave. Before you leave. Before you leave.

The words returned to her consciousness while she was packing an overnight bag.

As the final days of her vacation approached, there had been opportunities to talk about what would happen after she went back to the US. What had she hoped for? Certainly a conversation. Now that they declared their love for each other, surely, she could hope for more.

Rafael was wrapping up his toiletries when she turned to him. “So, after this overnight trip, I’ll probably go straight to Paris to catch my flight. We hadn’t talked about it, Rafael. What happens when I leave. How do you imagine us?”

“What do you mean?” he asked breezily before kissing her on the way out the door. He smelled like mint and aftershave.

Alarm short-circuited her system. Before he left the room, she reached out to graze his shoulder. “I mean, how do you

imagine us? What happens when I leave? You've never brought it up. Don't you think it's important to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?" he asked, confused.

"Us." Insecurity threatened to choke her vocal cords but she managed the word.

Looking even more confused, if that was possible, Rafael said, "You seemed perfectly happy to let the time pass without this conversation."

She stayed calm but her breathing shallowed. "You're right. I should have brought it up, too. So that's what I'm doing. Bringing it up."

His mouth opened but no sound came out. A flush of embarrassment heated her face. "You didn't think about this at all, did you? About me?"

His chuckle was humorless. "Trust me when I say you are all I think about, *mon ange*."

Her anxiety alleviated somewhat, enough for her to close the distance and put their bodies flush. She lay her head on his chest where his heart was beating hard and fast.

"Don't you think now is a good time to talk about it? Not that I have any brilliant ideas or concrete expectations. Things happened so fast. But falling in love with you changes everything." A nervous sound escaped in a whimper. "You weren't just going to drop me off at the airport without a plan, right?"

He pulled back and held her forearms. She was in front of him but the connection was strained, like a rubber band that could either bounce back or snap in half.

"Of course not," he mumbled. "Yes, we should talk but I thought we would figure things out after you leave, that's all."

"Like a long-distance thing."

"If that's what you want."

Is it? What *did* Tori want? Maybe at some point it would have been enough to stay connected and see where things led,

but after last night, she had to admit she wanted more.

Yet doubt lingered. Would she be enough for him? How would they navigate the challenges ahead? She knew how she felt about him. And then another doubt reared its ugly head. Was this another instance of her giving up her life for a man? The thought just rang false. With James, everything was an extension of his needs. She was naturally inclined to help and he took advantage of that. Her ex-husband gave minimal in return. Rafael gave her so much. Even the way he managed his pain, meticulously ensuring he took all precautions, he did that for her as much as for himself.

“If I...if I didn’t have a condo and a job to deal with, would you have, maybe, would you have maybe asked me to stay?”

“Why would I do *that*?” She didn’t know if it was the actual words or the incredulity of his expression that hurt most, but that lash across her heart was deep.

“I don’t know?! Maybe because we’re in love.” *Stay steady*, she said to herself. *It doesn’t have to be this dramatic.*

“Be serious, Tori. Why would you leave your life behind? Not for me, I’m sure. You know my condition.”

“What about your condition?” she asked. The vehemence behind her question surprised both of them. There was no turning back now. She plowed on. “People with far more challenges manage to be together. There are sacrifices in every relationship and I guess I didn’t see living with a hot, sexy chef in a charming French village as a sacrifice at all.”

“What if it’s a sacrifice for me?”

He might as well have slammed a door in her face, the shock of his words raised a concrete barrier between them. Was she this clueless about how he felt?

“You mean it’s a sacrifice for you to be with me beyond these few weeks?” It wasn’t a question so much as a realization. A bitter chuckle oozed through her words. “If so, what was there to talk about after all? How to schedule a

sporadic fling? Were you going to work around my vacation days, Rafael? What a considerate arrangement.”

Sarcasm came naturally to her. There was nothing natural about her words today, though. They were the evidence of pain coming out, short of ripping her chest open. A throbbing started behind her eyes. She walked across the room to look out the window so only the garden outside would witness her frustrated features.

When she thought about her love for Rafael, it felt like the beginning of something special. But for him? It sounded like his expression of love was only possible because they were at the end of the affair.

“No, Tori. Of course not. But being with *me*? You can’t truly want that. And knowing what you would be giving up, I can barely stand the thought. One of these days my body will fail me. Maybe sporadically but, ultimately, you can’t live your life with an invalid.”

She began pacing but stumbled midstride at his words. “Invalid? You have an illness. Something I’m willing to face with you because...because I love you.”

“I love you too, *mon ange*. Being with you these last few weeks? You’ve made me happy in ways I didn’t think was possible.” His voice was pleading, yet there was something hard behind his eyes.

“But?” she ventured.

“But what you want today isn’t what you’ll want tomorrow. Knowing that one day you would see how wrong I am for you? What then? I would never ask you to face such an uncertain future. Even *I* can hardly think of facing it.”

Her spine stiffened. “I’m a grown woman. Don’t tell me what I’m willing to face. And don’t tell me that I don’t know my own heart.”

He took a deep, labored breath. “What you feel here, they are—how do I say this—under certain conditions.”

“Conditions?”

“Vacation, serendipity, freedom. All those things you went to France for! But these aren’t real life. You’ll see. When you return to your life in DC...” He drifted off, eyes set over her shoulder.

“What. Say it.” Wrapping her arms around her torso, Tori grabbed her elbows to keep herself together.

“When you return to your life in DC, things will be clearer. And you’ll be more certain. It is hard for me to trust what you’re saying right now. Maybe...maybe if you return and still want to be with me after. Perhaps when you’re absolutely sure —”

“Let me get this straight,” she interrupted with a seething tone. Her chin trembled but she rallied with a clear voice. “You want to let me go. No, you want to *push me away*. And if I come back, *then* you’ll take me?!”

“Wait—”

“That doesn’t sound like someone who wants me at all.”

“I have my reasons. Please understand.” He slumped against the door frame, looking defeated.

“I know you have your reasons, Rafael. You’re struggling with a condition that requires time and patience and effort. Allison broke your heart because she didn’t want to face that future. But I do. I’m not her. I shouldn’t have to pay for her betrayal.” Tears spilled. She was too devastated to stop them. “This plan—to send me away so I can prove I love you? It isn’t a solution. It’s just making me feel like I have to prove myself to you. I want to love you, not *prove* that I love you!”

Her arms had been flailing around and she was tired. She slumped on the edge of the bed and covered her wet face with trembling hands.

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“I think that’s actually what you’re saying. I need to leave, be miserable, and hope you’ll want me when I return. Here’s the thing: it’s hard for me to believe that you want me at all if it’s so easy to push me away.”

“It isn’t easy. Don’t say that.” He came closer, laying a hand over her shoulder.

With a heavy sigh, Tori looked up at him. “It isn’t the first time you’ve pushed me away.”

He repeated the refrain through a tortured growl. “I have my reasons.”

“I know, Rafael. I’m scared too, but you’ve shown me what’s possible,” she gritted. Her throat was tight and her heart heavy. She needed him to look at her. To see what she could barely express in words. Cupping his face to tilt it downward, she spoke.

“Where’s the person who sweeps me in his arms? Who holds me as long as he can? Where’s the lover who pins me down and seizes my wrists before he buries himself in me? Rafael, where is the man who ruins me for anyone else?”

Looking pained, Rafael stepped back, letting her arms drop and the cold seep into her body. She wanted to crawl into a ball and close her eyes. To forget this painful confrontation. But there was no forgetting. Instead, she rallied. Strong and urgent, Tori continued.

“That’s the man I need. The man who’s brave enough to love me today and tomorrow and all the days after that.”

“Tori—”

“Ask me to stay. No. *Make* me stay,” she said, hardly believing the pathetic begging that came out of her mouth. “Hold me tight and don’t let go. Tell me I belong to no one else but you. Tell me you won’t let me leave.”

He didn’t speak, his silence louder than a scream. Tori roughly pushed the moisture away from her cheeks. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. What she needed to say had been said.

“Yeah. I didn’t think so. You get what you want, Rafael. I’m returning to DC. I’m leaving because I refuse to play this game. I refuse to *audition* for the role of someone you can trust.”

She pulled her bigger luggage from under the bed and dumped in the clothes from the dressers and the ones she had carefully packed in an overnight bag.

“What are you doing?” he blurted with appalled panic. “Tori stop. What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m staying in Paris till I leave on Saturday.” The statement almost sounded normal as she fought down the quivering strain of saying words she didn’t want to say.

“No, Tori. You are not leaving today.” Rafael’s voice was thick and labored, like he was underwater.

“Watch me,” she hissed and walked out of the bedroom with her luggage and purse. She wasn’t sure if she had grabbed everything, but so what? Everything was replaceable.

Except pride, she thought to herself. And certainly not her heart, which she knew she no longer owned.

Before she could open the front door, Rafael roughly pulled her luggage from her grasp. In the time it took for her to turn around in anger, he had already flung the luggage aside and wrapped his arms around her waist.

“Do not leave this way,” he gritted through a pursed mouth and tight jaw. Everything about his features was hard except his eyes of molten jade. It would have been so easy to get lost in the misery of his gaze. To comfort him for as long as he would let her. The thought jarred her into action.

Tori pushed against his chest in order to dislodge the iron strength of his embrace. They struggled desperately, her body rubbing against his and Rafael’s erection pressing harshly. She was aching with desire and trembling with rage.

“Let go of me, Rafael! I’m leaving!”

“No,” he said before slamming his mouth over hers. Because his body was so unyieldingly hard, the shock of his lips’ softness made her pause. His tongue sought hers, hungry and insistent. He repositioned her so he could grind against the cradle of her wet center. The pleasure of their bodies connecting almost shattered her resolve.

But Tori remembered something she had drilled into her consciousness after her divorce: no more catering to men's needs, no more compromising herself, no more fucks to give.

She ripped their mouths apart and unleashed the one word she knew would end this *now*. "Red," she blurted with a hard exhale.

Immediately, he relaxed his arms. It wasn't Rafael letting go, so much as him collapsing.

Tori didn't even bother grabbing her luggage. She ran to the train station with her passport and wallet, some of her pride, and none of her heart.

Chapter 22

RAFAEL

He watched her leave, her figure at a distance already more specter than reality. He messed up. He knew he handled everything badly. Couldn't find the words to explain his fear that she would regret the sacrifices she was making to be with him.

Hold me tight and don't let go. Tell me I belong to no one else but you. Tell me you won't let me leave.

He wanted to. God, he wanted to. But how could he ask her to leave her life? Her career, her family, her community. For him? That was ridiculous.

Rafael couldn't reconcile the conflicting facts: He craved Tori but he had no right to. He wanted her in his life but he shouldn't. He longed to give himself but his insecurities made him feel like he wasn't enough. Not for a woman like her, brimming with life. The thought of dimming her brilliance or holding her back made his teeth hurt. Or that might be from his locked jaw, who knew anymore.

At the end of the day, his love for her kept him from accepting her love. How fucked up was that?

The sharp ring of his phone made him jump. Rafael lunged at it, his heart leaping with hope. Tori. She would call and make all of his messy, stupid, anxious thoughts make sense.

Disappointment made him crumple to the sofa. It was Inez. His friend was back in Paris and had been calling him daily to stay in touch. Certain decisions needed to be made for invoicing and expansion and staffing. Now that he wasn't hiding in the cave of self-pity, their partnership was beginning to look more like the one that started their business. Not today though. He let it go to voicemail. Her text pinged.

Inez: I realize you're in the middle of honeymoon heaven but you need to call me later today. Today! We need to change our delivery service since they're raising their rates.

Honeymoon heaven? More like purgatory. As it turned out, judgment day had arrived. He belonged in hell for hurting the woman he loved. But he had to believe it was for her own good. He *had* to.

Rafael sighed with resignation. One thing he learned from the last few weeks was that sitting in his fortress of solitude solved nothing. If he couldn't be the man Tori needed, he could at least be a useful businessman and decent friend.

Rafael: Email me the new invoices. I'll look at it today and come in tomorrow. We can sort out the repair bills too while I'm there.

It wasn't three beats before his phone rang again.

"Qu'est-ce qui ne va pas?" His friend asked what was wrong. They continued in French.

"Doing my job, obviously. I've leaned on you a lot this year. Time to carry my weight, that's all."

"You've always carried your weight, Rafael. This sounds more like evading my question," she said with a snort.

"How do you figure?"

"You're asking for emails and volunteering to come into the city when I know you'd rather be at home enjoying your girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"Ah."

“What does that mean?”

“I didn’t say a thing!”

“You made that, that sound. Like you just solved something and I can’t even wrap my mind around the problem.”

“What can I say? I am all knowing. Took you long enough to figure it out.”

As much as he loved Inez, Rafael was in no mood for her light-hearted confidence.

“Email the documents. And, Inez, when I get there tomorrow, can you do me a favor?”

“I’ll do just about anything if you get the delivery and repair problems off my hands.”

“I, um, I still have Victoria Espinoza’s things since she, well, she left in a hurry. I’ll text her to arrange for you to bring her the luggage tomorrow. She leaves the next day.”

“Why don’t you bring it yourself if you can reach her?”

“I don’t want to get into it, Inez. Yes or no. If she lets me bring it to her, I will. If she doesn’t want to see me, will you do me this favor?”

“Of course,” she answered with a pitying gentleness that grated his nerves.

He hung up, determined to get something right today.

Rafael: You’re probably already in Paris. I’m sorry for how things went today. I hope we can talk when we’ve both cooled off. In the meantime, I’d like to bring you your things. If you don’t want to see me, Inez can deliver your luggage before you leave on Saturday.

Rafael saw the three dots appear and then disappear. The dots were fleeting and undecided, like his muddled brain. He decided to work off his anxiety. Maybe a run would clear his head. He took his medication and went out under the scorching sun, pushing his body more than he should.

Returning from the exertion, Rafael felt a tightening creep into his nerves before it seized him. It was such a familiar pain, it was almost a relief. A reminder, really, that he couldn't make this tedious illness part of Tori's life too. It wouldn't be fair for her to witness him like this, pushing himself a step forward then suffering the consequences two steps back. He sat and waited for the attack to ease enough so he could shower.

Finally, he managed to wash up and get dressed. That's when he saw it.

Tori: I'm sorry I left without my things. If you can throw or donate them for me, I would appreciate it.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he dialed her number. His call went straight to voicemail. He texted again.

Rafael: I can bring it tonight. It isn't fair for you to lose your things because I ruined everything. I'm sorry, Tori. Please let me bring this to you.

He was pathetic. The desperate attempt to see her one more time before she left was absolutely pathetic. Yet his yearning was undeniable. A few more minutes with Tori felt like a lifeline. He dialed her number. Again it went straight to voicemail. He also noticed that his last text did not have a notification of delivery.

"She blocked you, you idiot." Inez sounded exasperated. They were alone in the kitchen lab after the school closed for the day.

"You're right," he snarled at himself, feeling ridiculous. "Dammit, Inez, how did everything go to shit so fast?"

He had spent the day working in his office and talking to vendors. The whole time, Rafael wondered what Tori was doing or where she was staying. They were in the same city, but he felt galaxies away.

“What happened, Rafael?” There it was again. The pitying gentleness annoyed him as always. After a full day of avoiding the topic so he could face the world, he couldn’t pretend anymore.

“I fell in love with her.” He didn’t continue the rest of that statement. *I fell in love with her which is why I practically kicked her out of my house.*

Inez pursed her lips and shook her head. “That’s been obvious for a while. I knew it was inevitable when I saw the video of you both biting each other’s heads off at the cheese shop.”

“Maybe for me it was inevitable. But not for her. She was pissed and putting me in my place. I love her even more for it.” He couldn’t believe the drivel coming out of his mouth. It was one thing to ruminate with regret and doubt when alone, but to have someone witness it was a hundred times worse. He bit down hard on his lower lip to stop himself from more outbursts.

“I think you’re wrong. I think it was inevitable for her too. You were both drawn to each other, Rafael, despite the imperfections and misunderstandings.” She paused and reached over to lean a hand on his shoulder. “Sure, you’re not perfect. And neither is she. Being together isn’t about perfection. It’s about belonging.”

If she punched him in the chest, he wouldn’t have felt it as deeply as her words. There was a cracking in his ribs he had never felt before.

It’s about belonging. Inez’s words lingered in his head.

An overwhelming warmth flooded his system at the thought of creating a world in which Tori and he belonged to each other. Could a woman like her truly accept him? Despite his scarred body and the insidiousness of his pain? Even if she said yes, *should* she?

“I belong to her, yes. But I can’t claim her for myself. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“You’re right about that.”

He accepted the insult for the truth that it was and stayed silent. It wouldn't be right for him to expect the depths of his devotion to be shared, but there was no doubt *he* belonged to *her*. He hadn't ever known a person could take over every thought in his brain and beat of his heart the way she did so effortlessly.

“You know, for an arrogant man, you are infuriatingly easy to offend. You're right that it wouldn't be fair for you to claim her. Because guess what? When two people belong together, it isn't about claiming. Victoria is not a woman to be claimed. That's not what she wants or needs, Rafael.”

“I know. Fuck, I know. I can't stop reliving our fight. And I just wish I could have slowed it all down. Listened to her instead of giving in to the nagging fear that I don't deserve her.”

“We don't deserve the people we love, my dear. Belonging together and loving each other? Those are gifts we don't *deserve* but must always cherish.”

He let her words sink in. “I can't imagine a better life than cherishing her. Loving her.” It was as soft as a whisper but a louder, surer truth had never been uttered.

Running his hands over his head and pulling his hair, Rafael let his foolish choices sink into his bones. Twenty-four hours without Tori made his skeleton brittle and his skin clammy. Looking ahead to a life without her? That would be pure hell.

Everything was clear all of a sudden. No matter how ill he might get or how uncertain of their future, building a life with Tori would still be the only life he would want. Nothing would get in the way of Rafael trying his damn hardest to give her a life *she* would want, too. To cook for her, laugh with her, create with her, make love to her—these were victories he would relish every single day.

Nudging him out of his reverie, Inez asked, “Then what are you waiting for?”

He blinked slowly, her words settling into him. Filling his blood with heat and his mind with purpose. “Do you really think she would listen to me now? Inez, I was a reckless brute who kicked her out! What a fool to think I knew what was best for everyone when all I did was hurt both of us. Is there a chance that she’ll come back to me?”

She sighed indulgently before speaking. “Only one way to find out. Looks like you’ve got a flight to book for tomorrow.”

Chapter 23

TORI

“Victoria Espinoza, would you come to the agent desk please?”

Did she hear that correctly? Her earbuds weren’t loud but she hadn’t slept in two nights so it was possible she was hallucinating.

“Victoria Espinoza, Flight 2120 to Washington, DC, please see us before boarding.”

She jumped out of her seat and waved her hand to get the airline agent’s attention. Slinging her new backpack over her shoulder—she had to buy two days’ worth of clothes and toiletries after all—she ambled over.

“Hello, Ms. Espinoza. I have great news! You’ve been upgraded to first class. Here is your new boarding pass.”

“Oh, um, I didn’t pay for that. This must be a mistake.”

The woman furrowed thick brows in confusion but quickly recovered her professional smile. “You’re not charged at all! This is a, um, a free upgrade. Here!” She practically shoved the boarding pass to Tori.

“Wow, OK. That’s great. Thank you so much.” Although surprised, Tori was grateful. A roomy first-class seat instead of a middle seat in coach was a world of difference when you’re travelling for nine hours.

She was one of the first to enter the plane, happy to settle into comfort. At least externally. Everything else about Tori was far from comfortable. Her head was fuzzy, her stomach in knots, and her heart as heavy as an anvil on her chest.

Closing her eyes and leaning back, Tori steadied her breath. That's all she could do, right? Keep it together, she told herself. This will pass. She'll be fine in a few weeks.

Lies. Lies. Lies.

She never felt this kind of pain. Deep and profound and permanent. After she had stormed out of Rafael's home, she turned into a zombie, going through the motions of preparing to travel back home. She had blocked his number because she couldn't trust herself not to be a pathetic pushover. Taking his calls and texts would make her departure impossible. The need to see him one more time was so strong, her knees gave way at the possibility. She had to remember why she was heartbroken and humiliated in a plane she didn't want to be in.

Even if he didn't tell her to leave, Rafael didn't want her to stay. That was basically the same thing, wasn't it?

She took deep breaths but with each rising of her chest, a loud and urgent warning blazed through her system. Her pulse picked up as if adrenaline was injected into her bloodstream. An awful rush of...of wrongness. Being in a plane that took her across the ocean was wrong, wrong, wrong.

What the hell was she doing? Leaving when she wanted to stay, silent when she wanted to communicate, alone when she wanted to return to Rafael.

Dammit, she couldn't do it. There was no plan beyond the realization that she couldn't leave. Not like this. Tori gathered her things clumsily, standing up before undoing her seatbelt and plopping back down.

"Is everything alright?" A flight attendant came over with a writing pad. "Can I get you something to eat and drink while the rest of the passengers board?"

"No, I'm sorry. I need to..." She was interrupted as a flow of people streamed into the aisle, blocking her way. She undid

her belt and stood up to address the flight attendant.

“I’m sorry for the trouble but this was a mistake. I need to get off the plane. Please can you help me?”

“Pardon me? Did you say you want to *get out*?”

“Yes, yes I need to get out of the plane.” As panic gripped her throat, Tori felt the effort of speaking clearly. “I need to get out of the plane because I can’t leave Paris. I won’t.” The last word screeched out with a shaky breath.

Tori hated scenes. Being fussed over made her cringe. All her life, she was painstakingly careful about being vulnerable and emotional in public. Right now? An embarrassing outburst was near, ugly sobs clamoring to get out.

“Please,” she managed desperately. “I need to get off the plane. I can’t leave Paris.”

“Why?” A deep voice from the other aisle pushed through her consciousness. Gritty and low, it was a voice she would recognize till her dying day. She spun around and saw him across the center seats she had just vacated. “Why do you need to stay?” he asked again.

“Rafael, what are you doing here?!” Those words came out of her when what she wanted to say was: *Are you a dream I wished into reality?*

“I’m here for *you*, Tori,” he said with a smoldering look that rammed her heart with longing. “I was wrong to let my angel leave. I’m here for *you*, the woman I love.” He took a step closer and hovered over the center seats.

The sound of other people’s whispers and gasps trickled through her consciousness. She didn’t care. Her mouth opened yet Tori couldn’t form actual words. Who could blame her when the man she loved was taking her breath away?

The slashes of his cheekbones were stark on his clean-shaven face, the cleft on his chin calling for her touch. Jade eyes hooded by dark lashes were glued to her panting mouth. He was devastatingly handsome, as always, but there was something else. A determination she hadn’t seen from him before.

“I don’t deserve your forgiveness, or your time, or your love. But I’ll beg for it, anyway. That’s why I’m here.”

“You’re here.”

Cautious amusement tilted his lips to one side. “It is your turn to speak, *mon ange*. Why do you need to get off the plane? Especially when we have such good seats.” His voice was teasing but she heard a hint of nervous anguish as well.

“You’re the reason they moved me?”

“I figured if we’re sitting beside each other for a few hours, I could properly beg for your forgiveness. Maybe we would sort out all the things I messed up. That was my hope, anyway.”

“Madame? Would you mind moving please so we can continue boarding?” The flight attendant requested gently, steering Tori closer to Rafael.

“We’re sitting beside each other?” she asked.

She wanted to tell him how much she missed him. How the last two days were an eternity. Emotion made it impossible to turn her thoughts into clear statements so she stared. He made a gesture inviting her to sit. He did the same. Their foreheads leaning towards each other, Rafael spoke in a low, gruff voice.

“I was a fool, Tori. I had you in a place that you turned into a home but I let you go. So if we have to live in these two seats till I convince you to come back, that’s what I’m willing to do.”

She released a burst of incredulity that cut through some of the tension. “Live in these two seats?”

“I brought food so we should be alright.” The fact that he always worried about feeding her made her smile.

“We are sitting in a first-class cabin. I’m quite sure we were going to be alright, regardless.” It felt good to ease into their familiar teasing. She was still confused and unsure yet being around him, no matter how unsettling, always felt like they had a way of communicating uniquely theirs.

“Yeah, but they don’t have *this*.” She hadn’t noticed the Tupperware container till he brought it between them.

“Do you remember when we first met?” he asked huskily.

She nodded, transported to the vague memory of two kids snacking in an alleyway.

“You were sad,” he said. “But cheered up when you saw my sandwich.”

What? She didn’t remember being sad, exactly, but she did recall how his attentive kindness made her giddy. And truth be told, she did in fact remember a sandwich.

“I asked about your *Croque Monsieur* and you shared it.”

“At that moment, I couldn’t believe my luck,” he confessed. “This unbelievably pretty girl was enjoying something I made. I had been cooking for my family and working in restaurants for a while but it was the first time someone called me a chef. Do you remember that?”

“Honestly, I don’t remember much except how cute you were and how well you cooked.” She was smiling so hard her cheeks hurt. “You’re still a good cook, it turns out.” Tori couldn’t help flirting, not when he was grinning widely and a flush of color made him glow.

“Maybe less cute but more debonair?” he flirted back before opening the Tupperware container. Inside was a sandwich of melted cheese and ham. She burst out laughing.

“Now that’s just sad,” she said because it was nothing like the scrumptious dishes he usually created. Inside was a cold, wilted lump. He nodded in agreement, snickering at her honest reaction.

“I guess I’ll have to make you a fresh sandwich when we get home.”

After a beat, she ventured, “Home? Where is home, Rafael?”

She asked what was deep in her heart, consequences be damned. Maybe it was the wrong thing to say, or perhaps it was too presumptuous. The question scared her, left her

vulnerable to another rejection. She realized, however, that no matter the outcome, nothing would keep her from asking that burning question: *Where is home?*

“Where do you want it to be?” Rafael asked.

Through the last few weeks, he indulged her urgent desire to explore new tastes, new experiences, new people. It didn't matter if they were in the kitchen or visiting an isolated farm or touring a famous winery, he never held her back. In fact, he dared her to go further than she imagined possible. As if Tori could be herself and beyond, stretching her courage towards unknown futures and yet discovering something intimate and private about herself.

She couldn't find the words so she said, “I asked first.”

“Here's what I know,” he answered with a confident smile. “Home is where you are, Victoria Espinoza. From the first moment I saw you, you captivated me. Even all those years ago, I knew you were a person I wanted in my life. It took a while for that to happen and when it did, I was stupid enough to let you go. I doubted myself. I doubted us. And pushed away the most amazing person I had ever met. Will you forgive me?” Their foreheads were nearly touching as the words quietly lingered between them.

He closed the container and handed it to a flight attendant walking by. The man looked confused but Rafael was too intent to be interrupted. He turned to Tori and entwined their fingers. She welcomed his hand, his words, his warmth.

The truth was, it wasn't a matter of forgiving him. They both had insecurities that got in the way. So she could never fully blame Rafael. It wasn't only up to him to talk about their circumstances. She could have handled things differently, too. Maybe not throw down the gauntlet with an ultimatum? She could have found a more mature way to express what she wanted. Truly, they could have both done better. She forgave him with all her heart.

But could she *trust* him? *Could she trust herself?*

“What if I don’t know where that is? Home, I mean. In the last few days, I realized I want to be with you but I can’t lose sight of what I want for myself. So if you feel that *home* is where I am, well, I can honestly say I have no idea where that is or where it’s going to be.”

“Not back in DC?” he asked soothingly.

“No, at least not in the same way. I don’t know how to explain myself.”

“I’m listening. The way I should have before.”

That bolstered her courage. “I never felt more sure of myself than when I was unsure. Isn’t that remarkable and strange? It isn’t only about visiting exciting places. I loved meeting new people, learning from them, opening myself to adventures. I’m done living a stunted life without joy and wonder. If I sell my condo and lie low with one of my sisters, I don’t have to decide right away. I just know I want a life that I chose, instead of one chosen for me.”

“Perhaps a life in which you make the perfect scones?”

She laughed at the reference to her intense passion for baked goods. “Maybe.”

“In the meantime, while you decide where your heart takes you and what the future brings, will you let me cook for you?”

She smiled at his coy question because she heard the longing behind it. *Will you let me cook for you*, coming from the lips of a passionate chef, meant nourishment and care and companionship and love. But at what sacrifice for him?

“Rafael, you have a business and students and employees. A home you love. You can’t promise that you’ll be where I end up.”

“Even if you aren’t sure where you’ll end up, that will never stop me from wanting to cherish you and love you.” Rafael reached over and ran a calloused finger over her wet cheek. She didn’t even realize her emotions overwhelmed her to tears. Tori leaned into his hand and brushed her lips against his palm. “There’s one thing I know for sure: that home and

Victoria Espinoza mean the same thing to me. Good thing, too, because you're also the one I love the most."

She hugged him with all her might, his loving words exhilarating her spirit and heating her blood. "I love you too, Rafael. There's no denying it. That's why I wanted to get off the plane. To find you and tell you, at least one more time, that I love you so much."

He kissed her gently, firm hands tilting her head so his mouth could swallow her moans of bliss. Someone walking down the aisle jostled her armrest, jarring them into the moment. Rafael kept her close, rolling his forehead over hers while he spoke.

"I'm not perfect, Tori. I'm grumpy and scared, really scared, of where my illness will take me. But knowing there's a life I can share with you makes me stronger. We don't have to decide anything today. It's enough for me to know there's a future where you'll let me take care of you. So even if we're not together all the time, my home is yours. And everything I create from now on is with you and for you, no matter where we land."

The pilot's announcement filled the cabin with information about cruising altitude and time difference and weather predictions. A familiar anxiety gripped Tori's lungs and she straightened out to face forward. She didn't have to explain what she needed. Immediately, Rafael cradled her hand and offered small, caressing circles on her palm, between her fingers. She focused on the motion in order to lessen the angst of unsteady weightlessness during takeoff.

When the worst of her anxiety abated and they were floating over smooth skies, she opened her eyes to seek out the man she loved. He had been staring at her with furrowed worry but once their gazes met, he exhaled in one long swoosh.

"You are so beautiful, even when you worry me, do you know that, *mon ange*?"

"That's how I feel when I comfort you. Watching you power through your challenges is beautiful, Rafael. Even when

I worry, it is filled with admiration. Knowing we can comfort each other makes me happy.”

He kissed the corner of her mouth and moved along her jaw, ending with a light graze of his teeth on her neck.

“Yes,” she said.

He chuckled. “Yes to what, my love?”

“Yes to all of it. To this moment. To your kisses and your comfort. To making the perfect scone. To us, cooking for each other. Most of all, *yes* to creating together and for each other, wherever we land.”

Epilogue

Two Years Later

Tori banged her luggage against her shin in the rush to get off the train. Transportation from Zurich to Paris and then another hour to Le Vésinet did not bode well for her composure or her patience. Restlessness from hours of sitting made her clumsy.

She was returning from what had been an eventful and, frankly, very tiring week in Switzerland. On top of picking nuts, planting vegetables, foraging for mushrooms, preserving fruit, baking, and cleaning like any other member of the farm, Tori also took the pictures and videos needed to finish her social media proposal. *Ferme familiale*, an organic nut and fruit farm two hours from Zurich, was part of a global movement that involved tourism, food cultivation, and organic farming.

Hired as an independent social media consultant to help rebuild their website and drum up investors and volunteers, Tori's corporate skills were highly transferable. The former marketing director found ways to direct her experience to help smaller and more diverse businesses. From sales pamphlets to TikTok videos, from PowerPoint presentations to cutting-edge blogs, Tori shored up the resources needed to create a memorable social media presence.

Having grabbed an earlier train from Zurich to Paris, her arrival was hours before Rafael expected. God, she missed

him. He would have met her at the station but she had a mischievous desire to see his face when she surprised him.

She heard the bustle even before she saw the house. Laughter and music rose up to meet her as she approached their home with silhouettes of moving figures beyond the open front door. Her heart raced at the sense of excitement but she kept her tread light, thinking she might get a peek of—

She was grabbed around the waist by familiar arms and pulled against a hard chest. Before she could protest, a firm hand covered her mouth and she was tucked against the secluded side of the house. Her back pressed against the stone wall, she finally faced her captor—her gorgeous, sexy, beloved captor.

“What the hell is going on, Rafael?”

“Shhh,” he said against her ear, releasing bubbles of anticipation into her body and making her center clench. “You’re not supposed to be here till seven. Now you’re going to ruin your own surprise, *mon ange*.” His words were scolding but his tone was far from stern. Any seriousness was muffled by his nose nuzzling against her hair and his teeth playfully nipping at her thudding pulse.

“My surprise? What? Wh—why?” It wasn’t only confusion that made her stammer, it was also those large, calloused hands finding their way around her hips and under her buttocks, squeezing hard enough to leave a mark.

“Because I missed you. Because you feel so fucking good and I can’t get enough of how you feel, how you smell, how you sound. And because all week I’ve been dying to do *this*.”

He kissed her hard and she met each caress of his lips, each sweep of his tongue. Banked desire broke through, the flood of passion carrying them to a place where only each other’s breaths and bodies counted. She palmed his arousal and nipped his pillowy lip.

“You are really gonna get it tonight,” he said with a rough growl, pulling her hand away from his crotch and lifting it over her head.

“If you didn’t have all these people here, you could be giving it to me right now,” she complained before wiggling free and offering a playful wink. “Well, what’s this about a surprise, Rafael?”

“I, ahem, I wanted to throw you a little party.”

She raised a brow because he seemed uncharacteristically flustered. “I was away for a week, silly. That hardly warrants an elaborate homecoming celebration.”

“Every time you come home warrants a celebration, as far as I’m concerned.”

“True,” she agreed coyly. “But not like this! Who’s here, anyway? People from the school? You haven’t even told me why.”

“They’ll be disappointed that you aren’t surprised.”

“Who’s they?”

And then she heard it. A laugh that was part of her earliest memories. With a squeak of disbelief, she pushed past him and ran through the door.

“Mom?!” The house commotion screeched to a halt. “Oh my god! Mom! Dad!” She threw herself into her parents’ embrace. She hadn’t seen them since she officially moved to France over a year ago. It took some time to sell the condo and set up her finances, but she officially moved in with Rafael before launching her new business.

She hugged them tightly as tears of happiness fell. The one downside to moving to Europe was being so far from family.

“I can’t believe you’re here. Why didn’t you tell me you were coming? I would have postponed my trip!”

“Your surprise isn’t done, sweetheart,” her dad said.

“Tori! Tori! Tori!” The childhood chant of two grown women exploded behind her before she was jump-hugged by her wonderful sisters.

The three women held each other tightly while bouncing on their toes like giddy kids. “Oh my god, what is happening

right now. You're all here! Wait..." Tori pulled back to look at the middle Espinoza sister. "Did you bring the twins, Celina? I haven't seen them in ages!"

"They've grown so much. Yes, they're here but went to the park with Dane to burn off some energy."

"I can't wait to see them!" She turned to Kat. "Are you here with Max?"

"Hi, Tori," Kat's boyfriend said from the kitchen.

"We're all here. I can't believe we're all here." Emotion tightened her windpipe but she managed one important word. "Rafael."

She turned around to find the most amazing man in the world smiling widely. "You arranged all of this?" She stepped into his arms. "Thank you. This is amazing. Thank you so much."

"You should thank Max too since he flew everyone in." Kat's boyfriend happened to run a travel brokerage conglomerate which Tori didn't appreciate till that moment.

"Thanks, Max!" Tori hollered.

"You're welcome! And congratulations!"

"Wait, what?!"

She felt Rafael's deep chuckle. "There is another surprise."

"Let the boys do it since they made the galette," her mom said before Tori could demand an explanation.

"Is that what smells amazing?"

"Auntie Tor!" Jerome and Jonas burst through the door. Fourteen years old and towering, they planted a kiss on each of her cheeks.

She relished their boyish sweetness despite the fact that they were growing teenagers and not little boys. After hugging everyone one more time and finding her way between her sisters, Tori gathered herself enough to speak.

“I can’t believe you’re all here. This is like being in a dream. I’m so happy to have us together. Thank you for coming to surprise me. And Rafael. There’s no way for me to express how much you mean to me. Your thoughtfulness, your generosity, your love. This isn’t just a surprise for me, it’s a celebration of us. And it means the world.”

She took a step forward, bursting with the need to kiss him.

“Uh-uh, wait a minute. The boys have a surprise to reveal, remember?” her dad intercepted.

The twins walked over, Jonas holding the pie in front of him while Jerome had his hands behind his back.

“Auntie Tor, we made this for you...” Jonas held out the food offering and announced ceremoniously before giving his twin the cue to speak.

“Using yours and Rafael’s cookbook!” Jerome pulled the book behind him with a flourish.

“It came out?” she yelped. “It came out early?!”

She pressed it against her chest before running her hand over the hardcover. It was the cookbook Rafael started when they first met and her first social media project when she moved to France. The build up to publication was a marketing campaign she had poured her heart into. It was special to her in ways beyond its gorgeous pages and delicious recipes. It was special because it felt like *theirs*.

“Read the dedication,” Celina said.

“Out loud,” Kat piped in before shouldering her to open the book.

Opening to the front page, she spoke with bated breath and read the printed dedication: “This is dedicated to Victoria Espinoza, who is my home and the love of my life.”

But in written script was a message which she stared at because she couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Read it all!” Celina said.

Tori's spoke, her heart in her throat. "*Mon ange*, will you marry me?"

She looked up in shock to find Rafael holding a jewelry box. His deep voice reverberated throughout her body. "We made this together. And I never want to stop creating with you and for you. Will you make me the happiest man in the world and be my wife?"

"Yes, Rafael, yes!" She threw herself at him, the ring and the cookbook clashing. They pulled back long enough for him to slip the ring on her finger. Their lips touched for a moment before the surge of hugs and kisses from the Espinoza clan descended on the couple. Through the mist of some tears and the mayhem of boisterous cheers, she registered Rafael's hand reach over to squeeze hers.

Champagne flutes were soon distributed. Through the night, the family ate and drank and laughed. They teased each other relentlessly while embarrassing childhood stories resurfaced. The one downside of having chatty parents in the room was the limitless bounty of these stories.

As the evening waned and everyone's mild intoxication made them thoughtful, Tori leaned her heavy head on Rafael's shoulder. Around her were the people who had shaped her life: parents and sisters whose love defined so much of her identity. In their midst were the children who heralded a bright future and the partners who made every day special and exciting.

Most amazing of all, there was Rafael. He was everything to her: the man who changed her life, the chef who shared her passion, the supporter who believed in her dreams, the friend she laughed with, and the lover who gave her everything she would ever need. Now they were engaged and the *rightness* of their union overwhelmed her. Home wasn't a place; it was a sense of belonging.

Family members notwithstanding, she would have liked to sink into a passionate kiss. Brushing her lips against his neck would have to do for now.

In return, Rafael raised a perfect brow and unleashed a heartbreakingly handsome smile. As the surrounding

conversation veered to tomorrow's plans, he stood up to take glasses to the kitchen. She followed with plates, hoping for an opportunity to cuddle into her fiancé's muscular arms. Yeah, right. Who was she kidding? She followed him into the kitchen because Tori wanted to touch Rafael in ways that would make him blush.

She entered the kitchen to find him heating up his hot pack in the microwave. She put down the plates and wrapped her arms around his torso. Rafael pulled her closer and offered a kiss on her forehead. Without talking about it, he took out the hot pack, sat on the kitchen stool, and pulled her over his lap. And like they did when it was called for, Tori placed the comforting device on his shoulder. With a grateful sigh and a nuzzle against her neck, Rafael said, "Thank you."

"I think I should be thanking *you*. Making all these arrangements couldn't have been easy."

"Your sisters took over most of the planning once I told them about our cookbook's early release and my plan to propose."

"I can't believe you asked me in front of everyone," she chuckled. She couldn't help wiggling her backside against his growing erection. A deep groan of frustration was her reward.

"Less likely for you to say no, I figured," he responded while giving her hip a possessive grab.

"Did you doubt I would say yes?"

With a confident smirk and eyes glassy with emotion, Rafael rasped against her ear. "Someone once told me I'm used to getting what I want. And I want no one more than you, so that better be true."

She stood and turned, nestling between his thighs and wrapping her arms around his neck. "It was a wise woman who said that, wasn't it? Well, then I suppose there's nothing to be done but be yours."

"And I'm yours too, *mon ange*. Forever." His soft lips grazed her jaw, travelled down her neck, before kissing lower. He nipped her pulse and sucked hard.

“Forever,” she echoed as a zing of pleasure electrified her spine. He used his teeth to move her neckline to the side and expose a shoulder. When Rafael pulled the shirt down, the top of her breasts peeked out.

“How am I supposed to go out there and face your parents when all I can think about is squeezing my cock between your perfect breasts?”

“That’s not my problem now is it, Chef?” she teased. “And while you’re thinking about it, you should know that’s not the only place I want your cock,” she prodded further and caressed his thick length.

“Vixen,” he ground out. “Now you’re really gonna get it.”

THE END

Thank you for reading!

If you loved it, indie authors like me live for reviews and recommendations. Even a few words make the biggest difference!

If you enjoyed Rafael and Tori's romantic comedy, please leave a [review](#). Your feedback means the world to me!

Check out the reviews on Goodreads as readers rave about the first two standalones of the *Destination Love* series.

★★★★★ Another winner from Laura! Her characters are always flawed yet so loveable. You want them to overcome their challenges, and they do! –Jezabel

★★★★★ There was humor, angst and steam. It definitely gave me all the feels. Told in dual POV. I really liked seeing their relationship evolve. I think they both needed each other and brought out good in each other. My heart broke for Dane a few times. He loved her so much. Such a sweet ending. Overall, I really enjoyed it! –Rachel

★★★★★ Well this book just hit me in all the feels — I laughed, I cried and I got emotionally attached to the journey these two went on together! Wow! –Kayleigh

★★★★★ This *Swim & Slay* book has steamy enemies-to-lovers, forced proximity, and a mistaken identity novella. I became completely obsessed with the storyline from the beginning. Katerina is carefree and dislikes her boss Max, but in the middle of an unanticipated business getaway, they spend a lot of time together. Soon, after, they developed feelings for each other. I love the spice of this story. It was beautifully written! We have another AMAZING romance book by this Author! –Elizabeth

★★★★★ I loved the steam, the spice and the intimacy of this story, it was so beautifully written! Well done Laura on another amazing story!! –Molly

★★★★★ Laura Marquez Diamond has done it again, balancing super steamy scenes with lovable characters and great banter. Highly recommend! –Lindsey

★★★★★ What a beautiful read. Kat and Max have an interesting dynamic and quite a bit of sexual tension. Being away for work gives them a nice background for sparks to fly and going back home gives the opportunity to sink or swim. The story is addicting. I really loved this book. –Danielle

About the Author

Laura writes romances featuring women who slay their own dragons and the men who rock their world and hold their purse (or glass of wine). In her books, the fall is hard, the steam is blinding, the groveling is glorious, and the passion is all-consuming. She's addicted to romances where the longing is so intense, the rewards of pleasure only deepen when they follow.

She is the author of [*The Cincinnati Thrashers: Sports Romance series*](#) featuring five contemporary romances with a diverse cast of irresistible heartthrobs and the brilliant, audacious women they fall in love with. Each standalone book offers a unique and satisfying happily ever after, and favorite characters have great cameos throughout the series.

For more witty banter and heartwarming emotion, check out her series of contemporary romances full of adventure, heart, and heat. [*Romantic Revelations*](#) has it all: naughty and nice, swoony and serious, laughter and love. Most of all, it delivers the passionate heat to keep readers coming back for more.

Are you loving the Espinoza series? Visit [*Destination Love*](#) to read all of their adventures in love.

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In her labors of love, she hopes readers find something to relish, something to think about, and something to love.

ENJOY A
Sneak Peek
OF
Swim & Slay
DESTINATION LOVE BOOK 1

Chapter 1

KAT

To say that Katerina Espinoza met Maximillian Montgomery while he was ruining her life was not entirely accurate. She met him seventeen hours later when he stood at the head of *her* conference table announcing that the fate of *her* company was now in *his* hands.

He was the regional director for the faceless conglomerate that had acquired her travel discount company in a hostile takeover seventeen hours before that meeting. When Kat had contemplated the deliberate dismantling of everything she worked for, she realized he must have orchestrated the disaster for a while.

So the question, if one were to be picky, was exactly how long prior had he been planning on ruining her life? That bit of the unknown, for a logistical specialist and control freak like Kat, was a crucial part of the insult. She absolutely despised being the last to know. Especially when it involved her life plan.

Four months later, on her way to Jamaica for a business trip, Kat forced herself to focus on what she loved about the job ahead. She was tasked with coordinating a partnership with the Royal Cerulean Resort. Kat would be arranging excursions and amenities for future clients. Kat's company—

and she really did still see it as hers—had ran special deals for airline employees who could book at the last minute due to free travel benefits. She would be doing the same thing but as a branch of Global Conquest.

Royal Cerulean Resort was one of the upscale places Max arranged after the hostile takeover. The partnership was aligned with his vision to move things to less discounted establishments. Snobby places, in other words. Places where families like Kat's wouldn't have felt welcome.

Serving luxury experiences to high-end clientele was everything she resisted when she opened Espinoza Interline Travel. As a child of a pilot, her family flew around the globe for free. However, as one of three daughters in a middle-class family, those trips were always on a budget. That budget didn't include five-star resorts.

Unfortunately, since her life's work had been absorbed by Global Conquest Travel, the choice of partnering with vendors wasn't up to her now, was it?

At least she could get out of town for a week with an old friend and colleague, Jamie. They were going to vet the resort in order to organize accommodations and coordinate client packages. Jamie was her first hire when Espinoza Interline started. It felt apt that he join her in this new, albeit diminished, role as one of the many branch minions the regional director bossed around.

Still, she had to admit that she was dying to get back to what she loved about the business: finding gems and negotiating arrangements to find the best deals for her clients. More than anything though, Kat needed to escape the annoyances and indignities of the last four months since she was demoted.

And then she saw him. Sharp gray eyes and a square jaw, collared shirt and stiff back. The man who ruined her life was waiting by the gate for an early morning departure from Phoenix to Montego Bay.

Maximillian Montgomery.

What a name. What kind of parents gave their child such an aggressive alliteration unless they knew he was destined to be a villain? Wait. He was spawned from corporate robots so the question was moot.

Anyway, what was she saying? Ah, right. Max Montgomery—life dismantler, business saboteur, and villain spawn of robots—was waiting in the seat closest to the business class boarding lane.

“Where’s Jamie?” she barked.

Max looked up slowly from his tablet, taking in her summer dress and languidly leaning back before answering. “Sick, maybe. He’s sitting this one out.”

“Well, that doesn’t explain what you’re doing here.”

He exhaled impatiently. “It’s a two-man job.”

She heard it, that misogynistic insinuation that she was hardly equipped to do a man’s job at all.

Kat Espinoza not good enough to do a job she fucking invented? Puh-lease! OK, that was rather overstated since she tended to exaggerate around alliterative villainous robot spawns. “Still doesn’t explain what you’re doing here,” she whisper-muttered into her coffee.

“I heard that,” Max uttered with pure indifference. “Surely you remember I’m your boss.”

“Well, then let me do my job, *boss*.” She practically hissed the last word.

“Oh, you will,” he answered smugly before returning his attention to a tablet on which he was plotting evil takeovers and whatnot.

She sipped the cappuccino which was now as bitter as the air between them. Maybe the true inaccuracy of her account of the past was thinking that Max Montgomery was done ruining her life.

Meanwhile, the airline representatives behind the counter repeatedly looked up at Max, as if glimpses of him were the highlight of their morning.

Kat could admit that he was good looking with his perfectly shaped brows, an aquiline nose, and the build of an athlete. He wore a golf shirt of nearly the exact shade of his steel eyes. The material was high-end, fitted and clingy enough to show the lines of defined pectoral muscles.

However, she reserved the right to add an asterisk to “good looking.” Good looking in a *my life fell apart the second he walked into it* kind of way. In an *easy on the eyes and torture on the ulcer* sort of way. In a *ruffle his perfect hair and check if those lips were as soft as they looked* sort of way. Wait, what?!

“You have an entertaining way of fuming,” he droned.

“I’m not here to entertain you.” Kat was getting upset, her body temperature high and her nerves on edge. She knew her brewing temper was fundamentally inconsistent with the professional indifference needed to get through this trip.

“I know.” His statement was followed by a very deliberate acknowledgment of her newly heated cheeks.

“I doubt it. And stop studying me like I’m a...a...”

His brows raised slightly. “A flustered woman whose professionalism appears too fragile to survive a moderate change in travel companion?”

Her mouth gaped open before she could stop it. “You know nothing about me,” she stated.

“Really.”

“Really. I suggest you stick to what you know.” She began to stand. Suddenly, his fingers lightly grazed her bare arm. The zing she felt at their point of contact was so surprising, she was forced to sit back down and check if he literally electrocuted her. She wouldn’t put it past him.

She found herself staring at his ropy forearms, dusted with fine dark hair. Kat had the oddest thought that his forearm would taste the way he smelled: like sweet sandalwood and showered skin. Dammit, did she think of licking his forearm?

Did someone poison her bitter coffee?!

“And what, according to Katerina Espinoza, should I stick to?” His voice, husky and low, turned her heart into a gong. Because she was angry. Definitely because she was angry. She suddenly lost the ability to censor herself.

He asked for it, didn't he?

She shifted her body to face him and to more efficiently point at his broad, hard chest. “Boring golf shirts and stock options. Combing your hair like your mom would. And of course, let's not forget, torturing employees into annoyed boredom.”

Kat was so sure she'd get fired that she mentally prepared to negotiate her severance package. She expected Max's natural haughtiness to morph into righteous anger.

Instead, he blinked twice, pitched his head backward, and released a burst of laughter. Or more like an abdominal muscle chuckle. Or whatever it was that super fit villains did to make people like her feel trite and helpless.

When he was done, his face was closer.

“I can see why you're annoyed, considering the circumstances. But if your body is any indication,” he said with a glance at her straining nipples and panting chest, “you are far from bored.”

Chapter 2

KAT

Chugging the icy taste of vacation, Kat drank the last of her second margarita while in the shower. Official meetings would begin tomorrow morning. For now, a tipsy treat before dinner hurt no one.

Feeling refreshed and relaxed afterward, she dressed in an off-the-shoulder flower top and white skirt, perfect for sitting at the most casual of the five restaurants in the resort. Kat wanted to blend in as much as she could tonight, before she met the executives and staff in person tomorrow. After those broad introductions, she would lose her anonymity. The best way to get an accurate impression of her surroundings was to be treated like everyone else.

She already had a sense of the poolside bar's treatment when she swam in the pool; which was to say, those friendly bartenders were awesome.

She dodged having to make dinner plans with Max by slipping away after the shuttle from the airport dropped them at the massive, open-air, marble-floored lobby. Kat saved them both the awkwardness of admitting that a single minute more than was required in his proximity was one too many.

She would see him at the conference room early tomorrow morning. Till then, she was free to enjoy dinner with two margaritas in her veins and her boss out of sight.

Weaving her way through the resort gardens perfumed with sweet flowers and alive with the sound of busy birds, Kat took video footage to add to her electronic file of the Royal Cerulean Resort. She would normally expect Jamie to do this sort of documentation. Unfortunately, he wasn't here; so she made sure to perform due diligence. Kat planned to call Jamie in a couple of days to wish him well, not wanting to make him feel obligated to deal with work while sick.

The sea faintly tickled her senses, its breezes moving her hair as it did the palm trees dotting the immaculate landscape. She put away the recorder, spun around with outstretched arms like she was in a musical, and took a deep inhale. Some things couldn't be recorded by an electronic device.

A few resort workers walked by and glanced at the crazy woman who was twirling and skipping down the isolated garden path. They offered a friendly hello and she greeted them back, too giddy to be embarrassed.

She found her way to the restaurant closest to the water. Her timing was strategic. She didn't want to be part of the busy dinner crowd. Earlier, she had skipped lunch to go for a swim and walk the grounds. Now, she was famished.

The restaurant was empty, apart from one elderly couple, so Kat secured a small table perched over the beachside. As she relished her unobstructed view of the water, Kat felt her muscles relax and her mind wander.

This was why she stayed with Global Conquest Travel despite the indignities of being stripped of her title, despite taking a pay cut to make sure her small staff of four people kept their jobs. She agreed to be part of the conglomerate despite the humiliation of Max checking up on her office every other week, like a parole officer making his rounds on the delinquents.

She stayed with the job so she could relive this very moment when vacation nourished your soul and the daily grind faded away. On someone else's dime, that is. She would never be able to afford a place like this.

“*Wah Gwaan,*” a young woman said melodiously, distracting Kat from thoughts of delinquents and indignities and dimes. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“*Wah Gwaan,*” Kat responded, remembering the common greeting from the last time she was in Jamaica. She enjoyed the buoyant lilt of the patois dialect. “I’d love a chardonnay, please.”

“I’ll bring it along while you look at the menu,” the waitress said graciously.

“Actually, um, Dana,” Kat began by reading her nametag, “is it alright if I leave it to you to pick my appetizer and main dish? I don’t have any allergies and would love to be surprised by whatever you recommend.”

Dana’s hazel eyes brightened. “Of course, ma’am. It would be my pleasure.”

“You’re welcome to call me Kat,” she offered. “If you want to.” She added the last bit because she didn’t assume the woman would remember every guest that came by.

A perfect shrimp ceviche accompanied her wine. And since she wasn’t busy, Dana happily chatted about the nightlife at the club and the best times to borrow a kayak. By the time Kat was halfway through her grilled octopus, she could no longer ignore her full belly and restless feet. The restaurant was starting to fill and she was eager to explore. After leaving a generous cash tip for Dana, Kat took the shortcut to the beach and kicked off her shoes.

She walked along the water’s edge, her feet sinking into the sand and calves getting a workout. It was dark now, with only the moonlight to catch the capping of the waves and the outline of her arms swinging by her side. The quiet was interrupted by insistent pings on her phone indicating an incoming video call from her sister, Marcelina.

When she took the call, her view of her sister was obstructed by a ten-year-old boy’s nostrils. It was either Jerome or Jonas—one of the twins. Kat couldn’t tell because even fraternal twins were hard to tell apart from that angle.

“Hiya Auntie Kit Kat!” That was Jerome, who had a more nasally tone than his twin.

“Hello, monkey! How’s it going?”

“Good,” Jerome said right before his brother grabbed the phone.

“Can you bring me home a turtle from Jamaica?” Jonas piped in, the pitch of his voice higher and shriller.

“I can try,” she said in all seriousness, thinking about going to the market for some cute turtle-inspired knickknacks to bring home.

“Don’t say that! Turtles belong in the wild!” Celina said in the background.

“Or the zoo, which is what your house is, right monkeys?” Kat answered. To prove her point, the piercing sounds of wildlife emitted from the lungs of two boisterous children.

“Alright, alright, let me talk to your aunt. Your turn to take out the garbage, Jerome,” Celina proclaimed as she took her phone to another room.

Her sister was raising twin boys on her own. It still felt like acute anguish when Kat thought about the unfairness of it all. Celina lost her husband, Asher Whittaker, to a motorcycle accident three years prior. A wonderful man had been taken away from his high school sweetheart and their seven-year-old sons.

Kat quelled her sorrow because Celina did not abide anyone’s pity. As a single mother running an editing business from home, Celina didn’t have time for anything except the tyranny of daily demands. Kat would be the last person to waste her time.

“What’s up, sis?” she asked.

“I need a favor, or, advice I guess,” Celina said meekly. She wasn’t in the habit of asking for anything if she could help it.

“Of course,” Kat immediately piped. “Whatever you—”

The video alerted her with a notification that their eldest sister, Victoria, was joining the call.

“Tori! Tori! Tori!” Both Celina and Kat screeched in the collective chant they perfected when Kat was three and Celina was five.

Tori had her phone perched on a high shelf in her kitchen so they could see her move around an island strewn with pastries.

“I thought you were in Jamaica?” Tori said, completely ignoring the irritating chant of her name. She wiped her hands on an apron featuring the face of a sloth and text that read “bitch better have my cookies.” One of Kat’s more inspired finds.

“I am,” Kat said, sitting on the sand and stretching her legs.

“I can barely see you,” Tori said.

“Jamaica. Beach. Night,” Kat said snarkily.

“Are you safe?” Celina asked.

“I’m in a multimillion-dollar resort. The wine glass I drank from is worth more than me. Don’t worry, no one will benefit from my disappearance.”

“Don’t joke about that,” Celina said. “I heard—”

“She’s fine, Cel. Now, why did you call us? I can tell you’re stalling,” Tori interrupted.

Kat watched as the middle Espinoza sister sighed and looked at the ceiling. She was stalling, and she never stalled.

“It’s OK, honey. What’s wrong?” Now Tori’s tone was gentle and worried.

“We’re here for you,” Kat added.

“I, um, I need advice.” Celina looked away from the camera and back again. “It’s Dane.” Dane was the real estate mogul who had been Asher’s best friend growing up. He was an amazing friend to Celina and the best “uncle” to the boys. Kat couldn’t imagine what would prompt Celina’s worrying behavior.

“He wants to pay for a big winter ski trip for the boys and I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why? The boys are fantastic skiers. They would love it. Haven’t you and Asher gotten them season tickets at Mount Baker since they were toddlers?” Tori asked, referring to the Washington state landmark resort a few hours from Celina’s residence in a Seattle suburb.

“Dane wants to do a week in a new house he bought in Whistler, Canada. A mansion in the mountains. He’s arranging private slalom lessons and a helicopter thingy.”

“I’m sorry I don’t think ‘helicopter’ and ‘thingy’ belong in the same sentence,” Kat snarked.

“You know how he is! So, like, over the top!”

“What’s really the problem, hon?” Tori cut to the chase.

Celina spoke close to the phone so Kat could see the hint of moisture sitting on her thick lashes.

“It was Asher’s thing, you know? The way some dads teach their kids to bike, he did that with skiing. They have these amazing memories of their father, but they aren’t a lot. They aren’t...” Celina paused and gave a sound close to a choke. “They aren’t *enough*.” Her voice cracked at the last word, the closest she got to unraveling in front of anyone.

“Oh, Cel,” Kat said, tearing up and struggling to hold back an audible sniff.

“I guess I’m not in a hurry to overshadow those memories with, like, a fucking helicopter!”

The three women were silent for a while.

“Marcelina Espinoza Whittaker, you’re their mother. *You* decide what’s right for them and when, OK?” Tori stated with confidence. “There isn’t a wrong answer here, honey. There’s only what feels right to you.”

“I have an idea!” Kat interrupted, inspired by what she felt would be a good compromise. “Why don’t you check it out for a night or two on your own? That way, whatever you decide, it’ll be an informed decision. Think of it as research.”

“I couldn’t—”

“Why not?” Kat continued. “I’ll be there for Christmas so I can watch the boys for two nights. Besides, you in a winter mansion by yourself sounds like heaven.”

“I don’t know.”

“Do it,” Tori said. “If the vibe feels wrong or too over the top, you can cancel the kids’ trip or make the adjustments to your liking. Either way, you get a mini-vacay and they have time with Kat.”

Once the sisters got Celina to agree to the plan and everyone said their goodnights—including her two favorite monkeys—Kat was thirsty for another margarita.

She retraced her path along the sand. She didn’t realize how far away from the resort buildings she had ventured until the muscles in her calves started to cramp. She needed to hit the gym when she got back to Phoenix.

Till then, where was that nice bartender from earlier? Emil made a fantastic margarita.

She was busy brushing sand from her legs while shuffling towards one of the poolside bars, so she didn’t notice Max until it was too late to avoid him. When he deigned to look her way, his nostrils flared slightly and his full lips turned to a thin line. Those gunmetal eyes felt like lasers over her skin.

It wasn’t the assessment of a serial killer, exactly; more like a calculating sadist who wanted to prolong the kill. His expression was both a little intimidating and—she hated that the thought crossed her mind at all—a lot hot. She needed something icy. Right. Now.

“Where have you been?” he spat.

“Excuse me?” she retorted.

Max always had an air of authority about him, yet tonight’s testiness was verging on ridiculous. Was she expected to punch a time card for every minute she wasn’t working?

“Have you been walking down the beach at night? By yourself?”

Incredulity burst out in snorts. “I’m fine, *dad*.” The word “dad” lingered in the air. Max’s steel-gray eyes glinted. They delivered the kind of sharpened glare that would make a lesser badass cringe.

Kat refused to be intimidated. “What’s your problem, anyway?” she derided.

“There’s resort security that stays close to the buildings. Not all of the beach is secured. Do you know what time it is?”

“Oh, c’mon.” She dismissed his concerns before taking a seat and smiling at Emil who finally came around.

They met earlier. Efficient Emil, she had called him because he had effortlessly managed a bar full of demanding guests that afternoon. When she introduced herself as Kat, he came up with his own nickname.

“Another margarita, pretty Kat?” the young Black man asked warmly.

“*Ya mon*,” she answered in the local lingo.

She heard Max’s grunt and watched his whiskey glass slide by her arm that rested on the bar. When his body slipped into the seat beside her, Kat resigned herself to two distinct-yet-related realizations. First, having him that close made her hotter than the hour-long walk by the beach. Second, she might have to take another margarita into the shower to cool down.

“You’ve had dinner,” he stated as an accusation. “I didn’t see you at The Aviary.” He referred to the high-end restaurant, led by a Michelin-starred chef, perched over the main building.

“I grabbed something beachside. We’re eating there tomorrow night with the executives,” she stated confidently, since she was the one who created the schedule after all.

“They have a weekly menu. Every night is different.”

“The place is the same,” she contested. “And that, my dear boss, is contrary to the point of traveling. Where’s your sense of adventure? Didn’t pack it along with your vitamins?” She

almost said erectile dysfunction medicine but she had, like, way too much class. *Not*. She didn't want to get reported to human resources. The paperwork with a big company would be a bureaucratic nightmare.

“You always gotta break my balls, huh,” he uttered with what sounded suspiciously like amusement before taking a sip of his drink.

“Is that what I'm doing?” A quick glance from the corner of her eye revealed that he had the slightest tilt of his lips.

Kat had a bottomless supply of snark. She couldn't believe she was getting away with spewing it all day. She took a sip of her icy drink and, over the rim of her glass, added, “Tell me when you've had enough, boss. I'll stop.”

Salt from the glass rim lay on her bottom lip so she ran her tongue across it. He stared at her mouth, making her feel more alert than if she had an injection of caffeine.

Max turned his body so his knees jutted close to the outside of her right leg. She looked down at his thick thighs, on which his palms were leaning.

“That's the thing, Katerina,” Max said, making her name sound both lewd and melodious, “I'm not sure I have it in me to tell you to stop.”