




HEART
of a
WOUNDED
HERO 

HEALING A HERO

SOPHIA VINCENT

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*For my own Wounded Hero.
My heart is forever yours.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Proud supporter of Semper Fi & America's Fund. Semper Fi & America's Fund cares for our nation's critically wounded ill, and injured service members and military families. Supporting all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces, they provide one-on-one case management, connection, and lifetime support. Today. Tomorrow. Together.

The Heart of the Wounded Hero series was created to pay tribute to and raise awareness of our wounded heroes. Each of the over eighty authors involved have contributed time, money, and stories to the cause. These love stories are inspiring and uplifting, showing the sacrifice of our veterans but also giving them the happily ever after they deserve.

By increasing awareness through our books, we believe we can in a small part help the wounded heroes that have sacrificed so much. To see all the books in the series and to support Semper Fi & America's Fund, please go to: <https://heartofawoundedhero.com/>

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MELODY



Melody

*B*aby shark, doo doo doo...

The song that haunted my nightmares. At least it kept Lylah entertained, and for that I was thankful. I'd had to take her out of daycare due to the pandemic and working from home with a five-year old was a test of patience a monk would have had trouble with.

Don't get me wrong, my daughter was the light of my life, but sometimes... Sometimes, I wanted to snuff her out.

She was currently curled up on the couch with her bankie and binkie, so I could look forward to at least ten minutes of uninterrupted peace. Possibly more if she fell asleep.

I opened my schedule for the day's appointments, double checking that nothing had changed. An alert popped up, telling me I had a new patient scheduled for a consultation. That wasn't surprising. This pandemic had turned the world on its ear, and more and more people were experiencing difficulties leading them to seek therapy.

Lance Corporal Gabriel Martinez. Diagnosis, PTSD. Also unsurprising. I'd worked with many former soldiers since post-traumatic stress disorder was my specialty. I sneaked a glance at Lylah. I knew firsthand how difficult it could be to deal with a past that wouldn't let go.

I had just a few minutes before his scheduled appointment time, so I got up and hurried to make myself some coffee. Just as I settled myself at my desk, I got the notification that the system was connecting us.

It took a few seconds for the feed to connect. When it did, I had to stifle a gasp. The man on my computer screen was, quite possibly, the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen. I couldn't tell how tall he was, but he was solidly built, his muscles straining against the fabric of his OD green t-shirt. His hair, still in the military buzz cut, was black or dark brown. It was hard to tell with the length. He had a five o'clock shadow that covered a face reminiscent of a Greek god.

His eyes, though. Good Lord, they were the deepest of browns. Like a rich dark chocolate.

I was a chocoholic.

I was also a professional, and I managed to pull myself together before I blurted out what I'd been thinking. Namely, that I wanted to jump through the screen and lick every inch of that amazing body.

My voice was only slightly shaky when I spoke, and I hoped he'd chalk it up to the internet connection. "Mr. Martinez, hello. My name is Melody Novak. I'm a Mental Health Counselor, and I've been assigned to your case." I paused, waiting to see if he'd reply. Some people couldn't wait to talk my ear off, and some hated me just because, in their eyes, I represented whatever they were suffering from.

Mr. Martinez appeared to be the latter. I continued, undaunted.

"I understand you've recently returned from a tour of duty in the Middle East, is that correct?" A curt nod was my only response. Okay, he was going to be one of those. The toughest of nuts to crack.

Maybe "nut" wasn't the best way to think of him.

"And you've been medically discharged, correct?"

He nodded again, if you could call it that. It was more of a chin-dip type thing. Okay, eye-candy was going to be a problem patient.

“Why don’t you tell me about yourself?” Open ended questions. I had to get him talking to me if I was going to have any hope of helping him.

“You have a file.”

Oooh, four whole words. I was impressed. “I do. And I’ve read it. But I’d like to hear about you from you. Why don’t we start with your childhood?”

“Name, rank, and social.”

He was up to eight words. I felt like flipping him off. “Pardon me?”

“Name, rank, and social.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” I started tapping my fingers on my desk. I thought I saw the tiniest hint of a smile on his face, but I’m sure I was imagining it.

“That’s all the information I’m allowed to share.”

I sighed. Leaning forward, I propped my chin on my hands. “Mr. Martinez,” I began, but he cut me off.

“Gabriel.”

“Okay, Gabriel. I’m not a terrorist holding you hostage.” I quirked an eyebrow. “You’re not even a Marine anymore. You’re allowed to tell me whatever you want. I’m not asking for anything more than basic information.”

His expression darkened. If he’d been sitting in my office rather than miles away, it would have sent a shiver down my spine. That “thousand-yard stare” thing soldiers got wasn’t a joke.

“First of all, once a Marine, always a Marine. Secondly, I’m not doing this because I want to. I’m doing this because I’m being ‘encouraged’ to do so by the government. So, you get the information I want you to have, and nothing else. Name. Rank. Social.” He glared at me through the screen,

and I felt the challenge inherent in the look. It was obvious he didn't want to be pressed about his personal life, or his professional life.

This was going to be difficult.

“Okay.”

That startled him, and I had the satisfaction of seeing those dreamy eyes widen in surprise. “Okay?”

“I can't make you talk to me. I can't force you to do anything at all. So, yeah. Okay. We'll just sit here and stare at each other for an hour, three times a week until you either let me help you or you find someone else who can.”

It was obvious he thought I was bluffing. That slight smirk got just the tiniest bit bigger, as if he were just waiting for me to start lobbing questions at him. But I knew something he didn't.

I was stubborn, too.

I started going through paperwork on my desk, catching up on patient notes. Double checking my calendar. Eventually, I ran out of legitimate work and started doodling on a notepad.

He hadn't moved. Hadn't shifted in the least. If I hadn't known better, I would have worried that he'd stopped breathing.

He must have been great at stake outs. Was that something Marines did? Probably.

Just then, I heard a small voice calling to me.

“Mommy?” Lylah ran up to me, clutching her blanket.

“What is it, baby?” I leaned down to her and ran my hand over her hair.

“Sark stop.”

“Oh, okay. Can you give Mommy just a sec?” I turned back to Gabriel, who at this point, had me wondering if he was half statue. “Can you excuse me a moment?”

“Of course,” he said, his voice gruff. His gaze softened when he looked down at Lylah. Even statues had soft spots for small children.

I muted the chat, then got her settled back on the couch and restarted her show. When I came back to my desk, Gabriel looked more relaxed. That is, he didn't look as angry. I figured that was a step in the right direction.

GABRIEL



Gabriel

I was being a dick. I knew it, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. The pretty Ms. Novak was just trying to do her job, and all I did was give her shit. It wasn't her fault I'd snapped. It wasn't her fault Uncle Sam had dropped me like a fucking grenade.

It wasn't her fault, but she was the only one available to take my rage.

My mother's voice echoed in my ears, reprimanding me for being rude to a woman. A professional one, at that. So, instead of cussing her out, I decided to give her the silent treatment. It wasn't my proudest moment, but if the government thought I was going to cooperate with therapy, they were out of their minds.

Thankfully, it was easy to sit here and just enjoy the scenery. Melody was, quite possibly, the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Her hair was a glorious mass of fire, the copper-colored curls falling well below her shoulders. She had eyes that made me think of the waters of the Mediterranean Sea. A blue so clear and bright I could drown in them if I weren't careful.

A tiny voice interrupted my thoughts before I could really get into building a fantasy around my new favorite face. My attention was drawn to an exact duplicate of Melody, in miniature. The little one had to be her daughter. Seeing them

interact reminded me of why I'd joined the Marines in the first place. Protecting that kind of innocence was so important.

Melody muted the feed to deal with her daughter. When she came back, she had a soft smile on her face. Her eyes shone brightly as she glanced to the side, where I assumed, she'd left her kid.

"That must be your daughter." This wasn't why I was here, to talk about my therapist's personal life. But talking about something as pure and sweet as a small child was infinitely easier than admitting what was actually on my mind.

Melody's face lit with a huge grin. "Yeah, she's the love of my life. Sorry about the interruption."

I shrugged. "I don't mind it. She's beautiful." I paused, just a beat, while I decided if I should say what I wanted to. "Just like her mother."

Those gorgeous blue eyes widened in surprise and her mouth opened and closed like she knew she should say something but couldn't get the words out. A peach flush crept up her full cheeks. "Mr. Martinez," she began, but I cut her off.

"Gabriel." I just barely contained my smile.

"Yes, well," she said, looking anywhere but directly at me. "Uh, G-Gabriel. I..." She trailed off, then closed her eyes and sighed. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. You are, you know." I'd started off talking about her to draw the attention from myself, but something deep inside me needed her to believe what I was saying.

"I, uh, I don't think this is appropriate conversation, sir."

The softly spoken "sir" almost made me laugh out loud, but I didn't want her to think I was laughing at her. She was obviously trying to bring things back to a professional level. "Probably not," I conceded. "But it's a lot more fun than talking about the shit in my head that's got me so fucked up."

“So, you think you’re f-ed up?” I didn’t miss the way her eyes darted to her kid. I guess I had to watch my mouth. That was going to be almost as hard as opening up to her.

“I know I am. The Corps doesn’t abandon her brothers lightly.”

“You feel like the Marines abandoned you?” The change in her face from blushing, sensual woman to professional therapist was subtle, but I noticed it just the same. Again, I had to stifle a laugh.

“I know they did. They were right to do so. I was a loose cannon. My brothers were in danger because of me.” It was more than I’d admitted to anyone, myself included, since I’d been sent home.

Damn. She was good.

“Why should you be dangerous to them?” She picked up a pen and began writing something I assumed were notes for my file.

“Gabriel Samuel Martinez. Lance Corp,” I began, but she cut me off with a wave of her hand.

“You gonna clam up on me again? It was a simple question.”

“Simple to ask, not to answer.”

She quirked an eyebrow at me. I had a feeling she’d perfected that look in her years as a mother. “The right questions rarely are, Gabriel.”

MELODY



Melody

He'd been silent the rest of his session. The only time he'd spoken was to give me a hasty "bye" as he closed the connection down. I was worried about my ability to be able to get him to open up. He obviously wasn't one for sharing his feelings, and that was the entire purpose of my job.

But I wasn't good at my job. I was great at it.

I just needed to reread his file, now that I'd met him, and reformulate my plan to get him to talk to me. I had a basic understanding of what he'd been through, but, as I wasn't military, most of the details had been redacted.

He'd been Force Recon. EOD. He'd been in charge of disarming the bombs that littered the battlefields like the grains of sand littered the dessert. On his watch, an IED had gone off, killing three of his teammates.

Blaming himself, he'd attempted to take his own life. If not for his Sergeant disarming him, he'd have eaten the business end of an AR15.

I had to take a deep breath. A slight wave of panic hit me as I thought about what he'd been through. What he'd done. What would have happened if not for a simple quirk of timing.

For some reason, I felt as if I would have mourned him. Obviously, if he'd been "successful" I never would have met

him. But a part of me, a deep recessed part, knew that the world was better off with him in it.

His next appointment was due to begin in five minutes. I'd made arrangements for Lylah to have a sitter this time. I was hoping that if he knew there wasn't a child close by, he'd be more forthcoming.

I settled myself down at my desk in my home office. It wasn't anything fancy, but the door opened into the living room so I could watch Lylah while I was working if necessary. It was temporary, just for the next year or two. Just as long as it took the world to shift back to its normal axis.

The small "ding" that announced an incoming visit broke me from my thoughts. I clicked to answer the video call.

"Gabriel, hello." He was wearing a black t-shirt this time, one that hugged and traced every line of muscle on his upper body. It made his obsidian eyes practically glow. I cursed the stupid pandemic, this time for a selfish reason. If not for the need to stay at home, I'd be closed in a small office with this man, able to see just how tall he was. Able to inhale the scent of him.

One corner of his mouth tipped up, ever so slightly. "Melody."

One step forward, one klick back, apparently.

"How have you been since we last spoke?"

"Alive."

"Uh-huh. Is that all?"

"Yes."

I knew I should recommend he be transferred to another counselor. I should have done it after our first session, when he threatened to only tell me the same information he would tell a captor. I should have.

But there was no way I was going to give up on him. It wasn't just that he was mouth-wateringly gorgeous – even though he was. It was that I knew what it was like to want to end it all. I knew what it was like to feel responsible for things

beyond my control. I knew what it was like to feel as if there were no other way out.

I knew what it felt like to open my veins with a razor blade and curse the medical professionals who had patched me up.

I glanced down at the semicolon tattoo on my wrist. It was just barely peeking out from underneath my watch band. Removing it, I twisted my hand so that the ink was directly in front of the camera.

“Do you know what this tattoo signifies?” I didn’t expect an answer. I didn’t expect any sort of reaction. I was being unprofessional beyond words by bringing my own past into this. I wasn’t supposed to be a friend. I was supposed to be a competent counselor that provided my clients with healthy coping mechanisms.

But, and I couldn’t say how, I knew the normal methods wouldn’t work with Gabriel.

The reaction he did give me surprised me. He looked angry. Furious.

“What the fuck did you do?”

His voice, the softness of it, scared me more than a roar from him would have. It was a visceral reaction; I knew without a doubt that he’d never hurt me on purpose. I was, however, glad for the first time that we weren’t in the same room.

“I slit my wrists when my ex raped me.” My words burst into the air, like that IED he’d failed to disarm. “I was in the hospital, recovering, when I found out I was pregnant with Lylah.”

I saw a tic pop up in his cheek, as if he were clenching his jaw. His eyes shut, and he sighed. Making the sign of the cross, his gaze lifted, and his eyes met mine, and for the first time I could swear I felt the whisper of this man’s heat on my skin.

“How,” he began, but stopped abruptly when his voice lodged in his throat. “How did you survive?”

“My neighbor heard me screaming and called the cops. They showed up right after it happened.”

“No, you misunderstood me.” The pain that flashed in his eyes trapped my breath in my throat. “How did you survive afterward? After it all? How did you keep yourself from trying again?”

“For me, it was easy.” I smiled when I thought of finding out I was going to be a mom. “They found out I was pregnant when I was in the hospital. I didn’t care about myself, but I couldn’t kill a baby that way.”

His head dipped in a single nod of acknowledgement. “Makes sense.” His eyes lifted to meet mine. “I’m glad you weren’t successful.”

Surprisingly, I felt tears well up. I’d gotten to a place, mentally, where I could discuss my past with others and compartmentalize enough to keep it from destroying me. This man, however, this Marine who blamed himself for circumstances beyond his control, this gorgeous example of masculine beauty... He brought tears to my eyes and made my heart ache with empathy.

GABRIEL



Gabriel

The more I thought about it, the more I realized what I had to do. I couldn't, in good conscience, continue to see Melody as my counselor. She was too damn sexy, too irresistible to me. After she'd told me about her history, however, it was more than that. Her looks I could deal with. Her heart, the way she'd bared it to me, was too much for me to handle.

I waited impatiently for the software to connect. Her gorgeous blue eyes were echoing the smile on her full lips as she greeted me.

"Hey, Gabriel. How're you doing today?"

"I need to talk to you," I began, then realized how stupid that must sound. That was her job, the whole reason I was video chatting with her to begin with.

To her credit, she didn't roll her eyes or anything else at my stupid remark. "What's up?" She asked it casually, as if we were nothing more than two friends, catching up on each other's lives.

"I've requested to be transferred to another counselor. I can't work with you anymore."

I caught a glimpse of hurt cross her face before she retreated behind her professional mask. "May I ask why?"

"Is your daughter home?"

“She’s napping in her room.” Her eyebrows drew together in confusion. “Why?”

“Because I don’t want to take the chance she’ll hear what I have to say.” I look at her, fully, making sure she’s looking right back at me. “I’m too damned attracted to you. If it weren’t for this fucking lockdown, I would have already tried to get you to go out with me. I sure as shit would have kissed those sexy lips.”

Her eyes widened with each of my words, her mouth dropped open. She sputtered a bit, then managed to speak. “Wh-what? Seriously?” She shook her head.

“Melody, *cariña*, you don’t know the half of it.”

She blinked at me a few times, and I had to force myself not to laugh at the expressions flitting across her face. Confusion, disbelief, desire... It was that last one that had me opening my mouth again before my brain had time to filter my words.

“I want to see you. Personally. If you won’t meet me in person, I want to talk to you online. Whatever you’ll give me, I’ll take, and gladly.”

She mumbled something that sounded like “I have to go,” then my screen went black.

MELODY



Melody

Numb, hurt. Hopeful, even. I stared at my computer like I'd never seen one before. We'd never officially met. We'd never been in the same room, the same space. We'd never shared a touch, a breath.

My body tingled like I'd just climaxed, and desire, hot and electric, coursed through my body.

After taking a few deep breaths, I did the one thing I could think to do.

I contacted my office and had them transfer Gabriel to another counselor.

Then, I did something that could end my career if it were ever discovered. I pulled up Gabriel's personal information, and I called him.

He answered on the first ring.

"Hello." He said it as a statement, rather than a question like most people. His voice sounded closer, rougher, deeper over the phone than it had the computer.

I shivered.

"Gabriel? It's Melody."

"Hello, *querida*." The endearment, spoken in his deep voice, caused heat to pool low in my belly. I felt his voice, like an embrace.

I had to stop myself from audibly sighing with pleasure.

“I was calling to let you know I contacted the office to have them transfer you. They should be calling you with the new counselor’s information soon.”

He was quiet for a few moments. “Is that all?”

It should have sounded dismissive. It sounded hopeful, expectant.

Closing my eyes, crossing that professional line, sealing our fate, I answered him. “No. I wanted to tell you I feel the same way. I don’t know exactly what’s happening here, but I can’t lie to you. I feel something, too.”

“Good. I want to meet you. I’d like to take you to dinner.”

“What about Covid?”

“We’ll be safe. We can follow the directives.” His voice got softer. “I want to meet you in person.”

“Okay,” I heard myself say before I could overthink things. His voice was mesmerizing, and I wanted nothing more than to curl up next to him and have him talk to me forever. “When?”

“Are you busy tomorrow?”

“I’ll have to get a babysitter, but that shouldn’t be a problem.”

I imagined I could hear a smile in his next words. “It’s a date, then.”

GABRIEL



Gabriel

I sat in Melody's driveway, just staring at her front door. I couldn't fucking believe I was nervous. Taking a woman on a date had never made me nervous.

I'd stared death in the face. From enemies, from circumstances. From my own hands. I'd been calm and cold enough to disarm countless IEDs made by experts. I'd trained with one of the most elite fighting forces in the world, and hardly broken a sweat.

But this? Going on a date with Melody had me wrecked.

I could deal with sexual tension. I could deal with rejection if it came to that. But there was something about her that had my stomach in knots, and I felt like a fucking pussy.

I reached deep and found my damn balls, then got out of my car and walked up to her porch. Knocking, I forced myself to take deep, measured breaths. Just like I was sighting over a rifle.

When she opened the door, my breath whooshed out of my lungs in an instant. Over the computer, she'd been gorgeous. Coppery hair, big bright blue eyes. The sweetest heart shaped face I'd ever seen. Lips that were made for kissing.

In person, though? She was stunning. I had about six inches on her in height, which, in my opinion, made her the

perfect height for me to kiss. Her curves were lush, generous. Large, round breasts I couldn't wait to taste. A waist that was both plush, but that I knew I'd be able to span with both hands. Hips that I had an overwhelming urge to grip, to knead, to mark with my fingerprints.

Only years of military experience allowed me to keep from dropping to my knees and worshiping her like the goddess she was. I held out the single hot pink rose I'd brought her.

"Buenos noches, cariña."

She blushed, and what I could see of her cheeks above her mask turned almost as pink as the flower she brushed against her nose. Never thinking I'd be jealous of a flower, I took the hand she held out to me and brushed it to my mouth, hating the damn mask I was wearing more than I ever had before.

"Hi, Gabriel." She spoke softly, and her voice was like a song running through my veins.

"You ready to go?" I asked as she turned back just inside her door.

"Just grabbing my things," she replied, then closed and locked her front door.

"I wasn't sure how to dress," she began, gesturing to her sundress and flats. "You wouldn't tell me where we're going." She giggled as she said it.

"That's right. Tonight's a surprise." I placed my hand on the small of her back and had to mentally warn myself not to press too deeply. The simple contact we'd had so far had me hard and ready. Tonight was going to be a lesson in self-restraint.

I held the car door open for her and held her hand as she got in. Her eyes had a look of shock in them when she glanced up at me.

"What're you thinking?" My voice was rougher than I'd intended, but I couldn't seem to help it. I hoped she'd recognize it for what it was – desire for her – and not anger.

“I’m not used to this,” she waved a hand again, indicating the car door. She spoke with her hands a lot, it seemed.

“What, chivalry?” I suppressed a smirk. I didn’t want her to think I was laughing at her, but it delighted me that I could show her how a woman like her should be treated.

Her face flushed again, and she nodded. There was a crinkle at the corner of her eyes, telling me she was smiling, though.

Not answering her immediately, I rounded the car and got in. Then, I turned to her and took her hand in both of mine. “This is just the beginning, *mi ángel*.”

* * *

WE DROVE FOR ABOUT AN HOUR, talking of nothing too personal, yet still getting to know each other. Neither of us seemed to want to broach deeper topics, like our shared suicide attempts. This wasn’t the time for that; this night was for escape. For learning each other. For connecting.

She’d tried a couple of times to find out where we were going, but I dodged the question. I didn’t want her to feel unsafe with me, but I really wanted to surprise her.

When we arrived at the beach, she looked at me, confusion clouding her eyes. “I’m so not dressed for this. Neither are you,” she said, laughing and looking pointedly at my jeans and button up shirt.

“Do you trust me?” I gave her a smirk.

She answered without hesitation. “Absolutely.”

I didn’t respond. I simply got out, walked around the car, and held her door for her. Again, I held out my hand. This time, she took it immediately. I pulled gently until she was standing so close to me I could feel the heat coming off her body. I could smell her. She was wearing a spicy perfume that made me want to taste every inch of her luscious body. Mentally shaking my head, I tamped down those thoughts. The last thing I wanted was to scare her off by moving too quickly.

I released her hand only long enough to get a basket and blanket from my trunk. Placing my hand against her back, I urged her forward. My eyes scanned the beach, a habit I had picked up in the service and had no intention of breaking.

It was quiet. Dusk had fallen, and we had the beginnings of a glorious sunset. Red, pinks, golden streaks of clouds glowing with the late afternoon sun streaked across the sky. It reminded me of her hair, and before I could stop myself, my hand lifted and I stroked my palm down the silky strands, once, before I dropped my hand to her back again.

She turned, her eyes darkening as I watched. The shift in both of us was almost strong enough to be visible. So subtly, we didn't notice it, we shifted until our bodies were aligned from shoulder to hip.

I heard the tiniest of gasps come from her masked mouth. The sound went straight to my head like a potent whiskey.

Without realizing it, I drew to a stop and turned her with pressure from my fingertips until we faced each other.

“*Cariña.*” I finally allowed all the need I felt to come through in my voice and her eyes widened. I didn't see fear in them, just an answering desire that had blood rushing straight to my dick.

However, we were in public. During a pandemic. We were both wearing masks. I physically couldn't lean down and kiss her right now, no matter how badly I wanted to.

Tucking a lock of her hair behind her ear, I whispered to her. “Come one. I want to show you something.”

MELODY



Melody

Silently, I followed him. He led me to a small patch of beach grass that was far from the few other people roaming the beach. He spread the blanket out, then held my hand while I sat.

Taking a spot facing me, he sat as if there were a table between us. He opened the basket he'd brought, and I watched as he emptied it. Olives, grapes, strawberries. Two types of preserves, one a bright pink, the other a deep purple. Crackers and some thick crusty French bread. A selection of cured meats followed a platter of vegetables and cheese cubes. There were bonbons with fancy scroll work piped on them, and roasted peanuts for dessert.

The last thing he pulled out was a bottle of sparkling rosé and two flutes. The pop of the cork split the quiet night and I grinned at Gabriel. I took the glass he offered me and, removing my mask, drank, letting the bubbles flow down my throat.

He lowered his gaiter, and I got my first full look at his face in person.

His face was a study of masculine beauty. High, sharp cheekbones. A strong jaw that led into a square chin. He hadn't shaved; his face was covered in the sexiest dusting of hair I'd ever seen. And those eyes, those liquid ebony eyes.

They pulled at me, tugging something inside me that I felt all the way to my core.

I didn't want to distance myself from him. I didn't want to eyeball six feet of space and cover my face with fabric around this man. I wanted to launch myself at him, wanted desperately to feel his arms wrap around me. To feel his heat and smell his scent. To taste his skin.

Flushing, I set my glass down on the basket lid and picked up some grapes. I ate them slowly, looking out at the sunset he'd gifted me. Glorious, riotous color lit the sky, and his skin. "Gabriel," I said, then his expression robbed me of breath.

The hunger in his eyes was overwhelming, palpable. He banked it quickly, but not before my own need rose in answer. I took one shuddering breath, then another.

"Gabriel." I swallowed down the desire threatening to overtake me. "This is amazing, thank you."

He nodded, that same curt tip of his chin, but his gaze softened when he spoke. "De nada, *cariña*."

The word flowed over me like a caress. I shivered despite the warm evening. "What does that mean, *cariña*?"

"Sweetheart."

My breath hitched. "Oh." It was more a sigh than a word, but it was all I was able to get out. The way he was looking at me, his unrelenting need making my skin burn, I was surprised I'd managed that much.

I ate a few more grapes, trying desperately not to melt from his mere presence. He began to eat as well, and I relaxed, marginally.

It wasn't until the sun was fully set and we'd eaten our fill that he finally spoke again.

"Melody, I have to be honest with you."

"About what?"

He moved closer, then closer still, until mere inches separated our thighs. I felt his heat, warm and enveloping. I

smelled his scent, spicy and dark.

I'd never been more turned on in my life, and he hadn't even touched me.

"I want to take you home. I want to make love to you, *querida*." His fingers gripped my chin, and he turned my head until I had no choice but to look directly into his jet-black eyes. "I want it, badly."

My eyelids fluttered shut, and I swayed toward him in immediate surrender. "W-we can't. Lockdown. Lylah." Complete sentences were beyond me, but I had to get my thoughts out before this went any further.

He leaned in closer, and his hot breath wafted over the sensitive skin behind my ear. "I was tested before I was allowed back in the country. I'm negative." His teeth nipped my lobe, and a moan escaped my lips. "For everything."

I swayed toward him and before I could register the change in his position, he'd gripped my waist and tugged until I was sitting across his lap. His lips, those luscious, soft lips, were on mine. His eyes had promised dominance, but his lips gave me nothing but romance.

Soft. Sweet. Gentle. Slow. His kiss was everything I'd imagined it would be and more.

I reached my hand up and cupped his cheek, holding him to me. His manner changed instantaneously. Growling low in his throat, he tightened his arms around me, pushed his tongue deep into my mouth. He took from me everything I had to give, and more.

It was the single most sensual experience of my life.

I pulled back, unable to breathe past the desperation burning in my chest. "Gabriel," I whispered, reverent.

Stroking my back, my sides, my hips with those large warm hands, he spoke as if chanting a mantra, but I didn't understand the rapid Spanish. There was no mistaking the intent, however, when I felt his hardness press into my backside.

I gulped and forced the words past my lips. “We have to slow down. We shouldn’t be doing this.”

He tilted his head slightly to one side as he contemplated me. “Do you not want me?”

I felt the blush work its way up my chest and over my cheeks. “I do,” I whispered. “So much.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“You know what the problem is. We’re in the middle of a global pandemic, you and I aren’t ‘socially distancing’ properly, and I have a daughter I have to worry about.”

His eyes shut briefly, and he inhaled sharply, but when he spoke, his voice was soft and soothing. “I would never do anything to put you or your daughter in danger. I promise you, I’m negative.”

One of his large hands cupped the back of my head and he gently urged my cheek to his chest. I inhaled deeply, surrounded by the scent of him, a scent I knew I’d never get out of my psyche.

“If you don’t want this, tonight, or ever, I’ll back off,” he continued, his growly voice low.

“It’s not that I don’t want you. But I have my baby to think of. I can’t risk her health, not anymore than I already have, anyway.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” I replied just as he had during our first conversation.

He grinned, telling me he remembered it, too. “I’ll never push you into something you don’t want, *querida*.”

Feeling bold, I answered him, “It’s not that I don’t want you, Gabriel. I do, so incredibly much. But Lylah has to be my priority.”

“Of course. I’d never ask anything else. How about this? I’ll take you home. We’ll do this again. You take your time and decide what you want to do about us.” His voice got even

more gruff, quieter. It was all the more intense for it.
“Because, Melody, there is an *us*. I’ll go as slow as you want
me to, but I will have you.”

GABRIEL



Gabriel

*A*fter dropping Melody off at home and claiming her mouth once more, I drove home, feeling restless and unfulfilled. It wasn't just the arousal. I'd dealt with blue balls before, and I'd deal with them again.

But I hadn't wanted to leave her. I'd wanted to go into her home with her and stay. The night, forever – whatever she'd give me.

I'd never felt this way about another woman, and I probably should have been more concerned at the intensity of my thoughts, but they felt right. Comfortable. Natural.

Melody was in my head, my heart. I could easily see myself falling in love with her. And I couldn't wait to make her mine.

* * *

I WAITED until late afternoon to call her the next day. I was hoping to catch her after she'd finished with her clients for the day.

“Hello?”

That soft, sweet voice washed over me and a tension I didn't know I'd been holding released. “Hello, *querida*.”

“Gabriel, hey.” The way she said my name had me hard in a split second. I wanted to hear her say my name while I was inside her, while she was coming around my cock.

I didn’t let that thought come through in my voice, though. I didn’t want to pressure her. “I’ve missed you.”

She waited a beat, then, “I miss you, too.”

“When can I see you again?”

“Lylah’s with her grandparents for the weekend.” She paused again. “Come over.”

“I’ll be right there.”

MELODY



Melody

*H*e was fast, I had to give him that. Twenty minutes later, he knocked. Already breathing deeply in anticipation, I opened the door for him, and my heart tripped in my chest.

Somehow, he seemed even larger today than he had last night. Taller, more muscular. Maybe it was just the fact that I now knew what his body felt like pressed against mine, but he seemed to fill up my entire living room and I gulped for oxygen that suddenly felt lacking.

He didn't say a word to me. He locked his eyes on mine, hypnotizing me, and stalked me into the room until he could close the door behind him. The lock clicked into place with a sense of finality, and I felt a surge of nervousness.

I only stopped backing away from him when I felt the back of my couch hit my bottom. He was on me in an instant, his hands wrapping in my hair, angling my head exactly as he wanted it. His lips crushed down on mine and gone was the gentleness from the night before.

In its place was a man made of pure want, pure need. Nothing but desire and arousal. I was done hesitating.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed myself against him fully. He was so hard already, and an answering

liquid lust flooded my body. I moaned into his mouth, giving him all I had to give.

His response was a growl that I felt all the way to my toes. Ripping my head back, panting with longing, I fought to catch my breath. “Gabriel, please...” I wasn’t sure what I was asking for, but I knew with certainty he was the only one who could give it to me.

He growled again, a rumble that shook his chest and rattled my aching core. Picking me up, he finally spoke. “Bedroom.”

It wasn’t a question, but I knew what he wanted. “Second door on the left.”

He carried me down the hallway and jostled me a bit until he could release one hand to open the door. He laid me down, so gently, almost reverently, on the bed and began to undress me.

Naked, I stared at him. I should have felt self-conscious. The heat in his stare warmed me, heated my skin, and rather than embarrassment, an aching want filled me, and I felt a tell-tale wetness between my thighs.

He stripped himself quickly, still not speaking. The only sounds in the room were the whisper of fabric as he undressed and the ragged breaths sawing in and out of my lungs.

It seemed as if he stood there forever, but it was probably only a moment before he was on me, his weight resting on his forearms, his hips pressing me into the mattress with the force of his arousal. He was huge and a purely feminine fear tempered the ache in my pussy.

When he kissed me again, however, all doubt fled my mind and body. I didn’t care if he hurt me, I only knew I couldn’t wait much longer, and he’d barely touched me.

Slowly, so agonizingly slowly, he kissed his way down my throat, his hands never touching me. His erection pressed against my stomach and his lips on my skin were our only points of contact.

Licking his way across my collar bone, down my sternum, he finally spoke. “Melody, *mi vida, erés muy bella.*”

All I could do was answer with a gasp, then a long low moan as his mouth closed over my nipple and he suckled, hard enough to cause a sting. He laved my nipple with his tongue, easing the ache he'd caused and trailed hot, wet, open mouthed kisses down the outer slope of my breast.

I stopped breathing. My lungs begged for air, but his sensual assault wouldn't allow me control of my own body. Gasping, trying to moan and push myself further into his mouth, I reached down and gripped his hips. I dug my nails into his skin, certain I'd leave marks on his flesh, and I tugged him closer as I arched my back.

Undaunted, he continued working his way down my body, not neglecting an inch of my hyper-sensitized skin. Then... Then he reached the very heart of my need for him, and I screamed as he stroked me with his tongue. One long, leisurely lap from my entrance to my clit and I came on the spot.

I'd never, *ever*, come so quickly or so hard. Gabriel's mouth was magic. There was no other explanation.

The hot flesh under my hands was every bit hungry male, though, and he loomed over me, allowing every bit of his lust for me shine through those midnight eyes. "Gabriel," I whispered, not sure what I was even asking for. More, less, all of him. All I knew for certain was that I'd never be the same again.

GABRIEL



Gabriel

Her sky-blue eyes were grey and clouded with lust. I hadn't expected her to come so soon, but I had to admit to myself, it was the single sexiest thing I'd ever witnessed.

Her taste still on my tongue, I took her mouth as I wanted to take her body and swallowed her whispered exclamation that was my name.

Not wanting to spoil the moment, but needing to ask, I leaned down and licked the shell of her ear. She shivered, so I did it again. "I'm clean, and I need to know if you're on the pill, *cariña*."

She nodded against my shoulder where her face was buried.

"I need the words, *cariña*, baby, fuck!" She bit my shoulder and my cock jumped between us. I wanted to be inside her more than I wanted the air in my lungs, but I had to get her on the same page.

"Yes, Gabriel, please." Her voice was hoarse with her desire. Shaking, so hard it was painful, I sank into her in one hard thrust. I bottomed out, and never had I felt anything as close to Heaven as I felt inside Melody's sweet heat.

She cried out, so I withdrew almost entirely. "*Estás bien, mi amor?*"

She arched her back, pushing her hips into mine, taking me all the way again. “I’m okay, Gabriel, *please*... I need you.”

I began to move in earnest then, pulling almost completely out before slowly, aching slowly, pushing into her again until I was hitting her womb.

Her eyes were squeezed shut, and I saw tears leaking down her cheeks. I twisted so I could lean down and lap them up. “*Mierda*, baby, are you okay?”

She nodded and moaned, her nails digging in further, the sweet sting of pain urging me on. I stroked her, from the inside out, with my whole body. Skin to skin, her scent surrounding me, I felt feelings I’d never known before.

Meeting me thrust for thrust, there was no space for even light between our bodies.

It wasn’t long before I felt her inner muscles begin a rhythmic pulse, and my cock answered in kind, and I came like I never had before. Hard, hot, my release flooded inside her and I was sure it would never stop.

She screamed as she came, my name falling from her mouth like a prayer. It was so beautiful, the sight of her in release, the sound of her gasps and moans. Overwhelmed, I pulled out quickly and saw her wince.

“*Lo siento, cariña*. Did I hurt you?” I pulled her to me, rolling us until she was draped across my chest.

I felt her smile before I saw it, and the look in her eyes was pure satisfaction. “Not at all, Gabriel.”

I squeezed her tightly, shutting my eyes against the emotions threatening to rock my foundation. This tiny woman, my Melody, brought out feelings in me I’d forced down for years to protect myself while downrange.

I could swear I felt my heart crack open as I just lay there and focused on the feeling of her in my arms. The scent of sex in the air. The sight of her pale skin against my darker chest.

That shiny penny hair of hers was draped over my side and arm and I wanted to wrap my fists in it and claim her again.

So I did.

MELODY



Melody

*H*e didn't spend the night, but neither did he sneak away like a bad decision.

We didn't speak. We'd said everything we were willing to with our bodies. Words would have clouded up a situation that was already complicated.

Silently, he dressed, then kissed me. Long, deep, his tongue echoing what his body had done to mine all night, he said goodbye without saying a word.

And he took my heart with him.

* * *

I MANAGED to get some sleep, but it was restless. I missed Gabriel's warmth. I missed the smell of man and the feel of his arms around me.

I should have been worried about how quickly I'd become attached to him. It felt natural, though. As natural as having him in my body, I knew I needed him in my life.

I waited until Lylah was down for her afternoon nap before I called him. I didn't want to come off as desperate, but I couldn't seem to help myself. He was irresistible to me.

Answering on the second ring, his deep voice sent a wave of tingles through my body that was headier than any fancy champagne.

“Hello.”

“Gabriel. Hey,” I said, suddenly feeling unsure. He hadn’t made any declarations to me. He hadn’t made any promises of forever. All he’d done was take me on an incredibly romantic date, then bring my body so much pleasure I knew I was ruined for other men. “I was just calling to see how you are.”

“I’m okay. I got information about the other counselor they want me to see. He’s former military himself, so they thought it would be a good fit.”

I smiled, letting go of a nagging doubt I’d held since he told me he wanted to transfer. He hadn’t lied about his reasoning, but I’d been worried he wouldn’t take his therapy any more seriously with someone else than he had with me.

Hopefully, working with someone who could understand his history would make things easier for him. “That’s wonderful. Have you met him yet?”

“We have an appointment tomorrow afternoon.”

“That’s amazing, I’m so glad. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to help you, but I hope this new counselor will be more successful than I was.”

“It wasn’t you, *cariña*. At least, not because you weren’t good at your job. I couldn’t stop thinking about what you’d taste like, and there was no way I was going to admit to you what I’d done over there.”

“Well, as long as you’re getting help, that’s all I care about.” I managed to get the words out despite the heat flowing through me and pooling directly in my belly. His words alone had me feeling hot and bothered.

His other reason, though, bothered me. “Why couldn’t you talk to me about what happened while you were deployed? I’ve worked with other soldiers.”

“Marine, and I didn’t want to tell you what kind of man I’ve become.” He paused and I heard him sigh. “It was all government sanctioned, but the kinds of shit I did downrange was fucked up. I can’t and I won’t give you that burden to bear.”

“Gabriel, I already am.”

“What do you mean?”

“What happened between us last night changed things for me.” I wasn’t sure about his feelings, but I had to go for broke here. If I didn’t lay it all out on the line, I’d always regret it. I couldn’t lose him. “I’m falling for you, and that means I care about what you’ve been through and what you’re dealing with. I know I’m not your therapist anymore, but I’ll always be your friend and be willing to listen to you.”

“You’re not my friend.”

All I said, and that’s what he picked up on? The pang of hurt and embarrassment was instantaneous. “I’m sorry, I thought after last night...”

He cut me off. “After last night, you’re so much more than my friend, Melody.”

His words made my heart soar, but his tone had me falling right back to Earth. “Why does that make you angry?”

He sighed again. “I’m not angry. At least, not at you. *Cariña*, I can’t tell you the last time I got close to someone. I’m not the kind of person that does attachments and you’ve got me rethinking all the vows I made to myself.”

“Vows like not letting anyone get close? Like not allowing yourself to care about anything, yourself included?”

“*Mierda*.”

“Shit is right, Gabriel. I made those same vows. I was in an abusive relationship for years before I got out of it. I swore to myself that no one and nothing mattered, especially not some weak, pathetic, ugly woman who wasn’t worth the bandages it took to patch up my wounds.”

“*Cariña*,” he began, but I cut him off.

“No, you listen to me,” I said, getting more worked up by the second. “Everyone is worthy. Everyone deserves love. Everyone deserves happiness. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You don’t know what I did over there, how can you say that?”

“I read your file, remember? Sure, a lot of shit was redacted, but there was a lot of information in there, too. I know about the IED you blamed yourself for. I know that you tried to disarm it, and I know that you were unsuccessful. I know that people died because of that.”

“Melody,” he interrupted, and I should have taken his tone as a warning.

“No, I’m gonna finish this!” I was raging mad now, at the Marines, at the war, at life itself for putting this man in that untenable position. “You listen to me, Lance Corporal Martinez, *you* are worth loving. *You* did nothing wrong. Those men’s deaths are *not* your fault, do you understand me?”

The last thing I expected from him was a bark of laughter so loud I had to hold the phone away from my face. “I understand I better make sure I never piss you off, *mi leonita*.”

Anger spent, I sighed, then began to laugh a little myself. “Sorry,” I said through my giggles. “But I’m not sorry about what I said. I meant every word.”

“I know, *cariña*. And you know that it’s going to take time to let myself destroy those walls I built.” His voice turned serious, and once again, began to send shivers of longing down my spine. “But you already hold my heart.”

“Gabriel,” I sighed, hoping against hope I wasn’t misunderstanding his words. “You hold my heart, too.”

GABRIEL



Gabriel

I had to see her again, soon. One night with this woman, this incredibly sexy, sensual woman who fought for me harder than I fought for myself, would never be enough for me.

“Gabriel, you hold my heart, too.”

Her words soothed my heart just as they hardened my body in a rush. She’d admitted she had feelings for me, strong ones, and my heart and dick knew it.

She was mine.

“When can I see you again?”

“Well, I’m free Fri...”

“Tonight.” I couldn’t wait almost another week to see her, to taste her, to feel her come apart in my arms. I had to hold her, claim her.

“Tonight?” She sounded taken aback, but I wanted to make sure she knew exactly where I stood. I wasn’t playing games with this woman. “I’ll have to see if I can get a sitter for Lylah.”

“Do it. I need to touch you, *cariña*.” I dropped my voice to barely above a whisper. “Everywhere.”

I heard her gasp, then let out the softest of moans. My cock twitched in response.

If this kept up, I wasn't going to make it until tonight.

"I'll find someone."

"Be sure you do. I'll be over at eight."

* * *

TWO SECONDS TO EIGHT, I was standing on her doorstep.

Some habits die hard, and the punctuality the Marines drilled into me was one of them.

I knocked and heard her call "Coming!" from somewhere deep inside the house.

I'd have to talk to her about announcing her presence to just anyone who could be outside.

When she opened the door, I hardened instantly. She was wearing a soft green dress that was cut low on her chest and high on her thighs. Her copper curls were loose and flowing across her breasts.

She was the most stunning thing I'd ever seen. I dropped the two hot pink roses I'd brought her and dragged her to me. Giving into my urges, I wrapped my hand in those soft curls and devoured her mouth. She moaned, low and needy, and her eyes fell shut.

I wrapped both arms around her hips and lifted until she was as snug as I could get her while we were both still closed. She fit me perfectly; soft where I was hard, tender where I was strong.

She made me drunk with lust.

I walked her backward, leading her to her bedroom. I'd planned to take her out to dinner, but food would have to wait.

I had something much tastier I wanted to eat.

Not wasting any time, I spun her and tipped her forward onto the edge of her bed. I ran my hands up those silky lush thighs, lifting her skirt up as I went.

Her panties were pink.

My cock twitched, and I yanked the lacy fabric down her legs and off. Tossing her underwear onto the floor, I positioned her until her knees were on the edge of the mattress and her ass was in the air, her perfect pink pussy right in front of my face.

I leaned into her, licking from top to bottom. When I felt her sweet honey begin to run down my chin, I growled, an animal intent on rutting. She was driving me wild with her gasps and moans. With the undulating of her hips. With the way she pushed herself harder onto my tongue with each successive lap.

She screamed when she came, my name ripped from her throat. "*Gabriel, yes!*"

I lapped up her release eagerly. Using two fingers to spread her cream inside her, I scissored my fingers open, stretching her tight inner muscles, readying her for my invasion.

Dios mio, I could see the folds of her sweet cunt.

My heart was pounding, my blood rushing through my veins, making me harder than I'd ever been before. I shoved into her in one stroke, then stilled, using every bit of self-control the Marines had taught me to give her a moment to adjust to me.

She was having none of it. She wiggled her ass, rubbing her sweet pussy all over me. She tried to thrust against me, but my grip on her hips was too tight.

So, I did it for her.

I thrust, then again, and again, until I was moving so fast, I should have been concerned I'd hurt her. But Melody's voice was loud in the otherwise silent room, urging me on, to give her more, harder, faster.

I couldn't deny her anything because it was what I wanted, needed, too. The first flutterings of her orgasm urged me on even more. I pounded into her like a man insane, and it wasn't long before I felt my balls tighten and my spine tingle.

Going perfectly still, I released into her, her tight muscles prolonging my own orgasm.

I had to stop myself from collapsing on top of her. I didn't want to crush her, but she'd taken the strength out of my muscles. I did the next best thing.

I wrapped my arms around her, one behind her shoulders, the other around her hips and I rolled us until she was draped over me like a blanket that wasn't quite long enough.

She sighed in contentment and laid her head on my chest. Lazily stroking her skin, I breathed in the scent of sex and woman. My dick stirred, but she'd already fallen asleep, so I tried to ignore it. It wasn't easy.

Her sweet face was turned toward me, so I just took the opportunity to study her face. She was easily the most gorgeous woman I'd ever seen, and she was coming to mean more and more to me each time I talked to her, thought about her. Made love to her.

This is a woman who could own my heart if I wasn't careful.

MELODY



Melody

I think I dozed off, but it must not have been for very long. Gabriel was staring at me, a look in his eyes that I couldn't quite place. If I didn't know any better, I'd think it was love.

There was no way he was in love with me this soon.

I knew my feelings for him were strong, but did I love him? Not yet, although my heart was telling me it was only a matter of time.

"Hey there," I said, smiling at him.

His arms tightened around me, his hands gripping my bottom and pulling me, ever so slowly, up the length of his body until we were face to face.

"Hey there, back," he said, and kissed me. His mouth was hot, hungry, but slow and sensual.

I was learning that Gabriel was insatiable, but he was one of the most romantic men I'd ever known, too. His words and movements in bed were always designed to worship my body. Long, slow kisses. Hot, possessive touches.

He made me feel cherished; precious and sexy all at once.

He went to my head like a fine wine. All I wanted was to get drunk on him.

Placing hot, open mouthed kisses from my lips to my ear, he sent shivers up and down my spine. I moaned, unable to help myself.

I felt, more than heard, him laugh.

“Are you hungry, *cariña*?” His hands drifted lower until he was cupping my thighs, spreading my legs wide until I was straddling him.

I grinned up at him. “Very.”

Gently, I pulled his hands off me and pushed until they were next to him on the bed. I began to kiss my way down his hard, sculpted chest.

When he reached for me again, I playfully slapped his hand. “Don’t touch,” I told him.

It wasn’t long before I reached his abdomen and when I dragged my tongue along the trail of hair leading down to his erection, he visibly shuddered.

I felt like a goddess, so sexy that I could make a man like Gabriel shiver with desire. He was always so in control of everything. His words. His body. My body...

I took the tip of him in my mouth and circled my tongue, lightly, letting myself get used to the salty sweet taste of him. He wasn’t moving now, merely staring at me out of eyes gone coal black with need.

I saw him begin to reach for me again, and swiftly ducked my head, taking all of him into my mouth at once. I suckled him, nipped him, licked him. His gaze never wavered, but I could see the slightest quivering in his muscles.

Suddenly, with no warning, he grabbed my waist, flipping me until he was on top of me, teasing my entrance with that generous cock of his.

I cried out, thrusting my hips up toward him.

Granting my unspoken request, he filled me, rough, quickly. Fire spread through my veins, across my skin, down to my soul.

Gabriel had never been this rough with me.

I loved every second of it.

Loved the grip of his fingertips on my hips, knowing I'd likely have bruises. Loved the feel of him filling me almost to the point of pain. Loved the growls and groans of lust that poured from his lips as he pounded into me relentlessly.

I loved him.

GABRIEL



Gabriel

*A*s Melody dressed, I stared at the fingerprints on her silky skin. I knew I'd put them there in the heat of passion, but the sight of the injuries I'd given her turned my stomach.

I couldn't allow myself to get so carried away again. I couldn't risk Melody's safety, no matter how hard she made me. No matter how turned on I got from the feeling of her mouth on me.

I stood, then went to her and wrapped her up in my arms. "I'm so sorry, *cariña*."

Caressing her hips, I knelt at her feet and kissed each of the purple spots. "So sorry," I whispered against her, my heart ready for her fear to show.

But she didn't pull away from me. She didn't yell or curse me. She smiled down at me, that glorious hair of hers spilling over her shoulders like a sunset.

"Sorry for what, Gabriel?"

"For these," I said, brushing my fingertips against her as if I could erase what I'd put on her.

She laughed, softly. "There's nothing to be sorry for. I love making you go crazy," she said, her voice soft and sure.

"It bothers me that I hurt you."

“I loved every minute of it, Gabriel.” Kneeling, she met my lips with hers and reassured me with her kiss.

“Now, I believe you mentioned food. I’m starving,” she said, laughing a bit louder this time.

* * *

WE STAYED IN FOR DINNER. Our reservation had long since passed.

I wasn’t an amazing cook, but I could hold my own. I managed to make some chicken fajitas with what Melody had in her kitchen.

As we ate, she kept giving me quick glances. It was almost like she wanted to say something but wasn’t sure how to bring it up.

Given what we’d already done together, I couldn’t imagine what had her acting shy now.

“Something on your mind, *cariña*?”

She started, nearly dropping her fork. “Nope. Uh-uh.”

I gave her a look that suggested she was lying, and I wasn’t falling for it. “Sure,” I said, making it clear to her that I didn’t believe her in the least.

She sighed and deliberately placed her fork on her napkin. When she finally looked me in the eye, she seemed almost scared.

My heart broke, thinking she could be scared of me for any reason. She’d told me she didn’t mind the marks on her skin, but maybe she was just trying to not make me angry.

“Is it the bruises? I’m so sorry about that, *cariña*. I’d never hurt you, you know that, right?”

She looked at me like I was crazy. “No, I meant what I said. I enjoyed every second of that.”

The peachy-pink blush on her cheeks was back, telling me she wasn’t upset about the bruises.

“Then what is it, *cariña*? Talk to me, please.”

She sighed, deeply. “I have a confession, and I’m not sure how to tell you.”

“Tell me what, *cariña*?” I reached across the table and took her hands in mine. Bringing them to my face, I ran kisses along her palms and fingertips.

She smiled at me. “I love you, Gabriel.”

I waited a beat, two. Fully expecting the desire to run to rise up inside me as it always did when I was forced to confront emotions. Surprisingly, though, it didn’t happen.

There was no fear, no panic. No stiffening of my muscles in preparation to fight.

My face, however, went back to what I thought of as my “military mask”.

In contrast, Melody’s face fell when she saw my expression.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled hastily, standing so quickly she almost tipped her chair over. She disappeared into her bedroom, and I sat there, like an idiot, and let her go.

MELODY



Melody

I was humiliated. Hurt. And, dammit, I was angry.

He'd told me his heart was mine, but when I told him I love him, he retreated behind that same damn mask he'd shown me in the beginning.

I knew that we were moving fast. I was terrified of just how fast we were going. But I knew myself, knew my heart, well enough to know that this wasn't just a sex haze. There was something real there with Gabriel. Something almost tangible in its intensity.

I'd given him my heart, and he'd broken it in record time.

I heard a knock on the bedroom door.

This oughta be good.

I wiped my face hastily, hoping he wouldn't notice the tears. I was embarrassed enough, already.

"Come in."

He opened the door slowly, as if he were scared to come in.

Or, God forbid, he no longer wanted to. The thought was too much for me, so I banished it immediately.

"*Cariña*, I'm so sorry." His words were the right ones, but his tone was impersonal, his voice colder than I'd ever heard

it. My heart cracked further.

“It’s okay,” I managed to say despite the overwhelming urge to bury my head on his shoulder and bawl my eyes out.

“I have to go.”

“I und... What?” The tears stopped like a tap had been turned off. Anger, rage, hot and red, reared up in their place and, for the first time in my life, I wanted to hit someone. “Why?”

“I just have to go. *Lo siento, cariña.*”

He didn’t wait for a response from me, but turned and walked, briskly but unhurriedly, toward my front door.

When the click of the knob resounded through my now silent house, I allowed the hurt to take me under, allowed the tears to flow.

* * *

I MUST HAVE CRIED myself to sleep. The sky was light when I next opened my eyes, and it took me a few minutes to fully wake up. My eyes hurt and my whole body was sore, as if wracked with flu. I’d never before realized a broken heart caused actual physical pain.

My doorbell peeling had me sitting up, finally shaking off the last dregs of sleep.

My parents.

Lylah.

Shit.

I couldn’t face my parents right now. They’d take one look at my face and know something was terribly wrong. They weren’t the type of people to look the other way, also. I was in for either an interrogation or a confession.

Shit shit shit.

I rubbed my hands over my face, cringing when I looked down and realized I was still wearing my clothes from the night before. At least I wasn't naked.

I took a deep, fortifying breath. It did nothing for me.

Opening the door, I plastered a fake smile on my face and greeted my family.

"Mom, Dad, hey," I said, kneeling down to hug Lylah. "Hey, baby girl. You doing okay?"

"Hi mama!" She pulled out of my arms and ran inside, straight to the TV. For once, I was thankful for her childish attention span, as it meant that the talk I was about to have with my parents wouldn't be overheard by tiny ears.

My mother, still gorgeous despite the greying of her red hair and the lines around her blue eyes, arched an eyebrow at me. "You've been crying."

It wasn't a question, but I answered her anyway. "Yes, Mom, but I'm fine." I sent her a pleading look. "Really."

"You're not, but I'll let that slide." She gave me a pointed look. "For now."

My dad had been silent but watching us this whole time. He gave me a grumble to let me know he was annoyed, and I felt a small smile for the first time in hours.

"You weren't watching that show, *the Notepad*, were you?"

"It's the Notebook, Daddy, and no, I wasn't," I have to bite my finger to keep from laughing in his face. He's always been able to make me laugh, no matter what else is keeping me down.

My mom rolls her eyes. "Edward, knock it off."

My dad winks at me, and we go inside. "Can I get you guys some coffee?"

"No, sweetie, we need to get going. Just wanted to drop the baby off." My mom's eyes are searching my house, and I know she's mentally cataloguing everything that doesn't meet

with her approval. I'm sure I'll be hearing about my lack of decorating skills later.

She reaches out and hugs me, tightly, and whispers, "If you need me, you know where I am, right?"

Hugging her back, I nod against her cheek. "I do, mama. Thanks."

As they're leaving my phone rings and my heart lurches in my chest, thinking it could possibly be Gabriel.

When I check the number, though, I see it isn't him. My stomach drops again with humiliation and I swear, if it weren't for my daughter needing me, this situation with him would have me lying in bed all day, crying my heart out.

I answer the phone with resignation. It's my boss, Angela, and she doesn't call unless something's wrong.

"Melody, hey. Have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

She sighs, and I can picture her behind her desk, eyes pinched shut and her hand on her forehead.

"I'll take that as a 'no'."

Her tone has my stomach clenching in knots. "What's going on, Angie?"

"It got out that you're seeing Gabriel on a personal basis. There's talk about having your license stripped. HIPPA wants me to put you on administrative leave without pay while they investigate."

Now, I was downright queasy. I didn't think they'd be able to do anything since I'd passed Gabriel off as a patient before we ever met in real life. Hell, that was the whole point of transferring his case to another counselor.

I sat heavily on my couch, my knees feeling like they were going to buckle at any moment.

"How," I began, but couldn't force anything past the lump in my throat.

“How did they find out? The new counselor on Gabriel’s case, Steven, reported it after Gabriel told him why he transferred.”

“But, we didn’t do anything until after he wasn’t my patient anymore!” I was yelling now, not caring how shrill my voice must have been in Angela’s ear.

“It doesn’t matter. Steven’s a stickler for these things, and with the way OSHA and HIPPA operate, they’re going to investigate regardless.”

I sank down further into the cushions. I’d given my heart to a man who not only didn’t care or return my love, but that was now going to cause me to lose my job. Being stripped of a medical license was basically a death sentence career-wise.

GABRIEL



Gabriel

I'd been going to therapy regularly, not because the government wanted me to, but because I knew that Melody wanted me to. I figured, for her sake, I could give it a good effort.

The guy they switched me to after Melody was a douche, but if seeing this motherfucker meant I could continue to see her outside of a professional setting, I'd deal with it.

When I pulled up the video software and waited for it to connect, a pang of despair hit me. I should be talking to Melody. I should be at her house, in her bed. In her body.

I should have told her that I loved her, too, when she declared her feelings to me. It would have been the God's honest truth. I just didn't know how to say those words to someone, knowing that I wasn't worthy of hearing them.

But, she'd said them anyway. Said them, and meant them. That's what had my gut in knots. I knew, once she knew the extent of what I'd done downrange, she'd change her tune right quick.

I honestly didn't think I could take that, and it seemed almost inevitable. My only hope was to put it off for as long as possible.

The screen finally connected and that dick's face appeared.

“Gabriel, hello.” His voice was annoying for no other reason that it wasn’t Melody’s.

I nodded at him. I hadn’t been an easy patient, I knew it, but I didn’t give a shit. The only reason I was doing this at all was because I’d promised Melody to give it a chance.

Three sessions later and I was about out of chances to give.

“I wanted to tell you that I’ve reported Ms. Novak to HIPPA regarding what we discussed in your last session.” Steven’s words take a minute to sink in, but once they do, fury like nothing I’ve ever felt, not even in the desert, washes through my body like a tsunami.

My voice is quiet, even. It should have been a warning, but that asshole either was too stupid or too stubborn to pick up on it. “What the fuck did you just say?”

“I had to report Ms. Novak. Both your and her actions were inappropriate and unprofessional. Not to mention against HIPPA laws.”

This fucker is lucky there’s a screen and several miles separating us. “She didn’t break any laws, asshole.”

He shakes his head and gives me a condescending smile that says he thinks I’m simple. “That’s up to HIPPA to determine, Mr. Martinez, not you and certainly not Ms. Novak.”

Not bothering to reply to that ridiculous statement, I cut the connection and grab my phone.

Now, it seems, I have two things to apologize for.

* * *

THE THIRD TIME I tried to call Melody, her phone went straight to voice mail. I could take a hint. But, I was going to ignore it anyway.

She needed to hear what I had to say.

That's how I found myself sitting in her driveway half an hour later, more scared to knock on her door than I'd been to deal with IEDs or squeeze the trigger on my sniper rifle.

I couldn't lose her. And the odds are, I already had.

I had to find my balls, quick, and get to Melody before someone else had a chance to tell her how badly I'd fucked up her career.

I felt nauseous as I knocked on her door, and when she opened it, giving me a haughty look, I thought I was gonna vomit.

"*Cariña.*" My heart stuttered in my chest when she slammed the door in my face. It felt so harsh, so final. I couldn't bear it if I never again had the chance to hold her. Make love to her. Just be with her. So, I knocked again, vowing to myself this time I'd force my way in if she tried that bullshit again.

"Melody, let me in, *querida*. Now" I pounded on the door, knowing she was right behind it. I could hear her sobbing, and the sound cracked my heart into a million pieces. Knowing I was at least part of the cause of her pain ate at me, and for the first time in a long time, I felt that hopelessness that'd been so much a part of me in the desert.

It was terrifying, but not as scary as the thought that I'd lose the one person who made me want to fight for myself for once.

And I did want to fight for myself. I wanted to make myself a better person, try to atone for all the bullshit I'd done under orders downrange. I wanted to repent until my soul was as clean as a newborn's.

But all of that would be pointless unless I could get Melody to forgive me.

"Melody!" I was shouting now, not caring that her neighbors were beginning to poke nosy heads out of their front doors and windows. "Melody, open up, baby, please!"

Nothing. Well, not nothing. Nothing except those heart rending sobs that I knew were my fault. They cut into me,

sharp and dirty, and I knew those wounds would never heal.

“*Cariña*, I’m only gonna say this once. If you don’t open this door, I’m gonna kick it in.” The threat wasn’t futile. I didn’t want to add more damage to her life, but I had to have a chance to explain everything, a chance to make amends.

Shit, a chance to warn her about the HIPPA investigation. That was beyond either of us, and even if she kicked me to the curb and never spoke to me again, I had to make sure she knew about that.

“Okay, baby, since you’re not answering me, I’m coming in. This is your last warning.” I knew I sounded as if I were threatening her, and I guess in a way I was. She was threatening my heart; I was threatening that I wasn’t going to allow her to stay away from me.

I reared my foot back and gave one good solid kick to the wood just below the doorknob. The door crashed open with an ear splitting *bang!* Immediately, I heard Melody scream and her daughter start to sob.

I was a dick. What the fuck was wrong with me? Had I seriously just kicked down the door to the home where the woman I loved and her sweet little girl lived? Had I just done the unthinkable and terrified them both? I thought warning Melody what was happening would make it okay, but I immediately felt the rush of shame and remorse sweep through my body.

My skin was hot with the anger and regret I felt. I slumped down on her couch, slouching in on myself in an effort to make myself seem as small as possible. I wasn’t as tall as a lot of the Grunts I’d served with, but I knew how my solidly stocky build would appear to a woman, and especially a small child.

Fuck. Could I ever manage to do anything right?

Melody’s eyes on me pulled me from my self-reclamations. I could see anger in them still, spicy and boiling just under the surface. But what gutted me was the fear in

those gorgeous baby blue eyes that made me feel like the worst man to ever walk the face of the Earth.

“*Cariña...*”

She cut me off with a swift shake of her head. “No. No, Gabriel, you don’t get to literally break into my home and then expect me to listen to you and your bullshit explanations.”

She stepped closer, just slightly, as if she were afraid to get too close. I realized with sudden trepidation that I hadn’t just scared her with the door fuck up, but that she was now *scared* of me. As if she was realizing she didn’t know me that well, and for all she knew, I could be a woman beater.

I held my hands up, palms out, and sank further into her couch cushions. “*Cariña*, I’m not gonna hurt you, I swear it. I broke in the door because I have to talk to you, and I didn’t want to do it screaming at you where all your neighbors can hear everything.

“I fucked up. You’re going to be getting a call about a HIPPA investigation.”

Her eyes narrowed, but her shoulders seemed to slump. “I already did. What happened, Gabriel? What did you tell them?”

I gave her every bit of information I’d relayed to my new counselor. She settled herself in an arm chair on the other end of the room and rocked, back and forth and back and forth.

Taking a chance, the chance of a lifetime, I went to her, careful to keep my movements fluid and slow. I knelt at her feet, then took her hands in mine and brought them to my mouth.

“*Cariña*, please, *lo siento*, I’m so fucking sorry, baby.” Over and over I whispered to her, endearments and regret pouring from my heart to land at her feet. I kissed her fingertips, her palms, her delicate wrists where I could feel her pulse flutter.

She wasn’t crying. She’d stopped her sobs when I broke the door down. The silence from her worried me more than if she’d been bawling her eyes out.

“Baby, please, talk to me.” I kept trailing kisses up her arms, across her shoulders, up and down her sweet neck. These kisses weren’t preamble to making love, but a way for me to show her that I was sorry in a way words never could.

I took her mouth, briefly, and the break in my heart cracked wide, crumbling me heart and soul when she didn’t respond.

“Mommy?”

The smallest, sweetest voice I’d ever heard broke into my thoughts and had me standing, stepping back from Melody.

Unlike my words and kisses, her daughter’s voice got through to Melody and she turned, opening her arms to the little one.

They hugged and held each other and I heard her daughter stage whisper, “Mommy, what’s wrong? Who is that man?”

Melody stroked Lylah’s back and wiped the tears from her cheeks. “This is Mr. Gabriel. He’s a friend of mommy’s. He had some bad news, and Mommy got sad, but everything’s okay now, sweet girl. How about you go back and play in your room for a bit, and Mommy will take care of everything out here, then we can watch *Frozen II*, okay?”

The kid nodded and fled back down the hallway. I heard the door slam a moment later, and as soon as it did, I was back on my knees in front of Melody, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her as close as humanly possible.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry...” The words were a litany, a prayer, a vow all in one. I just hoped she could hear the truth in them.

She clung to me, finally crying again, and I didn’t know whether to be relieved or not. At least she didn’t appear comatose like she’d been a few minutes ago.

So I just held her, rocking her back and forth, trying to comfort her any way I could. A small, selfish part of me relished the feeling of her in my arms. Despite the reason, despite knowing I caused her pain, I had her clutched to me tightly, and my heart settled somewhat.

If I could take this all away from her, take her pain for myself, I'd do it in a heartbeat. All I could do was try to give her my strength and be there for her when the fallout of my actions came back to haunt her.

MELODY



Melody

Gabriel's shirt was soaked by the time I finally calmed down enough to stop crying. I couldn't bring myself to care. Especially considering it was his fault my heart was in pieces.

When he'd ignored my confession of love the other night, I thought I'd never felt such pain. But now, looking into those brown eyes of his, knowing he didn't love me and didn't care about my job, my livelihood... Surely this was more pain than a person could bear.

I wanted him to know exactly what it was his words, or more specifically lack of words, had done to me. I wanted him to know that his offhanded comments made to a man who'd always caused issues for me professionally because I hadn't wanted him personally had destroyed not just my chances with this company, but potentially the medical field altogether.

I was just as disgusted with myself, blubbering all over the man like a big baby. I couldn't fight my tears and my heart at the same time, though, and when he'd wrapped me in his arms, my body had felt the calm and comfort he radiated. Being with him, even if only for this short time, would have to sustain me for the rest of my life.

I pulled away from him, standing and putting some space between us. I had to learn to do this myself, to not lean on him

any more. It wasn't as if he was here to stay. He'd made that quite clear.

“*Cariña*,” he began, and my poor heart shattered even more. To never again hear his voice call me that. To never again feel the rumble in his chest as he spoke endearments into my hair, his breath warm against my skin. “*Cariña*, I love you, *te amo*.”

He waited a moment, then turned and began to walk away, walk out my door, out of my home.

Out of my life.

I cried out, his name ripped from me. “Gabriel!” Running toward him, I launched myself at him, clutching at him, sobbing his name over and over.

He gripped me tightly, so hard it hurt to breathe, and I loved every second of it.

“Sweetheart, *querida*, please stop crying.” He trailed kisses up and down my face, my neck.

I couldn't help it, though, the tears wouldn't stop. He lifted me, easily, and I'd never felt so cherished, so safe. He carried me inside, set me down on the couch. Sitting next to me, he shifted so that I was in his lap, cradled against his chest, his heartbeat strong and rapid in my ear.

After what seemed like forever, his lips finally found mine and I kissed him with all the longing, hurt, and need echoing through my body. “I love you, so much, Gabriel,” I panted, wanting nothing more than to strip and throw myself at him. I couldn't, of course, with my daughter awake and more than likely to show up at any moment.

His hot calloused hand cupped my breast, and it broke my heart to pull away from his touch, but I couldn't risk Lylah seeing something she shouldn't.

“Lylah,” was all I said, and he immediately set me down on the couch next to him.

“Sorry, *cariña*. I got carried away.”

“Would you like to meet her, finally?”

“More than anything.” His eyes were fierce on mine, the love in his gaze so evident, I wondered that I hadn’t seen it before.

I stood and went to get Lylah. She was in her room, playing with some dolls and looked up when I entered, her concern clear on her precious face.

“Mommy?” The uncertainty in her voice gutted me.

“Mommy’s okay, sweetheart. And everything else is, too, I promise you.” I knelt beside her and held her close, wrapping my arms as tightly around her as I could without squishing her. “Would you like to come meet mommy’s friend?”

She nodded and smiled, and while there was still a hint of worry in the gesture, she stood and followed me without hesitation.

Gabriel was standing in the living room when we returned, and he looked just as nervous as I think Lylah felt. It was heartwarming, the way he obviously wanted to make a good impression on my daughter.

“Lylah,” I began, pressing lightly on her back to urge her forward. “This is mommy’s friend Gabriel.”

He approached slowly, probably cognizant of the fact that he’d terrified her when he’d busted the door in. He bent, making himself smaller.

“Hello, *mija*. I’m sorry about the door. I’d never scare you on purpose.”

His apology seemed to dispel any lingering doubts Lylah had about the large stranger. She stepped away from me and wrapped her arms around Gabriel’s knees.

His face, when he looked up at me, was filled with love and wonder. He brought a large hand up and cupped the back of her head, hugging her back without overwhelming her.

Lylah lifted her cornflower blue eyes to his face. “Hello, Misser Gabiul.”

I went to them, wrapped my arms around Gabriel’s back. He held us both, and it felt like coming home. It felt right,

perfect.

GABRIEL



Gabriel

Looking into two sets of blue eyes that showed such trust and love for me was overwhelming. It felt like more than I could possibly deserve, more than I ever could have hoped for.

Just a few short months ago, I'd stuck my rifle barrel in my mouth and had every intention of pulling the trigger and ending my fucked up life. Now, though, I was so thankful I hadn't gone through with it.

I'd never have met this amazing, gorgeous, and giving woman in my arms. I'd never have met this tiny little girl whose heart shone in her eyes. I'd never have had the chance to love them, to shelter them from life's hardships.

I closed my eyes and let myself just feel their warmth against me. My heart tripped in my chest, and I knew that from that day forward, my fucked up life wasn't fucked up any more. It was going to be perfect, wonderful. Fulfilling on so many levels. I now knew why I'd survived when my brothers hadn't.

I was meant to love these two angels.

* * *

THE ONE DARK spot on an otherwise perfect evening of dinner and watching cartoons with my girls was the worry about what was going to come of HIPPA's investigation into Melody. It was like a blanket of doubt hung over us, and neither of us wanted to give voice to it, especially not in front of Lylah.

The poor angel had been through too much already, most of it caused by me and my stupid behavior.

Once she'd gone to bed, however, Melody and I settled down together on her couch, her bottom nestled between my thighs. I had an arm wrapped around her hips to keep her still. If she so much as breathed too deeply right now, I wouldn't be able to keep my hands to myself and we had to get this discussion over with.

"*Cariña*, I need to explain what happened with that fucker at therapy."

Melody lay her head back on my shoulder, shifting until she could see me in the eye. "I assume he asked why you transferred to another counselor, and you were honest with him."

I nodded. That was the gist of it. The only part that mattered, anyway.

She sighed, long and deep. "I have a confession, too."

Her voice was resigned, as if she dreaded having to tell me whatever it was that was on her mind.

"Steven probably wouldn't have said anything except for two reasons. One, he's had it in for me since I started working there. I've gotten two promotions since I started and he's worked there three years longer than I have. Both times, he told me in so many words that I must have slept my way up the ladder because there was no way I was smart enough to have gotten the promotions on my own."

It took an act of God for me to be able to keep my breathing even and my fists unclenched. I'd scared both my girls too much already, and the anger that was pulsing through my veins, if given control, wouldn't be stopped until that motherfucker's neck was in my hands.

Then I discovered Melody wasn't finished talking.

"He's also asked me out several times. Each time I turn him down, and I try to be polite, but I've had to get kinda firm with him, because he can't seem to take no for an answer."

"Has he ever touched you?" I managed to keep relatively calm, but I knew Melody could hear the rage in my voice. I'd kill him. Slowly. No one would ever find his mangled body.

"Just the one time," she said easily, as if she hadn't just ended this man's life as he knew it.

I'd deal with him. He'd never fuck with her or any woman again once I got through with him.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY I walked into the office Steven was working out of as soon as they unlocked the doors.

I gave the receptionist a curt nod in greeting and pushed right past her. She didn't try to stop me, and despite feeling like a jackass for intimidating the woman, I wasn't going to look an unintentional gift horse in the mouth.

Steven's office was empty when I opened the door, so I sat, taking the chair behind his desk. I couldn't wait for him to see what it felt like to have someone scare him like he'd done to Melody. She hadn't admitted as much to me, of course, but I could tell by the way her muscles stiffened when she spoke of him.

I didn't wait long until the door opened and he reached in to flick on the lights. It took him a moment to notice me, but when he did, the flash of shock on his face was satisfying.

"Mr. Martinez, did we have an appointment?"

I smiled at him. "Not one that you knew about."

He walked slowly to his desk, as if moving too quickly would set me off. Little did he know there was nothing he could do to avoid my wrath.

“I don’t understand,” he said and I got a sick satisfaction from the fear quivering in his voice.

“Melody Novak.”

His eyes widened and he began to back away from me.

“You’ll never speak to her again.” I stood, walked toward him. When I was standing so close he could feel the heat of my anger rolling in waves off my body I continued. “You’ll never look at her again.”

I dropped my voice, relying on the tactics the Corps had taught me. “And if I hear so much as a whisper of a rumor that you’ve touched her, I’ll make you suffer like you can’t even imagine. *Comprende?*”

“I - I never,” he stuttered and I grabbed his throat, squeezing ever so slowly.

“Don’t lie to me, *cabrón*. I know what you did.” His face was turning a delightful shade of purple. “You’re also going to call HIPPA and tell them you were ‘mistaken’ about Ms. Novak.”

Purple began to shift to blue. Reluctantly, I let him go. He couldn’t make the call if I killed him, unfortunately.

He grasped at his neck, which even now was beginning to bruise. His voice was hoarse when he gasped out, “Fine, fine.”

I walked toward the door, stopping just before crossing the threshold. “One more thing,” I added, turning back to him. “No one will ever know I was here, *verdad?*”

He nodded.

I barely managed not to slam the door behind me as I left.

MELODY



Melody

When Gabriel came back the next morning, he had a smile on his face, but he wouldn't give me any explanation other than Steven had been "dealt" with, and the investigation was going to be stopped.

Eventually, I dropped the subject. I had a feeling he'd threatened Steven, and if that were the case, it was probably better that I not know exactly what had happened.

You know, just in case.

Whatever it was, I got a phone call from Angela later that day letting me know I'd been reinstated and wouldn't have to worry about anything. Apparently, Steven had resigned.

When I hung up, Gabriel was sitting on the floor, playing Candy Land with Lylah, a huge grin on his face.

He just shrugged when I asked if he knew anything about it.

I bent down and placed a gentle kiss on his ear. "Thank you, Gabriel."

"De nada, querida."

"That means 'you're welcome', mommy!"

Gabriel had started teaching Lylah Spanish and she, true to her age, was picking it up rapidly and easily.

She'd outpaced me, that was for sure. I sat down, joining them. "That's right, smarty pants." I gave her a smacking kiss on her cheek, sending her into a fit of giggles. "I love you, sweet girl."

"Love you, mommy." She turned to Gabriel and flashed him a megawatt smile. "Love you, Misser Gabiul."

"*Te amo, mija.*" He turned to me, kissing me with a promise of the passion to come later, once we were alone. "*Te amo, cariña.*"

"I love you, too, Gabriel."

The End

EPILOGUE



Gabriel

*I*t's been almost a year since Melody came into my life. And every day I spend with her and Lylah, the more I fall in love with them both.

I've finally decided it was time to make it permanent and official. I knew they both loved me, so the nerves I felt were unwelcome and, frankly, surprising.

I'd been planning this day for a while now, and thankfully the weather was cooperating. I hadn't told either of them where we were going, mainly because I wanted to surprise them both, but also because I knew they couldn't keep a secret from each other.

It was precious to me the way they shared everything. I was close to my mom, loved her beyond words. But Melody and Lylah were friends, as well, and it warmed my heart to see them together.

I just about had the car packed for the day when Melody finally woke up. She came outside to me, carrying two cups of the Cuban coffee I'd gotten her addicted to. I quickly draped a blanket over the items I'd brought to hide them. If she so much as glimpsed them, she'd guess where we headed.

"Morning," she said, handing me a cup. Her voice was still raspy from sleep, and my dick twitched in anticipation. One of

his favorite ways to wake up was buried deep inside Melody's sweet pussy.

"Morning, *cariña*." I downed the coffee quickly, eager to get on the road now that she was awake. "Is Lylah up, too?"

"She's 'getting dressed'" Melody grinned. Getting dressed for Lylah usually meant putting on socks and shoes, then playing with her dolls until we hurried her along.

I turned Melody, pointing her toward the door. Smacking her ass with a loud *pop*, I said, "Go help her out. And get ready, *rapido*! We've got places to be."

She giggled, but didn't hesitate.

* * *

MELODY'S GASP told me she realized where we were going. I was taking them back to the place Melody and I had had our first date.

I glanced at her and noticed tears in her eyes.

"What's wrong, *cariña*? Don't cry."

"They're happy tears, Gabriel, I promise."

I reached over the console and grabbed her hand. Pulling it to my lips, I gave her a lingering kiss, a promise of how I was going to worship her body later, once Lylah was sleeping.

When we pulled up, I rounded the car and opened the door for my ladies. Lylah tried to run straight for the beach; it was one of her favorite places. But one work from Melody had her stopping in her tracks.

"It's okay, baby. Go with her. You remember the spot, no?"

She nodded. Leaning up on her toes, she kissed my jaw. "Of course."

Once the two of them walked off, I went to the trunk and grabbed the blanket and everything else I'd packed.

Then, nerves getting the best of me, I patted my pocket three times before I made it over to where they were waiting for me.

I spread the blanket on the sand, placed the basket down as well. When they both started to sit down, I held up a hand.

“Give me a minute, please.” I twisted to face them fully, lifting until I was on one knee.

Melody began to cry in earnest, and sweet Lylah looked confused. I gave her a wink to reassure her.

Pulling the boxes from my pocket, I opened one, then the other, holding one on each palm.

“Melody. Lylah. I love you both more than I could ever hope to say. I’m not great with words, but I hope my actions over this past year have proved to you that my heart belongs to you, and I can think of nothing I want more than to make you both mine.

“Melody, will you marry me?”

She sobbed loudly, screaming “Yes!”, causing several people to turn and stare. When they saw her launch herself at me, cheers went up and everyone began to clap when she kissed me.

I settled Melody on my upraised knee, then turned to Lylah.

“Lylah? Will you be my daughter?”

She still looked slightly confused, as if she couldn’t reconcile her mother’s smile with her tears. With a glance at Melody, who gave her a slight nod, Lylah’s face broke into a huge grin.

“Yes, Mr. Gabe! Does this mean I get to call you Daddy?” She clapped her hands in excitement.

“It sure does, *mija*, if that’s what you want.”

I held out Melody’s ring, placing it on her finger, then kissed the spot where the tangible proof of my love now rested.

Then I pulled Lylah's tiny ring out of its box and held it up to her. "This is for you, sweetheart."

She took it reverently, and put it on her left ring finger. "Now I match Mommy!"

Melody giggled, and whispered in my ear. "You know she's gonna lose that, more than likely before we even leave the beach."

I shrugged. "I don't care. I'll buy her a thousand more if they make her happy."

"You make her happy, Gabriel. You make me so very happy, too. *Te amo*, Gabriel."

"I love you, too, *cariña*."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophia has been reading and writing romance novels since she was a kid. She's a girly girl who loves chocolate, glitter, and believes in the power of true love. She lives in Florida with her own romance novel hero and their dogs, Ringo and Ozzy.



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