

The Ashford Brothers

Secretly Loving  
my Cowboy  
Best Friend



Julia Keanini  
A Small Town Sweet Romance

*Secretly Loving My Cowboy Best Friend*

A SMALL TOWN SWEET ROMANCE

JULIA KEANINI

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“*I’VE GOT THE MOVES ...*” Sofi sang with the rest of the bachelorette party, a tiara perched precariously on her head.

The five girls moved in sync, wiggling their hips and laughing more than getting a word out in tune.

“*Ma, ouhh, ouhh, ouhh, o-ouhh,*” Sofi’s voice rang out the loudest since she held the microphone as they commanded the stage at Mike’s Karaoke—the very best karaoke bar in all of Idaho. At least that’s what the sign in the grimy front window read.

Would Sofi typically be at a karaoke bar on a Friday night? No. It wasn’t really her scene. Besides, nine times out of ten she’d choose dancing over singing. But this was Rachael’s bachelorette party and what the bride wanted, the bride got. Rachael was also the reason Sofi wore a glittery plastic tiara that read *Bride* with a white veil hanging behind it. Rachael had plopped it on Sofi’s head, claiming it hurt her own, and Sofi didn’t have the heart to take it off.

And though one might think that the microphone was in Sofi’s hand because she had the best voice of the group, the only reason she held the mike was because she was the only one sober enough to do so. As designated driver she was now designated mike woman as well. A job she was actually kind of enjoying.

The song came to an end and Sofi relinquished her beloved microphone to a guy with stringy brown hair who neither smiled nor frowned as he ushered the girls off of the stage.



Clearly groups of inebriated girls gathered to celebrate upcoming nuptials were nothing new or interesting to him.

“I just love you so much,” Rachael muttered as she leaned her head against Sofi’s shoulder and then rested more of her weight, causing Sofi to put her arm around her friend lest she fall right to the ground. The other girls all began to lean on Sofi as well—whether because they wanted to join the lovefest or they needed help walking Sofi would never know—but she alone tried to keep the group upright as they walked through the bar.

Typically Sofi would have a sober partner in crime in her roommate and friend Leia, who was also friends with Rachael, but Leia’s nephew had broken his arm earlier today and although he was home now, proudly sporting a new blue cast, he wouldn’t allow his Aunt Leia to leave, waking up every thirty minutes or so to make sure she was still there. Rachael had understood that a young child’s well-being came before her night of partying and had encouraged Leia to stay. So now Sofi was alone in her soberness, which was quite a task as she tried to keep the other partiers from doing things they’d later regret.

The girls giggled as they stumbled back to the booth they’d inhabited all evening, but Rachael popped right back up.

“Another round of shots!” she declared, somehow getting tangled in her hot pink bachelorette sash.

Annie, one of Rachael’s bridesmaids, groaned as she leaned her head against the cold table. “Nope. Can’t do it. It’s getting late, Rach.” Their other friends nodded in agreement.

Rachael sank back into the booth, a pout on her pretty face.

“I’m not ready for my party to be over,” she whined in a way that sober Rachael never would have done.

Sofi sat next to her friend, her hands propping up her tired head. She had to agree with Annie and the others. It was at least midnight and though Sofi had had many later nights in the past decade, now that she was flirting with her thirties, Sofi

found herself sinking into her bed earlier and earlier. But this was Rachael's night and as any good maid of honor should do, Sofi kept her mouth shut about her own preferences.

"I have to work in the morning," Annie said. As an esthetician, she often had to work on weekends, when her clients were off.

"I have a date," Laney, their resident serial dater, piped up.

"Of course you do," Rachael muttered.

"And I have a hair appointment," Celia added.

Rachael just glared.

"Fine. Go home. All of you. But find your own way, because Sof stays with me."

Sofi fought against her sudden urge to groan or maybe complain the way the bride had moments before. She'd hoped that Rachael's friends could wage the battle and Sofi could have profited from their victory, but apparently not. Sofi was staying out. Thankfully she was pretty sure the karaoke bar closed at one a.m.

Annie grumbled something unintelligible but got out her phone, hunting for her rideshare app as they all piled out from the padded benches.

Sofi watched as the three girls headed unsteadily toward the door. She wasn't surprised she'd been left behind, as these women were more Rachael's friends than her own. But to leave their friend's bachelorette party early seemed, well, wrong.

By the way Rachael continued to glare at their backs, she agreed with Sofi. But as soon as they'd reached the door she turned to Sofi, a giant smile back on her face. "Shots?" Rachael asked hopefully.

"I'm driving, Rach," Sofi said. And that was that. Sofi may have done her share of irresponsible things, but driving drunk would never be one of them.

"But it's just one tiny glass," Rachael tried to reason.

Sofi really didn't want to disappoint her friend on her night but she had to draw the line.

"Rach," Sofi said, knowing Rachael would get her point with just her tone.

"Fine." Rachael sank back into her seat, back to pouting.

"How about I get us both some water? I brought those hydration packets you love and you know you'll be thanking me tomorrow when your head doesn't explode as it comes into contact with light," Sofi tried to cheer Rachael up.

Rachael pursed her lips.

"Strawberry?" Rachael asked.

"Is there any other flavor?" Sofi responded, a smile on her lips.

Yes, she would rather be home watching a movie, or better yet already asleep, but she truly was glad to be there for her friend. She and Rachael had been very close once upon a time. Maybe even best friends for a few years in high school. But then they'd gone to different colleges and things went the way they often did when friends didn't see one another regularly. However, Rachael had recently moved back to Blue Falls with her boyfriend, now fiancé, and she and Sofi had started hanging out again. It had still surprised Sofi a bit when Rachael asked her to be maid of honor, but they'd spent enough time together that the question hadn't come completely out of the blue.

"Make sure they add lots of ice," Rachael said, her eyes drifting closed even though she'd been ready for another round of shots a mere minute before.

"I will." Sofi stood to go get the promised water, but hesitated as she looked down at her friend.

"But open your eyes, Rach," Sofi warned. The last thing she wanted was to leave her friend prey to a bunch of drunk guys in a bar. She knew as long as Rachael didn't fall asleep she'd be fine. She hadn't drunk so much that she couldn't take care of herself.

Rachael opened her eyes wide as if to prove just how fine she'd be and Sofi grinned.

"Sof, you're a good friend," Rachael said before Sofi could leave.

"Thanks, Rach. You're a good friend too."

Sofi started to walk away but she swore she heard Rachael ask over the music, "Do you think I'm doing the right thing?"

The question hit Sofi like a ton of bricks. Rachael had never expressed any doubt that Roland was the man for her. They'd been dating for five years and engaged for one. Why would Rachael have stuck with him all this time if she didn't want to marry him? Sofi almost abandoned her mission to get water, ready to focus on Rachael's concerns, but realized that was a conversation for another day. One when Sofi wasn't so tired and Rachael couldn't blame anything she said on the tequila.

Sofi walked over to the still crowded bar to wait until she could get the bartender's attention. If anything, it seemed like the amount of people in the place had grown within the last hour.

"Loved your song," slurred a guy with tight jeans and a belt buckle shaped like the state of Idaho. He leaned close, clumsily grasping at Sofi's arm.

One good thing about being older: Sofi knew how to dodge those kinds of advances. She slipped her arm out of his reach as she waved and said, "Thanks."

Part of her, her brothers' sister, wanted to say a few choice words to the man who'd tried to touch her in an unwanted way, but the peacemaker in her prevailed. He hadn't actually done any harm and by the look of it, he was as sloshed, if not more so, than Rachael. He was probably just one of those over-friendly drunks.

Sofi elbowed her way into a spot at the bar, waving down a bartender and digging out a tip. She knew whoever got her water order would be disappointed and unlikely to serve her again unless she tipped them, though hopefully, with how tired

Rachael seemed, this would be her last venture to the bar tonight.

She glanced back at her friend and was relieved to see that Rachael seemed alert—as much as could be expected, at least.

“So are you like the queen of the bar?” a male voice said into Sofi’s ear, much too close for her liking.

She tried to take a step back but with people pressing in at the bar behind her there was nowhere for her to go.

Sofi decided it was time to tell Belt Buckle to buzz off, but when she glanced at the man beside her, it wasn’t Belt Buckle. A man twice his size loomed over her, his bicep the size of that Idaho belt buckle.

Sofi swallowed, suddenly feeling intimidated.

She shook off the feeling. This was just a guy. Like the other one. So what if he was huge? Sofi just needed to make it clear she wasn’t interested and he’d move on.

“Just wearing the tiara for a friend,” Sofi said breezily, hoping the guy would catch her drift and understand she wasn’t interested in anything he had to offer.

“I could make you *my* queen.” The guy moved in close once more and this time Sofi stepped away even though it took her farther from the bar. The waters could wait.

“Not interested,” Sofi said, meeting the man’s eyes, then fighting a shudder.

It wasn’t just the guy’s size that had her feeling intimidated. He gave off a vibe that made Sofi feel like she had ants crawling all over her body. She knew her firm response would have driven off most guys—at least any guy who respected a woman’s words—but this one didn’t budge. Instead he advanced, invading Sofi’s space again.

Sofi looked to the overworked bartenders and knew she wouldn’t get help there. She hadn’t seen a single security guard in the place ... a girl who couldn’t be above twenty-one had been the one to take their cover charges at the door. Sofi was surrounded by people, but would any of them step in if

she needed help? She glanced to her left and saw belt buckle guy turn away as she tried to make eye contact with him. Clearly he'd noticed her need but then sized up the guy and decided it wasn't his problem. Sofi had a feeling that was what everyone else in the bar would think as well.

She knew her only hope was going back to tipsy Rachael. Her drunk friend might not be much backup, but at least this guy would see she wasn't alone. Rachael could at least call the cops if things really went south.

Sofi backed away one more step, bumping into a girl that yelled at her to watch it, but Sofi hardly registered the girl's reaction, she was too focused on the guy that was matching her step for step.

Should she turn and run?

But the bar was so crowded. She wasn't even sure how quickly she could make it back to Rachael.

She wondered if Rachael had noticed Sofi's situation but didn't dare take her eyes off of this guy. Something in her warned her not to let her guard down for an instant.

With lightning speed, telling Sofi this guy wasn't intoxicated like the rest of the bar goers, he took hold of Sofi's arm, gripping it so hard that escape was impossible.

"Let go of me." Sofi said each word carefully even as her voice shook.

She'd been in some rough bar situations but nothing like this. She tried to pull her arm away but the guy's grip increased, and Sofi's heart went into panic mode.

She opened her mouth to scream when suddenly the grip on her arm vanished and the guy was flat on the ground, Sofi's best friend Austin on top of him.

Sofi felt another set of hands on her shoulders and was about to spin out of that grip when she heard the familiar voice of Memphis, Austin's brother. "Take a step or two back, Sof," Memphis directed her.

Sofi tried to release some of the tension from her body as she realized she'd been frozen in place. But how were Austin and Memphis there? How had Austin landed on top of the guy who'd been holding Sofi? What was going on?

Austin landed a few punches but the guy was able to push Austin off, jumping to his feet as Austin did the same.

Sofi glanced around the bar and just as she'd feared, no one appeared ready to intervene. The bartenders kept serving drinks and the people in the place only seemed to care about getting a front row seat to the fight. If it weren't for Austin, that guy could have ...

"Aren't you going to help him?" Sofi asked Memphis, suddenly fearing for her best friend. She knew Austin could hold his own—she'd seen him in too many fights—but this guy was huge.

"He'll be fine," Memphis said as he pulled her close, keeping her safe from all of the people trying to press their way forward.

"The guy is giant!" Sofi declared.

"No bigger than a cow and Austin can handle those," Memphis shrugged. Sofi wasn't sure his logic was completely sound, but surprisingly it did make her feel better.

The guy threw his first punch and even though his fist moved so fast toward Austin's face that Sofi could barely see it in the dim lighting of the bar, Austin easily dodged it while delivering a punch of his own to the man's gut.

"Oh, that had to have hurt," Memphis said with grin. "Most people think it's the punches to the face that hurt the most and sure, those can be bad, but a shot right in the solar plexus? He's going to be feeling that for days."

Sofi waited for some of that pain that Memphis had promised to register on the man's face but instead he began to charge forward, right at Austin.

"Austin!" Sofi screamed and immediately slapped a hand over her mouth. What if Austin had turned her way?

But thankfully her best friend was smarter than she was and stayed completely focused on the man in front of him. The man barreled low, ducking his head to hit Austin's chest. The same thing Austin must have done to him when he'd laid him out on the ground.

"He's going to hurt him," Sofi whimpered as she glanced around for something to help her. Memphis might have been confident in his brother's abilities, but Sofi didn't want to take any chances.

While Sofi was looking for help she heard a crash and saw that the guy had somehow fallen to the ground once more but Austin hadn't fallen with him this time. Instead the guy sprawled on the ground with a broken stool.

"Just like a charging bull," Memphis chuckled.

How could Memphis be laughing? Austin seemed to have the upper hand but Sofi wasn't taking any chances.

She grabbed a chair beside her. If she slammed this over the guy's head ...

Memphis gently took the chair from Sofi and set it back down. "He's got this. I promise. And if he doesn't, I'll make sure he's okay. Austin would kill me if I let you jump into the fray."

Sofi didn't doubt that, but she couldn't help her anxiety. Only her love for Memphis kept her from reaching for the chair once more.

But what if Memphis waited too long? If that meaty fist that had relentlessly squeezed her arm hit Austin's skull? Sofi bit her lip to keep from crying out as the man rose from the floor once more. This time he moved a little more slowly but with enough strength that Sofi knew the fight wasn't over.

A new guy started to step in from the circle of spectators at Austin's back, and Sofi recognized him. She'd seen him with the guy who'd grabbed her.

"Memphis," Sofi warned but Memphis was already on it.



He nudged Sofi behind him as he stalked toward the guy. “Looks like three would make this thing a little too crowded,” Memphis said, crossing his arms meaningfully.

The guy stopped, not realizing Austin had someone watching his back.

Sofi glanced from Memphis and his guy to Austin and his guy. The man fighting Austin was moving much more slowly now and Austin was mostly dodging and pushing the guy. He fell once more and Sofi thought he might finally be done. Memphis spoke, calling Sofi’s attention back to him.

“But I’m happy to join in on the fun if you decide that’s something you’d like.”

Sofi couldn’t believe the levity in Memphis’s tone. Well, actually she could, since Memphis often found his way into fights. It was almost like he looked for them and she suspected this really might be Memphis’s idea of fun.

The guy stepped back and Memphis nodded. Sofi was sure if he’d been wearing his cowboy hat he would have tipped it at the guy.

Finally the big man started backing away from Austin, his hands palms forward, the universal sign for *I’ve had enough*. Thank goodness.

Sofi knew Austin as well as she knew herself and she knew exactly what Austin would do now. He’d send the guy a curt nod, check back to make sure Sofi was alright, and then warn him to stay away from her.

Sofi almost smiled when Austin followed that precise formula. Her smile was only almost there because she wouldn’t be able to fully smile until after she checked in on Austin and made sure he was okay. The huge guy hadn’t seemed to have landed anything but that didn’t mean Austin hadn’t gotten hurt. Because of her.

“I didn’t realize she had a boyfriend,” the man said. Sofi only heard his muttered words because now that the action was over people were drifting away and Sofi had been able to move closer to Austin.

“Shouldn’t have mattered,” Austin shrugged. Sofi really didn’t want her heart to flip when Austin didn’t correct the man for calling him her boyfriend. But it did. And then Sofi berated her foolishly hopeful heart.

The guy held his stomach, his other hand over his eye as he spoke. Austin’s hands hung lazily by his sides. Hopefully that meant he hadn’t been hurt.

“Don’t touch a woman who doesn’t want to be touched,” Austin said as he moved one step forward, encroaching into the man’s space like he’d done to Sofi.

“They sometimes play hard to get,” the man began.

“No, they don’t,” Austin said as if his word were law. “Remember that. I’d rather not have to remind you again.”

Austin communicated so much with those few words. Sofi knew the man understood that Austin would be watching him. Sure, Mike’s Karaoke was a town away from Blue Falls, their hometown, but spots like this were frequented by the same people from towns all around. Austin had probably seen the big guy before—heck, Sofi was pretty sure she’d seen him too—and Austin was likely to see him again.

For Sofi’s part, after that night, she was taking a bar and club hiatus for at least a few weeks.

The big man nodded once before blending into the crowd with his friends.

“Someone’s gonna have to pay for the barstool.” The guy with stringy hair was back. Mike, was it? And where had he been earlier when she’d been in trouble?

“I won’t press charges but ... ” The guy let his sentence trail off.

“You won’t press charges?” Sofi screeched, the intensity of the evening getting to her. “I was assaulted and no one helped and then when my friend starting fighting Goliath to save me no one stepped up to do anything and you’re saying *you* won’t press charges?”

Sofi knew her eyes had gone wide and she'd gone into what her brothers called banshee mode, but at the moment she didn't care.

"Sof." She felt Austin grab her around the waist and pull her in beside him before he threw a couple of bills at Stringy Guy.

"Keep a better watch out for the women in here, Mike," Austin warned. "I'd hate to see this place start going downhill because some of the good folks around here aren't willing to patronize your bar anymore."

So the guy *was* Mike. And Austin knew right where to hit him.

"I'm in the process of hiring some security," Mike promised as he stuck the money in his pocket.

Sofi doubted he was already in the process of anything, but if he did hire some security that would be a start.

"Good," Austin said with a nod as Sofi melted into her best friend. Here, sidled up against Austin, was where she belonged. Even though her heart still raced because of all that had happened, even though she still didn't know whether Austin had been hurt, she finally felt safe.

Sofi was suddenly shifted from her safe place, Austin's hands bracing her shoulders as he pulled her in front of him, sweeping a searching gaze over her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his question urgent.

"I'm fine," Sofi said, unsure why he was asking about her well-being when he'd been the one in a fight. "But are you?"

Austin puffed a breath out of his nose, a sure sign that he was about to be cocky. "I fought one guy, Sof. Of course I'm fine."

Sofi rolled her eyes as Austin's gaze softened.

"You sure you're okay?" he asked, this time with less intensity but the same level of concern.

"I am," Sofi promised.

“When I saw that guy with his beefy hand gripping you so tight,” Austin began before pressing a chaste kiss to Sofi’s forehead.

It was the kind of kiss that melted every part of Sofi even as she knew it did nothing to him.

“And then you barreled into him like you were a bull and he was wearing red,” Memphis spoke up.

Sofi had forgotten he was there.

Oh shoot! Rachael!

Sofi whirled around to rush to Rachael’s table when suddenly the bride-to-be appeared, leaning as heavily on Austin as she had on Sofi before, taking the place that Sofi had hoped would be hers, at least for the rest of that night.

Sofi didn’t often get to be the woman on Austin’s arm since he was typically dating some woman or another. But as Austin’s best friend Sofi *always* held a part of him, more than any other woman could claim. So even as he dated one woman after another, he always held a place in his heart for Sofi. So Sofi was okay with their arrangement. Or at least that was what she told herself.

But tonight it looked like Rachael was taking Sofi’s coveted spot and since Rachael really couldn’t stand all that well on her own, Sofi wouldn’t begrudge her ... much.

“Did you come to join the party?” Rachael asked, somehow sounding drunker than before. Had she gotten ahold of someone else’s drink?

“I’m a bachelorette, you know,” Rachael explained as she pointed to her sash that was inside out, concealing the sequined letters that spelled out *Soon to be Mrs.*

“Did you drive her?” Austin asked Sofi.

She nodded.

“I think it’s time that you get home,” Austin directed Rachael.

“With you?” Rachael giggled, letting her head rest on his arm.

Sofi fought the urge to rub her chest where her heart had begun to hurt. Rachael shouldn't be flirting like that with anyone other than Roland. Still, Sofi knew it wasn't Rachael's flirting that had hurt ... it was Austin's responding wink.

“I think your fiancé may have a bit of a beef with that,” he said smoothly as he let Rachael fall all over him while they walked to the doors.

Memphis followed, shaking his head at his brother's antics although he was probably also taking notes. The only Ashford brother who flirted and dated more than Austin was Memphis.

Sofi walked behind them all, forcing herself to watch her best friend and reminding herself who Austin was. He flirted recklessly with a woman so far off the market her wedding was just a couple of weeks away, yet he was always so careful, so appropriate with Sofi. Sure, he teased her, but really flirting? Never. Was Sofi just that unappealing to him?

Tears pricked her eyes and then began to fall. She was glad she was so far behind the others that they didn't see her wipe them away. The last thing she needed was to have to explain herself.

At least she had good reason for emotions tonight, after the trauma she'd just experienced. And really, that was probably the reason she was crying now. As the adrenaline faded and she processed what she'd been through, it was only natural to shed a few tears. They had nothing to do with her most recent thoughts.

But as Sofi tried to keep lying to herself, the truth kept pressing forward. Unless she got over her crush on Austin, he would keep breaking her heart piece by piece until there was nothing left. She would lose not only her heart, but her friend. And Sofi couldn't have that. She couldn't imagine life without Austin.

So as she wiped her tears and straightened her shoulders, she knew what she had to do. She'd been considering it for

months but hadn't had the nerve to pull the trigger. But she'd come to the point that she now feared not doing it more than going ahead. It couldn't be put off any longer.

But that didn't mean she was going to like it.

AUSTIN BOUNDED up the steps to the duplex Sofi shared with her best friend Leia. He let himself in without even knocking; he was there so often Leia and Sofi had gotten fed up with having to answer the door and had given him a key. He glanced around the cozy living room complete with white sectional and a matching giant ottoman, finding it empty. His gaze lingered on a plant Leia had named Fergus that stood next to the picture glass window overlooking their tiny front yard while others hung in swinging pots over the window.

“Sof!” Austin called out, surprised that no one was in the living room or the adjoining kitchen. The white kitchen cabinets gleamed, as clean as all of the other surfaces in Sofi’s home. Austin would have thought so much white would feel cold and sterile, but with Leia’s green plants and the pops of yellows Sofi had insisted on—throw pillows and the old fashioned fridge Sofi loved more than almost anything else—it was homey in a way that had Austin never wanting to leave.

“Oh thank heavens, it’s you,” Sofi said, coming out of her room wearing a typical Sofi outfit of a hoodie and a pair of trendy jeans. Her dark wavy hair had been somewhat tamed into a knot at the top of her head but a few tendrils had sprung loose. Austin loved that Sofi’s personality was portrayed so well by her hair. Like her, it was fun-loving, beautiful, and uniquely Sofi.

Austin raised a brow in question.

“The Tías are coming over,” Sofi explained, turning her head toward Leia’s room.

Austin grinned. He loved the Tías, the nickname Sofi had bestowed on her two aunts and her mom. But he typically only saw them when he went to Sofi's childhood home or the mercado. They rarely came over to Sofi's duplex, complaining that Sofi had abandoned them for this place.

"I didn't mean to tell them about setting up your online dating profile," Leia called out from her room before tentatively walking out as if gauging Sofi's temperament while doing so.

Sofi's online dating profile? When had this happened? Before Austin could ask, Sofi rounded on her friend and demanded, "Then why did you?"

Sofi threw her hands in the air to emphasize her words.

"Tía Rosa texted and asked what I was doing. My guard was down."

"Why was *my* tía texting you?" Sofi asked, hands on her hips.

"Tía Rosa texts me too," Austin piped up.

Sofi rolled her eyes. "Of course she does. Those busybodies that I love with every fiber of my heart will be my undoing."

The doorbell rang and Sofi took a few steps back. "They're here."

Austin bit back his grin. He absolutely adored Sofi's flair for the dramatic.

"I'll get it," Austin offered as he walked back to the door and opened it for the three lovely women. Two of them had caramel-toned skin a little deeper than Sofi's while one was as white as Austin, her hair a bright blonde.

"Austin," the three women gushed, hugging him and telling him he had to eat more the way any good Tía would.

Leia came up to greet the Tías next as Sofi stood where she always had, her back against the wall.



“Come here and say hi to us,” Tía Rosa commanded Sofi when she didn’t make a move toward her aunts and mom.

Sofi obediently stepped forward, leaving her place on the wall to hug her family in greeting.

“Online dating?” Tía Melinda asked as Tía Rosa clucked her tongue. Apparently there was no need to waste words of greeting on Sofi.

“It’s not a big deal,” Sofi tried to reason. She turned to her mother, who was typically the most sane of the bunch.

“Why online though?” Tía Rosa asked.

Austin’s thoughts exactly. He wasn’t against online dating, per se, but he felt that most normal men his age in Blue Falls, like him, dated the old-fashioned way. See a cute girl, ask her out. He was sure Sofi was turning down those invites left and right.

“Leia’s been pushing me to do it.” Sofi threw her friend right under the Tía-driven bus.

Leia narrowed her eyes in Sofi’s direction for an instant before smiling at the Tías.

“I thought it would be a good idea for Sofi to move into new dating territory. She’s been *stuck* in the same place, forever.” Leia emphasized the word ‘stuck’ as Sofi’s cheeks blazed red, both of them glancing at Austin before turning back to the Tías.

Was Austin the reason Sofi felt stuck? He hoped not. Sure, their friendship sometimes dissuaded people from being willing to date them, but that was their own fault. Anyone worth their salt would be fine with the close friendship Austin and Sofi had ... right?

*Right*, Austin assured himself.

“We have boys for you,” Tía Melinda offered in a tempting voice, as though she was about to bring out a dish of her famous flan.

Sofi’s face paled as she shook her head.

“Men,” Sofi’s mother revised.

“Yes, men,” Tía Melinda said. All three Tías gave a firm nod in unison.

Sofi only stopped shaking her head to rub her hands over her face. Austin knew she was wishing that when she opened her eyes back up the situation before her would be gone.

“Sometimes it’s easier to date a stranger than someone you all would know.” Austin stepped in to save Sofi the same way she would have done for him.

“A *stranger*?” Tía Rosa asked in the same voice she would have used to question whether Sofi was dating a murderer.

“A stranger is not safe,” Tía Melinda said.

This time all three Tías were in agreement. Even Sofi’s mom wasn’t on her side.

Sofi was now rubbing a spot at the bottom of her forehead, surely staving off a headache.

Austin had to do something. He hated seeing Sofi hurting in any way.

“I’ll make sure it’s safe,” he spoke up.

The Tías’ ears and eyes perked up as the three heads swiveled toward him.

“I’ll be there on Sofi’s dates,” Austin continued, liking the idea for himself as much as the Tías. He had to admit Sofi going out with a bunch of strangers rubbed him the wrong way. Not that when she dated his friends it had been any easier. In fact, she’d dated one of his best friends just before she’d gone to Mexico the year before and for some reason Austin had gritted his teeth every time he thought of them together. But the relationship hadn’t lasted long, and Sofi hadn’t had another date since. Austin was beginning to wonder if his friend was the reason Sofi was having a hard time jumping back into the dating market. If so, Austin would have to have a conversation with Matt. No one hurt his Sofi and got away with it.

Sofi shook her head. “Nope. Not happening.”

Austin saw she was digging her heels in and knew he'd have to tread carefully.

“Or the Tías could be there,” Austin suggested, realizing too late that it was the opposite of careful. He hadn't meant to threaten Sofi, but the idea that she wouldn't have someone there to back her up wasn't right. He had to be there. She'd met a stranger just the other day at the karaoke bar and if he hadn't been there ...

Sofi's eyes went wide with disbelief and horror as she stared at him with a look of utter betrayal.

“Yes, we could go on the dates,” Tía Melinda said, clasping her hands together as if praising a deity with her delight. Sofi gave a squeak of dismay, too horrified for words.

“I promise I'll be discreet,” Austin assured Sofi. “I can even have a date of my own if that helps.”

The more he thought about it, the better his idea was.

Sofi glanced from the Tías to Austin.

“And you'll go out with one of our men,” Tía Rosa added, punctuating her words with a finger pointing toward Sofi.

“This isn't a negotiation. This is my life,” Sofi said, meeting the eyes of each person in the room and obviously not finding what she was looking for.

“It seems like a fair deal to me,” Leia said softly. “There are lots of crazies out there.”

“Et tu, Leia?” Sofi asked, crossing her arms as she narrowed her eyes at her friend.

Leia shrugged.

Sofi sighed, shaking her head and dropping her arms to her sides.

“You guys are ridiculous,” Sofi said but Austin heard the sound of defeat in her voice.

He and the Tías shared victorious smiles as Sofi scowled.

“But I'm so getting you back,” Sofi warned Austin.

Austin didn't doubt it. In fact, he was looking forward to it.



AUSTIN HAD LEFT before the Tías did so he still didn't know why Sofi felt online dating was the answer. Between him and the Tías, he knew she could have dates lined up for weeks. But maybe that was part of her motivation. She'd seemed excited to date outside of the pool she'd been in.

Maybe that's what Austin needed as well. He had to admit his dating pool was feeling a little stale as of late.

But he would have to hold that thought for now because Land, one of Austin's younger brothers, appeared with a mare in their ranch's training ring, so Austin turned his attention to them. This horse was beauty and power ... and as stubborn as Austin had ever seen. But Land had a touch and Austin had the will. The mare would be trained one day.

Watching as she bucked against the bridle Land had put on her, Austin had to admit it would probably be a day far into the future.

"She still giving Land a hard time?" Logan, Austin's oldest brother, asked as he came up beside Austin and leaned against the wooden post of the corral.

Austin looked ahead, knowing he didn't have to give Logan an answer. The mare was speaking for herself.

"Did you give her a name yet?" Logan asked Austin as they watched the horse show off her raw strength, Land's muscles distended as he strained to keep the horse under control.

"They're waiting until she shows a personality trait beyond stubborn pain in the—" Memphis began as Logan shot their brother a warning look. Logan had begun to be much more strict about swearing on the ranch since his young and precocious soon-to-be stepdaughters started running around the place. They all knew if a bad word was said, surely one of

those adorable youngsters would overhear and then probably teach it to all of their friends.

“The girls have surely heard the word—” Memphis tried again, but this time Logan reached out to shove him, causing their little brother to stumble backwards.

Both Austin and Memphis laughed at Logan’s hands-on style now that those little girls were involved with ranch life. They’d brought out a protectiveness in Logan that his brothers hadn’t ever seen. Even Holland, their baby sister, didn’t engender that kind of overbearing watchfulness. But Austin guessed that was what happened when one had daughters. Just one more reason he wouldn’t be having a wife or any kind of offspring for the foreseeable future—maybe ever. Yes, his brothers Logan and Jackson claimed falling in love was the best thing to ever happen to them, but all Austin saw was a bunch of responsibility as well as being tied to just one woman for the rest of his life. Hard pass, at least for now.

“Memphis, keep your giant yap shut,” Logan called after the man as he walked away from Austin and Logan, still chuckling. Despite the laughter, Austin knew Memphis would do just as their big brother asked. They all respected him too much not to do so, and honestly, those girls had all of the brothers watching out for them the way they would have Holland or their new cousin Madison, but it was still fun to give Logan a hard time.

“What they don’t hear can’t hurt ‘em,” Memphis called back as he walked backwards toward the barn.

“If I hear those girls using another word for butt, you’d better believe, Memphis ... ” Logan let his words trail off. Probably unsure of how he would threaten that particular brother. Memphis seemed to care about so little these days. Austin would have been more worried if he didn’t kind of feel the same way. And he was fine. So surely Memphis was as well.

Logan and Austin’s attention went back to Land, who held the mare close, whispering to her, part of his process. The man was a genius with horses so none of the brothers ever

questioned him, even when they didn't quite understand what or why he did things the way that he did them.

"So you really didn't name that mare?" Logan asked.

Austin shook his head. Their father had had a unique way of naming horses. He liked to observe some of their personality traits and then choose something that fit them. With so many horses on the ranch, that didn't always happen—they had a Chestnut and a Praline like every other stable this side of the Mississippi—but for a horse as special as this mare, it seemed right to honor their father and do what he would have done.

"He's still in every part of this place," Logan said softly as he gazed around the land. His eyes swept the fields that belonged to the Ashfords, extending beyond the horizon, then moved to the barn to their left and the stable to their right before he turned to look at the house behind them.

Logan didn't have to say who *he* was. Austin focused on the mare and Land, unwilling to let his thoughts dwell on the man who should have still been there. Their father had been a force of nature with the kind of will that brought lesser men to their knees, yet he was gone. And the void he'd left behind still gaped, even after all this time.

Austin swallowed as he tried to get a grip on his emotions.

"He'd want us to remember him," Logan added carefully, knowing he was going into territory where Austin didn't want to join him.

"I know," Austin said, his voice gruff. "And I do."

Logan nodded, understanding that was all Austin could give him for now.

The brothers then stood in silence as Land rubbed the mare along her neck and then she bucked away so quickly and suddenly that Land nearly lost her reins.

Austin chuckled. He hadn't seen a horse—or woman, for that matter—give Land this hard a time in years. It was kind of nice to see that his brother with a magic touch was still human.

“So Lake and I have been wedding planning.” Logan shared the news that wasn’t news to anyone. The wedding plans had been underway for months and although Lake was about as sweet and unassuming a bride as could be, their mother, Holland, Madison, Ruby, and anyone else helping to prepare for the big day never let the brothers forget that it was coming up. Right around the corner, as their mother liked to say while she roped her sons into lending their muscles to the preparations.

“You don’t say,” Austin replied, unable to let this perfect opportunity at sarcasm go.

Logan looked at Austin from under his furrowed brow of annoyance and Austin smothered a grin.

“We loved the musical number Jackson and the others put on at our engagement party, and ... ” Logan’s voice trailed off because Austin was already shaking his head emphatically.

“You have a gift, Aus. It would be a shame to hide it.” Logan said the words, Mitchell, their father, had always used to get Austin onto a stage.

Back then it had just taken a little chiding and Austin would jump up, ready to take the mic in hand, or if that wasn’t available he’d use his rich, powerful voice to fill up the room.

But the man who’d been a master at that chiding was gone. The reason Austin took joy in singing was gone. He would never grace a stage again. He hadn’t even tried to sing since the funeral, where he’d sung one last time for the man he loved above all.

“Logan.” Austin’s voice was full of warning. He was done with this conversation. There was nowhere for it to go.

“Right. I thought as much but had to ask for Lake’s sake.”

Austin thought about asking if Logan’s bride-to-be was really the one who’d asked for him to sing but then realized he shouldn’t, because it didn’t matter who had asked. Even though he loved Lake like the sister she was about to become, he would never sing again. Not even for her.

“But on the subject of favors,” Austin said, hoping he could lighten the mood. As much as he knew he could never sing again, he hated disappointing his family. Especially his big brother. Logan had been there for Austin in every way he’d needed. To say no felt wrong, but to say yes was impossible.

Logan pushed off of the corral and turned to look at Austin. His shoulders bunched slightly as he tensed, waiting for Austin to ask if ...

“Do you mind toning it down on the PDA?” Austin teased, knowing Lake would have melted into a puddle of embarrassment on the spot if he’d asked that question in front of her. Thus he’d waited till only his brother was there.

Logan shoved Austin harder than he’d pushed Memphis. The message was clear: Austin had annoyed his brother even more than Memphis had.

“We’re nothing compared to Jackson and Ruby and you know it,” Logan said about their second oldest brother and his girlfriend Ruby.

“They have a lot to make up for. They were enemies for years,” Austin said with a shrug of his shoulder, bracing for Logan to slug him. Honestly, he deserved it. But sometimes that was what being a brother meant: saying things that made you deserve a punch.

“And Lake and I don’t?” Logan asked instead of turning aggressive.

That was true. Logan and Lake had been high school sweethearts, only breaking up because Logan was an idiot. He’d held a torch for her ever since and it was only after several years and some intense pain in Lake’s life that they’d finally found their way back to one another. Cute story. For someone else. Austin was so glad that wasn’t the way his life had gone. If he’d failed to see a woman right under his nose for years? He deserved to be teased about it for the rest of time and maybe eternity as well.



“They’re happy. We’re happy. One day you’ll get it, Aus,” Logan said as he strode away from the corral, leaving Austin alone with his thoughts.

Would he get it? Austin wasn’t sure he ever would. He’d never seen the appeal of one woman forever. Sure, it would mean fewer dramatics—he’d had his fair share over the years, thanks to his decisions when it came to women—but other than that? Where was the bright side? Loving one woman for all of his life seemed stressful, if not boring.

Granted, he’d loved Sofi for nearly all of his life but Sofi was different. It was a different kind of love, the kind that could last through the ages. At least in Austin’s book. It wasn’t like he thought his brothers’ relationships were destined to fail, but they were the exception, not the norm. And Austin was as normal as they came. He couldn’t hope for the exception. No, he was happy with his ever-changing girlfriends, his constant best friend, and his family. His life was good. No need to change things.

LEIA SAT COMFORTABLY on the couch, raising her eyebrows when Sofi slammed the door behind her as she came in after a long day at the mercado. She loved her family and their family business, but today was one of those days that made her wish she had a backup plan for her life. Since childhood she’d dreamed of cooking the food she’d grown up on for the people of Blue Falls. She’d even traveled to Mexico to learn the family secrets from her abuelo. But after nine hours on her feet and endless tormenting from her brothers—not to mention questions from her mom about when she was finally going to go on a date and her dad telling her mom that she shouldn’t be on those stupid dating apps—yeah, she was tired. And ready for a break. And maybe a change in career.

She threw herself down on the couch next to Leia and let out a sigh that reached into the depths of her soul.

“That good of a day, huh?” Leia asked wryly.

“Why did I think it was a good idea to work with my family?” Sofi groaned. She knew Leia wouldn’t judge her or

her family for her question. Leia had known Sofi and the crazy Castillo family for long enough to know that her question came from a place of love. Well, kind of love and kind of exasperation. “I should hang up my apron and work with you.”

Leia let out a bark of laughter as they both imagined Sofi sitting at a desk and working with numbers all day. Actually, Sofi didn’t even know exactly what Leia did, just that she was an accountant. Accountants worked with numbers all day, didn’t they?

“You wouldn’t last a day,” Leia predicted and Sofi knew she was right. Sofi had been born to cook. It was not only her passion but her calling. She was good at it while she truly excelled at little else. And while she would hate to work anywhere that didn’t have her nosy family, she sometimes wished they could just give her a break for a day or two. But even as she complained, she knew that wouldn’t ever happen. The Castillos weren’t designed to give anyone space, especially one of their own.

“I know.” Sofi leaned her head back against the soft cushion behind her. “But if I have one more brother try to alter my dating profile ... ”

“You’ll still go to work tomorrow the same way you always do,” Leia said as she stood and turned to wink at Sofi.

Sofi’s mouth fell open.

“What? You know it’s the truth,” Leia said as she made her way into the kitchen and began to plate up some of the leftovers that Sofi had brought home. Sofi always made a point to bring home food from the mercado on days she worked the evening shift. Although they only stayed open until seven, and Sofi was usually home by eight or nine, the last thing she wanted to do after cooking all day was think about dinner. So she made it easy on herself and Leia by taking care of it while she was still at work.

“I know. But for you to bring it up right now? That’s just rude,” Sofi said as she crossed her arms over her chest and pretended to pout.

Leia laughed as she slid the first plate into the microwave. Sofi was grateful she'd been living with Leia for so long that they'd fallen into a rhythm. Sofi provided the food and Leia would serve it up as well as clean up after dinner. Sofi had insisted on doing dishes every other day but Leia had said if she was getting free meals so often, she'd clean up every night Sofi brought home dinner. Sofi was still pretty sure she was getting the much better end of the deal, but after slicing, dicing, sautéing and then washing dishes all day, she was more than happy to relinquish the job to someone else.

“So ... ” Leia began as silence descended over the room.

“If you ask me about that dating app,” Sofi warned.

“I'm not asking,” Leia paused, “but if you want to tell me something.”

Sofi laughed as she chucked a throw pillow toward the kitchen, knowing she'd thrown it way wide. But she wanted to get her point across without sacrificing her adorable yellow pillow to a shower of rice or beans.

“I've matched with a few guys. We've been talking. I don't know. I guess things are progressing, but I'm already tired of this whole thing. Remind me again why I'm doing this?” Sofi said, sighing once again.

“Austin.” Leia barely whispered the name but it was exactly what Sofi needed to hear. She sat up straighter, proverbially girding her loins, as she unlocked her phone and pressed on the app determinedly. Austin was exactly why she was doing this. She couldn't pine over her best friend forever.

“But what I don't get ... ” Leia started again as she brought over two plates loaded down with Leia's favorite carne asada as well as rice, beans, and a giant side salad.

Sofi shook her head, knowing what Leia was going to say next. She'd said it plenty of times before.

“What? You should at least say something. Before you get stuck in another relationship you don't want to be in,” Leia said with a shrug as she dug into her meal.

“I’ve never been in a relationship I didn’t want to be in,” Sofi defended her past actions as she likewise scooped up a forkful of the steaming food.

Leia set down her fork and raised an eyebrow at her roommate.

“Matt?” she asked pointedly, reminding Sofi about the guy she’d broken up with when she’d moved to Mexico for six months. Honestly, she could have handled long distance, but leaving had been the perfect excuse to end things with the guy. Leia was kind of right on Matt’s account—Sofi really had been itching to get out of that one. She’d enjoyed dating Matt for a couple of months but for the next few had been wishing for a way out. Honestly, she’d spent more time in that relationship being unhappy than happy.

“Dylan, Joe, other Matt, Rider, Krew, Dustin, Ellis,” Leia continued, ticking the names off on her fingers.

“Now you’re just naming all of my ex-boyfriends,” Sofi said before shoving a piece of tender meat into her mouth. She never got tired of the taste of roasted steak that had been marinating in the most delicious juices for twenty-four hours straight.

“Exactly,” Leia stated. “You haven’t wanted to be in any of those. Because of Austin.”

Leia stabbed at a piece of lettuce while she stared at Sofi accusingly.

Sofi let her eyes fall, no longer able to look her friend in the eye. Because Leia was right. And Sofi hated that she was. Loving Austin was pointless, yet here she was. Still doing it.

“This dating app is another band-aid, just like all of those relationships were,” Leia said.

“You’re the one who pushed me to get on it,” Sofi protested, her eyes flying up to meet Leia’s as her shame fled in the face of this truth.

“Because I thought you’d say I was an idiot and then turn to the real problem. I didn’t think you’d go through with it. Especially after I got the Tías involved.”

“I knew you didn’t tell them ‘by accident.’” Sofi threw air quotes up beside her face.

“I didn’t. And then I thought for sure when they all agreed that Austin had to go along on the dates ... I don’t know what it will take for you to finally tell Austin the truth, but I thought for sure that would be enough.”

Leia’s voice conveyed her disappointment, but it didn’t affect Sofi as much as it would have if Sofi weren’t already so disappointed in herself. Yes, she should tell Austin how she felt. It might be the only way to get over these feelings that had been building up for years.

But was she going to do it?

Heck to the no.

“I can’t tell him.” Sofi voiced her final opinion on the matter. It was something she’d gone over so many times it made her nauseous just starting to think about it. And there was no other way to see it. She’d say she loved Austin. He’d tell her he didn’t feel the same way. And their friendship of two and a half decades would be over. Sofi could survive a whole lot of things but losing her best friend wasn’t one of them.

“But if he feels the same way?” Leia argued.

“Then he would have told me.”

“But you haven’t told him ... ”

“Leia.” Sofi’s voice warned that she was at the end of her rope. She couldn’t discuss this with Leia. Or anyone. It hurt too much to face the fact that the man she loved would never love her in return. But he was her best friend. And for that she went to bed every night, grateful she still had him in some form.

Leia pursed her lips before stabbing yet another piece of lettuce but she let the conversation go.

“A guy did ask me out,” Sofi said as she toyed with her own meal, no longer hungry.

Leia pasted a smile onto her face, neither of them willing to point out that it was fake. But Leia would pretend to be happy for Sofi that she was “moving on” from Austin. It was a tale as old as time for the two of them. Sofi would date some new guy in the hopes she’d forget about her feelings for her best friend even as they both knew it would never really work.

“I’m sure Austin is ready to spy on him ... and you,” Leia said, her voice making it clear that Austin must feel something more for Sofi since he insisted on being so protective of her. But that was just Austin. He was protective over the women he loved. Like Sofi and his sisters. Because although he would never love Sofi in the way she wished he would, he loved her dearly in that other, platonic way. The way Sofi loved her brothers and Austin loved his sisters. It tied Sofi’s stomach in knots even as it lifted her heart.

“Wait, did you ever find out why he was at the karaoke bar?” Leia asked. When Sofi had shared the events of Rachael’s bachelorette party she still hadn’t known how Austin had happened to show up right at her time of need. Sofi didn’t like to think about how the night would have gone if Austin hadn’t been there. She would have liked to think she could have put that Goliath in his place, but she couldn’t be sure. And she was grateful she’d never had to find out. Because Austin had been there. The way he always was when Sofi needed him.

“He said it was best friend ESP, but I’m pretty sure he was just coming to spy on Rachael’s bachelorette. You know they used to have a thing back in the day,” Sofi said as she timidly took a bite of rice. Her stomach still wasn’t feeling great after the roller coaster of emotions she’d ridden talking about Austin.

“Austin used to have a thing with just about everybody back in the day,” Leia pointed out.

Sofi almost spit her rice back out because of the way her mouth soured at Leia’s words. Yes, Austin had dated nearly every eligible girl to young woman as they’d grown up. Everyone except Sofi. And Leia. But Leia was one of Sofi’s few friends who hadn’t crushed on the gorgeous honey brown

curls, blue eyes, and lean, muscled form that was Austin Ashford. Not to mention his giving heart, wicked sense of humor, and the way he made a woman feel she was the center of his whole world.

“Well, whatever the case, I’m glad he was there,” Leia said with a nod before she started on her beans. Leia had a quirk, insisting on finishing one thing before moving onto the next. She almost always started with greens and then moved around her plate to finish with the carne asada.

“Me too.” Sofi was glad Leia had spoken, moving her thoughts along from what it was like for the women who got to date Austin.

“So what’s this new guy like?” Leia asked the way a good roommate should, crossing her legs as she got more comfortable on the couch.

“He’s from just outside of Boise,” Sofi explained, a smile touching her lips. As much as she was still hung up on Austin, she really was excited for this date.

“Meridian?” Leia asked about one of Boise’s larger suburbs.

“Fruitland,” Sofi replied.

“Small town guy,” Leia observed.

Sofi nodded. It was something that had attracted her to him. Blue Falls made her appreciate a quieter, simpler pace in life and she realized she really wanted a guy who felt the same way.

“He’s in finance,” Sofi went on.

“Ugh,” was Leia’s reply.

“You’re an accountant,” Sofi accused.

“But I’m not in finance,” Leia shrugged.

Sofi set down her plate because her stomach was done with dinner even if her plate was half full, and then raised an eyebrow at Leia. What did that even mean?

“People who say they are in finance are a special breed,”  
Leia continued.

“Special breed?” Sofi replied skeptically, feeling Leia was being all too dramatic.

“It’s the same thing as a chef claiming to be a ‘culinary artist.’”

Sofi laughed. She could see what Leia was getting at, but then again Leia was probably determined to find something wrong with this new guy so that Sofi would finally just open up to Austin.

“I’m sure that was just an easy way for him to cover what he does without getting into the gritty details,” Sofi defended her date.

Leia eventually nodded, giving in to Sofi’s explanation. “So does this dreamboat finance guy have a name?”

“Rob.”

“Hmph,” was Leia’s reply.

What could she have possibly found wrong with his name?

“Did you date a Rob already?” Leia asked.

“Like ten years ago,” Sofi said, wondering if maybe she should branch out and make new friends who didn’t know her dating history.

“And he was a winner,” Leia said sarcastically.

Last Rob was indeed the opposite of a winner. He’d ended up dating a now ex-friend of both Sofi and Leia.

“Not all Robs will be the same.” Sofi pointed out the obvious.

“I guess.” Leia sounded unconvinced. “I’m just glad Austin will be there to judge this Rob as well.”

“About that ... ” Sofi shifted in her seat and pulled a throw pillow into her lap, holding it like a shield.

Leia groaned.



“I don’t want him hovering over my dates physically as well.” Sofi knew she didn’t have to explain that Austin would obviously be on that date even if he wasn’t there in the flesh, because Sofi was a fool and brought Austin in her heart everywhere she went.

“You can’t ask me not to tell him. Or the Tías. I promised to report back to both.”

“And that’s why I won’t tell you the night of the date. That way you won’t have to keep a secret. Tell them I’m planning a date and that you don’t know more. They can hound me for details.” Sofi sounded braver than she felt. She didn’t actually want anyone hounding her for anything. But thankfully the date was scheduled for tomorrow, so she wouldn’t have to keep her secret long. She’d even told Rob she’d meet him halfway between Fruitland and Blue Falls so she wouldn’t just happen to run into anyone she knew.

“What Austin doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” Sofi finished when she finally got Leia to nod in agreement.

“What don’t I know?”

Sofi sprang from the couch at the sound of his voice, her pillow flying. Why had she given him a key to their place?

More importantly, how much had Austin overheard?

“Nothing,” Leia quipped, followed by a nervous giggle. Sofi was sure Leia had been startled as well.

“Why are you sneaking up on us?” Sofi accused, feeling it was better to go on the offensive and ignore Austin’s question altogether.

“So I can hear things like ‘what Austin doesn’t know won’t hurt him,’ obviously.” Austin headed for the kitchen but made a sharp detour into the living room when he noticed Sofi’s still mostly full plate of dinner.

He pointed to it, Sofi nodded, and their conversation went on without a pause.

“I was speaking in the privacy of my home,” Sofi said, and if she were standing she would have put her hands on her hips.

But she settled for leaning over to grab her cushion and holding it defensively against her chest.

“About me. Therefore I have a right to know what the conversation was about. Wait, let me guess,” Austin said in that aggravating way. So calm, even as Sofi’s gut churned with anxiety that he would sniff out the truth.

“Let’s see ... it could have been about my rugged handsomeness or my charming personality,” Austin mused as he dug into Sofi’s meal and let out a groan, his head tilted back in pure bliss.

“You, Sof, have a gift,” he said the same way he did anytime he ate Sofi’s food. Which was nearly daily.

Sofi couldn’t take the compliment because she was too busy berating herself. She should have made sure to have her conversation with Leia in the privacy of her bedroom later on that night. Leia had started the conversation by asking, but Sofi could have put her off. She’d known Austin just showing up was a high probability.

Just like he’d probably show the next night. But since she was working the early shift and could get out of the mercado by five, she’d be well out of Blue Falls and already at wherever she and Rob decided to get dinner by the time Austin figured out she wasn’t home.

“But I’m guessing whatever you’re talking about must be something I don’t know and I obviously know those first two things already,” Austin went on.

“Obviously,” Sofi deadpanned. “Can you just drop it?”

Austin shook his head. “No can do, Sof. For your sake as much as mine.”

Sofi rolled her eyes. What she should do was shove Austin out of her house and let him keep wondering. But since he had a key he’d find his way right back in and Austin was like a dog with a bone when it came to figuring out the truth, at least when he cared about it. So Sofi was probably better off just telling him the truth, saving them both time.

But she wasn't going to tell him everything. Let Austin get out of her that she had a date. Though she wouldn't be telling him when or where. It helped that Sofi still didn't know exactly where the date would be.

"Is what you you're keeping from me the reason why you're online dating? Because you haven't told me about that, by the way," Austin commented before Sofi could say anything more. He took another bite and chewed while thoughtfully watching Sofi.

"No," Sofi said too quickly, biting her lip in frustration when Austin's eyes narrowed. She definitely wasn't telling him her real reason for online dating, but her quick answer had just made him all the more suspicious. Now he would want to know what he didn't know along with why she was online dating. She was really sucking at this conversation.

"I mean, kind of," Sofi tried to backtrack. "I haven't told you the reason I'm online dating because I was worried it would hurt your feelings."

Sofi swore she heard Leia stifle a giggle at Sofi's poor excuse. Sofi knew she was now just saying things and at some point they were going to have to make sense, so she'd better start being a little more coherent. "I mean, I've dated mostly your friends. And honestly, they've all stunk."

Austin burst into laughter.

"That's what you've been hiding? That you're looking for love online because my friends are bad boyfriends?"

Had that worked? Leia shot Sofi a hopeful look behind Austin's back and Sofi's face lit up as she smiled.

"Nope, that was too easy," Austin said as he leaned back in his seat.

"No, that is totally the reason I'm online dating," Sofi insisted. One reason, but whatever.

"I believe that. What I don't believe is that it's what you're hiding from me. You would have been all too happy to tell me my friends are terrible boyfriends."

Sofi tried to hide her feelings on that but her lips pursed anyway. He was right. And he was getting closer to the truth. She could feel it. But he couldn't know that this date was tomorrow. She needed space from Austin if this was going to work. So she was back to plan A. She'd tell Austin she had a date but keep the details from him.

Austin set down his plate—or Sofi's plate—and put his hands on either side of Sofi's face, pulling her to look at him. Sofi fought the urge to close her eyes and relish Austin's soft touch.

She swallowed and pulled her head out of the haze that threatened, looking Austin dead in the eye. The way any best friend would.

“You have a date,” Austin said gleefully, totally unaffected by his and Sofi's nearness. She kind of hated him for that.

“You saw that in her eyes?” Leia asked, incredulous.

Austin laughed as he dropped his hands. “I knew it from the moment I heard Sofi's declaration to keep something from me. What else would she keep from me?”

Other than her undying love for him? Yeah, nothing.

“I know you don't want me on these dates, Sof. You made that more than clear when the Tías were here. But I'm coming. I made a promise to you and me.”

“Don't forget the Tías,” Leia added unhelpfully.

Sofi turned to glare at her friend.

“And of course the Tías.”

Sofi shook her head. “Well, you can't. I do have a date. But that's all I told Leia. I'm keeping all other details to myself. And you can tell the Tías that's what I said.”

Sofi had a feeling this might be her only date without Austin hovering in the background. After the Tías heard about this there would be hell to pay and Sofi would give in. But for this one date, for tomorrow, Sofi would stand her ground.

“Fine,” Austin said as he went back to Sofi's dinner.

“Fine?” Sofi echoed, unsure if she’d heard correctly.

Leia’s identical question was spoken through her gaze.

“Yeah, fine,” Austin said as he took a bite of rice, beans, and asada, a smile forming the minute the flavors hit his tongue.

Sofi watched her best friend carefully, wondering if he was up to something.

But if he wasn’t pressing she was going to let it go as well. Was Austin really just going to let her win? It looked like it.

Sofi smiled to herself as she felt her hunger re-emerge. She took her plate back from Austin.

“Hey!” Austin said as he tried to reclaim the plate but Sofi turned and he relinquished it.

“There’s more in the kitchen,” she offered and Austin jumped up to make a plate of his own.

Sofi still wasn’t sure what had happened but she was going on a date. Without Austin in tow. Yes, she’d hear it from the Tías. Yes, she would probably lose her privacy for all future dates. But if she could get on one date without having Austin along maybe it would give her a chance to finally push away these feelings that had been plaguing her. She knew it was a long shot, but not having Austin along for the date made her feel like at least she had a shot. Now hopefully that shot would find the basket and Sofi would finally move on. She had to.



SHE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN.

The minute a red pickup pulled into traffic behind Sofi as she took the road out of Blue Falls, her heart had dropped. So much for an Austin-free evening.

She wasn’t sure who had betrayed her schedule to him. It could have been her mom, her tías, her dad, her brothers, or even Leia, but someone had and now Austin was tailing her.

Somehow he'd known tonight was the night for her secret date.

But what could she do? She had to leave now or she'd be late. She'd taken a bit too long getting ready in the mercado bathroom but she'd wanted to look good. She'd chosen to wear a red, sleeveless fitted dress. Red because she rocked the color and sleeveless because it was a warm June evening and Sofi felt quite confident about her arms. It was amazing the amount of muscle tone one gained hefting heavy pots and pans. And fitted because she wanted to look dressed up but didn't want to do it in a froofy, frouncy way. She wasn't sure either of those were words but she figured they got her message across. She'd sleeked her hair into a tight ponytail that waved down her back and then arranged her growing out bangs around her face in a frame that looked quite pleasant if she did say so herself. She'd gone light on the makeup, mostly because she'd run out of time, but she'd felt pretty with her swipe of mascara and some blush on her suntanned skin. She'd finished with a nude lip and then marched out to her car, ignoring her mom's flurry of questions about why she was so dressed up on a Thursday evening.

Though none of that felt like it mattered now that Sofi was being tailed by Austin. She could have knocked Rob's socks off with her look but he'd still run if he saw that she'd brought along her best friend. Because even though Austin had promised to be discreet there was no hiding the man. He drew attention everywhere he went.

Sofi thought about trying to lose him but it was obvious she was headed for the freeway. Once she was on the freeway she could try to drive above the speed limit and get off quickly at her exit but that seemed not only silly but dangerous.

So she was stuck with Austin. For better or worse. She had a feeling this evening was headed for worse.

Sofi tried not to think about Austin or how much he cared for her on her hour-long drive to dinner. But it was hard to deny or forget it. Austin loved her. And she knew it. That was part of the reason it was so hard for her to let her feelings for him go.

She turned up her music and began dancing along to the next song. Better that than letting her thoughts run free.

A few minutes later, Austin pulled up beside her, his face full of fake astonishment that they were on the same road.

He looked back at the road as he lifted a finger up and down in Sofi's direction and then blew on his hands, miming fire.

Sofi turned back to her driving as she tried to will away the blush that threatened from Austin's compliment. He'd told her she was hot hundreds of times before but it still got to her, messed with her head. This was why she didn't want Austin along on her date. As well as the fact that no one should be tailing Sofi on a date. Wasn't the very definition of a date two people?

But neither the Castillos nor Austin had ever been sticklers for rules. Unless those rules worked in their favor.

Finally Sofi saw the turn off for Mountain Home and she took her exit as her GPS directed her to the local Italian spot that Rob had wanted to try.

Rob. That's who her thoughts should be focused on. The butterflies that had tumbled around in her stomach after Austin had complimented her should have been for the man she was about to meet. Not her best friend.

Sofi pulled into the parking lot but kept her engine on as she pulled down her sun visor and looked in the mirror to make sure nothing had been too messed up on her drive.

"You really shouldn't leave your doors unlocked. You never know who could just barge into your car," Austin said as he jumped into the passenger's seat of Sofi's beloved Audi Q7.

"All kinds of ruffraff." Sofi lifted her eyebrows toward Austin.

"Or handsome passersby, but y'know, better to be safe," Austin added, to which Sofi just rolled her eyes.

Austin closed her visor as he looked her over. "You are way too beautiful for any man in that restaurant. But some

lucky bastard has to get you, so I guess Rob is as good of an option as any.”

“It was Leia?!” Sofi exclaimed when Austin knew the name of her date. She’d thought for sure her friend had her back.

“She only told me the guy’s name. Tía Rosa gave me your schedule and it was your mom who said you would probably be going tonight since you brought a duffel bag with you to work today.”

“They are all dead to me,” Sofi threatened but they both knew she was bluffing. Sofi’s people meant everything to her, even if she was absolutely furious with all of them at the moment.

“They care about you, Sof. We all do. We know you have to do this, but it doesn’t mean we like it. So we protect you,” Austin said as if it was the most natural thing in the world that he was trailing her on a date. And in their world, it was. Was that sad or wonderful? Sofi couldn’t answer that question without a lot more thought.

“But you’d better get out there. It will do you no favors if Rob sees you in the car with a guy that is way better looking than he could ever hope to be.”

Unfortunately, Austin’s words were probably true, and Sofi leaped out of the car and began walking purposefully toward the restaurant before she could second guess her motives.

She heard Austin’s car door slam and hurried her step. She wanted to be seated before Austin came in and disrupted her equilibrium.

Sofi opened the door to the restaurant, pausing to let her eyes adjust to the low lighting as she glanced around.

“Sofi!” A man with sandy blonde hair stood from a table near the front of the restaurant and waved.

Sofi smiled at him before nodding to the hostess and joining Rob at their cozy table. A candle burned between them as Italian music hummed through the speakers.



“I’m Rob.” He held out his hand so Sofi placed her hand in his.

“Sofi, but you already figured that out,” Sofi joked and Rob laughed, easing a little of the timidity Sofi always felt on a first date.

“I did. You are just as beautiful as your photos.”

Sofi smiled even as she cringed a little. The compliment was a bit overdone but whatever. It was nice.

“This place is so cute,” Sofi said, needing to change the subject as she nodded toward the red and white checked tablecloths and the pictures of Italian landscapes on the wall.

“And it smells delicious,” Rob added, leaning over the table in a conspiratorial way and getting way up into Sofi’s space.

Sofi swore she heard Austin clear his throat but she had carefully avoided watching the entry of the restaurant behind her when Austin would have trailed her in so she had no idea where he was seated. If he was seated yet.

“Nothing like pasta and pizza,” Sofi replied with a fake smile, attempting to feel at ease.

But there was just something about Rob that was a little disconcerting.

“Have you been here before?” Sofi asked, trying to start a real conversation of any sort. She had to give Rob a chance.

Rob nodded. “The margherita pizza is divine. As well as their bolognese.”

Sofi’s awkward smile seemed to be going nowhere tonight but she wasn’t sure she’d ever heard one of her dates use the word ‘divine.’ It was a fine adjective, but could pizza be divine?

“I think I’ll go with the Bolognese,” Sofi said, feeling pasta over pizza.

“Then I’ll get the Margherita and we can share,” Rob said decisively, even though he hadn’t asked if Sofi was okay with

the plan. But that was fine. People overstepped on first dates all the time, right?

Their waiter came and took their order and then Rob just watched Sofi for an uncomfortable span of time as she worked to come up with something to say.

“Preseason is right around the corner,” Sofi finally said. It wasn’t a great conversation starter but it was better than Rob just staring at her.

Rob had mentioned on his dating bio that he was a Salt Lake Lightning fan and since the NFL season would be starting relatively soon, Sofi had gone with that.

“I can’t wait,” Rob responded as he folded his arms in front of him, propping them on the table.

“Yeah, me neither,” Sofi said, wishing Rob had said more. Didn’t men usually wax eloquent when they could get started on a topic like football?

Rob blew out a breath and Sofi paused. Was he trying to tell her something? Did he already want the date to be over? Because she had to admit she wouldn’t be too sad if he ended it right there. She could get her Bolognese to go.

“So ... ” Rob started.

He was about to dump her. She was a little embarrassed it was so soon and wished Austin wasn’t about to witness her humiliation, but things were so ridiculously awkward. She was glad that Rob felt it too.

“I really like you,” Rob continued.

Wait, what had he said?

“But I have to tell you something.”

Sofi sat still, not wanting to assume anything more because she’d been wrong on everything she’d guessed thus far.

“My family had a big party last night. It was my uncle’s birthday and—that’s not important. We had a family party and I thought it would be fun to bring along this woman I’ve been seeing.”

Sofi blinked. Yeah, she'd guessed wrong again. Why was he telling her this?

Rob blew out another breath. "I guess she ... " He paused awkwardly, fidgeting with his napkin. "She asked me to marry her."

Sofi felt her jaw drop. What had he said?

"In front of my whole family, so I had to say yes. Do women feel this kind of pressure when they're proposed to?"

She'd heard him right. The man was engaged and yet he was sitting here on a date with her.

"I know you have to be wondering why I didn't cancel with you, but we had so much chemistry over the app and I had to see it through. And now that you're here, I can't help but wonder if I made a mistake ... " Rob's voice trailed off.

Two reactions hit Sofi equally. One, that poor woman. And two, she needed to let Rob know the only mistake he'd made was not cancelling this date.

"You didn't," Sofi piped up when she finally found her voice. But shock tended to paralyze her vocal cords. "I mean, you should have cancelled on me, but I am not the right woman for you."

"I don't know," Rob mused, his eyes bouncing from her to the table as if he were completely conflicted.

"I do. And for future reference you probably shouldn't go on dates while you're engaged to someone else."

"In my defense, the date was set up before I got engaged."

That didn't win him any points.

The waiter came over with their food.

"Do you mind boxing this up for me?" Sofi asked as she handed her plate back to the waiter, who nodded knowingly. Had he overheard what Rob had said? Was everyone in the restaurant following this bizarre drama? She knew she'd hear it from Austin later, but for now she just needed to get out of there.

“Still shouldn’t have come,” Sofi said to Rob.

It would’ve been strange to have her date cancelled because the guy suddenly got engaged, but still better than showing up to keep his options open.

“But you’re so beautiful ... ”

Sofi shook her head. This wasn’t happening.

The waiter reappeared and Sofi would tip him in a big way for that. He also brought two checks. Bless the man.

Sofi took her check and inserted her card as Rob just stared at the other folder.

“You split our check?” Rob asked the waiter, his blue eyes wide.

The waiter handed Sofi’s check off to a coworker before nodding at Rob.

“But we’re on a date,” Rob said.

“Did you want to pay for the lady’s meal?” the waiter asked.

“I’d rather pay for my own,” Sofi piped up.

“But what if you wanted to pay for us both?” Rob asked Sofi.

Was this man for real?

“I didn’t,” Sofi said quickly.

“As an engagement gift?”

Sofi glanced at the waiter and they shared a bewildered look. Sofi was grateful someone else could share in the weirdness of this moment and affirm that she wasn’t going crazy.

“No. I didn’t know you were engaged,” Sofi said, wondering why she needed to explain herself.

“But now you do.”

“I still don’t want to pay for your meal,” Sofi reiterated as the waitress came back with her check. She added a big tip and

then gathered her card and the box of food the waiter handed her.

“And to think I was going to ask you to come to the wedding,” Rob said, annoyance filling his every word.

Sofi had no words.

She waved a small goodbye and practically sprinted for the door. She felt a surge of gratefulness that while her date had been a complete loser, at least he wasn't from Blue Falls. Hopefully she'd never lay eyes on him again.

Laughter followed her as she walked out into the beautiful June evening.

“Shut up, Austin,” Sofi said before he could say anything.

“Engaged?” Austin choked out through his guffaws.

Sofi just shook her head as she headed straight for her car, locking the doors before Austin could join her again.

She placed her dinner on the seat beside her and pulled out of the parking lot, Austin's laughter ringing in her ears long after she got on the highway.

As she began to recall the evening, Sofi's shoulders began to shake, her own laughter bubbling out of her.

She'd been on so many first dates, and some of them had been less than stellar, but this one had to take the cake. Yes, living it hadn't been fun but it would be a story she'd tell forever.

*And to think I was going to ask you to come to the wedding.* Sofi laughed hardest at Rob's parting shot.

That was one wedding she was more than happy to miss.

## Three

SOFI'S next date was as unexpected as it was welcome. It would have been even more welcome if the date in question didn't look on her as just a best friend and if she hadn't been a solution to a problem. But when Austin had called her two nights before in a panic because Lake wanted all of the brothers to bring a date to her wedding and he'd been planning on going stag, Sofi had to say yes. She practically never said no when it came to Austin.

"You are going to knock that boy's boots off," Leia said as she came into Sofi's bedroom.

Sofi shifted from foot to foot, teetering on her four-inch white sandals as she stood in front of her full-length mirror and tried to see what Leia saw. Her dress was pretty, Sofi would allow that. The collar on her mint green dress was a band around her neck before giving way to her bare shoulders. The soft material draped loosely over her top half but with a matching tie around her waist it cinched in, defining one of Sofi's favorite parts of her body. The skirt then fell in an A-line to right above her ankles, showing off the killer heels and French tip pedicure Sofi had gotten earlier that day. All of the colors she wore contrasted perfectly with her rich golden skin tone. Her dark hair was pulled up in a high bun with a few curls framing her face and she'd put in some extra effort on her makeup, opting for a gold smokey eye and a soft pink lip. And while objectively Sofi could see how all of those elements would, say, knock a boy's boots off, Sofi was second guessing everything. Was her dress trying too hard? Should

she wear less conspicuous shoes? Was her makeup too much? She was just a best friend, a sub-in date, after all.

“Stop it,” Leia commanded even though Sofi hadn’t said a thing. “You look beautiful. Don’t downplay yourself because he’s too stupid to see you for what you are.”

“What am I?” Sofi asked softly, knowing she was basically asking Leia to keep complimenting her, but Sofi’s ego had taken a hit a few days before with Rob. And now as she prepared to be on the arm of the man she loved most but who saw her only as a friend, Sofi was feeling a little sorry for herself.

“A knockout, Sof. As well as the sweetest and kindest woman I know. You’re funny, gorgeous, happy-go-lucky, friendly to a fault, and the best cook in all of Blue Falls.”

A smile grew where Sofi’s frown had once been. “Just Blue Falls?” she joked.

“Can’t let your head grow too big. We wouldn’t want it to outshine that dress,” Leia teased right back.

“Speaking of knockouts.” Sofi whistled as she turned to look at her roommate.

Leia wore a light pink chiffon dress with three quarter length sleeves and a slit so high up the side that Sofi wanted to cheer. Self-conscious of her body, Leia often hid in baggy t-shirts, but the plunging V on Leia’s dress tastefully showed off what her mama gave her and Sofi couldn’t have been happier for her friend.

“You look hot!” Sofi exclaimed.

“Stop it,” Leia said even as her eyes begged Sofi to continue. It looked like Sofi wasn’t the only one who needed a confidence boost that evening.

“Seriously, I am going to have to keep an eye on you,” Sofi continued as she looped an arm through Leia’s and brought the two of them into the living room. “Though I’m going to guess Trent will be doing that plenty as well,” Sofi said.

Leia's sister had died two years before, leaving behind a husband and two adorable little boys. Her husband Trent had been a mess, understandably, and Leia had stepped in as caretaker for not only her nephews but for her bereft brother-in-law. As a result, the man was extremely protective of his wife's sister. Sometimes Sofi wondered if there was more to what Trent felt for Leia than met the eye, but she'd never brought it up to her friend. Leia hadn't seemed ready to hear it. Maybe one day.

"Ugh, don't remind me," Leia said with a groan. "It's hard enough getting a man to give me a chance without Trent hovering around, but as soon as he's in the same vicinity, there is no chance whatsoever."

"Now it's time you stop it. I've seen men fall over themselves, literally, to get your attention."

Leia rolled her eyes but she knew it was the truth. Her extra curves seemed to only enhance the attention she got from the opposite sex. Even when she wore giant band tees and sweatpants that she'd stolen from Trent years before.

"So I guess we're ready," Sofi said even as she kind of wanted to delay their departure. Since Austin was a groomsman, Sofi had insisted he stay at the ranch instead of picking her up, so that he could be there for whatever Lake and Logan needed. Leia would have caught a ride with Trent and the boys, but when she heard Sofi was driving she figured she might as well jump in with Sofi and meet her three dates at the wedding as well.

Sofi would have smiled at her and Leia's pathetic wedding date situation if it hadn't been quite so indicative of reality. Sofi spent all of her time with Austin instead of trying to get over him and Leia spent all of hers with her emotionally unavailable, just-family brother-in-law and his two kids. It wasn't a wonder that they were both single. But not for long, hopefully. Sofi had another date lined up and although this was a setup by her Tía Rosa, at least Sofi knew the man wasn't already engaged.



Sofi's Audi made quick work of the drive to the ranch and she followed the directions of one of the valets the Ashfords had hired for the night. She got out of her car when directed and handed off her keys to yet another valet who would park her car in the makeshift lot.

Leia got out of the car as well, her mouth dropping open at the transformation the ranch had undergone in the last few weeks. Sofi had been there the night before to help with the day's setup so she wasn't quite as surprised but she was still impressed.

The women walked through an elegant arbor covered in white hyacinth and periwinkle and onto a gorgeous grassy field that Logan had tended to himself. He knew that Lake had a vision for their big day and Logan had done everything in his power to make sure it was exactly what she'd hoped it would be. Trees dotted the back of the wedding area, a perfect backdrop for another arbor, much like the one Sofi had just walked through, but this one was an A-line instead of rounded, marking the spot where Lake had chosen to have their ceremony. In front of the arbor were rows of white painted wooden chairs, more bouquets of white flowers tied to each chair that lined the length of white fabric that made the aisle.

Sofi knew that beyond the trees was a giant clear tent decorated with twinkle lights and yet more white flowers, which sheltered white tables and chairs as well as a giant dance floor where Lake intended to dance the night away.

"I can't believe they made all of this happen here," Leia said, noting the differences between the way the ranch typically looked and what they were walking into.

"Right? Between Lake's vision and Morgan's desire to make every wish of her soon-to-be daughter-in-law come true, miracles happened," Sofi said, then added, "Oh and of course Logan's excellent watering skills." She pointed to the picture-perfect grass that cushioned their footsteps.

"So this is what it's like to marry an Ashford," Leia said quietly, causing Sofi's heart to pitter patter and then squeeze painfully.

Sofi would be lying if she didn't admit she had once or a million times imagined walking down the aisle to Austin, but she could have never imagined this beautiful setting. So now her wedding fantasies would only grow as the reality that Austin would ever see her as more than a friend continued to dwindle away.

"Aunt Leia," the cutest little voice called out, grabbing the attention of both women. The two hurried over to the waving toddler. Leia's sister had devastatingly passed during childbirth, but Beckett was the treasure she'd left behind.

Even though the wedding venue was filling up, Trent had found his family seats toward the back edge of the seating area, the perfect place to sit if one might need a quick getaway with a toddler who didn't like to sit for too long.

Leia took the open spot next to Beckett and Sofi sat next to her.

Just in time, since a couple then sat next to Sofi and their row was filled to capacity. Sofi looked around to see most of the other seats filling just as quickly. With only a few minutes left before the ceremony started, it made sense.

"Hi, Sofi," Justin, Trent's older son, said shyly before ducking his head behind his brother.

"Hey, Justin. How is it that you get more handsome every time I see you?" Sofi asked as she leaned down so that she could see Justin's eyes just behind his brother. Both boys were adorable in blue button-up shirts, white suspenders, and khaki pants, though Beckett's outfit had the added accessory of a cast.

Justin's cheeks reddened and Trent sent a wink Sofi's way. He'd confided in Leia and Sofi that Justin craved female attention, probably because he'd lost his mother at such a young age. So Leia and Sofi had taken it upon themselves to make sure Justin and Beckett were lavished with all the maternal affection they could handle.

"Sofi!" a voice called out.

Sofi turned around to see Ruby waving her down from the aisle. Since Sofi was in the middle of her row, she was a little hard to get to. Sofi waved back at Jackson's girlfriend but Ruby shook her head at the greeting before motioning for Sofi to join her.

"Now?" Sofi asked because the ceremony really would be starting soon and if she went all the way down the row to talk to Ruby now she wasn't sure she'd be back in her seat before the processional started.

"Yes," Ruby confirmed, beckoning urgently.

Sofi shrugged toward Leia before excusing herself as she bumped into nearly everyone on her row on her way out.

"What are you doing way back here?" Ruby good naturedly scolded as she pushed Sofi ahead of her down the aisle. "Austin asked me to make sure you sat up with the family."

Sofi turned her head to look at Ruby even as Ruby's hand pressed against Sofi's back, propelling her forward.

"I'm not sure that's the best idea," Sofi hesitated as she swiveled her head forward once more to keep from tripping while continuing to walk. She then glanced up at where Morgan sat with her clan. All of her kids were missing since they were Logan's groomsmen and Lake's bridesmaid, but on either side of Morgan was an empty seat, and Sofi knew they were reserved for Lake's daughters, Morgan's soon-to-be-granddaughters. Nearby sat Madi, Logan's cousin and Ruby's best friend. When Ruby and the young girls joined them they would be a group full of the most important women to the Ashford men. Sofi didn't want to claim a spot amongst them. Not when she knew she'd be ousted as soon as Austin found the right woman. Even though Austin dated like it was a sport at the moment, Sofi knew one day he'd settle down and then ... well, Sofi would have hopefully already settled down at that point as well or she wasn't sure she could endure that heartbreak.

"Of course it is," Ruby said, her hand never leaving Sofi's back, as if she knew Sofi might flee back to her seat next to

Leia if given the chance.

And Ruby was right. Sofi totally would.

“But Leia’s back there,” Sofi tried coming up with an excuse. She needed to sit in the back. Away from this family she adored and dreamed of joining. Sitting up here would give her heart too much hope.

“With Trent and the boys. She’s fine. But if you don’t sit up with us, Austin will probably yell at me, and then Jackson will have to defend me and the brothers would fight at Logan’s wedding, ruining Lake’s day. You wouldn’t want that, would you?” Ruby asked innocently as the two stopped beside the very front row where the family was seated.

Sofi waved at Lake’s mom and family on the other side of the aisle before turning to Ruby.

“You are a menace,” Sofi accused Ruby, but her tone was so light there was no bite to her words.

“And you need to know your worth to this family. I may just be a girlfriend and therefore have no right to speak for all of them, but they love you, Sofi. As one of their own. Don’t hurt them all by sitting back there. Though I can guess some of your reasons why you’re keeping your distance.” Ruby’s eyes were full of knowing.

“Wait, you don’t think—” Sofi felt panic well within her. Ruby didn’t know what she felt for Austin, did she? If she, a newcomer, had figured it out, did they all know?

“I don’t think anything. Other than hopefully Austin will get his head out from wherever it is and see what’s right in front of him. But until then, sit with us,” Ruby said quietly.

So Ruby did suspect something. But Sofi was pretty sure she was implying her own hope, not that she’d noticed Sofi’s hopes. Hopefully? But because Sofi wasn’t willing to admit her feelings to Ruby, she guessed she wouldn’t know exactly what Ruby knew. And Sofi was okay with that. Sure, it was embarrassing to wonder if others were witnessing her pining, but as long as Austin didn’t find out she’d manage.

Sofi nodded once and Ruby pulled her into a hug. “These Ashford men can be fools, but I promise they’re worth it.”

That’s what Sofi was afraid of. But she said nothing as she turned to embrace Morgan.

“You look beautiful, my Sofi,” Morgan said as she pulled Sofi in tight.

Forget regretting never having Austin as the man in Sofi’s life. How would any mother-in-law measure up to Morgan Ashford?

“Not even half as gorgeous as you,” Sofi responded from within Morgan’s arms.

Morgan wore a lace dress similar in color to Sofi’s. Lake had asked that all the women in the family dress in mint green and when Austin had relayed that message as he’d asked Sofi to be his date, Sofi had been sure she wasn’t to be included in the family dress code. But Lake had texted her moments later asking her to please wear mint green. So even though time had been short, Sofi had gone on a hunt for the perfect mint green dress and had found it at one of Blue Falls’ local boutiques.

In fact, nearly their entire row was dressed in the color aside from Logan’s grandpa, who looked dashing in his black tuxedo.

Ruby took the open seat next to Madi and gestured for Sofi to sit between her and Logan’s grandma.

Sofi hurried down the front of the row and sank into her seat just as the music began to change, a string quartet playing Lake’s and Logan’s song.

All heads turned and Sofi’s did as well. Her lips curved into a smile as she watched Logan’s brothers, Brooks and Memphis, walk Lake’s friend Lottie down the aisle. Lottie shone in her coral dress, the color assigned to the three bridesmaids, while the brothers in their black tuxedos caused an audible gasp amongst some of the female attendees. Memphis winked at a few of the gaspers as Brooks seemed oblivious to it all and Lottie beamed. Memphis and Brooks left

Lottie on the bride's side before taking their places in front of where Sofi sat with Logan's family.

"You look hot," Memphis mouthed to Sofi and she rolled her eyes. What else could she do when Memphis acted like Memphis?

Heads turned again, this time for stunning Holland being led down the aisle by her brothers Land and Phoenix. It wasn't often that the Ashfords had Phoenix home since he played professional football for the Salt Lake Lightning, so the women who had gasped for Memphis and Brooks now sat on the edges of their seats, hoping to catch the attention of the most elusive Ashford.

Land and Phoenix followed the same path Memphis and Brooks had, Phoenix giving Holland a high five before moving to his side, and a ripple of laughter went through the wedding attendees.

Sofi held her breath and tried to hold onto her heart as she knew who was coming next.

*He's going to look like a dream,* Sofi warned herself. Austin in a cowboy hat, flannel, and jeans made her want to curl right up in his arms but Austin in a tuxedo? The few times she'd witnessed that work of art she'd nearly collapsed as her knees went weak.

And there he was. Sofi knew he was walking down the aisle with Grace, Lake's sister, and Jackson. She should at least notice the others. But she couldn't; her eyes would only allow her to take in Austin. His honey brown curls were combed back, though a few escaped the attempted styling. His face wasn't quite clean shaven, the five o'clock shadow Sofi adored gracing his strong jawline. And then the tux. It was molded to his shoulders, showcasing what hours on a ranch did for a man.

Sofi wrenched her gaze away from him and looked to the front where Phoenix, Land, Brooks, and Memphis all appeared perfectly acceptable in their tuxedos. A sight she could handle.

Sofi pretended something in her purse needed her attention as she felt the gaze of all around her go toward where the men were surely dropping Grace off before moving to their positions. Standing in front of Sofi. She couldn't look down for the entirety of the ceremony and yet she couldn't look at Austin either.

But her problems were put off for another minute as all heads turned back once more and Sofi grinned, watching her friend, a man she admired, walk down the aisle, his hands tightly gripped by two smaller hands. A beaming Delia and Amelie clung to their almost-stepfather as they eagerly towed him down the aisle, their long white dresses swishing around their ankles. Not that he needed much encouragement—Logan was clearly eager to get to the end of the aisle to await his bride.

Logan found his place under the arbor and fixed his eyes at the far end of the aisle, impatiently waiting as the song drew to a close. He gathered his new daughters beside him, squeezing each of their hands as they all looked toward where they knew Lake would enter. Sofi couldn't help smiling as she saw Logan physically leaning toward the aisle as if willing Lake to appear.

Suddenly the little orchestra began playing the wedding march and all of the guests rose as Lake entered the venue. She looked resplendent in her ivory mermaid wedding gown, her veil trailing all the way to the ground behind her. Lake's father appeared triumphant being the center of attention, nodding to various friends as he walked, while Lake had eyes only for her little family. Her gaze went straight to Logan and then dropped to each of her girls.

“Mommy!” Amelie cried out as watery laughs filled the space.

Sofi felt her own tears fall and she would bet there wasn't a dry eye in the place.

Lake's father led his daughter down the aisle, slowing as they approached the eager groom. Lake leaned down to hug each of her girls before her dad led them back to the saved

seats on Sofi's row. Lake then grinned up at her groom and took his hand. It seemed that only then did Logan relax, tension releasing from his shoulders now that Lake was at his side.

The ceremony went quickly, Lake causing laughs with her vows as Logan's elicited tears. And then it was done. Somehow Sofi had managed to keep from yearningly watching Austin, but only because the couple that were being married deserved all of her attention.

After the bride and groom had gone back down the aisle as husband and wife, Lake's daughters jumping up to follow close behind, Sofi waited for the bridesmaids and groomsmen to follow, her eyes on Grace, Holland, and Lottie as she couldn't look at the groomsmen. She knew there was only one man who would capture every bit of her awareness.

But Grace walked a few steps forward to her family as Lottie went a few rows back to her husband Leo and her brood of adorable children. Holland hurried to her mom, giving Morgan a gigantic hug. Ruby stood up from her seat and giggled as Jackson met her, rising on tiptoes to whisper something in his ear.

Brooks was soon beside Sofi, speaking to his grandparents, and Sofi realized the entire wedding party wasn't walking back down the aisle but had instead dispersed to their loved ones.

Before Sofi could second guess whether she should seek out Austin or stay just where she was, a large callused hand she knew all too well took hers and lifted her to her feet before spinning her right where she stood.

"You are a sight for sore eyes, Sofia Castillo," Austin mused as his gaze appreciatively took her in.

See, this was what she didn't understand. She knew Austin found her attractive, she knew they were compatible in every way, yet he'd friend zoned her so hard there was no coming back from it. Why?



“I’m a lucky man to have you as my date,” Austin said as he spun Sofi into his arms and gave her a hug.

Sofi relished the feeling of Austin’s strong arms around her, his embrace the most comforting space in the world.

“You are,” Sofi said saucily, forgetting all of her earlier qualms. When she was with Austin her confidence soared. He always made her feel beautiful and appreciated, just not his.

Austin laughed as he let go of Sofi too soon. “And I promise not to get engaged until after our date.”

Sofi slugged Austin in the arm.

Of course he’d have to bring that up.

“I can’t believe the guy did that to you,” Ruby chimed in, telling Sofi her story was already engrained in Ashford family lore.

“But if he invites you to his wedding, you should wear that,” Memphis chimed in, his eyebrows pumping.

Austin stood in front of his brother, blocking Memphis’ view of Sofi.

“He already told me I won’t be privy to an invite after the way I treated him on our date,” Sofi replied with a grin, grateful she was able to laugh about the disaster of a date so soon.

“No,” Madi gasped.

Sofi nodded and they all began to laugh before the wedding planner came to gather them for pictures.

They followed her to the field Lake had chosen for most of their wedding photos and the wedding planner called out groups. First the entire family and wedding party, followed by Lake’s family and then Logan’s family and then just the bridal party.

Thankfully the setting June sun wasn’t too warm and it made for the perfect weather and setting for pictures.

Sofi stood to the side, watching Austin joke with his brothers, especially Logan, as the photographer got lots of fun

shots of the bridal party. Sofi was surprised that she'd been included in all of the family photos but stood to the side, unsure if she actually belonged. She knew the Ashfords loved her but she wasn't Ruby, who would surely be getting a ring in the near future, or Madi, who had found the Ashfords after years of not knowing who her father was. Those two, along with Lake, would have forever ties to the family whereas Sofi was ... just a friend.

Those words made her heart ache even as she smiled at the antics of the brothers. She adored them all so much.

When Sofi realized she was no longer needed for photos—even Lake's daughters had wandered off by now—she made her way to the tent where the rest of the guests were already beginning the party with hors d'oeuvres and drinks.

“You okay?” Leia asked as Sofi joined her.

Sofi nodded, feeling so happy for Logan and Lake yet almost absent from her body, as if she was trying to protect herself from the inevitable hurt that was coming. She would never be Lake. An Ashford bride. And as much as she loved this day for Lake, it hurt to see it all and know it would never be hers. Even if it was what she wanted most in this world.

“Oh, Lake was the most beautiful bride,” Sofi's mother, Darla, gushed as she and Sofi's father joined Sofi and Leia.

Lake had been kind enough to invite all of Sofi's family to the wedding but only her mother and father had accepted, her brothers finding excuses, any excuse, to escape a wedding.

“Did you guys just get here?” Sofi asked when she realized she hadn't seen her parents during the ceremony.

“We slipped into the back row just as things were getting started. We were almost late since we left Mario in the kitchen and there was a last-minute cilantro emergency,” Darla told Sofi too quickly, the way she said all of her words.

Sofi's eyes went wide with alarm. “He didn't mess up my soup, did he?” Sofi asked. People came all the way from Boise for Sofi's tortilla soup. And if Mario had ruined all of her hard work in one afternoon?

“Nothing like that. It’s fine, mija,” her father said in his calming way, his words only half the speed of his wife’s.

Sofi believed her father and smiled, grateful for the reprieve. Even worrying about her soup was better than the self-pity she’d been absorbed in. Austin didn’t love her. But one day, some great man would. And Sofi would have her wedding. Not this wedding, but a beautiful one. One that would have her mom gushing as well.

Sofi’s parents proceeded to fill her in on the happenings at the mercado as well as her family. It didn’t matter that she’d seen them the day before, they were full of new stories. Apparently her twitterpated cousin had cut his finger while trying to learn to carve wood because his new girlfriend loved homemade gifts.

“And like a little idiot, he’s back in the shop again. Even after he almost lost his finger,” Darla stated with a shake of her head.

“Lost a finger is a little dramatic, Amor,” Sofi’s dad interjected.

Leia bit her lip as she held back a laugh; she always enjoyed Sofi’s parents’ antics. Leia had told Sofi that Sofi knew more about her extended family than Leia knew about herself and that sounded about right. The Castillos were all up in one another’s business at all times. It was what made them endearing as well as annoying.

Their conversation came to a halt as the emcee called all of their attention. He explained to them that they could soon be seated at the tables, asking them to check in with one of the wedding planner’s assistants to find where they’d been assigned.

“But before you do that, let’s announce our wedding party!” the emcee called out to the cheers of all attendees.

Before the emcee could say his name, Sofi felt her eyes drawn to the side of the dancefloor where Austin stood. Somehow, even when wearing the same things as his brothers

who surrounded him, he stood out. Like a beacon calling to Sofi.

She closed her eyes to try to break her connection but when she opened them again, somehow her gaze was still on him, even though he'd moved.

Sofi had a problem. One she wasn't sure how to fix.

The emcee announced the wedding party one by one, calling out the height and weight of the brothers like they were entering a boxing match. The brothers playfully punched one another as the bridesmaids played their roles of shock (Lottie), trying to break up the fight (Grace), and holding up a card that read *Round One* (Holland). The crowd enjoyed every part of the antics as the wedding party took their seats at two different tables, but the clapping kicked up a notch when Lake and Logan entered the tent.

“And give it up for your bride and groom, Mr. and Mrs. Aaaaashford!” The emcee boomed as the cheers turned almost riotous.

Lake beamed up at Logan, who only had eyes for his bride. He led her to a table at the head of the room and the two sat before the wedding planner's assistants flitted around the room, seating people quickly.

Sofi hung back with her parents, waiting for their assignment as others who were more anxious to sit went straight to the assistants.

“Hello there,” a cute blonde said as she came up to Sofi, Leia, and Sofi's parents. “Name?” she asked Leia.

Leia gave her name.

“Table ten,” the assistant replied with a smile.

“I'm guessing that's table ten?” Leia pointed to a table that Trent stood next to. He was in deep conversation with Phoenix, which made sense, considering the two were best friends.

“Sure is,” the blonde said before she turned to Sofi's mom.

Darla gave her name and the assistant let her know they were at table five. Sofi was about to follow them when the assistant stopped her.

“Table five is just for Mr. and Mrs. Castillo. Are you Sofia?” she asked.

Sofi nodded, following where the assistant pointed on her seating chart. Table one. Next to Austin Ashford.

“But isn’t that table for the wedding party?” Sofi asked as her parents walked away.

“And their dates. Lake figured since she made them all have dates she should at least let them sit with their dates.”

Sofi had almost forgotten all of the brothers would have dates. Because none of the other dates had sat with the family at the ceremony nor were they in any of the pictures. But as she glanced toward table one and two, sure enough. Brooks was sitting with one of Grace’s friends while Land sat next to Grace, who must be his date. Memphis had his date in his lap and a gorgeous blonde sat two chairs down from Memphis, pouting with her arms crossed over her chest as she glared at the back of Phoenix’s head. That must be his date.

Sofi was sure there was a backstory there and she wasn’t positive she wanted to know what it was.

“I can take it from here,” Sofi said as she felt his presence before she’d heard his voice.

“Thanks, Austin.” The cute assistant beamed up at Sofi’s best friend and Sofi wondered if there was a backstory there was well. The assistant was totally Austin’s type. Had he already asked her out? Let her know that Sofi was just a friend?

Sofi swallowed back her jealousy that wanted to rear its ugly head. But she had no claim on Austin. She never had and she never would.

“Table one, got it.” Sofi started that direction at a brisk pace before Austin could touch her hand or the small of her back or some other place that made her lose her mind.

She hurried as fast as her giant heels would let her and slipped into the empty seat beside Land.

She couldn't keep doing this. She had to get a better control on her emotions. Typically Sofi could totally accept just being Austin's best friend but it had to be something about this setting, so many dreams on display that would never be realized.

That had to be it.

Austin took the empty seat on Sofi's other side and she felt his worry without even looking at him.

"Everything okay?" he whispered in her ear, causing goosebumps to erupt all over her exposed skin.

She quickly brushed them away, trying to keep her movements casual as she turned a smile to Austin, hoping he'd buy it.

"It's perfect. I was just a little surprised by the seating arrangements," Sofi said breezily. Or at least that's what she was going for.

"Oh," Austin said knowingly. She knew he was assuming it was because she hated being anywhere near the limelight. Which Sofi did. And she was glad for his assumption.

The emcee then announced dinner and soon everyone was seated at their tables with plates of salad in front of them. People dug eagerly into their meals and Sofi lifted her first bite to her mouth as well, but she continued surveying the others at the table, hoping to get her mind off of the man at her side.

Phoenix had come back from his chat with Trent, his date still appearing sulky even though she was no longer alone. Sofi watched as Phoenix nervously played with his fork, his glance flitting from brother to brother and then finally resting on his date. She shook her head and he shook his in return, some kind of silent disagreement that Sofi was sure they'd be hearing about soon.

Phoenix once again turned to the table at large before clearing his throat.

“So,” Phoenix began as his date’s frown deepened. Phoenix glanced toward her but then turned his attention to his brothers and their dates. “You guys know I’m going back to Salt Lake early tomorrow.”

The brothers nodded.

“I would have waited for a bit more of a private time to tell you all but at this point it doesn’t really matter who overhears since the announcement will be made public tomorrow,” Phoenix continued. “I’m quitting football.”

Sofi’s hand flew to her mouth as the brothers’ faces all ranged in different forms of shock. Only Jackson and Ruby seemed unfazed by the announcement.

“Why?” Land asked.

Phoenix shrugged. “It’s time. I gave as much as I could to the sport and while part of me wishes I could play forever, I know the truth. A few more really bad hits and it won’t be just retirement for me. It could be a whole lot worse. I love football, but not enough to give it everything.”

The brothers all nodded as Grace’s friend seemed as if she wished she were elsewhere during this family announcement. Memphis’s date, on the other hand, was eating it up, probably wishing she had her phone to record the whole thing. Phoenix’s girlfriend, who had been quiet up to that point, scoffed before shaking her head once again.

“So you’re just going to throw away all of the money, fame, and your life in Salt Lake, just like that,” she said, turning on him.

Austin raised his brows as Memphis choked back a laugh.

“If you want to look at it like that,” Phoenix replied calmly.

“What other way is there?” she pressed.

Phoenix stood and gently took his girlfriend’s arm.

“Maybe this is a conversation we should have in private,” he said.

She rolled her eyes and shook off his touch but stood to follow him.

Judging by the tension radiating off of both Phoenix and his girlfriend, Sofi had a feeling their relationship wouldn't last the rest of the evening.

The two walked out into the darkness together as Memphis started laughing.

“That’s why you never get serious with them,” Memphis snickered to Austin.

His date slapped his shoulder.

“What does that mean?” she demanded.

The rest of the table fell into smaller conversations as Memphis tried to dig himself out of his hole.

Austin and Land began discussing a mare they were training as Grace turned to her friend, giggling about the cute guy sitting at table six.

Brooks and Land seemed unfazed that their dates were checking out this new guy so Sofi didn't worry about it either. As much as Sofi liked Grace, her allegiance would always be to the Ashford boys. She'd grown up with them and they felt almost like her own brothers. She actually might like Land and Brooks more than her flesh and blood brothers, though she did love the Castillos more. That was the funny thing about family. You could love them fiercely without liking them all that much.

Sofi passed her empty salad plate to a waitress and then dug into her steak and mashed potatoes entrée as she moved her people watching to the room at large. She noticed her parents laughing with the couple beside them and Beckett trying to climb under the table. Just as Leia grabbed him by the back of his suspenders, the emcee got up to announce a slideshow of photos of Logan and Lake's lives as Jackson, the best man, and Grace, the maid of honor, made speeches.

The entire room went quiet as photos of little Logan were displayed on a giant white screen. Jackson told stories about the rambunctious brothers, paying tribute to Mitchell Ashford,



the Ashford's patriarch who had passed. Sofi's face was streaked with tears and she noticed each Ashford boy swiping under his own eyes by the time Grace got up to speak about how much she admired her resilient big sister. In the face of all adversity, Lake had won.

Without a word Austin pulled Sofi's chair closer to his during Grace's speech, just a little but enough to slide an arm around her shoulders. She was sure he'd noticed her tears and this was his way of comforting her, maybe even receiving some comfort for himself as well.

Being this close to Austin was doing all kinds of messy things in Sofi's brain and she tried to focus on the waiters as they brought around the desserts and then on Logan and Lake as they cut their cake. She laughed along as Logan carefully fed Lake perfectly just before she shoved her piece into Logan's face.

And as much as she enjoyed watching the arrival of her dessert and the sweet moment between the couple, Sofi's entire being thrummed at being so near to Austin.

Sofi applauded and smiled with everyone else when Lake started to clean Logan up after the cake debacle and then watched as he led his mom onto the dance floor while Lake joined them with her dad. It was only when Austin finally moved his arm to dig into his dessert that Sofi was able to do so as well. She tried to ignore the sudden chill that swept over her now that Austin was no longer so close and smiled a bit too widely when Logan handed his mom off to Jackson, who led her back to her seat as Logan cut in and danced with Lake for their first dance.

Before she knew it, Sofi had wiped her dessert plate clean—if she couldn't have the man of her dreams, at least she'd enjoyed the dessert of her dreams. That chocolate soufflé was everything. She licked her fork as Austin turned his attention to her, Sofi's cheeks going warm as she realized he'd witnessed the way she devoured her soufflé. Sofi dropped her fork.

“And this is why I keep breaking up with women. No one can clean a plate like my Sofi,” Austin said to Land as if he compared all of the women he dated to Sofi.

Her embarrassment fled in the face of confusion. Because why in the heck would he do that when he could have her? None of it made sense, so Sofi refused to let her heart jump at the idea that Austin thought her the woman all others should be measured against. Okay, her heart jumped a little.

“There was this time in high school when we were both on dates and Sofi’s date ordered her a salad,” Austin said to Land, pulling Sofi’s attention back to him when he looked at her. She shook her head at the memory. She could appreciate a good salad, but as her whole meal? Nuh-uh.

Land laughed, knowing Sofi well enough to judge the guy’s mistake. “Sofi waited until the entrees came and switched their plates, telling the guy that she thought he’d ordered the burger and fries for her.”

“He was pissed,” Sofi interjected, memories of that night coming to life in her mind as Austin told the story.

“No, he got pissed when you wouldn’t share any of the burger with him. You told him he should have ordered a burger for himself if he really wanted one.” Land began laughing. “Sofi then not only polished off her whole plate, but she proceeded to steal half of my fries as my date didn’t even finish the salad she’d ordered for herself. I’m pretty sure my date ended up in a relationship with your date for a few years,” Austin finished and now all three of them were laughing.

Sofi had forgotten all about that. She really did love her food, but she’d never realized that Austin appreciated that about her. His eyes twinkled as he took her in and her breath caught painfully.

“And now we’d like to open the dance floor to all of our guests,” the emcee announced, startling Sofi enough to look away from Austin. Her eyes turned toward Land. Had Austin’s brother seen what had happened?

Sofi was going to guess he hadn't because Land wasn't even looking at them. With the announcement he'd turned expectantly to his date.

Out of the corner of her eye Sofi watched as Austin stood, offering Sofi his hand. "Dance with me?"

She had to look up at him as he spoke and once again her breathing didn't feel quite right as his blue eyes focused solely on her.

She should say no. She would have said no. If she could have.

But her heart apparently had other ideas and Sofi found herself taking his hand and following his lead onto the dance floor. She shut her eyes as he pulled her in flush with his body, his hand pressing against her back.

And in that moment Sofi was his. Completely. He didn't know it but he held her heart and soul as much as he did her body.

Why didn't he know it?

Sofi swore she felt his lips brush against her hair as she pressed her cheek to his chest.

What was he doing to her?

Sofi wanted to pull away. To save the last shred of her heart. Her sanity.

But instead she let herself enjoy every sensation, from Austin's touch to the whisper of his breath on her skin.

When Austin began to hum, Sofi was lost.

His deep voice kept perfect tune with the music as he began to softly sing the words of the song they danced, at a volume only she could hear.

"Everyone turns to see," he sang as Sofi closed her eyes again, treasuring the moment.

She knew Austin didn't sing anymore. At all. For anyone. That he would do so for her? Even if it was just as they danced, she knew it was because she made him feel safe.

Without thinking she turned her head up, looking into the animated blue eyes she knew better than her own. He cared for her. She knew he did.

If she just lifted onto her toes ...

Sofi yanked herself out of Austin's arms and said the first thing she could think of. "I have to pee."

Austin's startled face changed to an expression of mirth at Sofi's declaration.

"Then you should pee," Austin said amidst his chuckles.

Sofi turned on her heel, grateful Austin suspected nothing. But she'd been about to ... she couldn't even think it. It would have ruined everything. She would have ruined everything.

Everything.

Years of friendship. Because she knew how Austin viewed her. He'd made it plain as day. He asked out the women he was interested in. He'd never asked Sofi out. Ever.

Hurrying toward the ranch house, she walked in, wishing she could find some of the peace this place had always brought her. But it was missing. Maybe part of her was missing.

All she knew was that she had to leave. She needed space from this place. From Austin.

She pulled out her phone as she exited the house without peeing. Her bladder could wait. But these texts couldn't.

*Can you get a ride home?*

Leia was her first text.

*Of course. But are you okay?*

*I just need to go home,* Sofi texted hurriedly as she asked the valet for her keys. She hoped this second exchange would go as well.

*Sorry. I don't feel well. I think I'm going to head home.*

Would Austin believe her?

*Where are you?* came the immediate response.

*Waiting for my car. Don't leave. It's your brother's wedding.*

*But if you're sick.*

*I'll be fine. Just need bed and a couple of pain relievers.*

*Do you have a headache?*

Headache, heartache, it was nearly the same thing.

*Yeah.*

*Then let me drive you home.*

Thankfully the valet showed up with her keys and Sofi texted when she was in her seat but not yet driving.

*Already behind the wheel. I'm good. Tell Lake and Logan I'm sorry but I'll be seeing them plenty.*

She followed that text with a winky face.

*Sofi. Come back. I'll drive you home.*

Sofi ignored that text until she was safely in her driveway.

*Already home.*

*I'm in my car. I'll be there in five.*

Sofi shook her head. She couldn't see him now. She wouldn't be able to bear it.

*GO BACK. I'm fine.*

She should have thought this through better. She should have known Austin would be worried. But she'd just run, damning the consequences.

It was then that a brilliant thought hit her. Enough of the truth that just maybe Austin would believe her.

*I didn't tell you the whole truth. My headache isn't that bad but I left because the wedding was too much. It made me realize how much I'm missing out on by not taking dating seriously. It just gave me a lot to think about, you know? I needed some space.*

Sofi sat in her car as she watched three dots appear, soon followed by Austin's response.

*You gave me a scare. I'm glad you're okay. I'm sorry you're feeling sad about not being married, but you know that's all on you, right? Any guy worth his salt would be dying for a chance to date you, Sofi. Give them a chance and you'll be married within a year.*

Three dots appeared again.

*I guess I should go back then. But call me if you need to talk. Love you, Sofi.*

And there it was. Love you. Not I love you. And how different those two phrases were. Sofi got out of the car, feeling badly for her selfish reaction but also knowing she'd acted in the only way she could have to preserve her dignity and her friendship. If she'd stayed in that romantic setting with Austin saying the things he was saying, touching her the way he'd been, watching her the way he had... Sofi might hate being the center of attention, but being the center of Austin's world was like a drug. She craved it even as she knew she shouldn't have it.

Austin was right. She needed to give other guys a chance. She needed to date more. Find someone out there. Because there had to be someone who could hold sway over her heart like Austin currently did. Someone who would help her forget she'd ever been in love with her best friend. Because if there wasn't ... Sofi couldn't think like that. There was. There had to be.

And it was only that thought that helped Sofi fall asleep that night.

"WE NEED YOU," Rachael said through the phone as Austin stepped out of the restaurant where he'd met some friends that evening. "Sofi said you'd come and we need you," she reiterated.

Austin was already on his way to his truck.

"Where are you?" he asked, vaulting into the driver's seat and turning on the car in one fluid motion. Who knew what

kind of situation the girls were in? Time was probably of the essence.

From Rachael's slurred words she was as drunk as she'd been the last time Austin had seen Sofi in trouble, and he knew she'd be poor backup if Sofi really needed help. His heart dropped as he remembered the giant guy and his rough grip on Sofi's arm. Possessive in a way that made Austin's stomach curdle. Especially when he recalled the panicked look on Sofi's face. If it was that same guy ... no, if it was any guy.

"Gray's." Rachael named the popular bar thankfully just a few blocks over from where Austin had been.

"Give me a minute," Austin replied, knowing he could make quick work of the distance between them. "Is Sofi okay?" he had to ask. Rachael was too out of it to worry too much about anyone other than herself. But he needed Rachael to be aware of Sofi. Knowing Sofi, she was bearing the brunt of whatever situation they were in while Rachael chatted on the phone. For all the urgency of her words, Rachael's tone was too relaxed. Something was off, and Austin didn't like it.

"She's fine. She needs you but she's fine," Rachael said, her voice quieting. Was she falling asleep?

Austin hopped out of his truck and ran the short distance to the entrance of Gray's Bar. He waved to the bouncer, a high school classmate, and hurried in, glancing this way and that for the emergency Rachael had called him about.

"I'm here." Austin had to yell into his phone over the sound of the music playing beside him. Gray's always had a live band.

"Oh," Rachael giggled.

What in the heck?

It was then that Austin remembered he'd heard Rachael clearly, meaning she couldn't have been in the building. Were the women outside?

Austin jogged out, scanning his surroundings with increasing anxiety. Where was Sofi?

“Can you hear me?” Rachael yelled, causing Austin to pull the phone away from his ear. Now that he was outside, he could not only clearly hear Rachael over the phone, but he followed the sound of her voice around the building to a side parking lot. Sitting on the curb was Rachael. Alone.

“Where’s Sofi?” Austin asked urgently, starting to feel a bit dizzy from twisting his head rapidly back and forth.

“Um, at home?” Rachael quipped.

Austin froze, staring at her in disbelief.

“I knew you would come for her. You always come for her. You’re always there for her. How come no one is there for me?” Rachael asked, her voice breaking as she patted the sidewalk beside her.

Now that Austin wasn’t worried Sofi was in immediate danger, he had time to take a breath. And to feel some major annoyance at Rachael. But judging by the way she couldn’t quite sit up straight, she was more plastered than he’d ever seen her. And even though he was frustrated at her deception, he knew she couldn’t be thinking correctly. So he lowered himself to the curb beside her, mostly because she was Sofi’s friend but also because she was a woman in need. He didn’t even want to think about what his mom would say if he left Rachael here, drunk and vulnerable.

“What have you eaten today?” Austin asked, knowing drinking on an empty stomach was a bad idea.

“Um, milkshake? Nope, that was yesterday. I ate. I can take care of myself,” Rachael said with an annoyed glare.

Why was he here again? Austin had never been so tempted to get up and leave a woman but when he’d been desperately looking for Sofi he’d noticed something else. Rachael was all alone. And she was Sofi’s friend. So by extension, Austin should help care for someone Sofi cared about.

Austin pulled a protein bar out of his jacket pocket. He always kept one on him since Sofi tended to go from slightly hungry to full-on hangry in seconds. Over the years he’d



learned that in order to enjoy the most pleasant Sofi experience it was better to keep her fed.

He handed the bar to Rachael who quickly opened it, pausing before she bit into it. “Was this for her?”

Austin waited for Rachael to take a bite, hoping the bar would absorb some of that alcohol in her stomach, before asking, “Sofi?”

Rachael nodded but stopped, dropping the bar to hold her head. “Why does the world keep shaking like that?”

“Are you okay, Rachael?” Austin asked, more concerned about why she was drunk than her actual drunken state. He had a feeling there was more to this behavior than met the eye.

Then again, he didn’t know Rachael that well anymore. Since they’d dated they’d both kept their distance. They had Sofi in common but otherwise Austin probably wouldn’t have seen much of the woman. But what he did know was that she was getting married. Soon. Next weekend, in fact. She’d already had her bachelorette party when he’d beat up the guy messing with Sofi, so why was Rachael here, alone and hammered?

“He didn’t come. I tried calling him but he’s out with his boys. I hate his boys.” Rachael mumbled her words so Austin had to lean in to hear what she was saying.

“Who didn’t come?” he asked, wondering if he should be trying to follow along or just get Rachael into a rideshare and be done with it.

“But you came. For her. And you aren’t even getting married to her.” Rachael flung the protein bar she’d only taken one bite of and watched as it bounced against a car tire.

“You called your fiancé?” Austin asked.

Rachael nodded and then held her head again. “Stop spinning!”

Austin felt disgust toward the man Rachael was marrying. What kind of guy left his bride on the curb at some random bar so he could hang out with his friends?

“I know what you’re thinking. I shouldn’t marry him. I shouldn’t. I keep drinking, hoping I’ll feel better, but I don’t. I’m planning my divorce now. It will be a good one.” Rachael slurred the last words as she leaned her head against Austin’s shoulder.

Poor woman. Austin wondered if Sofi knew any of this. Surely she had to. But then again, Sofi wasn’t the type to let her friend make this kind of a mistake.

“You can’t tell Sofi,” Rachael whispered hoarsely, letting Austin know he’d been right. Sofi would have been the one sitting right where he was, had she known.

“Why couldn’t you love me like you love her?” Rachael jumped topics once more.

Austin wasn’t going to answer. It didn’t seem like Rachael was listening to him anyway. But as he thought about her question the answer welled within him. He couldn’t help but say, “I can’t love anyone the way I love her.”

“But it’s different,” he had to add, just in case Rachael remembered this when she was sober and felt the need to relay the message to Sofi. The last thing he needed was for his best friend to think he was pining for her. She’d probably be disgusted and never speak to him again. And if she wasn’t disgusted? That would be even worse. Because Austin did love Sofi, and he hadn’t ever loved another woman outside of his family. He was beginning to wonder if he didn’t have the capability. So for Sofi to move into a zone where he’d never been able to love? He couldn’t do that to her. To them. Their friendship meant too much to him. “I dated you,” he added. “I cared for you in a different way.”

Rachael nodded, her head slipping, and Austin reached out to catch it.

“It’s so heavy,” Rachael complained about her head.

“Yeah, I can imagine. I think I need to get you home,” Austin replied as he stood up, pulling Rachael with him. The woman was slight and Austin had no problem moving her as he put an arm around her waist and led her back to his truck.

He had considered the ride share for about a minute before deciding Sofi would have his head if she knew he'd abandoned her friend in her time of need. So Austin would play rideshare for the night. There wasn't a role he wasn't willing to play for Sofi's sake.

"Could you ever love me?" Rachael asked, her eyes round and full of desperation.

Austin had no idea what to say. He doubted it. Hadn't he just admitted he wasn't sure he could love any woman in that capacity? And he hadn't thought of Rachael in that way since they broke up. So what could he say?

"He says he loves me, but he's not here. You are. Does that mean you already love me?" Rachael continued and Austin decided he wasn't needed in this conversation at all. He'd just get her home as she answered all of her own questions.

"No, because you love her. She's special. I know she's special. She's one of my best friends. But you're special, too. And I'm special. So you could love me because I'm special," Rachael continued as Austin got her into his passenger's seat.

"Put on your belt," he told her as he ran around the car and got into his seat. He started the car and then drove down the road that would lead them to Rachael's house. Thankfully his memory was pretty impressive and he had no problem recalling where Rachael lived from the times he'd dropped Sofi off there in the past few years. Unless she'd moved?

"Do you still live in the same place?" Austin asked Rachael.

"Ever since college," Rachael replied, sounding a little more alert than before. Maybe that bite of protein bar was paying off.

Quiet enveloped the cab for a few blissful minutes before Rachael turned in his direction and asked, "Why did you break up with me?"

This really wasn't a question he wanted to answer, especially now that he knew it was more likely Rachael would remember what he'd said. So he kept quiet.

“Austin?” Rachael pushed.

Austin barely refrained from swearing. She wasn’t going to let this one go.

“We weren’t right together. And thank goodness I did, or you wouldn’t be getting married.” Austin tried to sound bright despite the fact that the woman had just told him she was planning her divorce. But pretending her marriage was a good thing seemed the only option since he really didn’t want Rachael to be both drunk and crying.

“Yeah. Married.” Rachael turned in her seat so that she was facing Austin. “What if I told you I still love you?” she asked abruptly.

Austin gripped the steering wheel harder, willing her house to just appear so that he could be done with this car ride.

“You’re getting married, Rachael.” Austin swallowed. *Please let that be enough.*

“You don’t love me, I get it. Because you love her.”

Austin wasn’t about to explain that his love for Sofi wasn’t what she was asking for either, but decided to let it go. He’d rather tell Sofi the truth later if Rachael remembered any of this than go into it with Rachael now.

“But would you do something for me?” Rachael asked, gripping Austin’s arm so tightly that he had to start driving with just his left hand.

“Rachael ... ” Austin didn’t feel like now was the time to be making her any promises.

“Please?” she pleaded, and Austin glanced over to see tears starting to drip down her cheeks. No, anything but crying.

“Sure,” Austin replied, hoping that would dry up whatever was going on in his passenger’s seat.

“You need to stop my wedding,” Rachael said.

“What?” Austin blinked, hoping he’d misheard her.

“You know when they ask if anyone objects to this union? I need you to stand up and object.”

Yeah, that wouldn't be happening.

“Rachael.”

“You have to!”

She let go of his arm to slam her fists against it. Thankfully he still hadn't put that hand back on the wheel.

“Rachael, you are going to regret this in the morning.”

“I'm not that drunk, Austin,” she muttered, and when he glanced over once more he could see that she was sobering up by the minute. But still. This request was outrageous.

“If you don't want to get married, *you* have to call it off, Rachael,” Austin said. He breathed a sigh of relief as he finally turned down her street.

“I can't. We already paid for everything. I have the prettiest dress. I can't do it, Austin. But I can't marry him either.”

Was this why Rachael had been drinking alone? She liked to have a good time, but Austin felt like this was out of character. He really did feel badly that she felt so stuck. But he wasn't her way out.

“Just promise me that you'll do it. If I regret asking you this, I'll text you. But if I don't text, you have to do it. You have to save me, Austin. Please,” Rachael begged, tugging on his arm once more as he pulled into her driveway and cut off his engine.

He scrubbed his free hand over his face, wondering how he'd gotten here. This was why he didn't save anyone other than Sofi. Sofi would never ask this of him. She wouldn't have gotten so drunk in the first place. Sofi ... there was his answer.

Austin pulled his phone out of his pocket and pressed the name of the last person he'd called.

She answered on the third ring.

“Austin?” Her voice sounded groggy. Austin could imagine her sitting up in her white sheets, a ratty band tee falling over one shoulder as she sleepily pressed her phone to her ear. Her hair would resemble a lion’s mane, the prettiest lion ever.

“See. You love her,” Rachael whispered.

“I need your help,” Austin said, Rachael’s voice reminding him of his purpose.

“Are you okay?”

“He’s fine,” Rachael said, loudly enough for Sofi to hear.

Austin put the phone on speaker.

“Rachael?” Sofi asked.

“I lied and told him you were in trouble and he came to get me. I need him to stand up during my wedding and object, Sofi.”

Rachael slapped a hand over her mouth. “You shouldn’t know that,” she said around her fingers.

“Why does he need to stop your ... do you not want to get married, Rachael?” Sofi was sounding more awake by the second.

Rachael shook her head.

“She’s shaking her head no,” Austin said for Rachael.

“She’s not supposed to know that!” Rachael scolded.

Austin felt like he was playing a game he didn’t know the rules to. A game he was anxious to finish.

“Rachael, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. But if you don’t want to get married, you need to tell Roland.”

“I want to get married. I don’t want to marry Roland. I would marry Austin.”

Austin backed up so that his back was against his car door.

“Austin, would you marry Rachael?” Sofi asked, her voice serene.

Austin really wished Sofi were in the car so that she could see the cold look he'd just sent her. He also would have liked to use her as a human shield against Rachael, who seemed to be scooting ever closer.

"No," Austin finally replied. Better to say the one word. No frills, but it had to get the message across.

"You can't marry Austin, Rach," Sofi said softly.

Rachael huffed out a breath. "I know. So he should do this for me. Since he won't marry me."

"Rach, that's asking a lot. For a guy to stand up in the middle of your ceremony and object." Sofi was trying to reason with Rachael and Austin doubted she'd have much success.

"Then you'll do it?" Rachael asked Sofi.

"Rach ... "

"Hang up the phone, Austin," Rachael demanded.

"Rachael, Sofi is right. You need to do this. We can't save you."

"You would save *her!*" Rachael accused, pointing at Austin's chest.

She was right. If Sofi were getting married and she asked Austin to stand up and object he wouldn't even think twice about it. He'd do it in an instant. But Rachael wasn't Sofi.

"No one in their right mind would want to interrupt a wedding like that," Sofi said. "It's dramatic and ridiculous, thus making for great movie scenes but terrible real-life portrayals."

Rachael threw her head against the rest behind her and Austin worried she'd hurt herself when she started groaning but soon realized the groan came from a place of emotional pain.

"He didn't pick me up, Sofi. Austin came for you and Roland didn't come for me."

"Isn't tonight his bachelor party?" Sofi asked.

“He chose his boys,” Rachael repeated.

“Maybe he didn’t see your missed call?”

“He answered. And said to call you or my mom,” Rachael replied.

The guy was a loser.

“I’ll be right there,” Sofi said. “Aus, can you stay with her until I get there?”

“Sure,” Austin replied because even though he might have said no had Rachael made the same request, he had to give in to Sofi.

Rachael leaned her forehead against Austin’s passenger window as he hung up. She stared out toward the large tree in her front yard, hiccupping. Was she crying or still that drunk?

Austin decided he didn’t need to look too closely. Sofi would be there to save him soon.

“She’s a good friend,” Rachael said between hiccups.

“The best,” Austin replied easily. He’d never known a truth more fully.

“I knew she would make me do this. That’s why I didn’t tell her. But a good friend would make me do this. Instead of having you object. That would have been more dramatic and ridiculous, though,” Rachael said as if it was a good thing.

Austin didn’t reply.

“I love her. Almost as much as you love her. Even though I tried to get you to love me tonight I would never take you away from her. She loves you too much. And I love her too much.”

Rachael was making little to no sense.

“You should love her like she loves you.” Rachael turned so that she was looking Austin in the eye.

“I do. I love her more than almost anyone else.”

Austin wasn’t about to start ranking those he loved. He loved his parents and his siblings and his grandparents, and



Sofi was right there with all of them.

“No, not like that, though. Like she loves you,” Rachael insisted.

She was still a lot more drunk than Austin had initially thought.

Car lights beamed on the back of Austin’s car and he jumped out of his seat as Sofi pulled in beside him. He couldn’t have been more grateful for backup.

Sofi turned off her car and got out, wearing a giant hoodie over some silky pajama shorts.

Austin couldn’t help but appreciatively take in the sight. This was an upgrade from the athletic shorts Sofi had worn to bed in years past and he had to wonder what was under the hoodie. Austin could get used to this.

“Where is she?” Sofi asked, reminding Austin why his friend was here.

“Still in my truck.”

Sofi hurried around to the passenger’s side of Austin’s truck and opened the door slowly.

Austin took in the rest of his friend. Her hair was a crazy riot of waves and curls all pulled up into a messy bun. Her cheeks were tinged the slightest shade of pink, causing Austin to wonder why.

Oh shoot. Had she noticed he was checking her out? He knew he shouldn’t do it. This was his Sofi. But at the same time, Sofi was hot. She knew it. He knew it. So why shouldn’t he appreciate it?

“Give me your keys,” Sofi directed as she stood in front of Rachael.

Rachael dug into her jeans pocket and drew them out. Sofi tossed the ring to Austin and then helped Rachael out of the car.

Austin hurried ahead to open the door and soon Rachael and Sofi made their way in. He watched from the doorway as

Sofi dropped Rachael onto her couch and then turned back to Austin.

“Thank you,” Sofi said to him as she made her way back to the door.

“Will you guys be alright?”

Austin realized that he’d been trying to get away from this situation just moments before, but now that Sofi had shown up he couldn’t help wanting to stay.

“I think I’ve got it from here.” Sofi held out her hand and Austin dropped Rachael’s keys into them.

“You do love her like she loves you,” Rachael muttered.

Sofi’s eyes shot to her friend.

“What did she say?” Sofi asked.

Austin shrugged. He probably wouldn’t have understood either, had Rachael not been telling him the same thing over and over.

“I can wait until you have her settled, and then I’ll follow you home. It’s late,” Austin said, suddenly not liking the idea of Sofi being out alone. He knew the streets of Blue Falls were about as safe as they came but he still wanted to be sure Sofi made it home.

“I’m good. I think I’ll probably just crash here tonight. I have a feeling we’ll need to make a few phone calls in the morning,” Sofi said, reminding him that she wasn’t just here because Rachael was drunk. She was going to help her friend call off her wedding if that was what she still wanted to do when she woke up sober.

He knew that should be his cue to turn around and walk away, but for some reason Austin wanted to prolong their time together. He never loved leaving Sofi each night, and tonight he felt that times one hundred.

“Are you feeling better after the wedding?” Austin asked, realizing he hadn’t checked in since the night before.

Even in the low light of Rachael's living room Austin could see Sofi's cheeks turn red.

"Yeah. It was just one of those nights. I'm fine now. Feeling a little silly, actually."

"Did that guy really hurt you?" Austin asked.

The engaged guy was one of the stupidest men on the planet.

"No. I mean, I guess my ego took a little bruising, but it was more the idea of getting married. The dream seems to get further and further away the older I get. I assumed it would be the opposite."

Austin understood that. As a kid he'd always assumed he'd have what his parents had. Definitely by the time he'd turned thirty. But now that he was a couple years beyond that, he couldn't really ever see it happening. Not when he'd never felt for a woman what he'd have to if he were to remain committed to just one, forever.

"You'll find someone," Austin promised. Because even though he couldn't see marriage in the cards for his future anymore, it had to be for Sofi. She deserved the doting husband, the adorable kids, and the picket fence. She wanted it so she'd get it. Austin would make sure of it.

"I'll keep trying. I'm even letting Tía Rosa set me up."

Austin felt his eyes go wide.

"My thoughts exactly," Sofi said as if she were already regretting the decision.

"Sofi," Rachael moaned.

"I'm being paged. But really, thanks again, Austin. I owe you."

Austin shook his head. That was just silly. Sofi could never owe him. They just did stuff like this for one another.

He watched as she hurried back to the couch and helped Rachael get more comfortable. Sofi leaned over and Austin forced himself to look away before really getting a good look

at Sofi's backside like his eyes wanted to. Those silk shorts were just so tempting. But if any other man had tried the same in front of him, Austin would have knocked him out. Maybe he should knock himself out.

Austin walked out, closing the door behind him. He made it into his truck before texting Sofi, *Lock the door behind me.*

Sofi texted back immediately. *Already done.*

Austin sat in his truck for a minute, waiting as he watched the last of the lights go out, ensuring all was well.

As he began the drive back to his place he thought about how lonely it would be. His home was beautiful. Built out on the lake at the ranch. The perfect house for a family.

But Austin wouldn't be having that. Not with the way he dated and couldn't ever commit. Most of the time he was fine with his life's choices. But tonight he longed for something different. He wasn't sure why.

But tomorrow he'd be back to normal, knowing he'd chosen the right path for himself. Tomorrow all would be right.

## Four

“I NEED to stop going into every date hoping he’ll be *the* one.” Sofi met Leia’s eyes in her mirror.

“*The* one, the one? Or the one who’ll make you forget Austin?” Leia asked honestly.

“Pretty sure they’re one and the same,” Sofi answered as she blended her eyeshadow with a fluffy brush. She didn’t really need to. Her makeup had been done for fifteen minutes. But she didn’t want to sit on the couch as she waited for her date, so standing in the bathroom seemed like the better bet.

It was one minute until six. When the man Tía Rosa had chosen for her had told her he’d be there.

Sofi sighed. It was a sad day when even Sofi held hope that the guy Tía Rosa set her up with could be the one.

Sofi’s doorbell rang, causing her to jump. She usually wasn’t this nervous before a first date but for some reason she had a lot more riding on this than normal. Maybe it was attending Lake and Logan’s wedding or maybe it was spending the last two days cancelling every part of Rachael’s wedding, but Sofi had forever on the brain and she wanted to get started in that direction.

Leia left the bathroom to answer the door as Sofi gathered up her nerve and courage. Sofi began to imagine the guy on the other side of her front door. He was probably shorter than she was and slightly balding. Yes, she’d just conjured up the image of Tía Rosa’s husband, Tío Markus, but if Tía had

chosen that man for herself, wouldn't she come up with someone similar for Sofi?

And if he did look like Tío Markus, as much as Sofi loved the man, she wouldn't have to worry about forever. There was no way she could spend forever with a man who looked like her uncle.

The thought made her giggle and settled some of her nerves.

She could do this. She'd done dozens if not hundreds of first dates over the years. She was an expert. This was just one more.

She set her eyeshadow brush down as Leia called her name.

*Ready or not.*

Sofi walked down the small hall that led to their main living space and rounded the corner to see Leia standing with a man who definitely was not shorter than Leia or Sofi.

His caramel skin nearly matched Sofi's, making her wonder if he was half Mexican and half white as well, something she'd never had in common with a guy she'd dated. His hair was a light brown while his eyes were dark and alluring. His shoulders were broad and he wasn't balding in the least.

Sofi's heart sped up as she felt a spark of attraction. He was gorgeous. Maybe not Austin gorgeous but—nope, no more comparing any man to Austin. This was Sebastian.

“Hi,” Sofi said as she approached Leia and Sebastian.

With her back to Sebastian, Leia's eyes went wide, telling Sofi she approved of the good-looking man in their living room.

“These are for you,” Sebastian said as he offered Sofi beautiful yellow daisies with one hand and a box of chocolates with the other. “I wasn't sure which to get so I got both.”

Sofi grinned as she took the offered gifts.

“Corny, I know. But classics are classics for a reason, right?” Sebastian asked.

Sofi nodded. She swore she’d said the same thing at some point in her life.

Sofi set the chocolates on her kitchen counter but Leia took the flowers. “I’ll get these in water,” she offered as she left the two to go to the kitchen.

“Thanks, Leia,” Sofi called behind her before turning back to Sebastian. “I guess we should be off?”

Sebastian nodded, a smile on his lips as he appreciatively gazed at Sofi. She noticed his eyes stopped on her long curled hair, a happy gleam in them, before moving to her silky pink tank that she’d tucked into a pair of white wide-legged jeans.

“You look amazing,” Sebastian complimented, aware that Sofi noticed him checking her out. She liked that. He was confident. She could work with confident.

“As do you,” Sofi replied because he did.

He wore a black tee that fit his shoulders and chest perfectly, showing off his stature and build. She was grateful he wore jeans as well. When he’d said to dress casually, Sofi had worried she’d gone too casual, but Sebastian’s outfit told her she’d hit the level of dress perfectly.

Sebastian opened her door and held it as Sofi walked out, then hurried ahead to his blue truck, opening the passenger’s side door.

And chivalrous. Although Sofi could open her own door, she appreciated a man who was willing to do it for her.

She watched as he rounded the front of his truck, taking in more of him. He really was attractive. Part of her wondered if he was too attractive.

Count on Sofi to find a downside to an attractive man.

“So ... have you ever been ax-throwing?” Sebastian asked as he climbed into his seat.

Sofi grinned. She'd been quite a few times, thanks to Austin's addiction to the sport.

"I have," Sofi said, shooting Sebastian a friendly smile because he seemed even more nervous than she did.

"Oh good. I thought it might be weird for a first date but I really wanted to do something where we could talk but not just a normal dinner, you know? Although we will get food after. I hear from your Tía that as long as I feed you, you'll like me."

Sofi burst into laughter. That sounded like her Tía. She would have been offended if it weren't the truth.

"So, Sebastian—" Sofi started.

"You can call me Bash. Everyone does," he interjected.

A nickname. Sofi liked it.

"And you can call me Sofi. I mean, I answer to Sofia too, but most people like the shorter version."

"I like both," Bash said, a grin filling his face and showing off his white teeth.

Okay, but why was he just getting better and better?

Before Sofi knew it they were at the ax-throwing place, Billy behind the counter winking because Sofi was finally there with someone other than Austin.

"Watch out for this one. She's an ace," Billy said as Bash ordered their equipment and got their lane assignment.

"An ace, huh?" Bash said as he turned to Sofi. "Nice."

He seemed not in the least intimidated that she might be better at this than he was. Another positive for Bash.

They walked down to their assigned throwing spot as Bash teased, "I was kind of hoping to be able to get a little closer to you by showing you technique, but it looks like you might be the one teaching me."

Sofi laughed, not hating the idea of getting close to Bash.

Through her laughter she heard a voice she'd been hoping to get out of her head. At least for the remainder of that



evening.

“No,” Sofi whispered as she noticed a group of guys coming down the walkway toward them. Her heart dropped as they stopped at the target just next to the one Sofi and Bash had been assigned.

She thought for sure she’d be free of him for this date. There was no need. Tía knew this guy. He’d been vetted. The only reason Austin followed her on dates was to make sure she was safe. She was safe. He could leave.

Unless this was a coincidence. Austin really did like ax throwing.

But then she saw Austin pump his eyebrows once and Sofi knew.

“Sof, introduce us to the date,” Austin said as he flung a possessive arm over Sofi’s shoulders.

She was going to kill him. And then make him marry her because no one else would, thanks to him. Maybe not in that order.

“That’s okay,” Sofi said as she shrugged Austin’s arm off and gave him a not-so-gentle shove back toward his target.

Yes, they were next to one another, but he didn’t have to be this close.

“Ex-boyfriend?” Bash asked quietly as Austin, Memphis, and Joey began to yell over one another about each of their ax-throwing prowess.

Didn’t Sofi wish. Then maybe she’d have Austin out of her system. Because as much as she was annoyed, her heart couldn’t help rejoicing that he was there.

“Best friend. Overprotective best friend,” Sofi replied as she picked up her ax and held it over her head. She let it go with all of her might, throwing it right at the center of the target. Bash let out a slow whistle.

“You *are* an ace. And if I was your best friend, I’d be worried for my head.”

Sofi grinned up at Bash.

“And maybe a little worried for mine if I mess this night up,” Bash added.

Sofi laughed.

From the corner of her eye she saw Austin turn in her direction before his eyes narrowed on Bash.

“Have you done this before?” Sofi asked Bash, trying to ignore Austin.

Bash shook his head. “But I’m always up for new experiences.”

Sofi liked that too. Bash was pretty dang awesome.

Bash took his ax and lifted it over his head like Sofi had before letting it sail through the air. It sliced through the air before falling with a thud on the ground right in front of the target.

Sofi heard laughter burst from Austin’s direction and realized Bash was right. Austin had better watch his pretty head because Sofi was about to lose it.

Bash joined in Austin’s laughter as he shook his head. “Man, maybe I should have practiced at least once before coming on this date with a pro.”

He didn’t seem ashamed, just jovially amused.

“Well, now I guess I’ll just have to show you some technique,” Sofi said, flirting in a way she typically didn’t on a first date. But between Bash being so sweet and Austin being right there, she couldn’t help it.

Sofi walked over to pick up Bash’s ax, sashaying her hips a little more than she needed to, knowing Bash was watching. She lifted it and turned to walk back to him with a flirty smile, but froze when she caught sight of Austin’s face.

His jaw had dropped and the open longing in his eyes was impossible to miss.

Sofi swallowed and turned back to Bash, her date, minus the smile. Who cared how Austin looked at her? He was

attracted to her, sure, but that and friendship were all that he could give.

The look Bash gave her was no less intense and Sofi pushed a smile back to her lips as she came to Bash's side and handed him the ax.

“When you throw, try to lean back a little and then push yourself forward. That momentum should help,” Sofi said, backing down from the idea she'd had to place Bash in the position he should stand in, her hands going all over his abs. It had seemed like a good idea in theory but now she couldn't bring herself to do it. It was too forward. It wasn't her.

Bash tried Sofi's way and he hit the target with the back of his ax before it bounced away.

“Better,” she said with a clap and grin, trying to forget how closely Austin was watching her.

Sofi decided not to compete against Bash—it wouldn't be fair, considering her experience—but by the end of the night he was hitting the target more often than not, not quite the center like Sofi typically did but he'd improved remarkably.

“You're a natural,” Sofi complimented Bash as they gathered their things.

She swore she heard Austin grunt but she ignored him the way she had with everything else he'd done that evening.

She and Bash took their things back to Billy and walked toward the front door, but there was one thing Sofi had to do before they left.

“Do you mind waiting for a minute?” Sofi asked Bash.

He shook his head as Sofi headed back to where they'd been throwing and saw that sure enough, Austin and his friends were gathering their things as well.

“Stay,” Sofi said as she approached Austin and then put a hand on his chest.

Seeing the stern expression on Sofi's face, Memphis and Joey dispersed.

“You know I can’t do that, Sof. I promised the Tías.” Austin shrugged as if he couldn’t help what he was doing but Sofi knew he was loving every minute of ruining Sofi’s date. She wasn’t sure why, but he was enjoying himself.

“Tía Rosa picked this guy out. He’s not some rando from the internet.”

“Pretty sure there weren’t any such guidelines. You go on a date, I follow.”

“The guidelines were implied.”

“Not from where I stand.”

“Austin, please. I think I could really like this guy. The date is going fairly well despite you. We are going to dinner, alone. I need this. Please.” Sofi knew her voice held more than a hint of pleading but she needed Austin to understand without fully understanding. Nothing could ever grow between Sofi and another man if Austin were there because she’d always choose Austin. But Austin wasn’t a choice. So she had to be given a chance to make something else work.

Austin lifted Sofi’s hand from his chest and held it with both of his own.

“If this guy does anything to hurt you ... ”

“You get free rein at him,” Sofi promised.

Austin nodded once. “I’m sure he doesn’t deserve you.”

“Who does?” Sofi joked.

“Yeah, who does,” Austin repeated, but his expression was far more austere than Sofi’s had been.

Sofi turned and left before she tried to analyze Austin or before he changed his mind. If the second half of this date was as good as the first could have been without Austin, Sofi finally had hope for a new future. One in which she didn’t pine for Austin for the rest of her life.

## Five

“SOFI SURE LOOKED friendly with that date of hers,” remarked Joey, one of Austin’s best friends since childhood.

Austin couldn’t help his immediate response of glaring at Joey. He then softened his face as he pondered why it bothered him so much that Sofi had looked happy on her date. She should look happy. That’s what Austin should want for Sofi. Yet, he didn’t. At least not completely. His conflicting emotions were confusing him.

“It’ll never work,” Matt, Austin’s friend who’d dated Sofi before she’d gone to Mexico, said into his mug of nearly empty beer.

Austin spun to look at his friend. What was that supposed to mean? Austin didn’t like that Matt was implying that something was wrong with Sofi. That she was the reason the two of them hadn’t worked out. Austin knew it had been Sofi who broke things off with Matt before she’d left, but so far he’d seen Matt make no effort to win her back. And Sofi was a woman worth pursuing.

“Don’t give him that death glare, Aus,” Memphis said from the other side of the table.

After ax throwing, or stalking Sofi’s date, Austin and his friends had decided that they still wanted dinner even if they couldn’t continue chasing Sofi. So they’d decided on a little dive that served the best tacos in town and a whole bunch of cerveza. Not that Austin was drinking, since he was their driver. Matt hadn’t been invited to the Sofi-date-stalking

portion for obvious reasons, but when Sofi had pushed them away, Austin had decided to invite the guy who'd been moping for the last year or more since Sofi had dumped him.

“Why not?” Austin asked, his attention still on Matt. “He’s acting like it’s Sofi’s fault that they broke up.”

“It is,” Matt said.

Out of the corner of his eye Austin saw that this time it was Memphis glaring at their friend, who was already on his third cerveza.

“Do you want to die today, man?” Memphis asked Matt, who just shrugged in response.

Austin was still feeling defensive of Sofi, but at the same time he felt sympathy for Matt. He hadn’t realized Sofi had done such a number on him. It was almost as if he were still mourning the relationship when it had been over for more than a year and they’d only dated for a few months. Austin guessed if any woman could make a man pine after her for so long it would be Sofi. He honestly could not imagine his life without her. If she ever left him ... he’d never recover. Thankfully Sofi wasn’t the kind to leave friends. Just boyfriends.

“And it’s his fault,” Matt added, ignoring Memphis and jerking his head in Austin’s direction.

“My fault? Because we’re friends?” Austin asked, sliding back on the bench he shared with Matt even as he leaned forward. He was curious. As well as a little annoyed.

“You can’t be that blind. He can’t be that blind, can he?” Matt turned to Joey and Memphis as he asked the question.

Joey shook his head as Memphis said, “Shut up, Matt. You’re too tipsy to avoid saying something you’ll regret.”

“Or maybe I’m just tipsy enough to say what needs to be said,” Matt countered, his voice rising.

Austin felt like he should know what they were talking about and yet he was lost. It was obvious Matt was saying he was the one who was blind. But what was he blind about?

Sofi? That couldn't be the case. If there was one place in his life where he saw clearly, it was anywhere Sofi touched.

"She loves you, dude," Matt declared as Memphis lunged across the table just moments too late to silence him.

Austin froze. His ears took in Matt's words, but his mind refused to accept them.

"Sofi?" Austin asked. Memphis had slid back down into his seat, his face covered with an expression Austin couldn't quite place. It wasn't fear, but it wasn't sadness. After a moment of study he realized it was guilt. Memphis felt guilty for what Matt had revealed. But who did he feel guilt toward?

Matt nodded as he raised his hand to try to get the attention of their server.

Memphis leaned across the table to shove Matt's hand down. "I'm cutting you off."

Matt muttered something unintelligible but it sounded like a few four-letter words directed at Memphis. Memphis chose to ignore them as his attention turned to Austin.

"Who was he talking to?" Austin asked Joey and Memphis, the guys who hadn't imbibed beyond what they should have. The guys who weren't nursing broken hearts.

Joey shook his head, his expression clearly stating he wasn't going to get involved. Memphis shrugged.

"I really liked her. But she only ever loved you," Matt said, his gaze clearly on Austin.

"Because she's my best friend," Austin said, knowing Memphis would back him up. Memphis always backed him up in this. Sure, he'd heard this plenty before. When people saw a male and female best friend of a certain age, they just assumed there had to be something more. But with Sofi and Austin, what you saw was what you got. Memphis got that.

"Shut up, Matt," Memphis groaned as he leaned his head on the booth behind him.

Why wasn't Memphis speaking to Austin? Matt was talking out of his rear. They all could see that, right? Nothing

he said was making sense. Yet, Joey and Memphis weren't acting like the man was crazy, the way Austin wanted them to. Because Matt was crazy. Or heartsick. Or whatever. What he wasn't? Speaking the truth.

Austin looked at his brother, who still had his gaze fixed somewhere in the air.

"I'm gonna help him walk this off," Joey said as he got up and dragged Matt to his feet, letting him lean heavily on Joey as they left toward the front doors. Austin had a distinct feeling Joey was running. And judging by the way Memphis still wouldn't meet his eyes, he knew Memphis wanted to do the same.

But why? They just had to say Matt was too drunk to know what he was talking about and the discussion would be over.

"She's my best friend, Memphis," Austin reiterated in case Memphis had missed it.

"I know," Memphis said, cracking his neck before he met Austin's gaze.

"So Matt has no idea what he's talking about, right?" Austin said, running a hand through his hair. He knew that made his curls jump in all directions, but right now he didn't care if he looked semi-unhinged. He was beginning to feel it. Matt couldn't mean what he'd said. He couldn't. It couldn't be the truth. The ramifications ... Austin couldn't even begin to think about them. Sofi was his best friend. Boyfriends for her and girlfriends for him came and went, but she was his constant. He couldn't lose that. He couldn't lose her. And dating her? He knew it would mean losing her. Austin couldn't hold onto a woman. It wasn't in his nature.

Memphis scrubbed a hand over his face. "What do you want me to say?" he asked, clenching his jaw as he waited.

What did Austin want? The truth. He wanted Memphis to tell him Sofi was his best friend and nothing more.

"The truth," Austin said, unsure of why he had to explain that.



Memphis shook his head once before turning around to see if Joey or Matt had returned. But no one had gone in or out of the doors since they'd left.

Memphis blew out a breath. "I'm not sure I can do this to Sof. She's your best friend, but we all love her."

Do what to Sof?

"Memphis," Austin pushed, a note of irritation in his voice. He had to hear what his brother was holding back, even as fear gripped every part of his heart.

"He's right. She loves you. Maybe always has," Memphis said quickly, as if he was ripping a band-aid off.

"As her *best friend*." Austin had to be clear because Memphis sure wasn't.

"No," Memphis said the one word and Austin wouldn't have been more surprised if a gong had appeared out of nowhere and knocked him upside the head. In fact, he would have preferred that.

"What do you mean 'no'?"

Memphis shook his head once more. "I shouldn't be telling you this."

"Did she tell you about her feelings for me?" Austin pressed, needing every part of this.

"She didn't have to. Austin, it's clear to everyone but you."

Austin began shaking his head. It couldn't be true. "She would have said something."

"And ruin her most important friendship? What I don't get is why you're freaking out so badly. It's obvious you love her as much as she loves you."

Austin let out one short laugh even though there was nothing funny about this situation.

"As a friend, Memphis. If you think I love her romantically, then you've got it all wrong. You all have it wrong. We are best friends. An adult male and an adult female can be best friends."

Memphis lifted a shoulder, telling Austin he wouldn't fight about this. But Austin wasn't done. He couldn't let Memphis leave thinking Sofi loved Austin and he loved her.

"You're my brother. You know how I am in relationships. I ruin every single one. Sofi is constant. My best friend. To be anything more ..."

*Disaster* didn't begin to cover the devastation that would come about if he were to date Sofi.

"I guess you're right," Memphis said, looking behind him again.

"I know I'm right," Austin prevailed. "So if Sofi loved me and you all knew it, why did Matt and so many of my friends date her?"

"Because Matt is a selfish prick. Sofi's hot, Aus," Memphis said, as if that was answer enough. Austin guessed it typically was. With any other woman, but not with Sofi. Sofi was so much more than just hot.

"And every friend of yours who dated Sofi was the same as Matt. But have you noticed none of your very closest friends have ever dated Sofi?"

Austin thought about his brothers, Joey, Ricky, and all of his other closest guy friends who had been by his side since high school. Even James and Landon, his closest friends in college, hadn't dated Sofi, even though Austin knew for a fact that Landon had had a thing for her. He'd wondered why Landon had never pursued it and Austin had assumed it was because Landon didn't want to mess things up for his and Austin's friendship. Because Austin had made it clear to every one of his friends who had dated Sofi that if things went south and he had to choose a side, he'd always choose Sofi. But that was the only reason his brothers and closest friends hadn't dated Sofi. It definitely wasn't because she was in love with him.

Austin shook his head. It couldn't be. "You haven't dated her because she's like a sister to you," he pointed out to

Memphis. He'd practically grown up with Sofi as a big sister, she was over at the ranch so much.

Memphis sputtered. "Nope. Never thought of her like a sister. If I thought I had a chance, I'd date her in a heartbeat. She's hot, funny, watches football, and could play hours of video games with me and call it a date. I would have dated her for any of the first three, much less all of them, and married her for the last one. Have you seen how many times she's rejected me?"

Austin narrowed his eyes toward his brother. Those were jokes. They all knew it.

"Maybe I ask her out in a lighthearted manner, but only because she's made it abundantly clear that I don't stand a chance."

"Why would she date Matt if she loved me?"

"I doubt she enjoys loving you as you date anyone who looks halfway decent in a dress in the entire state, including most of her friends."

But that's what Sofi and Austin did. They dated a lot. And if that overlapped into their other friendships, they dealt with it. Because they knew in the end they'd always choose the other before anyone else.

"Why have you never told me? And why tell me now?" Austin asked, his brain throbbing as he tried to comprehend what Memphis was saying.

"I didn't tell you—Matt did. And you know that first one. I love Sofi. I would never betray her."

Austin got that. He wouldn't have wanted his brother to betray Sofi. But this? This had to be a mistake. Right?

"And honestly," Memphis added, "I think she's been trying to get over you for as long as she's loved you. That's another reason no one has said anything. But I don't think you have to worry about her loving you anymore. I think this latest guy might be your answer. She seems to really like him. As long as you're sure you don't want Sofi for yourself?"

Austin didn't even have to think, he was already shaking his head no. Of course, he wanted all of Sofi's friendship, but he'd always known she'd end up with another man. Austin would never be good enough for her, not when he couldn't be sure that he wouldn't break her heart.

"Then I say give her some space. If you're always there she'll compare the feelings she's had for you for years with this guy that's just come into the picture. If you stay away, they may have a shot," Memphis said as if he'd been thinking on this for a while. Maybe he had.

"We talk every day, Memphis," Austin said, unsure of how to give Sofi space. She was the biggest part of his life. "She'll freak out if I just go missing." He was pretty sure he would freak out, too, if he had to stop seeing her all the time.

"Then tell her part of the truth. You want to give her space to let this new guy in. Let her know you're cheering this on. Cheering her on."

Austin swallowed. He didn't like Memphis' plan but he could understand it.

"How much space?" Austin asked.

"You'll know when you're there. But a good amount."

Austin scrubbed a hand over his face. He still didn't like it. But he'd do it. The last thing he wanted to do was injure Sofi. And if she really was pining after him? That wasn't okay. So maybe this space thing was the answer. She deserved to love a man and have him love her back. And if this guy, who couldn't even throw a dang ax, was the one to do this for Sofi ...

Austin pulled out his phone and began composing a text. He knew if he spoke to Sofi he'd never follow through with Memphis' plan. He'd cave. The time Sofi had been in Mexico had been some of the worst months of his life and he'd still called her every day. He just hadn't seen her face for months. But to cut off all communication? He swallowed hard at the thought.

But if that's what Sofi needed? What Memphis said was starting to make some sense. Austin also was beginning to see

some truth in the idea that Sofi did love him. But it was probably just misplaced, since he was the most important guy in her life. Seeing him every day and longing for romantic love, she'd likely led herself to believe that she was attracted to him. But without him around all of the time? Sofi would have so much love to give. And she could give it to this guy.

He'd better be worthy of her.

Austin felt his tacos rise up in his throat as he pressed send.

He turned his phone off, knowing he'd respond if Sofi texted back. And he couldn't do it.

"You'd better be right about this, Memphis," Austin nearly growled, he was so angry with the situation. He knew it wasn't Memphis' fault, nor his, nor Sofi's. It just was. But he still hated it.

Memphis nodded before leaning over to pat his brother on the back.

"I know I am. But it will still suck."

Yeah, that was what Austin was anticipating.

“MAYBE I’VE HAD my sights set on the wrong brother,” Rachael said as she leaned her chin in her hand, her elbow resting on the picnic table in front of her. She gazed longingly in Phoenix’s direction as Leia and Sofi exchanged a look.

When Trent had decided to throw a BBQ in his backyard for his nearest and dearest friends, Rachael hadn’t been on the guest list. But Leia and Sofi had decided together that their friend could probably use an afternoon in the sunshine and an evening by a bonfire. She’d seemed alright since calling off her wedding, especially after she’d talked to her parents and they’d seemed to be relieved instead of upset that they were footing the bill for an event that would never happen, but Leia and Sofi had been sure she was feeling more than she appeared to be.

Yet, apparently all she was feeling was some attraction toward a specific football player who’d recently announced his retirement as well as a breakup from his beautiful girlfriend.

The whole reason Trent had tried to keep the guest list as small as possible was for Phoenix’s sake. He knew most of the single women in town would be chomping at the bit to get near the man. Sofi and Leia just hadn’t realized Rachael would be one of those women. She’d broken off her engagement just a few weeks before; surely she needed some time to grieve before moving on.

Sofi, on the other hand, was biting back disappointment. She hadn’t heard from who Rachael had deemed the wrong brother in over a week. That was the longest they hadn’t

communicated since the eighth grade, when they'd both gotten cell phones for Christmas. She'd read his text and understood his sentiment. He was right that Sofi wasn't giving her all to any of her relationships, the way Austin didn't give his all either. And she wanted to be grateful he was willing to step away so that she could have a real chance with Bash. She'd been on three dates with him in the last week and had begun to really like him. But her pervading emotion at the moment, stronger than the Bash-induced butterflies, was missing Austin. A lot. She thought about him nearly every hour of every day, even while she worked, and while that sounded a bit obsessive—it probably was—Austin was just that much of a part of her life. And now he was suddenly gone.

She'd hoped that Trent's invitation would extend to Phoenix's brother. Although maybe it had, but Austin was just that intent on avoiding Sofi for the time being. Even as she knew he was doing this out of love, as they were too reliant on one another if they wanted futures with other people, she hated it. Probably because Sofi didn't actually want a future with anyone else. Even Bash, much as she liked him.

Did it make her a terrible person that she was still dating him? But then again, she held out hope that her feelings would change, that she had a real chance of finding love with Bash. As hard as this time away from Austin was, she hoped she would one day soon jump out of the absence-makes-the-heart-grow-fonder phase with Austin and into the I-can-love-you-like-I-want-to phase with Bash.

She wasn't even sure her hopes made complete sense, but she clung to them. Because otherwise, she wasn't sure she could keep going.

"Just don't do anything about it now," Leia urged Rachael after a few long moments of silence.

Rachael turned to Leia, her head still in her hand. "Why? Do you want a chance at the gorgeous ex-Lightning?"

Leia's cheeks went immediately red and Sofi wanted to draw their attention away from Leia but knew Rachael wouldn't move along in conversation until she got an answer.

“No, not at all. Can you even imagine Phoenix going for a girl like me when there are women like you around?” Leia constantly put herself down, and Sofi hated it. Yes, Leia was a brunette, whereas Rachael, as well as Phoenix’s last girlfriend, were blondes. And if that were the only preference Leia was indicating, maybe Sofi would let it go. But Sofi knew that wasn’t at all what Leia had meant. Leia was all curves that she abhorred and tipped the scales at a number higher than Phoenix’s last girlfriend, and she was incredibly self-conscious about her size. In Sofi’s mind, Leia’s curves just served to enhance her feminine appeal and if Phoenix couldn’t see that, it was his loss. And he was an idiot.

“Leia,” Sofi admonished. She wouldn’t let anyone talk about her friend in that manner, even Leia herself. “Not nice.”

Rachael grinned. “I agree. As well as completely untruthful. If a man had us both side by side and he chose me? I’d have his vision checked.”

Leia laughed as if Rachael’s words were a joke and Sofi frowned. It bothered her that Leia really couldn’t see her own worth. And Leia’s appeal to the opposite sex didn’t stop with her pretty face and curvy figure. She was the most loyal and kind friend, a nearly flawless aunt, and was willing to put others before herself. If a guy couldn’t see her as ideal girlfriend material, he was, again, an idiot.

“Thanks for the ego boost, but beyond that, I’d never date Phoenix Ashford. No offense to him, but ... ”

“I have to say, quite a bit of offense has been taken,” Phoenix’s deep voice interrupted Leia. Rachael squeaked in surprise, Sofi’s eyes went so wide her eyeballs ached, and Leia froze as her entire body flushed an uncomfortable red.

“Um,” Leia managed but then pinched her lips shut.

Sofi didn’t blame her; what was Leia supposed to say?

“Aunt Leia, will you push me on the swing?” Leia’s cute nephew came up beside Phoenix.

Leia’s entire body relaxed as she let out a sigh of relief.



“Sure!” Leia jumped up so quickly that she swiped Sofi’s leg with her foot as she moved, but Sofi couldn’t care less. She figured she was lucky if her injuries were as minimal as a slight bruise, considering the kind of embarrassment Leia was fleeing.

Leia turned quickly to Phoenix, patting his shoulder and blurting, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend. I promise my reasons have more to do with me than with you. You have to know what a catch you are, and if you don’t, let me tell you now. You’re a catch. Just not my catch.” Leia finished her stumbling apology and shrugged as if that was the best she could offer.

She began to follow her nephew toward their swing set when Phoenix called after her, “I’d love to hear those reasons sometime.”

Leia froze for a moment before trying to walk again as if nothing had happened. “Okay.” Her voice sounded tight as she responded and Sofi knew her friend was hoping that ‘sometime’ would never come.

Phoenix walked away, chuckling, and Sofi turned back to Rachael, her eyes still wide.

“And just when I think I have a chance, another Ashford brother falls for another of my friends.” Rachael pursed her lips.

“He does seem like he’s into her, right?” Sofi said, schooling her features, but her eyes were dancing. She hadn’t even thought of Leia and Phoenix together, but now that the idea was in her mind, she couldn’t help but be excited by the prospect. They really would be great for one another.

“Mm-hm,” Rachael muttered unhappily.

“Wait, but what other Ashford brother is into one of your friends?” Sofi asked as Rachael’s words replayed in her head.

“If I have to explain that to you, you’re more hopeless than I thought,” Rachael replied before getting up to join Leia at the swings.

Sofi scowled. Rachael was clearly referring to her. But did that mean she was talking about Austin? And how did Rachael know? Sofi had always been so careful with her secret and she knew for a fact she'd never told Rachael her true feelings for her best friend. Had Rachael figured them out on her own? And if Rachael had read Sofi so easily, could others see it too? She remembered Ruby's words at the wedding.

Sofi's heart dropped. Did Austin know? Was that the true reason he was suddenly giving her space? Had he figured out Sofi was in love with him and was now pushing her toward another man? That idea made way too much sense and she didn't like it.

Tears began to well in Sofi's eyes, and she hastily tried to blink them away. If Austin knew the truth ... this was the beginning of the end. She'd always known that if the truth of her feelings ever got out, she'd drive Austin away. And where was Austin right at this moment? Away.

But maybe he'd come back? If Sofi could prove she was into Bash and was trying for a future with him, surely Austin would re-enter her life ... wouldn't he?

He had to. Sofi had endured just one Austin-less week and the emptiness had been almost unbearable. But forever?

No, Sofi couldn't manage it. She'd never survive.

So she'd throw her all into this relationship with Bash. And just maybe he really could be the one to make her forget Austin. And then all would be well.

Sofi firmly squashed the one tiny part of her brain that told her just how pathetic the situation was. Austin seemed willing to throw their friendship away rather than even try dating her. If that didn't speak his true feelings loud and clear, nothing would. Austin would never, ever love Sofi in the same way she loved him. So there was nothing to do but get over him. And soon.

Time seemed to be running out.

## SEVEN

“AUSTIN. AUSTIN!” Phoenix waved a hand in front of his brother’s face.

“We’ve lost him. Two weeks without Sofi and he’s permanently zoned out,” Memphis said from his spot in front of the fridge.

Austin’s first reaction was to put Memphis in his place. Yes, Austin had zoned out, but it was absolutely not because of his separation from Sofi. Or was it? Because he realized just where his mind had been ... reliving memories. With Sofi.

He fought the urge to rub at his chest where his heart ached. When Memphis had set this challenge, he’d known it would be hard. Sofi was his one constant. And it had been hard. Harder than Austin could have ever imagined. But what he hadn’t anticipated was just how lost he would feel. He didn’t feel like Austin when he had no Sofi. But where did that leave him? He couldn’t rely on Sofi to be his number one forever. He couldn’t give her everything she wanted, everything she deserved. Austin had only ever given half his heart at most in relationships, and he wouldn’t do that to Sofi. So he had to let her find that love she deserved from someone else. Even if it was, as Memphis pointed out, killing him slowly.

In the end, they would all be grateful. Or at least that was what Austin was telling himself.

“So you’re back here for good,” Austin said to Phoenix instead of responding to Memphis.

“Have been for over a week now, bro,” Phoenix replied, shaking his head in mock worry for his brother’s sanity.

Had it really been that long? How had Austin so easily marked the time Sofi had been missing from his life but hadn’t even noticed how long his brother had been back? His head was a mess. And he didn’t even have the energy to want to pull it together.

“Cool,” Austin muttered.

Phoenix raised an eyebrow at Austin before turning to Land, who’d just joined them in their mom’s living room. The brothers didn’t gather here as often now since Land, Memphis, and Phoenix lived in a bungalow in town—near Sofi’s home, actually—though Phoenix was now building his home on the ranch, digging in his roots the way Austin, Jackson, and Logan had. Their homes on the lake were each man’s pride and joy, though while his older brothers had opted for large ranch homes to house their future families, Austin had built a simple two-bedroom, cabin-style home. With just him there was no need for all of the extra bedrooms and frills. And the bonus was that he’d built his home in a fraction of the time it had taken his brothers or it would take Phoenix. His younger brother seemed determined to have the largest home of them all.

But tonight was just a random Thursday evening, and after work they’d all migrated here instead of to their own homes. Morgan had been happy to feed them all and they were now lounging, even though the only people who actually lived in the home, Morgan and Holland, had already gone to bed.

“Anyway,” Phoenix said to Land, as the brothers cracked up over something Austin had missed and couldn’t bring himself to care about, “how’s Brooks doing?”

After the wedding Brooks had gone right back to his last months in culinary school.

Land shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. I think he texts Mom and Holland because he knows they’ll pester him if he doesn’t, but he ignores the rest of us.”

Phoenix grunted, probably understanding. When he'd lived in Salt Lake City, he'd also kept up with his mom and sister but hadn't bothered to contact his brothers. Austin figured it was one of the best things about having mostly brothers—not having to keep in touch.

“He does text me about the horses from time to time,” Land added.

That made sense. If anyone knew about the well-being of their animals, it would be Land. And kind-hearted Brooks would surely be missing all of them since he had to go to school states away.

“Speaking of horses,” Memphis piped up as he set out leftovers on the kitchen counter even though they'd only finished eating a couple of hours before. “Did you talk to that buyer like Logan asked?”

All three turned expectant eyes on Austin.

Buyer? Horses? Austin knew that was a big part of his job, but had he been specifically asked to speak to one buyer? If he had been, he was in trouble. Because he couldn't recall talking to any buyer in weeks. He'd been busy with other things. Other ... things, that he couldn't quite remember at the moment. The days had gone by and he'd been busy, doing something.

“That blank face tells me we'll be hearing it from Logan tomorrow,” Phoenix groaned.

“Logan is on his honeymoon,” Austin reminded him. He'd figure out what he'd been assigned to do in the morning and get it done before anyone was the wiser.

“Logan got home three days ago. He was in the barn with us today,” Land said slowly as if he was worried Austin wouldn't be able to follow the line of conversation.

Wait, what?

Austin did a quick mental replay of the day and sure enough, he'd had a short conversation with Logan and Land. It had been just a few minutes. It had slipped his mind. Just like it could with anyone.

Although it had never happened to Austin before.

“He’s worse than lovesick,” Memphis chimed in.

Austin turned to glare at his brother.

“What’s the point of all of this?” Phoenix asked. “Because Sofi looked as miserable as you are.”

Austin spun toward Phoenix. “You saw Sofi?” There was a desperate rasp in his voice, but he didn’t care.

“Last weekend. I told you. At the BBQ at Trent’s.”

Austin fell back against the sofa cushions. Right. Phoenix had told him about that. At length, because Austin had pried every detail from him. He knew what Sofi ate, nearly every word she said—at least all the ones Phoenix could remember—and he even knew what she’d worn.

After being forced to relay the entire encounter, Phoenix had told Austin he was a mess, but Austin had ignored him because of one thing Sofi had said. She’d been on three dates and confessed that she was starting to really like Bash. Even as it had crushed his heart, Austin knew he was doing the right thing. Holding onto Sofi had been selfish. Too selfish.

But being selfless, even for Sofi’s sake, might be the end of him. However, if he could buck up and pull through for anyone, it would be for Sofi. So he would.

“She misses me, but she’s falling for Bash. She needs this,” Austin muttered from his slumped position on the couch. He was reclining so far he was practically lying down. Not exactly comfortable, but his posture matched his emotions.

“Does she?” Memphis asked as he brought a full plate of food to the couch. The smell of sloppy joes tempted Austin despite his woes and his still-full belly from dinner.

“Does she what?” Austin asked.

His mind felt like it was pushing through mush to get to any kind of coherent thought.

“Does she need this?” Memphis clarified.

“I agree. Because apparently what she wants is *you*. And if your pathetic state is any indication, you want her too. More importantly, you need her,” Phoenix added as he swiped a fry from Memphis’ plate.

Austin, even as he didn’t want to let his brothers into all of his business, couldn’t disagree. “I know I need her. But she needs more than I can give her.”

“Friendship?” Land asked, cocking his head.

Austin nodded.

“But why?” Phoenix asked. “Why just friendship? There has to be chemistry between you two. Sofi is hot.”

“Will you all quit saying that.” Austin didn’t like that each of his brothers had to be checking Sofi out, considering their opinions on her attractiveness.

“She is. That’s fact, not opinion,” Land stated.

Austin growled, causing his brothers to smile. He missed the days his temper could strike fear into the hearts of his little brothers.

“So there isn’t any chemistry?” Memphis pressed just before he bit into his juicy sandwich.

“I didn’t say that,” Austin replied. He knew he was attracted to Sofi. Did he want to be physically close to her? Hell yes. There had been many a late night where he’d just about given into temptation, and only his love for her had saved them, but that wasn’t enough. “But when have I ever had a relationship last longer than a few months?”

Austin looked from one brother to the next.

“Never,” Land finally answered.

“Exactly. And how long has my friendship with Sofi lasted?” Austin asked.

“Forever,” Phoenix said easily.

“Right. So why would I give up forever for a few months? I’m not a math whiz, but that makes no sense.” It would be like exchanging the Olympic torch for a match.

Austin rested his case. He wished he had a judge to pound a gavel, emphasizing his point and forcing all his brothers to drop the subject once and for all.

“But what if you can have a relationship longer than a few months, and you just haven’t yet?” Memphis asked.

Austin had considered that a heck of a lot of times. “So I’d experiment with Sofi? Can’t do that to her.” He shook his head emphatically as he revealed the conclusion he always came to.

“But it’s not exactly an experiment. You and Sofi have always been forever in whatever capacity she’s in in your life,” Land said after some thought.

“Do you know that?” Austin sat up to ask Land.

Land met Austin’s eyes and then finally shook his head. “I mean, it’s what makes sense.”

“I’m not willing to risk everything with Sofi on what makes sense. Something I can be sure of: we’ll be friends forever. The rest? I can’t know,” Austin said as he cracked his neck. He didn’t like it any more than his brothers, but it was just the way it was. If Austin could change it, he would. He didn’t love that he was doomed to be alone, but at least he’d have his brothers and their families, and he’d also be the world’s greatest uncle to Sofi’s kids. Although the thought of Sofi having children, someone else’s children, made him want to vomit. Not the idea of Sofi as a mom—she’d be the best mom ever—but all because he would be jealous of whatever bastard got to be her husband and share all of those parts of life with her. Austin was cognizant enough to admit that.

“But what if you aren’t friends forever? I wouldn’t want my wife to have a male best friend who finds her attractive and has possible chemistry with her,” Phoenix said.

Not *possible* chemistry. Austin knew his blood ran hot for Sofi and he had a feeling she felt the same way. If they ever combined, he knew they’d be explosive, but he didn’t correct his brother.

“Then you wouldn’t be the right guy for Sofi. The right guy for her would trust her and me. I would never, ever get in



the way of Sofi's marriage. I love her too much."

"And that's supposed to put her husband's mind at ease?" Memphis asked, raising a fry in the air.

"For the right guy, it will be." Austin was confident. Because if that guy wasn't out there, Sofi wouldn't choose him. He and Sofi were a package deal, and if a guy didn't like that, he could walk. Austin was sure Sofi would feel the same way. Their friendship was everything to her as well.

"I still think you're making a mistake. Better to have loved and lost," Memphis began.

Austin shook his head so hard his curls flew. "Not with Sofi. I can't lose her."

Land and Phoenix shared a look that Austin could easily read. They thought Austin would give in. That he would act on his feelings for Sofi. That he would let his selfishness win in the end. And in any other situation, they would probably be right. But here, they were wrong. Austin could never give in. Sofi meant too much to him.

He'd endure today's pain for tomorrow's happiness. Yes, Austin would be jealous of whatever guy got Sofi's whole heart, but he'd learn to live with that. He'd live with seeing her start a family, and he'd live with her putting them above him. Because as long as he was still on her list of most important people, he could live with any of that.

The alternative ... that, he couldn't live with.

## Eight

“ORDER UP!” Sofi called to her mom, who was working the counter at the mercado that evening. Sofi had just dished up some of her absolutely incredible pozole, if she did say so herself, and felt excited on behalf of whoever had ordered the meal. They had no idea what they were in for. Unless they were a repeat customer, in which case they knew exactly what they were going to get and probably felt even more anticipation than Sofi. Yes, this was presumptuous of her. But when it came to her food, Sofi had absolutely no insecurities. Every other part of her life? Tons of them. But she knew she could rock a tamale, taco, and everything in between.

“We’ve only got one serving of pozole left,” Sofi said when her mom came to the window that exposed part of the kitchen to the rest of the store.

“Got it,” Darla replied before putting on a wide smile and handing the bag with a takeout serving of the soup to the waiting customer.

“Is Sof back there?” Sofi heard her brother Mario ask as he joined their mother behind the counter.

“Depends,” Sofi called out guardedly. “What are you here for?”

Sofi loved her brothers with all of her heart, but didn’t trust them a lick. They only ever texted or came to see her when they needed something or felt the urge to really annoy someone. Her mom had been saying for years now that her

relationship with her brothers would one day mature, but Sofi was still waiting for that day.

“Just wanted to check in on you, Sis. Is that so strange?” Mario said, leaning through the window so that his head was in the kitchen.

“Yes,” Sofi replied with no hesitation as she plated up three tacos, along with her famous rice and beans. Famous only in Blue Falls, but Sofi would take it.

“You can’t win with women,” Mario sighed as he turned from the window. Sofi rolled her eyes as he complained to their mom.

“Have you ever just checked in on Sofi before?” Darla asked. Sofi could imagine her mother’s raised eyebrow, the one that shot high on her forehead anytime Sofi’s brothers did something questionable.

Ha! Sofi wanted to shout with that vindication but refrained. If she gloated about her mother being on her side, Mom would switch in a heartbeat.

“Not in so many words,” Mario hedged.

Sofi chuckled under her breath. More like not in any words.

“I’m doing well,” Sofi decided to answer her brother’s inquiry as she came to the window with the takeout container and handed it to a waiting Darla.

Now that she’d answered the obligatory question, they’d find out why her brother had really come. She had no doubt that he was here for more than checking in.

She poked her head through the window so that she could not only hear but watch Mario’s next words.

“Good, good,” Mario said. “And how’s Rachael?” His voice was a little too casual.

“Ha!” This time Sofi didn’t hesitate to declare the thought aloud. “I knew it.”

“You knew what? I was checking in on you. Now I’m checking in on your friend.”

“My hot, newly single friend,” Sofi corrected as Darla laughed.

Mario turned to their mother.

“What? Sofi’s got a point,” Darla said as she turned back to her work.

Sofi narrowed her eyes at her brother. “Rachael is okay, all things considering. The last thing she needs is some guy who’s never been on a second date asking her out.”

“I’ve been on a second date,” Mario snarked back, irritation covering his handsome features.

Sofi knew that was technically true, but Mario was the definition of a player. She wasn’t sure if he did it on purpose to look unattainable or cool or whatever, but he wasn’t the type to commit. Kind of like someone else she knew. Maybe that was why she was so willing to forgive Austin’s faults. She was surrounded by men with the same issue.

“Stay away from Rachael,” Sofi warned, pointing a wooden spoon through the window at her brother.

“I was just asking how she was doing. A concerned brother of a friend, if you will,” Mario said smoothly.

Sofi rolled her eyes so hard her head hurt.

As she went back to the next order on the docket, her phone vibrated in her back pocket. She let it go. Most people knew that if she didn’t answer, she was probably at work, but when the vibrating started again a second time, Sofi felt a touch of concern.

She finished up the order, passed it to her mom, and pulled out her phone. Three missed calls. All from Rachael.

Sofi glanced up toward the window where she’d last seen Mario, wondering if this was somehow his fault.

Ignoring the other waiting order, Sofi pressed Rachael’s name to call her back. She answered instantly, her sobs

greeting Sofi's ear.

"I know you're at work, but I just can't, Sofi. I need you," Rachael somehow managed to get out between heart-wrenching sobs.

"I'll be right there," Sofi promised before hanging up the phone, filling a container with Rachael's favorites, and hanging her apron on a hook in the mercado office.

"Hey Mario," Sofi called out, thinking this had to be poetic justice.

"Yo." Mario stuck his head through the window once more.

"That friend you were so worried about? She's having a bad night and needs me. Now you get to put your money where your mouth is and step up."

"You want me to come with you?" Mario's excitement was palpable.

No way was Sofi letting her brother within five miles of Rachael.

"I need you to cover here for me and help Mom close tonight," Sofi said and watched as Mario's face fell.

If she were a nicer sister, she would have felt bad. But the Castillo siblings weren't known for being nice.

Sofi laughed. "Come on, Mario. Everything is already prepped for tomorrow. You just have to fill orders until we run out of food and then clean up."

Mario's head disappeared and Sofi thought for a second he was going to ignore her request.

But when Mario rounded the corner, Sofi beamed.

"I knew I could count on you, big brother," she said as she gave Mario a hug, the bag of Rachael's food slapping against his back.

Mario shrugged her off. "Next time I'd appreciate the thanks coming from Rachael."

Sofi chuckled as she shook her head. That would be happening no time soon. But if Mario could ever change his ways? Then maybe Rachael should give him a chance. Because deep down, way deep down, Mario had the kind of heart women searched far and wide for.

Sofi handed Mario the last ticket she'd been given and went to find her keys and purse.

"You're a good brother, Mario," Darla said, telling the siblings she'd overheard the exchange.

"Right? And she thought I had an ulterior motive for visiting," Mario accused Sofi.

"You did!" Sofi retorted.

Mario just shrugged, a smug grin on his face. He'd known exactly what he was doing. But he hadn't been able to let Sofi get away without one last dig to get under her skin.

"How can I love you so much and hate you all at once?" Sofi teased as she walked toward the back door.

"It's the kind of thing science should study," Mario replied as he washed his hands and set to work.

Sofi laughed once more. She really did love her brother. Most of the time.

Sofi pulled into Rachael's driveway at nearly the same time as Leia. Sofi had called Leia on her way over to Rachael's, knowing she'd need backup and sure that none of Rachael's other friends were up to the task.

Rachael had a great group of friends for partying. But for everything else? Sofi just didn't trust them to show up.

"I was waiting for the other shoe to drop," Leia said as she joined Sofi and the two of them started for Rachael's front door.

"Right? Up till now she's seemed too okay, considering how long he's been in her life," Sofi said.

Leia nodded but kept her mouth shut. They were at the door.

Sofi knocked but when there wasn't an answer she tried the doorknob and found it unlocked. She opened the door and stepped in cautiously, followed by Leia.

They exchanged a glance when sobbing greeted their ears and followed the sounds into Rachael's living room. Sofi's heart hurt for her friend and the closer she got, the more she wanted to pummel Roland for being a terrible fiancé.

Sofi set the bag of food on Rachael's coffee table before sinking down next to Rachael, who was curled up on the couch under her favorite blanket.

Leia placed her bag of junk food—she must have raided their pantry—on the same table before taking a seat in the armchair next to the couch, tugging it a bit closer to Rachael.

The friends exchanged a look before turning back to Rachael. Now that they'd arrived, they weren't quite sure what they could do for her. Sofi thought about patting Rachael's back, but that felt insincere even if it was heartfelt. Honestly, Rachael didn't look like she wanted to be touched. So Sofi did the only thing she felt like she could do for her friend. She waited.

“He was supposed to love me forever,” Rachael moaned as she pulled her blanket over her head.

Sofi wasn't about to point out that Rachael had been the one to break it off with him. Because she hadn't wanted to. She'd called off her wedding because she realized the guy was a douche and not worth her time, much less the rest of her life. The breakup might have been initiated by Rachael, but it had been one hundred percent Roland's fault.

“Why did I break off our engagement? I would have been a married woman, Mrs. Roland Biggs, by now if I'd just stayed the course,” Rachael said between choking sobs.

Sofi and Leia shared yet another look. Rachael knew she didn't want to just stay the course and be stuck with Roland for life. She knew calling off her wedding had been the right thing. So should her friends point out what she already knew? Or just let her bemoan her fate?

“But he didn’t love me. Not like he should have. *He* was just staying the course. The way I should have but didn’t. But then would we have been happy?” Rachael didn’t even pause before she continued. “No. I know that. The only reason we were getting married was because we’d dated for so long and he was sick of everyone asking when we were going to get married. So Roland proposed. More for them than for himself. At least that’s what I think. We shouldn’t get married for other people. But I want to be married.” Rachael was holding an entire argument with herself and it was beginning to make Sofi nervous, but at least it had stopped her heart-wrenching sobs. So she remained quiet, simply patting Rachael’s back from time to time.

Sofi was no good at this. She’d grown up with brothers and Austin. She’d had girlfriends, but none of them were ever as close as she’d been with guys. At least not until Leia and Rachael in recent years. And this was the first time any of them had gone through something like this. Sofi worried that she wasn’t enough. In fact, she knew she wasn’t. Thus she’d called in reinforcements: Leia. But Leia seemed as lost as Sofi was.

“I understand wanting to be married,” Sofi finally said, responding to the last thing Rachael had said. It felt like as good a place to start as any.

“Me too,” Leia chimed in.

“But I wouldn’t want to be married to the wrong guy,” Sofi added.

Leia nodded in agreement.

“And you know that Roland is the wrong guy,” Sofi concluded, trying to keep her voice gentle.

That was good, wasn’t it?

Rachael poked her head out from her blanket before sighing and nodding once. “I do.”

Her poor eyes were bright red and puffy as she blinked in the light. Sofi wondered how long Rachael had been crying before she’d called Sofi.



“Are those tacos?” Rachael asked, her eyes finally focusing on the bags on her coffee table.

“Along with ice cream, chocolate, and sour cream and onion chips,” Leia replied.

Rachael began to sit up as Sofi opened the bag of tacos and handed it to her.

“You guys are the best,” Rachael said as she dug into the bag and pulled out the container that housed tacos, rice, and beans.

Sofi breathed a sigh of relief. Showing interest in food was a good thing. They were making progress. Yes, they would probably fall two steps back soon, but going forward for a minute was a triumph to be celebrated.

“I know I don’t want to be married to him. I know I did the right thing. But I still follow him on insta, and he posted stories with this new girl, and it just hit so hard. For a moment, I just wanted to be that girl more than anything. But then I realized I *was* that girl and I’d been so easily replaced. Then I wondered if he could have ever loved me if he had already moved on and then, well, you saw the rest.”

“Maybe you should stop following him,” Leia suggested, eyeing Rachael’s phone as it lay on the coffee table.

Sofi nodded her agreement.

“I did. After I social media stalked the girl and then realized what I was doing.”

“We’ve all been there,” Sofi said, ashamed that she wasn’t at all exaggerating. She’d social media stalked every last one of Austin’s many girlfriends.

“Yeah, we have,” Leia agreed.

Sofi’s gaze slid curiously to her friend for a moment, wondering whose girlfriend Leia had checked up on, before she was distracted as Rachael bit into a chicken taco and let out a gusty sigh.

“I guess I have to ask how much I loved him if this taco could really be healing me so well.”

“It is an amazing taco,” Leia said.

Sofi laughed.

The women sat in silence as Rachael ate. She offered the box of food toward Sofi and Leia, but neither took her up on it. They knew Rachael could use every one of those tacos.

“The thought that keeps coming back to me is that I want to find a guy who loves me the way Austin loves Sofi,” Rachael said as she set down her taco and wiped her hands on a napkin.

Sofi gave a single, short laugh, thinking Rachael had to be joking.

“Why is that funny?” Rachael asked, her eyes widening.

“I know you’ve figured out my feelings for Austin,” Sofi said to Rachael, who nodded. “So let me just tell you, loving someone with all your heart and then having them love you back as just a friend? It’s a special kind of torture. Don’t wish for that.”

Rachael cocked her head as she surveyed Sofi. “But he doesn’t love you as just a friend.”

Sofi looked down at her hands as she cracked her knuckles, a habit Austin was forever trying to get her to break. “He does, Rachael. We’ve been best friends for almost all of our lives and he’s never once showed the slightest inclination that he wants more.”

“Have you shown him you want more?”

Sofi looked up so fast she felt a tiny bit dizzy. “Heck no.”

“And you feel more for him,” Rachael pointed out.

“It’s not the same,” Sofi protested, even as she began to wonder if Rachael might be right. Well, hope more than wonder. Because it couldn’t be true.

“You should have seen him that night I texted him that you needed him. He came rushing like your knight in shining armor. And when he found just me, he was nice, but he was

sad you weren't there. He was there for you and only you, Sofi."

"Because he's my best friend. And weren't you plastered that night? How do you remember anything?" Sofi asked.

"I have a surprisingly good memory when I'm drunk. I might be out of it then, but the next morning it all comes back. Mostly it's a curse, but in this case a blessing."

Sofi realized that was true. She remembered other times Rachael had been completely sloshed but the next day she knew—and cringed over—what she'd done the previous night.

"Best friends don't send each other longing looks when they think no one is watching," Leia added from her corner.

Her too?

"He doesn't—" Sofi began.

"I've seen it," Leia interrupted.

"Me too," Rachael agreed.

Sofi shook her head. How had this evening become about her?

"Well, it doesn't matter what you all say. He hasn't texted me in two weeks. If that doesn't say he doesn't care as much as I care about him, I don't know what does. And anyway, we're here for Rachael."

"And Rachael wants to talk about you and Austin. Between that and tacos, I might be healed," Rachael said with a shrug.

Leia grinned.

Sofi let her head fall against the back of the couch. She heard Rachael shift in her seat and when she looked over at her friend, the tacos were gone from her lap and she'd moved forward into a focused position.

"It doesn't matter. I'm dating Bash now," Sofi said. Her friends were getting too excited over the prospect of nothing.

“Exclusively?” Leia asked as Rachael said, “And if Austin were to show up here tonight and say he loved you, you’d tell him you were dating Bash?”

The answer was a resounding no to both questions, but Sofi remained silent for a moment.

“I can’t lose his friendship,” she finally said, cutting to the heart of the matter.

“It looks like you kind of already are, if you haven’t spoken in two weeks,” Rachael said softly.

Sofi hadn’t let herself go there. To think that their rock-solid friendship could be weakening. Austin *was* stepping away from her. But it was because he loved her. That meant this time apart was only solidifying what they had, right?

Yet Sofi had never felt so distant from her best friend. Even when they had been countries apart, their bond had felt stronger than it did right now.

“But when Bash and I are in love and things are going well, Austin will come back and ... ”

“Bash will be okay with that?” Leia asked the question Sofi had been too scared to ask herself.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. They weren’t there yet. They were just getting to know one another. She couldn’t ask him if he’d be okay with her having a guy best friend who had a key to their place and dropped by all the time, who texted and called daily and discussed everything that was going on. Who shared a very deep and intimate part of Sofi’s life.

So what would happen if she did fall in love with Bash and then he wasn’t comfortable with Austin? What would she do then?

She couldn’t give up Austin. But could she give up a chance at love?

What if her only chance at love while keeping Austin in her life ... was with Austin?

The question shook Sofi so much that she found herself gripping the couch arm beside her.

“You might lose Austin no matter what. Won’t it be better that he knows how you feel? That you know you’ve done everything in your power before giving up on him?” Rachael asked. Her perspective might be skewed by recent life events, but she spoke the truth nonetheless.

The reality shook Sofi even as she felt the rightness of it in every fiber of her being. She couldn’t give up without trying everything, and if she gave her all to Bash now without knowing what could have happened with Austin, she’d always wonder what if. She couldn’t do that to herself or the man she ended up with. She had to know the truth, even if it scared her to her very core. Even if it meant losing Austin’s ... Sofi didn’t let that thought finish or she’d never have the courage to do what she had to do.

Sofi’s heartbeat quickened as she considered her next step. She didn’t want to do any of it but as she looked to the future after hearing Rachael’s words, she could now only imagine it going in one way. She had to take this path and then let the pieces fall where they would.

Anything else would be cowardly.

“Do you mind?” Sofi pulled out her phone and pointed to Rachael’s bedroom.

“Of course,” Rachael said as Sofi got up to call Bash. It wasn’t a conversation to have over text. But he needed to know she was in love with someone else. She hadn’t been fair to him. She hadn’t been fair to herself.

So she’d make the call and then ... well, the pieces would really start to fall.

AUSTIN FELL BACK on his couch after arriving home moments before. It was later than he'd expected to be out, considering he'd just been at his mom's house a couple of minutes away, but after his brothers had finished ragging on him about Sofi they'd moved onto other conversations and even though Austin hadn't been paying too much attention, he was sure that if he'd tried to sneak away his brothers would have turned their attention back on him, prying for answers about Sofi that he just didn't have.

Was he attracted to Sofi? Yes. Did he love her? Yes. Did he want her in his life forever? Again yes. But could he date her?

He really wanted that answer to be yes as well. Especially now that he had an inkling maybe she felt the same way for him. He still wasn't sure he believed his brothers but he also couldn't completely disregard what they had said. So he was in limbo and he didn't know if he wanted out. Because if he knew Sofi did care for him in that way ... if he knew without a doubt ... could he date her?

That was the question it always came back to. And he hated, for himself and for her, that the answer was probably no.

How could he? With his track record? If he wanted forever with Sofi, dating her would be the wrong move. Hadn't he been so sure of his bachelorhood that he'd constructed his house for a single resident? He wasn't built for forever. His parents had been. His grandparents as well. Most of his siblings were. But as Austin had watched them all fall in love,

be in love, he hadn't felt anything missing in his life. He was fulfilled just as he was. Single. A bachelor.

He could try to carve out space for Sofi, but ten years down the line would he resent her? Worse, would she resent him? Because even if she did love him, he wasn't what she deserved.

He knew that much for sure. Sofi should be served the stars, moon, and freaking sun. She was owed nothing less than whole hearts and entire lives. She didn't deserve a man who would always wonder *what if?* What if he wasn't cut out for being a husband, father, grandfather, all of the complementary roles to what Sofi would be.

And what Austin couldn't bear most of all? Breaking Sofi's heart. He would kill any guy who did so and if he was the one who'd done it? It would destroy him. He couldn't risk their friendship, Sofi, them, all of it just because he hoped it would all be okay in the end. Hope wasn't enough to sustain reality.

Austin felt self-loathing begin to grow that he couldn't give this to Sofi. If this really was what she wanted. He still hoped that wasn't the case. But if it was, if this ever came to a head, Austin knew what his answer would have to be. No. He couldn't date Sofi. If any other man of his caliber tried to date her, he'd be the wall the man couldn't get past. So he had to hold the same line for himself. No matter how much he wished otherwise.

Austin blew out a breath as his fingers itched to reach for his phone and call the woman his thoughts had revolved around constantly. Especially in these past two weeks. It had taken willpower beyond what he thought he had to keep from calling, texting, or dropping by her house. He'd had to drive right past her driveway three times in the last two weeks as his mind had taken him there on autopilot before he'd realized what he had done.

He stood from his couch, walking to his fridge and pulling out a carton of milk. He hadn't tried this trick since he was a kid, but maybe warm milk would be the ticket to calm his

racing mind. Nothing else he'd tried these last two weeks had worked.

He considered turning on the TV to tune out the quiet, but decided he'd drink his milk and head to bed instead. The morning would be brighter, literally, and hopefully figuratively as well.

Maybe he should get a dog.

Austin put the carton back in the fridge and opened the microwave to set his mug in when the sound of crunching gravel along his driveway warned him that someone was there. If this was one of his brothers coming to give him a hard time about Sofi ...

He moved to his kitchen window and squinted out into the night. The headlights seemed lower than he expected since all of his brothers drove trucks, but higher than a sedan's. Maybe it was an SUV? Or maybe his vision was just off tonight, along with the rest of him.

Austin closed his microwave and headed for the front door. If it was one of his brothers, he'd stop them before they set foot in his house.

Austin opened his front door and his breath was momentarily stolen when he saw who was on his porch.

Poised with her hand in the air to knock on his door stood his Sofi.

"You're here," was all he managed even as his mind cautioned him to play it cool. This was his best friend, nothing more. His body's yearning for her was natural, considering the time they'd spent apart.

Austin ignored the little voice that told him he'd never felt this way after such a brief separation from anyone else.

Sofi dropped her hand.

"Yeah. I know we're doing the no communicating thing. Or you were. You didn't exactly ask me if I wanted to do it." Sofi stood up taller.



Austin grinned. Man, he loved this woman. He should have known she would take him to task for that one.

“I know. I couldn’t ask you. It was hard enough to make the decision. I knew if you voiced any hesitation, I wouldn’t be able to do it. And I had to do it. I know how much you want one of your relationships to really work. And it seemed like you really liked Bash.”

Sofi listened intently as Austin spoke and gave a single nod when he finished.

“I get it. I hated the lack of communication, but I get it. I kind of even admire you for it,” Sofi said with her teasing grin he’d missed so much.

Just seeing her here made him wonder how he’d survived these last two weeks. She was like air for him. Necessary and always a relief.

“Come in,” Austin said when he realized they still stood at his front door. He really was off his Sofi game. Any other time during their friendship she would have already been inside. Probably poking around in his snacks.

Sofi walked past him, the scents of jasmine as well as the smells of grilled meat flowing from her. Sofi’s smell was just like her: a perfect mix of his favorite things.

“So about Bash—” Sofi began as Austin said, “Do you want something to drink?”

Sofi waved her hand to decline, so Austin waited for her to continue as they both settled in on his couch. He passed her the knitted blanket he always hung on the back of the couch just for her. It didn’t matter that it was August, Sofi was always cold.

She snuggled into her spot and Austin’s heart warmed at the sight. This was where she was meant to be. Beside him.

But also with Bash, he reminded himself. Or someone like him.

Austin didn’t like that last part, but forced himself to mentally acknowledge it.

“I broke things off with him,” Sofi said, pulling Austin out of his thoughts.

What had she said? Austin hoped he was mistaken. Things had to work out with Bash. Austin hadn’t realized it until now, but if things didn’t work out with Bash, he might have to go through this same misery for every guy that Sofi dated, and he wouldn’t survive that. She had to make things work with Bash.

“What do you mean? I thought you really liked him?” Austin heard his voice getting high and panicky but couldn’t do anything about it. He felt frantic.

“I do. I mean, I did? I’m not sure what I mean. I just knew I couldn’t keep going on dates with him when I didn’t want to date him,” Sofi replied as she pushed her hair behind her ears and shifted onto her knees.

Austin loved when Sofi did that. He’d never seen a person so comfortable in such an uncomfortable position. Austin wasn’t sure he could sit on his knees like that for even a minute, much less choose to sit like that indefinitely.

Wait, he needed to stop getting distracted. Sofi had broken it off with Bash. Because she didn’t want to date him? Austin was confused. Hadn’t she liked him? What had gone wrong?

But even as confusion filled him, Austin had to admit a part of him only felt bliss at the idea that he no longer had to share Sofi. She was his and only his once more.

Even as he felt dread for future Austin who would have to endure those two weeks of torture, present Austin was thrilled. Sofi was back. For now. Until he had to let her go again.

But he wasn’t thinking about that now. There would be plenty of time to worry about the future in the future.

“So you don’t like him?” Austin asked, needing clarification. Wait—had Bash hurt her?

“Did he do something to you?” he tried to ask in his most nonchalant voice even as his muscles tensed in anticipation.

Sofi gave a light laugh through her nose. “No. You don’t have to go after the guy.”

Of course she'd read his thoughts.

“What was wrong with him then?” Austin asked, ready to be on the lookout for these qualities in the future. If a guy had any of them, Austin wouldn't implement the two-week plan. He wouldn't go through the agony of missing Sofi unless he knew for sure the next guy was the guy. Or at least had potential to be the guy.

Sofi swallowed, her golden skin paling oddly.

Was she okay? Bash *had* hurt her. Austin was going to kill him. His fists began to clench.

Sofi dropped her gaze and whispered something Austin couldn't quite pick up over the roaring in his ears.

“Sorry, what was that?” he asked, shifting forward so that he was right next to Sofi, her knees pressed against his thigh.

“He wasn't you,” Sofi repeated, slowly lifting her eyes to meet his.

Austin felt his body go stiff as her words penetrated his mind. He shook off the feeling of fear, pushed back the shock. He could have misheard. And if he hadn't ... he had to be here for Sofi. Be in his right mind to explain things in a way that she would understand and forgive him for. So they could go back to what they had been.

“Thankfully no one else is.” Austin tried for a joke that fell flat when neither of them laughed.

Okay, no more joking. He should have known from the start, but he'd hoped to lighten the mood. But now he focused on what he had to say. On what he had to prove to Sofi.

“What do you mean by that, Sof?” Austin asked, needing her to be completely clear before he could let her down as easily as a man had ever let down a woman. He hated that he was letting Sofi down. All he ever wanted to do was lift her up, but this was a necessary evil. One that he hoped she would appreciate one day soon.

Sofi's body lifted and suddenly her lips were on his. His blood roared with pleasure, responding before Austin's mind

could realize what was happening. And with that roar, his mind shut off, his body took over, and boy was it happy to do so.

Austin's hands cradled the back of Sofi's head before he deepened the kiss and lost all control. His hands twined through her hair as her arms slipped around his shoulders, tugging him closer. He needed more of her.

He pulled her onto his lap, desperately seeking a better angle, every part of his body craving her touch. It wasn't enough that her hands were caressing his back, her arms clinging to his shoulders. It wasn't enough that her legs were wrapped around him. He needed more.

But the only way to get more ...

It was that thought that connected Austin's body with his mind. His mind that was yelling at him to slam on those brakes.

Austin, his entire body rebelling as he did so, pulled his head back, breaking the all-encompassing connection he'd shared with ... his best friend. He'd kissed Sofi.

And he couldn't deny it was like nothing he'd ever experienced. Something he wanted to live over and over again. But if he had any hope of keeping this incredible woman in his life, he could never repeat that experience.

He released Sofi, leaning back as he ran his hands through his hair and tried to catch his breath.

He recognized the look of disappointment on her face.

This was why best friends shouldn't kiss.

"I shouldn't have—" he began but stopped when he saw her vehemently shake her head.

"Don't regret me," she stated in a tone so firm it caught him off guard.

She climbed off of his lap and Austin had to sit on his hands to keep from reaching out to her once more.

“I could never,” he managed through the fog that their kiss had caused. It would be a fog of bliss if it wasn’t so wrong. Now shame and guilt tinged what should have been beautiful.

“I know you enjoyed that,” Sofi said.

Austin had to nod. He wouldn’t lie to her. Especially now.

To be completely honest, he had more than enjoyed it, but he wasn’t going to add that. He figured there was a line between lying and omitting unnecessary information.

“I know you love me.”

Austin nodded again. He doubted she could comprehend his love for her.

“But you’re about to push me away.”

Austin’s heart grew cold. He was.

“Sof, I can’t,” he said, knowing he couldn’t leave it at that as her entire body caved in and she slumped over, her arms wrapping around her middle.

He longed to hug her, but knew that would be more for his own sake than hers. And he only had so much time to make this right.

“I’ve gone over this again and again. I would love to date you. And for a few months it would be pure joy. Until it wasn’t. You’d want more. I’d want less. You’d want a future; I’d want the present. You’d want a family while I’d want us to be best friends forever. Eventually we’d grow to resent one another. I wish I could change. I’ve wondered if I can, but I don’t have it in me to want forever with a woman. No longing for a family. Look at my house. I built it for myself. When I see into my future, you’re always there, but as my best friend. I can try to give you more but I’d fail. And I can’t live with failing you, Sofi,” Austin spoke the words from his heart.

“We could try ... ” Sofi began but let the words fall away. “I don’t want to hurt you either, Austin. But what if I can’t get past this? I love you. All of you. You’re right. I want more. I want the future. I want the family. I want forever. But I don’t want you to change, Austin. I think if you took this step

forward you'd see that you, exactly as you are, can want the same things I do."

"And what if I don't?"

They let those words linger in the air.

"Once we take that step we can't go back," Austin finally added.

"And we can now?"

Austin nodded. They had to be able to.

"But what if I don't want to?" Sofi said the words with a grimace that told Austin they were as painful for her to say as they were for him to hear.

"So either I date you or we aren't best friends?" Austin struggled to say the words.

Sofi sat frozen for minutes before she finally nodded.

Austin closed his eyes. This couldn't be it. This couldn't be the end. He had to try to date her, didn't he?

But that would only make things worse. He wouldn't just lose her, he'd give her hope and then break her. Walking away now would be excruciating, but it was better than the pain that would come after seeing what they could have and then Austin failing to give more.

"Don't answer now," Sofi said as she stood, stretching a hand toward Austin's shoulder and then slowly withdrawing it.

"I—" Austin began.

"Don't. Please," Sofi begged and Austin had to acquiesce.

"Think about it."

All Austin had been doing was thinking.

"Give it time. We would be great together. We just have to take that first step. We just have to give it a chance," Sofi said softly as she began to back away.

Could they be?

Austin asked that question for long enough that before he could say anything more, Sofi was gone, the door quietly shut behind her.

And in that moment he knew they could be. They would be great together ... until they weren't. But could Austin give Sofi up for good? It seemed impossible. But no more impossible than dumping her the way he had every other woman. Sofi was special. So the only other option was for him to date her and be committed to staying no matter what he truly began to feel. Stay for longer than he would have with anyone else, stay for her sake. But all he could see in that scenario was him staying for so long that everything that had made them great would die a slow death. He couldn't do that to Sofi.

Austin covered his face with his hands as emotions he'd never experienced whirled through him.

Maybe Sofi was right. Maybe time was their answer.

Or she was wrong. But because Austin couldn't face that reality, he focused on the former. And hoped an answer would come with time. But he couldn't silence the small voice that asked if this would be the time hope truly failed him.

IT HAD BEEN four weeks since that night. Summer had given way to the yellowing leaves of fall and Sofi could still feel the touch of Austin's lips on hers.

"She's touching them again," crowed Daniel, Sofi's youngest brother.

Sofi dropped her hand and scowled. Her brothers thought themselves so clever, coming up with a game where they ate sweets every time Sofi touched her lips. Let's just say even though her brothers were doing a cut—unlike Sofi, they were major gym junkies—they were still getting a whole boatload of sugar.

"Shut up," Sofi snapped at Daniel as he triumphantly pulled a handful of cinnamon candy out of his pocket. Yes, that was how often they got to eat sugar. They actually kept their sweet of choice on their person.

"Hey, I'm not complaining," Daniel said with a grin before going back to whatever it was that he did at the mercado. Sofi swore her parents hired her brothers just because no one else would. Even as the thought entered her mind, she knew it wasn't the truth. She was just bitter about the candy thing. Her parents as well as her brothers were the reason the mercado ran smoothly and efficiently, and when they helped her out in the kitchen she never had to worry.

But they didn't have the defined role that Sofi had. They were kind of jacks of all trade, a lot like their dad. Where they were needed they worked. But Sofi still teased them about



being superfluous hires. It was her job, as their sister, to keep them humble.

“Thanks for the chocolate, Sof,” Mario snarked, popping his head into the kitchen to wink at her.

Sofi threw a towel that barely missed him as he laughed his way out of the room.

Why couldn't her mom have had at least one more girl? If Carlos, her middle brother, had been there that evening, Sofi knew he'd probably have been leading the teasing.

“Just hurry up and clean so we can get out of here,” Sofi yelled back, unwilling to think about anything other than the task at hand. She knew that if her thoughts wandered at all, they'd fly straight to Austin and then she'd touch her lips and they'd be right back here.

But even as she pushed the thoughts away, one still lingered. Why hadn't Austin called her yet? She'd said to take his time, but four weeks was more than she'd expected to have to endure.

But she always came back to the same place. If this waiting got her to the place she wanted to be, in Austin's arms, she could endure this momentary pain.

“Plans tonight?” Mario asked nonchalantly, but Sofi knew why he cared. He was hoping she was going out with Rachael. And she was. So Sofi ignored her brother, knowing it would drive him wild.

Served him right for the whole chocolate comment.

Sofi finished up her cleaning as Mario pressed. “Where are you guys going? If I just happen to show up you can't take any of the blame.”

“The fact that you know someone will have to take the blame if you're in the same room as Rachael is the reason you will never know where I'm going tonight.”

“I could follow you,” Mario reasoned.

“Even you wouldn't stoop so low.”

Sofi couldn't help the sudden rush of memories of another time she'd been followed, but resolutely pushed the thoughts aside. She met her brother's look with an impassive expression.

"Come on," Mario pleaded but Sofi stood firm. She knew if she didn't tell Mario he'd be just fine. He'd go to some party or restaurant or bar and have his choice of women. Women who weren't Sofi's friends.

Sofi gazed around at her spick and span kitchen, nodding in satisfaction before hurrying to gather her things. She'd told the girls she'd meet them at nine and it was already approaching nine fifteen. Thankfully, the sports bar, Ernie's, wasn't far from the mercado.

"She'll thank you," Mario promised Sofi, who was already on her way out the door. Her brothers would turn off the lights and lock up.

"Have a good night, Mario," Sofi sing-songed before adding, "Bye, Daniel."

"See ya, Sofi," Daniel called back as Mario said, "Isn't it every girl's dream for her brother to marry one of her best friends?"

"As if you'd consider marriage to anyone," Sofi said just before the door closed behind her.

The evenings were beginning to grow chilly, and Sofi hurried to her car, hopping in before pulling out of the lot and parking a few blocks over. Sounds from Ernie's spilled out into the street as she opened her door and stepped out. She'd known the place would be packed, considering it was a Saturday night, but this was busier than she'd even imagined.

*Sorry. Just got here. You guys at a table?* Sofi texted the group chat with Leia and Rachael.

*Walk in and look left,* Rachael texted back immediately.

Sofi followed her friend's instructions but when she looked to her left, the mass of tables were packed with people she didn't recognize. She kept searching until her eyes landed on a table near the far wall. There they were.

Sofi wound her way around table after table until she finally reached her friends.

She sighed, wishing that they'd opted for a night in, their typical choice of Saturday evening activity. But ever since Rachael had become single, she'd wanted to hit the town. So here they were, eating overpriced apps and watching Rachael down too many drinks. Since neither Sofi nor Leia really drank, they got to stay sober and witness everyone around them progressively becoming more and more drunk. It wasn't Sofi's idea of a good time. But she was a good friend, so here she was.

"We already got you a water and ordered two baskets of wings and a basket of fries for the table," Rachael said when Sofi slid into a chair.

Sofi grinned at her friends, glad that they knew the way to her heart. She'd been too busy to eat dinner that evening—the dinner rush at the mercado had been even more ruthless than usual—so the wings and fries were exactly what she needed.

"So how were your days?" Sofi asked the girls as she chugged some of the water Rachael had ordered her. The food had yet to make an appearance.

Leia shrugged and tipped her head toward Rachael. "She's the one with news."

Rachael frowned. "Roland called me today."

Sofi felt her eyebrows rise.

"It wasn't like he was asking me back or anything. But he did ask how cancelling the wedding was going and if I wanted any help."

That was more than Sofi had ever expected from the man, so color her impressed.

"I told him it was all done, considering our wedding had been planned for almost two months ago," Rachael continued.

True. Sofi was somewhat less impressed.

"I asked how his new girlfriend was doing. He said she wasn't his girlfriend and then I hung up. I'm pretty sure he

wanted to ask some kind of favor; I dated him long enough to know his tells. So I hung up before he could get there,” Rachael said with a grin.

Sofi chuckled. It wasn’t the way she would have dealt with the situation but if it helped Rachael to feel better, Sofi was all for it. The guy had put her through quite the wringer. Rachael deserved this one moment of triumph.

“I’m guessing no calls or texts for you today?” Rachael moved along, looking at Sofi sympathetically. It was a question they couldn’t help but ask every day. Sofi would have asked as well if the situation were reversed. But every time she had to tell them nothing had come through her heart broke a little more.

Sofi shook her head.

“He’ll come around,” Rachael promised but it was Leia’s silence that worried Sofi. Leia was usually the first to utter words of comfort. Maybe she was beginning to see what Sofi refused to. This much time might be Austin’s way of saying goodbye.

Her heart clenched at just the thought. It couldn’t be. Yet she’d been the one to issue the ultimatum.

Had it been a mistake? Typically she wouldn’t press a man beyond what he could give. But this was Austin. He wouldn’t give unless he was pressed, at least not in this. And she knew this was what was best for him. That was the advantage to being friends for nearly their whole lives—she knew what he needed before he did. But what if it had been too much?

But Sofi couldn’t backtrack now. She’d put the words out there, for better or worse. And despite the misery of the past few weeks, she couldn’t regret them. But this wait was going to be the death of her if it went much longer.

Her heart plummeted as she searched for a distraction, any distraction.

“Sof, aren’t those your brothers?” Leia asked, pointing behind Sofi.

Okay, any distraction besides them. Sofi closed her eyes. If they'd followed her ... But then she realized they hadn't had to. She'd parked on the street and her brothers could have easily seen her car while they'd been driving around, deciding how to spend their evening.

Sofi turned, her fiercest glare ready.

Mario's hands were already up as he and Daniel joined their table.

"I didn't know you'd be here. I swear. But now that you're here and we're here and there are no empty tables ... " Mario's voice trailed off before he turned a charming smile at Rachael.

Sofi's friend beamed up at the goober, so Sofi guessed it didn't matter what she said. Rachael now wanted them there. Maybe a few dates with Mario were just what she needed to get her groove back. But if Mario hurt her, Sofi would end him.

A server came by, dropping wings and fries at the table.

"Sorry, but can we get another round of the same thing?" Sofi requested before the server could leave. With her brothers joining them, Sofi knew she'd have to double the food if she wanted anything for herself.

"Sure thing," their server said before hurrying back toward the kitchen.

"Grab some food while you can," Sofi directed her friends. "As soon as we offer some to them, it will be gone."

Leia didn't hesitate to fill her plate but Rachael looked to Mario.

"She's right. And ladies first," Mario said, magnanimously waving a hand over the food that wasn't even his to offer.

Yet Rachael looked at him like he'd offered her the world.

Sofi refrained from rolling her eyes as she also took what she wanted. As soon as Rachael had helped herself, the boys dug in.

Mario quickly fell into conversation with Rachael, a mixture of actual questions and flirting that tried Sofi's gag reflex. She turned to her right to see that Leia and Daniel were talking too. Sofi caught the word 'football' and tuned it out. Football only made her think of a certain person. Her brain, against her protests, reminded her of how they used to plop down on his couch and turn on the tv, cheering for the players and screaming at the refs together.

So without a conversation buddy, Sofi focused on her food as well as the views. Since the boys had joined them, shifting them all around the table, Sofi now had a view of the front door as well as most of the patrons in the place. She recognized quite a few as customers from the mercado, people she'd gone to school with, or just because she'd lived in town her whole life. She watched each of their conversations, guessing that with the way Tony waved his arms he was telling the only story she'd ever heard him tell, the time he'd fought off a bear while camping in the mountains alone. Suzy Hapsworth was surely recounting her pageant days by the walk she was showcasing to her group of friends, touching an invisible tiara on her head. There was something wholly comforting about being surrounded by people she knew so well.

Suddenly, she felt a tug at her attention. Even though dozens of people had gone in and out of the front door since Sofi's brothers had arrived—the place really was packed—Sofi's eyes were drawn to the door and she couldn't pull them away as it opened once more.

She didn't know how she knew, but sure enough, as the booted foot came into view she already recognized him. After four weeks of no connection, Sofi couldn't help that just the sight of his leg drew her to her own feet.

"Sofi?" She dimly registered Daniel wondering at her strange reaction. But her attention was fixed on the man entering the bar.

She watched as the rest of Austin came into the room, her heart beating wildly. This was it. He was here for her. He had

to be. Too many things were lining up for Sofi to deny that this was their moment. Finally.

Tears sprang to her eyes as she waited for him to turn in her direction. Their eyes would meet and he'd push through people in the bar to get to Sofi.

But then Sofi noticed that as Austin came in the door, his hand was connected with another. He pulled someone in behind him. A blonde, busty, gorgeous someone.

Sofi didn't even realize she'd slammed back into her seat until Leia's and Rachael's arms encircled her from either side. Her brothers' backs were to the door but they'd turned to see what Sofi had been watching and even over the noise of sports and loud conversation Sofi heard her brothers growl in unison.

"He gave me no promises," Sofi said, more to herself than anyone else, as she swiped her tears away. She wouldn't cry. She'd promised to give him time. She hadn't asked him to check in with her when that time was up. Evidently he'd made his decision and just hadn't notified Sofi.

No, that wasn't okay. Sofi tried and failed to come up with excuses for him. He was her best friend. He'd never hurt her. Yet this moment was defying everything she knew about him. Why he'd ignore her while going on dates with other women when he knew full well that Sofi was in love with him.

She began to shake.

"Sof," Leia said, just loud enough for her to hear.

Sofi wanted to lean into her friend, to turn away from the view of Austin with another girl, but she couldn't do it. She had to witness all of this with her own two eyes. So when Austin came back to her, if he came back ... what if he never came back to Sofi? Even for friendship? Her body trembled harder as she realized that even if Austin came back for her, Sofi couldn't accept him. Not after this. He'd been the one man she'd been sure would never harm her, the person she could always trust. But all of that had broken and she knew it couldn't ever be repaired. This moment would be seared in her mind and now when she thought of Austin, their catalogue of

the best memories in Sofi's life wouldn't be what played, but she would see this instead.

Austin led his date up to the bar, calling for the bartender's attention as Daniel and Mario rose to their feet.

Sofi gave the slightest shake of her head. She couldn't have her brothers confronting Austin—that was her job. Rachael and Leia understood and in unison they moved into action, pulling at the backs of Sofi's brothers' shirts and tugging them back into their seats.

"I have to see how it plays out," Sofi said to her brothers as well as her friends.

Her friends nodded in understanding, but Mario and Daniel both looked ready to tear Austin limb from limb. They might annoy Sofi nearly to the brink of sanity, but they were proving what she'd always known—her brothers couldn't bear to see her suffer. And they knew hurt from Austin would be the worst pain of all.

Austin's date leaned over and whispered something in his ear, sidling closer to him even as she spoke. She snuggled into his side, leaving her barstool altogether. Like she hoped to share the one Austin sat on.

She was in the process of looping one of his curls around her pinky, the curls Sofi had often daydreamed about fingering in the same way, when Sofi stood. She'd seen enough. Her feelings for Austin hadn't died, and they probably never would, but all hope was officially extinguished. She was done. Her eyes were burning with unshed tears, her body still quaking in disbelief.

She'd steeled herself for all possible outcomes after she'd declared her feelings for Austin. She was prepared for him to tell her they were better off as friends, for trying to date and having it fail, and for trying to date and all of her dreams coming true. She'd obviously dwelt on that last one far too much, because maybe if she hadn't had her head in the clouds, she might have foreseen this. Austin cutting her straight to her core.



Sofi's standing seemed to give her brothers the idea that they should do so as well, but instead of staying at the table, they leapt into action, breaking free of Leia's and Rachael's grips to shove their way through the crowd, their focus solely on the man at the bar.

"Daniel! Mario!" Sofi cried out. The last thing she wanted was a scene. But the place was too loud. Her brothers wouldn't be able to hear her over the insane amount of noise.

Sofi knew there was only one thing to do. Even as her legs felt shaky beneath her, she strode through that bar after her brothers, grasping onto the backs of chairs for support instead of pushing people out of her way. By the time she reached Austin, he was already on his feet as well, his collar in Mario's fist as Daniel looked ready to throw the first punch. Austin's date had begun screaming bloody murder, but when Sofi looked at Austin's face, she saw all of his attention on her.

She tried to ignore the tiny skip of her heart that said maybe all wasn't lost. It was the same poor, stupid heart that had led her astray for all of these years. She'd feel more anger toward it if she didn't feel so much pity.

"Don't," Sofi urged, pushing herself into the situation, her body between Austin's and Daniel's, her face turned up to Austin's.

Daniel took a step away from the situation, his sister's appearance allowing his cooler head to prevail, but Mario didn't move. He clenched Austin's shirt even tighter.

"He can't just do this to you," Mario ground out.

"Yet he did," Sofi couldn't help her reply that she directed at Austin. He'd shown no fear at the sight of her enraged brothers, but at Sofi's words he flinched.

"Let him go, Mario," Sofi said in a strained voice, unsure how much longer she had until she collapsed, physically and emotionally. Her safe place, her best friend, the love of her life ... she began shaking once more and had to suppress those thoughts.

"Sof, I can't ... " Mario began.

But Sofi uttered, “Please.”

And she watched as her brother’s grip went slack.

“You are a piece of worthless ...” Sofi ignored the rest of Mario’s words as she turned and headed toward the door. Now that neither Austin nor her brothers were in danger of bodily harm, she could leave. The heat of the place was suddenly stifling. She could barely see, hear, feel anything. Her body felt like it was slowly detaching from her consciousness and even as the feeling scared her, Sofi welcomed the reprieve she was getting from the overwhelming pain that had started when she’d seen Austin walk into the bar with that woman.

Sofi stumbled as she neared the door and felt a strong hand grip her arm to keep her from falling. She turned, expecting to see one of her brothers, but when she saw the face she adored the most instead ...

She jerked back, shaking off Austin’s grip as the tears began to race down her cheeks. She’d be sobbing in about thirty seconds and she had to get out of there. Away from him.

Sofi finally made her way outside, breathing in the fresh fall air as she looked in either direction, trying to remember where she’d parked. Everything was hazy, but if she could just find her car, she could go home and deal with this pain.

“You can’t drive. Not right now.” She heard Austin’s voice just behind her and her throat tightened. Why wouldn’t he leave her alone? He’d seemed perfectly happy to ignore her these last four weeks. But now, when he was the last person she wanted to see or hear from, he was everywhere. Invading her senses with his scent, touch, and voice.

“Daniel,” Sofi called for her brother, knowing he had to be close behind if Austin was there with her too.

“Sof.” Daniel put an arm around her waist as she leaned heavily into her brother. She knew she wouldn’t have to say another word. Her brothers and friends would get her home.

“Go away, Austin,” Leia declared bitterly. Sofi had never seen her sweet friend confront anyone; things must have been bad for her to stick up for Sofi like she had.

“I can’t. Sofi, please,” Austin began.

Sofi shook her head, hoping the action would keep Austin’s words away from her ears. “Where’s your truck, Daniel?” Sofi asked.

“Just let me take you home. I can explain,” Austin pleaded, but for the first time in Sofi’s life, nothing Austin said could move her.

“No,” Sofi said, loudly enough for all those gathered to hear. She didn’t know if Austin’s date had followed them, because Daniel and Mario had situated themselves between Sofi and everyone else.

That one word was enough for her brothers. They ushered her to the side of the building where Daniel’s truck waited. Sofi heard others following at their backs, but she wouldn’t look behind.

Daniel helped her into his truck as Mario came around to the passenger’s side and heaved himself in. He lifted his arm and Sofi fell into his embrace, burying her face in his shoulder. She couldn’t bear to look outside. She didn’t want to know if he’d followed. Either way would drive the knife of pain further into her heart.

The rumbling of an engine coming to life alerted Sofi that they would be gone soon. The evening would be over, but she had a feeling the pain was just starting.

She closed her eyes as she shifted in her seat, now leaning her head on Mario’s shoulder.

“I’m starting to like this Bash guy a whole lot more now,” Daniel said under his breath.

Sofi would have laughed if she weren’t so devastated. Bash was now a fixture of her past. She’d given him and every other man up for Austin. Not even for Austin—just for the hope of Austin. A hope that he had ground into the dirt along with her heart.

Sofi had just begun to allow the weariness she felt to permeate her bones when lights shone brightly into the back of Daniel’s truck.

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Sofi managed.

Daniel nodded. “I’ll pull into your driveway and keep Austin away. Mario, you get Sofi in the house immediately.”

“I’d prefer to be the one to keep Austin away,” Mario said, cracking his knuckles.

“Yeah, and I’d prefer no one get arrested tonight. I know I was right there with you in the bar, but Sofi is right. We’ve got to chill out, get her home, and then we can hate Austin all we want,” Daniel replied.

Mario was still tense, but because he didn’t argue Sofi figured he agreed with his brother. Sofi wasn’t sure how she felt about the situation. Part of her wanted to cause Austin as much pain as she felt. Although she wanted to be the one to deliver the punch if that was going to happen. But the bigger part of her could never allow Austin any kind of pain. As conflicted as she was, she knew which side would win if called upon. She’d always protect Austin. That was why it was so completely unbelievable that he’d done this to her.

Sofi undid her seatbelt as Daniel pulled into her driveway. See, she wasn’t completely helpless.

Mario jumped out of the truck and Sofi shot out behind him. She had as little desire to see Austin as her brothers wanted her to see him.

“Sofi!” Austin’s voice called from behind and she turned around before she could stop herself. She’d always turned at the sound of that voice. Years of habit couldn’t be undone in one night.

He’d jumped from his still running truck, his long legs making quick work of Sofi’s front yard.

Mario’s tug from behind reminded Sofi of their goal. He’d already unlocked her door and he shoved her into the house just before slamming the door, staying outside with Austin.

Sofi’s body fell against the door, her entire being exhausted.

“Lock it!” Daniel called out, and Sofi quickly twisted the lock with fumbling fingers. Just in time, considering the rattling of the doorknob that followed.

How Austin had gotten through both of her brothers to reach the door, Sofi didn't know.

The sound of his key entering the lock warned Sofi that he could still get in.

“Don't,” she managed to say through the door and it was only with her one word that Austin paused. There was a moment of charged silence before Sofi heard the rasp of the key being removed.

“Just let me talk to her. Please let me talk to you, Sof. I can't stand to see you like this,” Austin pleaded.

Sofi's door might have blocked the man out but not his voice. She knew if she didn't want to hear him she needed to go to her room, but she couldn't bring herself to move.

Daniel snorted.

“Funny, considering you're the reason she's like this,” Mario replied.

Sofi's thoughts exactly.

“It was a stupid experiment. I was trying to see what I felt when I went on a date with another woman. Sofi's been in my head for every moment since she told me what she felt for me and ... ” Austin's voice trailed off. “I need to tell Sofi all of this.”

“Not happening,” Daniel replied, unmoved by what Austin had said. Sofi didn't want to be affected either, and mostly she wasn't. An experiment? That still didn't explain why he hadn't contacted her in a month. But part of her was curious. Not curious enough to see Austin, though.

“Go home, Austin,” Leia's voice commanded, letting Sofi know her roommate was now home as well.

“Not until she talks to me,” Austin said, sounding as firm as Sofi had ever heard him.

“Hold him,” Leia instructed and Sofi heard an ensuing scuffle. She then heard Leia’s key in the lock and pushed off the door barely in time to keep from getting trampled. Leia slammed and locked the door all in one motion just before the sound of a thud on the other side of the door hit Sofi’s ears.

“Sofi!”

Sofi ignored the ache she heard in his voice. He didn’t get to hurt. Not after what he’d done.

“Be quiet or I’m calling the cops!” Sofi called through the door, her voice steady in a way none of the rest of her was.

Leia stood by Sofi’s side, shoulder to shoulder, letting Sofi know she wasn’t going anywhere.

“Please do,” Daniel said.

Sofi imagined Mario was muttering his agreement but with the door in the way she couldn’t hear every nuance of their conversation.

“Sofi,” Austin said once more through the door.

Sofi could no longer take it. Her body was barely able to remain upright, her mind was cloudy with grief, and her emotions were raw and wild. She left the door behind, walking through her living room and down the short hall to her bedroom. She somehow made it to the edge of her bed before she collapsed, falling face first into her pillows and hoping sleep would claim her quickly. She was exhausted enough to sleep for months.

But she had no such luck. And worse, she’d been mistaken. She could still hear the conversation at the door even from her bed. Maybe Austin was now yelling but she heard his voice.

“She’s gone. Leave her be, Austin,” Leia said as she pounded the door once, probably trying to scare him off. Sofi knew almost nothing scared her best friend ... wait, he was no longer her best friend, was he?

Suddenly the sobs that had been threatening for so long erupted out of Sofi, the volcano of her emotions erupting

everywhere. She held a pillow tightly against her stomach as she curled into a ball, each heave pulling from her very depths.

Sofi tried not to let the night's events replay in her mind. The hope she'd felt that the stars had aligned and she and Austin were about to start their lives together. She couldn't believe how wrong she'd been, and suddenly the pain became so intense that Sofi wasn't sure she'd make it. Her heart was no longer the only ache. Every part of her physically hurt, either piercing, throbbing, or aching accompanying the rhythmic squeezes of her broken heart.

But even with the physical pain permeating every part of her body, Sofi cried for her heartache alone. That was the only pain she couldn't bear.

Her sobs had to have reached every part of Blue Falls and soon, Leia was in her room, drawing Sofi's head into her lap.

"You'll be okay," Leia promised.

Sofi wanted to believe her. But she knew it couldn't be true. How would Sofi ever be okay without Austin?

Leia stroked Sofi's hair, alleviating some of her body's pain, but the ache in her heart only grew. Because even as she wanted him nowhere near her, she knew the only person who could truly heal her pain was Austin. And he'd made it clear that he never would.

And that was Sofi's last thought before sleep finally claimed her.



SOFI HATED that even before her eyes opened she remembered the pain. Or maybe it had never left. The blazing headache that fought through her consciousness told her it hadn't.

She sat up too quickly, her head now spinning even as it pulsed with pain. She thought about throwing herself back and curling once more under the covers but the sun's angle told her she'd already slept too much of the day away, and the crick in

her neck promised to become full-blown neck pain complete with nausea if she didn't do something besides lie in her bed.

She knew food should be her first plan of action. Maybe after some food, the world wouldn't appear quite so bleak. But her stomach churned with sorrow, threatening all kinds of things if Sofi did turn to food.

Brush her teeth and make it to the couch. Those were her only goals for the day. Thankfully she wasn't scheduled at the mercado and could take this respite. Although she was pretty sure her brothers wouldn't have let her come to work even if the kitchen were open.

Sofi finally stood up from her bed and got to the bathroom. She eyed her matted and yet still frizzy hair in the mirror. Nope, not on the list. She grabbed her toothbrush and applied toothpaste to the bristles, each step feeling like so much more. She put the brush in her mouth and got to work.

She almost smiled when she finished step one but then a swell of agony filled her soul and she hurried to the couch, flopping down before piling every blanket in the vicinity on top of herself.

She heard Leia pause whatever she was doing in the kitchen at the commotion.

"I know I'm not the cook you are, but I can whip up some eggs for you? Or maybe a sandwich?" Leia offered, because the hour was somewhere between breakfast and lunch.

Both options made Sofi's stomach turn.

"I'm okay." Sofi tried to sound reassuring but since her voice broke over just those two words, she doubted she was successful.

It was then that her eyes drifted to their front window and her focus fell on a red truck parked on their street. He was back? Why was he back? And why did Sofi's heart lift at just the idea? Hadn't it learned its lesson?

Leia joined Sofi in the living room, her eyes following Sofi's line of sight. "He's knocked on the door every hour



starting around five am. At least he's respected us enough not to use his key."

Sofi opened her mouth to apologize. Leia had been up that early? "I'm sor—"

Leia waved Sofi's attempted words away. "I couldn't have slept anyway."

"Leia," Sofi began, hating that she was upsetting her friend.

"Don't even start. I already stopped you from giving one apology. You don't get to give this one either."

Leia sat on the couch beside Sofi. "None of this is your fault. If anyone gets to be sorry, it's me. If I were a better friend, I would have talked you out of going to Austin. Or loving him in the first place or ... I don't know what I could have done, but I should have done something."

Sofi was surprised to hear her own scoff. It felt good to feel something other than overwhelming sadness. Leia's words had helped her to feel disbelief as well as a little annoyance.

"Talked me out of loving Austin? There wasn't a chance. That's actually what I'm most afraid of. That I'll never stop loving him even though he's told me loud and clear how he feels about me," Sofi said as she wiggled her way deeper into her blanket nest. She was pretty sure Austin couldn't see her from where he was but she was still taking extra precautions, considering how she looked. A little voice in the back of her mind questioned why she should care about how she looked in front of Austin, but Sofi told her brain to shut up.

"Okay, I know I just said I should have talked you away from Austin but ... I will hate myself if I don't say this. Especially after he's been out there all night," Leia said.

Sofi raised her eyebrows. "All night? He never left?"

"Not according to Mrs. Sanders next door, who's been texting me since we all got home at ten pm last night."

"Mrs. Sanders stayed up all night to spy on Austin?" Sofi asked. Even she'd gone to sleep eventually.

“It’s Mrs. Sanders,” Leia shrugged.

That was true. The woman lived for gossip and this was some of the juiciest their street had seen in a while. Sofi declaring her feelings for her best friend, her best friend feeling sorry for her but then going on a date with another woman because ... what had Austin called it? An experiment? Then he stayed outside all night while Sofi sobbed herself to sleep.

“Should we listen to what he has to say?” Leia asked, interrupting Sofi’s thoughts.

Sofi loved that Leia said ‘we.’ She wouldn’t leave Sofi on her own through any of this.

“He said it was an experiment,” Sofi said, her head still aching. Trying to think was helping nothing.

Leia stood and went to the fridge to grab Sofi’s water bottle. Coming back into the room, she set it on the coffee table. “You keep squinting, so I’m guessing that means you have a headache,” Leia explained.

Sofi wasn’t sure why she’d ever called Austin her best friend. Leia was worth a million Austins and ... Sofi couldn’t complete that lie of a thought. Leia was amazing. But Austin had been Sofi’s everything.

“He did say that. Do you know what that means? Because I’m confused. And he also said he needed to speak to you after that. He has more of an explanation, and I don’t think he’s leaving. Mrs. Sanders brought him a plate of breakfast and I saw Phoenix drive up with a bag of stuff. Austin then brushed his teeth, spitting in the bushes over there.” Leia pointed to the bushes between Mrs. Sanders’ property and their own.

“He can’t stay forever,” Sofi said, crossing her arms under the blanket. She wanted to stand firm. Her brothers would want her to do the same. Granted, her brothers also thought their candy game was funny. And the three of them had been in serious relationships for a combined total of approximately one year. Maybe Sofi shouldn’t listen to their imagined advice.

But could she let Austin in? If he said the right words, she couldn't imagine being strong enough to push him away like she should. Yes, she loved him. Yes, he'd loved her in his way. But if she just forgave him and they went back to being friends, wasn't this whole cycle bound to repeat itself? She couldn't turn off her feelings for him. The only way she saw to kill them was to expel Austin from her life. Her feelings hadn't subsided in the slightest in the four weeks they hadn't spoken, only growing stronger, but she surely just needed longer. These feelings had to die. They had to.

"He can't," Leia agreed as she stood once more and went into the kitchen, filling a bowl and bringing it to Sofi. "I know you can't stomach the idea of real food, but you need something to fortify you for whatever today may bring."

Sofi looked into the bowl full of watermelon and took it. Leia was right. Sofi needed something and this seemed the least offensive option.

She slowly chewed a piece. It was a little mushy since they were past prime watermelon season, but it was still juicy and her stomach didn't rebel. She downed another piece and then another, her headache subsiding with each bite.

"Will you regret not listening to him?" Leia asked softly when Sofi finally set down her empty bowl.

Sofi nodded. "But I think I'll regret listening to him as well." She had no idea what she'd do after she heard what Austin had to say. But if she didn't hear him out, she'd always wonder what he would have said and ...

Leia pursed her lips.

Sofi mimicked her action as she considered her options. How was she here? Of all the futures she could have imagined for herself, this was nowhere near any of them.

Leia jumped as knocking sounded on the door.

Sofi put the blanket all the way over her head.

The knocking of wood changed to the sound of knocking on glass and Sofi realized Austin had moved to the window

where she'd seen his truck. The window that faced the couch where she huddled in her blankets.

"I see you," Austin called through the window. "Please, Sof, just let me explain."

"Do you want me to close the curtains?" Leia offered. Sofi felt a surge of gratefulness. At least she knew Leia was always on her side, even if she did think that maybe Sofi should hear Austin out. But if Sofi was in the same room as Austin once more, looking at his face ... she couldn't do it.

But an idea suddenly dawned and even as she hesitated Sofi wondered if it wasn't the best solution.

"Call me," Sofi said from within her blanket cocoon.

"What?" Austin asked through the window.

"Call her," Leia said loudly.

Sofi knew as a woman of thirty-two years she shouldn't be hiding in the blankets from a situation, but even grown women needed their safe place. And with Austin gone she could think of no better alternative.

Almost instantly, Sofi's phone began ringing from her bedroom. She felt the couch shift as Leia ran to grab it. When Leia returned it was no longer ringing, but she simply tucked it into Sofi's blankets. Sofi saw that Leia had already received the call but had yet to say anything. Sofi glanced down at the time ticking away on the call with Austin's name above it. How many times had she seen this same sight? One of her favorite in the world. But now ...

"Sofi?" came Austin's voice through the phone.

Sofi put the phone on speaker and let it fall beside her.

"Say what you have to say," she said, feeling Leia's presence by her feet once more.

"I'd rather say this to your face," Austin said quietly.

"I'd rather you'd called me sometime during the last four weeks," Sofi bit back.

Austin sighed. "That was fair."

Yeah it was.

“Austin, I’m giving you five minutes,” Sofi said. She’d never spoken to Austin this harshly before. But she needed to get this done and then move on. She had to move on.

“I love you, Sofi,” Austin said.

No! No, no, no, no, no. He didn’t do what he did and then say he loved her. Wait, he meant as a friend. The way he’d always loved her.

Sofi’s heart clenched even as her stomach felt a bit more at ease.

“I get it. We’re best friends. You don’t want to lose me. We are so good just as we were. Did I miss anything?” Sofi spouted, kind of wishing she could throw the blanket back from her face, but then she’d see Austin, who was surely still in the window. And she couldn’t handle that.

“You missed everything, Sof. Because I said I *love* you,”

Sofi realized she hadn’t been mistaken the first time. He was declaring his love for her. Over the phone. To be fair, the phone part had been her doing. But if it weren’t for last night ...

An image of the gorgeous blonde nearly climbing into Austin’s lap filled every corner of her mind. It was too easy to recall. It would be with her for life. Yes, she’d seen Austin with other women. She’d even seen him kissing others. And though it had always caused her sorrow, this was different. This was after he knew what the sight would do to her. And instead of talking to her first, he’d gone on a date. Wait, why was he on a date if he loved Sofi? His actions didn’t jive with his words and Sofi suddenly knew what she’d already felt deep inside. She could no longer trust Austin.

“I get that you don’t want to lose me. Losing you will torture me more than I can say,” Sofi said, her voice cracking as she imagined life without Austin. “But you can’t just say things you don’t mean.”

“Sofi, I mean it. I swear to you. I went on that date to make sure all other women were out of my system. I was planning

on coming over right after. To tell you everything.”

“You had to go on a date?” Sofi needed clarification even as she wanted this call to be over.

“I had to make sure my feelings for all other women were gone. I couldn’t commit to you and then back out. I needed to be positive my heart was only yours forever. I couldn’t do anything halfway. I had to give my all to this. To you.”

“And you could only know after going on that date?”

“When you say it like that, it sounds ridiculous, but it made sense at the time. Sofi, I can’t hurt you. I would never. It was why I had to be more than one hundred percent.”

“And yet you did,” Sofi’s soft words were hitting a nerve if Austin’s intake of breath was any indication.

While he was stunned she continued, “I was more than one hundred percent about you without dating any other guys.”

“You dated Bash—”

“While you dated the whole of the state, Austin. You’ve had hundreds of women to prove to you over the years if what you felt for me was real. Why this date? It makes no sense.”

“Do you think I’m lying to you?” Austin asked, the distress in his voice clear.

“I don’t know what to think, Austin. You were the one man I was sure would never injure me. Now I’m not sure of anything,” Sofi said.

He’d said he loved her. It was everything she’d wanted to hear for so long. But after last night her trust and belief in him had been destroyed, and his words were no longer enough. Sofi wouldn’t trust mere words even if her heart screamed to give him another chance.

“I’ve never lied to you.”

“You’ve also never wounded me like this. You had to know what that would do.”

“I didn’t mean for you to see us.”

The knife of pain was back, this time somehow digging deeper.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Austin said quickly as he heard Sofi’s sharp intake of breath. I meant that by the time you found out about the date, you’d know it was only a precaution and that my love for you is true. It’s all consuming, Sofi. I don’t know how long I’ve felt it but as soon as I started giving you space it began creeping up on me until I knew what it was. I started getting my life together so that I could be the man you deserved. This date was my last thing.”

“A last hoorah?” Sofi felt sick at the thought.

“Not at all. Sofi, I wanted to give myself one last reminder that all of the other women in the world would pale in comparison to you.”

“And you had to go on a date to know that?” Sofi felt like she was repeating herself, but she had to make sure she understood him. She kind of did understand it, especially knowing Austin the way she did. But it still didn’t make it right. If he loved her the way he said he did, going on a date with another woman should be unbearable. Sofi knew that every time she went on one it was. And that was without knowing how Austin felt for her.

“It was the most idiotic thing I’ve ever done. If I could take it back I would. I now look at it and know I didn’t need it. At the time it had seemed important but now ... I can’t believe I thought that.”

Austin was baring his heart and soul. Sofi wanted it to be enough.

But last night’s pain was too fresh, her wounds so raw they begged for mercy.

Still, could she give up Austin for good? She knew she wasn’t in a good headspace. If she made a decision now, she’d be behaving rashly. Maybe his reasoning would make more sense to her in the future? Maybe it wouldn’t. Or maybe she just wasn’t quite ready to let go. So what she said next was all

she could while staying true to the many conflicting sides of herself.

“Give me time,” she said, hoping she wasn’t making a mistake. The ghosts of her sobs were sure she was.

“Of course. I can do time,” Austin immediately agreed. “I’ll prove myself to you, Sof. I’ll gain your trust back. I swear it.”

Could he? Sofi rooted him on even as she doubted it was possible. But even with all of the discord in her soul, Sofi’s stupid heart lifted once more. Because even as her brain told her to proceed with caution, her heart was ever hopeful.

Pitiful organ.



AUSTIN PACED the floor of his mom's kitchen, hating that Sofi was somewhere hurting and not only had he caused it, he hadn't fixed it. And he had to fix it. Somehow. So he'd enlisted the help of all of the women in his family even as they looked down on him for wounding Sofi. But knowing he was doing this for her was the only reason they'd all agreed to help him.

"How do I stop her from hurting?" Austin asked, his voice breaking. Even he wanted to kick the trash out of Austin from last night. The knowledge that he'd caused Sofi to hide away in her blankets from him? His heart was breaking off piece by piece. And he'd take that pain. But leaving Sofi to hers? He couldn't.

"Besides finding a time machine?" Holland asked sassily, flipping her blonde hair over her shoulder.

Austin ignored his unhelpful sister's answer.

"I'm not sure that you can," Ruby said with a frown. "But the good news is you aren't the first man to injure the heart of the woman they love."

"You aren't even the first Ashford," Lake chimed in.

That didn't surprise Austin. He didn't know every aspect of their love stories, but he knew his brothers had probably messed up at some point. They were his brothers, after all.

"It takes time," Madi added.

That was the last thing Austin wanted to hear.

“What about a daily text? Things I love about her. Or just ‘good morning’ so I don’t come on too strong. She’s asked for time and space, but I also know that not communicating with Sofi for a month was the dumbest thing I could have done.”

“Nope, going on a date with another woman was dumber,” Holland piped up unhelpfully.

Austin glared at his sister, who just winked back at him. But he let it go. Because he wasn’t truly annoyed with Holland. He knew that her wisecracks were her way of punishing Austin for Sofi’s sake. He couldn’t fault her for that, but he was going to direct his questions to his more helpful family members from now on. He turned to them before he spoke.

“So I don’t want to do that again. But is texting not respecting her space?” Austin asked. He couldn’t help but think he could cheer her at least a tiny bit with a daily text. Maybe the heartache would truly only go away with time, but he’d work his darndest to see that time come to an end sooner rather than later.

“Maybe start with a text asking if it’s okay. Tell her that you want to respect her wishes, but you also need to let her know that you realize you were an idiot before and you want to start doing better,” Lake said.

Ruby and Madi nodded as Holland shrugged and Morgan silently watched from her workspace in the kitchen.

That sounded like a good idea to Austin. So with no magic way to wipe Sofi’s pain away, he’d start with this. And a vow to never be the one to break her heart again. He then moved to the other issue at hand.

“So the hurt has to heal in its time,” Austin said and the women nodded. “The other thing I really messed up on ... ”

Holland opened her mouth and Austin put up a finger to hush her. “I broke Sofi’s trust.” He shook his head in disgust but he’d beat himself up later. Right now he needed a plan of action. “How do I earn it back?” He’d promised Sofi time and he’d give it to her. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t going into

this with a strategy to be ready to win her heart as soon as time was up. He'd been the most senseless man on the planet and he'd almost lost the most important woman to him because he couldn't see beyond his own needs. He'd never make that mistake again.

"Stay steady in her life," Holland replied finally, her voice lacking the sass of earlier.

"Never lie to her," Ruby chimed in.

"Never allow her to doubt your feelings for her," Lake said.

"Show her you trust her," Madi finished.

Austin looked at each of the women who meant so much to him but had given him squat. Everything they suggested he'd already been planning.

"I need more than that. I need something amazing. One big action that will show her that I will always think of her first. That she is my true priority now and forever," Austin clarified.

Ruby's and Madi's faces were filled with sympathy. Holland rolled her eyes like he was an idiot.

"It doesn't work like that," Lake said gently, crushing all of Austin's dreams.

It had to work like that. If not, then how would he ever show Sofi how sincere he was? That they would be incredible together. If she didn't trust him, she'd never believe any of his efforts were real.

"But ... " Morgan's voice came from across the kitchen where she was making apple rolls, filling the entire house with a mouthwatering smell. "I don't think Sofi's trust in you is completely broken. It's been damaged. And she's been hurt. Because you were stupid."

"An imbecile," Holland piped up.

"An idiot," Ruby added.

"Foolish," Madi said.

“Thoughtless, imprudent, and unwise,” Lake supplied. “But no worse than our significant others have been.”

She shared a look with Ruby that boosted Austin’s heart just a bit. If Jackson and Logan had been as stupid and somehow kept their amazing women, maybe Austin stood a chance.

“I’m so glad we can’t marry dumb Ashfords,” Holland said to Madi before breathing an exaggerated sigh of relief.

“Yeah, you *are* dumb Ashfords,” Austin couldn’t help but throw back at his sister, pumping his eyebrows with his taunt.

She laughed and the rest of the group joined in until Morgan cleared her throat. The room immediately fell silent as they gave the floor to the matriarch of their home.

“Pain and suffering can cause us to see things in a distorted manner. And not to downplay anything Sofi is feeling, but I think that once her hurt subsides, she’ll see that she *can* still trust you. You didn’t mean to hurt her. In fact, you were trying to protect her. Your motives were good, even though I think what you did was one of the dumbest ways of showing protection.” Morgan shook her head at her third son even as a fond smile lurked at the corners of her lips.

His mom was preaching to the choir. Austin now saw the error of his ways.

“And once she gets there, you’ll be ready. To show that support, truth, and love your wise sisters have directed you to have,” Morgan continued.

“So I just wait?” That didn’t sit well with Austin.

Morgan shrugged. “You don’t have to.”

Austin’s ears and ragged countenance perked up at the idea of *doing* something.

“You have a one up on many men in this situation,” Morgan continued. “You know Sofi better than most men know their wives. So what does she need from you that you haven’t given?”

“Besides going on dates with her and not other women,” Holland clarified.

Why had Austin invited his little sister to this group?

But as soon as his annoyance with Holland had passed, he knew exactly what to do. It was so obvious that he was frustrated at himself for not seeing this way forward before. But he guessed not seeing what was right in front of him was kind of par for the course for him right now.

“Thank you all so much,” Austin said so exuberantly that the women in the room exchanged glances, unsure how to react. The question was clear on their faces. Had they really already helped him?

Austin dropped a kiss to his mom’s cheek because she’d been the one to guide him to his next step in winning back Sofi before he headed for the back door where his truck was parked.

“Where are you going?” Holland called after him, curiosity getting the better of her.

Austin paused just before opening the door. “To ask the Tías for help.” He tried to hide his grimace and it didn’t help that all of his helpers looked at him with varying degrees of pity. Well, except for Holland, who was beaming.

“Ohh, that will not be fun,” Holland said. “The Tías hate you right now.”

The fact that no one contradicted her told Austin all he needed to know. But they were the only ones who could help him now. So he was off to see the Tías.

For better or worse.



“THAT BOY better not be thinking he can just show his pretty face around here like nothing has happened,” Tía Melinda muttered as Austin stood just outside of the Castillo residence. Thankfully his mom was right and he knew more about Sofi

than many men knew about their wives, including Sofi's family's schedule. And he knew for the Tías, Sunday afternoons were reserved for rummy. After attending Sabbath services, of course.

Darla stood in the doorway, barring Austin from entering. Tía Rosa and Tía Melinda hadn't even gotten up from their seats. They'd never treated Austin this way before. They were always the first to come hug him and kiss his cheeks.

If he hadn't already known he'd majorly messed up, this would prove it. But at least Tía Melinda had said his face was pretty ... that had to be a relatively good sign, right? Austin needed all the points in his ledger that he could get.

"You're lucky the boys aren't here," Tía Rosa added, not bothering to look up from her cards.

"I know I messed up big time," Austin began, wishing he could remember the speech he'd rehearsed on the way here. But seeing the Tías angry was so different from knowing they would be angry. Austin had never upset them like this and it was terrifying, to say the least. But enduring their wrath was worth it. For Sofi.

Darla clucked her tongue as if Austin's statement was obvious.

"I know I can't say anything to make last night better. I shouldn't have gone out with that other girl. I definitely shouldn't have practically ignored Sofi for a month. When she came to my house and told me she loved me, I didn't know how to process it. I knew I loved her, and that I would always love her, but it scared me to my very core to think about the kind of love she had for me. Because I knew I didn't deserve that love. No one deserves all of Sofi. She's too incredible for any man on the planet."

Austin eyes began to well with unshed tears. Even with all of the emotion he'd felt these past couple months, he hadn't cried since his father had passed two years before. He couldn't even remember the time he'd cried before that. But saying these words, feeling the truth of them, telling the women Sofi cared about the most that he might have lost her forever, he

couldn't help his rising sentiments. He blinked away the moisture and looked from Darla to Tía Melinda to Tía Rosa. At least they were all looking at him now.

“So I spent weeks being way too in my head. I sold the wrong horse to a buyer, a mess that Logan will never forgive me for, I walked around like a zombie trying to figure out what was up and down. My whole world tilted with Sofi's declaration. I knew I couldn't lose her, but I also wasn't sure how to become the man worthy of her.”

“Then you went out with another woman,” Tía Rosa interrupted.

Yeah, he wasn't living that one down anytime soon. Not that he should be forgiven. But it would be nice to complete a thought without being reminded of his own stupidity.

“I'm getting there,” Austin promised. “It took some time, but I finally understood that to become worthy of Sofi I needed to appraise myself. My shortcomings. I know that I lose my temper too easily so I had my brothers try to annoy me and I had to keep from reacting.”

“How did that go?” Darla asked.

“Not so well,” Austin admitted.

“I also know that Sofi hates how I allow clutter to build up. So I started trying to keep my house neater. I began swearing less, drinking less, fighting less.”

“Those are things many men come into relationships with, Austin,” Tía Melinda pointed out.

“I know,” Austin said. “But I didn't want Sofi to have to just deal with me and my bad habits. I would be getting the ultimate prize with Sofi. I wanted her to have the same. It's what I would have expected from any other man who tried to marry Sofi.”

Darla's mouth dropped open as Tía Rosa gasped. Finally he had everyone's undivided attention.

“You aren't trying to date Sofi, you want to marry her,” Tía Melinda worked out. She was now standing at the table where

they had been playing their now-forgotten game.

“It’s the only option with Sofi. I’m not going to date her if we aren’t headed for the altar. We know each other too well—we don’t have to date to see what the other is like. I know every part of Sofi and it took me too long to realize this, but I love every part of her. I was never able to imagine my life with a woman because I’d always had Sofi right there. Everything I needed. But I didn’t realize that until we spent that time apart. I thought I wasn’t prone to loneliness but really it was because with Sofi I was never alone. I thought I wasn’t the kind of guy to want a woman around all the time, but Sofi had always been there. She was the most perfect part of me and I was blind to it for so long.”

Tía Rosa opened her mouth.

“So the last thing I had to do was make sure I had every other woman out of my system. The idea of dating anyone other than Sofi wasn’t appealing but with my past, I had to be sure. I would give Sofi nothing less than my entire heart. I couldn’t be hiding any part of it away for a potential future woman. So I asked Tracy out. It was stupid, and I now know I shouldn’t have needed that last test. But I’d been testing every other part of my life and at the time it made sense.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t run that plan of yours by a woman?” Tía Rosa asked tartly.

Austin shook his head. He hadn’t run his plan by anyone. He now knew he should have. Especially knowing the heartache he’d caused Sofi. That was the only part of this he couldn’t stand. He knew he deserved the pain, but Sofi ...

“You deserve for her to hate you forever,” Darla finally spoke. They weren’t the words Austin wanted to hear, but they were the truth.

Austin nodded.

Darla looked back to her sisters-in-law, who also nodded.

“But we won’t let that happen,” Darla said as she let Austin in, relief filling him with each step he took into the Castillos’ home. He knew most would say it was a crazy



emotion as he was walking into the lionesses' den, but for his plan to succeed he had to face this danger.

And now that Darla had voiced her support ... maybe, just maybe, Austin would make it out of this mess.

“So I’ve injured Sofi’s trust in me and I know it will take time and many acts to restore, but I know there’s something she’d like me to do for her. She’s never said it out loud but now I see all of those times she said she hoped that her future husband did this ... I can learn and do this for her,” Austin began, the Tías hanging on his every word.

He knew he hadn’t tamed the lionesses but they were for the time being not threatening to eat him alive. Austin would take that and hopefully they’d be willing to guide him as he took this step into foreign, for him, territory.

## Twelve

SOFI COULDN'T HELP the smile that came over her face as her phone dinged just on time. A little after Sofi's request for space, Austin had texted her, asking permission to contact her just once each day. Since then, the texts had come in like clockwork, at the exact same time every day. At first she'd been hesitant, not sure if she was ready to give Austin daily access to her, but he'd proven so much with just this one thing. He was never late, always considerate, and reminded Sofi daily that he knew her inside and out. She now couldn't feel anything but grateful for giving him this chance. They were rebuilding their friendship slowly but surely. In fact, in recent days Sofi had started to think maybe they had a chance for more.

She tried to keep that hope from growing too wildly but she still loved Austin. She always would. And if he truly loved her ... she pushed back down on that ever-persistent hopefulness that continued to be her constant companion and began to draw her phone from her back pocket.

Austin's texts were so consistent that Sofi had timed her breaks by them, knowing if she ended her break right at 2:15, she could read Austin's text just before returning to the kitchen for the next few hours.

Two-fifteen was an oddly specific time. For the first week or so, Sofi had puzzled over it, and then it had come back to her. A conversation they'd had back in high school. The last bell would sound right at two fifteen and Sofi had often declared it her very favorite time of the day. So Austin had

remembered that and sent her a text at her very favorite time of the day. Reminding her how well this man knew her and how he cared about her happiness. She glanced down at her phone to read what he'd sent that day.

*Que tengas un hermoso dia, alma mia.*

Her smile grew as she lingered on the words *alma mia*. *My soul*, something he'd begun calling Sofi quite often in these texts. It was almost like he'd been taking Spanish language classes and come upon that term, unable to let it go once he learned it. But Sofi knew that couldn't be the case. Austin had told her more than once that he'd never have the patience to learn a second language, often when he was marveling at the fact that she spoke two languages. It was a cute sentiment, although Sofi had always wished Austin wouldn't put that skill on some unreachable pedestal but would realize that he could learn too. If Austin spoke Spanish? He'd be the perfect man. She slipped her phone back into her pocket before washing her hands and then concentrating on wrapping burritos. They were today's special at the mercado, which meant nearly every customer had ordered them.

Like she'd asked, Austin was giving her space. Barring the cute daily texts, she hadn't seen or heard from her best friend and she was missing him more than she could have imagined. Especially since it had only been two and a half weeks, seventeen days, since she'd asked for space—not that she was counting, of course—and she'd more easily survived the four weeks of silence from Austin the month before, even though that had seemed like torture at the time.

But this time it was different. Because the distance between them was her choice. And she often wondered why she was still keeping that space when all she wanted was to see Austin's face again. But then she'd remember him with his date and she'd be reminded of her pain ...

However, the more she mulled over the events of that night, the more she realized she may have overreacted. At least a bit, saying things she shouldn't have said. Austin had made her no commitment. Yes, he'd known how she felt and it was a slap to the face, but after hearing his reasons she at least

somewhat understood his logic. His actions were stupid but the reasoning was valid. So even as she wasn't happy with what he'd done, she'd already forgiven him. Something she had yet to tell him, because she didn't want him to think that she was ready to completely move on. After that night, things had changed. Sofi had seen that like every other man, Austin could break her trust and her heart. Not that those things couldn't be fixed with time, but she'd always assumed Austin was the one man who would never let her down. She knew that it was only her own idealized version of him that he'd failed, and that holding him to that kind of perfection wasn't fair, but still Sofi couldn't help her disappointment. She'd been assailed by doubts, questioning whether they were as right for each other as she'd always assumed. Maybe their love wouldn't be one for the ages. It might just be a normal love, the same kind she would have had with any other guy she'd chosen, and that disillusioned Sofi deeply.

Those thoughts kept her busy as she wrapped burrito after burrito, wishing she'd taken the afternoon off. Any of her buffoon brothers could have taken over this shift at the mercado kitchen because Sofi had already prepped all of the burrito fillings and toppings. She really needed something more complicated to slow her running thoughts instead of having all of this time to dwell on Austin.

She was still hurt. But she couldn't ignore the fact that she also ached to be near him. She'd forgiven him. But she wasn't sure what she wanted from him. She'd never been so confused and that scared her. Austin's character had always been steady and sure to Sofi. Because who he was felt different now, did that mean they weren't meant for one another?

"Mario!" Sofi called out, knowing her brother was stocking shelves out in the market. She'd trade jobs with him. Anything was better than being alone in this kitchen with her thoughts.

"Sup, Sof?" Mario said, waving through the window that led to the mercado.

"Wrap these burritos for me?" she asked, holding up an empty tortilla. She'd made a big batch from scratch that

morning and rewarmed them just now to assemble burritos.

“Aw, Sofi. You know I’m no good at that,” Mario whined.

But Sofi wasn’t dissuaded. “It’s not that hard.” She quickly showed Mario how to wrap one and he grunted.

“Fine, but you owe me,” Mario replied.

Sofi nodded eagerly. Her brothers often told her she owed them but they soon forgot any debts. Kind of like the way they forgot how they’d been so angry at Austin seventeen days before. Both Daniel and Mario had asked in the last few days when Austin would be coming to visit the mercado or join them for Castillo dinners. Sofi hadn’t mentioned that they had been ready to kill the guy mere weeks before, because she wanted them to forgive him, but how were they so quick to forget? Sofi wished it were that easy for her.

Another group who’d forgiven Austin rather easily were the Tías. One day they’d been condemning him to the afterlife beneath them, and the next day they shocked Sofi by letting her know they had no objections to her dating Austin. Sofi would have wondered where the change of heart came from, but these were the Tías. They were never known for the logic behind their actions.

Sofi walked into the mercado, walking around until she saw a few boxes in the middle of an aisle. That must have been the place Mario had left. He was restocking boxes of arroz and Sofi set to work, her thoughts quickly displaced by the conversations surrounding her.

“I couldn’t creer he spoke to her como eso. Y frente a su abuela,” a woman in the next aisle spoke.

“That’s what she gets for dating a man her mamá told her not to date. Pero she’s a smart girl. She’ll break it off with him soon,” another woman said, their words flowing smoothly between Spanish and English in a way that made Sofi grin. She loved all of Blue Falls, but she loved their little mercado community most.

Sofi continued eavesdropping, her grin growing with each interaction. Ten minutes on the floor and she already knew

who was pregnant and not ready to tell people the news yet, who was getting married and shouldn't be, as well as who all of the tíos thought would win the next big boxing match.

“Sofi?” Sofi jumped up at the mention of her name. So far she'd been able to stay pretty undetected by her boxes of rice. And Mario was probably never going to trade jobs with her again, considering she'd stocked a mere thirty bags in ten minutes.

Sofi turned to see a face she'd never expected to see at the mercado. Not after the way she'd left things with him.

“Bash?” She stood, taking a random bag of rice with her. Of course at the same time, the Tías' little heads peered down the aisle after Bash. She hadn't even known they were here this afternoon. But she realized she should have—where there was fodder for gossip, the Tías would be near.

“Hey,” Bash said as he nervously shifted his weight from foot to foot.

“How are you doing?” Sofi finally asked when the silence had grown long enough that it had begun to feel awkward.

“Good. I'm busy working. I've actually been dating a lot,” Bash said with a half-smile.

Sofi wasn't sure how to respond to that. She was pleased that Bash was dating. He was a nice guy and deserved to be happy, and she didn't want him to be pining after her. But because the last time she'd spoken to him was about not wanting to date him anymore ... it was a weird topic of conversation.

“I just ... ” Bash continued so that Sofi didn't have to answer. Thank goodness. “Are you still hung up on Austin?”

Sofi dropped the bag of rice in her hand. She took back her mental *thank goodness*. She'd rather talk about Bash's dating life than her lack of.

“Um,” she hedged as the Tías' ears almost visibly perked up, they were so intent on hearing her answer to Bash's question. “Maybe we should go in the back,” Sofi offered, pointing to the stock room.

Bash nodded and the Tías groaned. They knew Sofi would be shutting them, as well as anyone else standing around, out of the conversation. But since Sofi had just been one of those eavesdroppers, she knew how easy it was to “overhear” everything in the mercado. This was the last conversation she wanted anyone to listen in on.

She picked up her bag of rice and tossed it into the box. “You guys can stock that box if you’re looking for something to do,” Sofi teased the Tías as she led Bash out of the aisle and into the empty stockroom. She thought about locking the door behind her but figured that was going a bit too far.

She offered Bash a rolling chair that, for some reason, had been left in there instead of in her dad’s office but he just shook his head, waiting for Sofi to speak.

Knowing she could avoid him no longer, she said, “I think I always will be.” The words caused shivers to run up her body because she felt the absolute truth of them. Even as she continued to push him away for now, she couldn’t help but love Austin. She had for nearly all of her life and she couldn’t envision stopping now. Especially now that he’d said he loved her too. But did he truly mean it? She worried that he felt forced to say the words out of concern that he might lose her friendship rather than because he truly felt the same love for her that she did for him. She didn’t know what would be worse—never having Austin as her one person or having him but watching him realize he’d fooled himself into thinking he loved her.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Bash said. He sighed and took the offered chair as Sofi leaned against a stack of boxes. “I kept dating these women. Great women, beautiful women, but my thoughts kept going back to you. I had to make sure you really weren’t available to me before diving back into the dating pool.”

Sofi pursed her lips. How easy would it be to choose Bash right now? A man so into her that he couldn’t even think about other women when he was on dates with them. She knew that was what she wanted. But even though Bash offered it to her,

she couldn't take it. Because she craved that exact devotion from just one man.

Would he ever show it to her? Would Sofi ever give him a chance to show her? She realized that second part might be as much of a deterrent to their future as anything else.

“So are you two a thing, then?” Bash asked tentatively. As if he didn't want the answer but had to know the truth.

Sofi shook her head.

“Is he still being a tool and calling you his best friend?” Bash asked.

Sofi didn't realize she'd bared so much about herself and Austin to Bash. Maybe she should be more discreet with future guys she dated.

Even as she thought the words, her chest clenched, telling her there would be no future guys to date except for one. Either she would choose Austin or she wouldn't. But there would be no other man. Years of dating had taught her one thing: there was only one man for her. But could he say the same about her? He'd said that he could ...

“Kind of.” Sofi went on to tell Bash what had happened and when she told him about the date he lifted a shoulder as if what Austin had done wasn't that big of a deal.

Sofi's eyes went wide. She'd expected him to take her side.

“I'd be a hypocrite if I condemned him for that. Because if you'd told me today that you had Austin out of your system, even though you broke it off with me to go after him, I'd take you in a heartbeat.”

A stab of pain shot through Sofi's chest, so sharp that she rubbed the spot as her eyes dropped to the floor. She hadn't realized she'd made such an impact on Bash. Another reason she was done with dating, unless things worked out with Austin. She wasn't the only one who got hurt when she dated someone else.



“It’s kind of the same thing, isn’t it?” Bash asked and Sofi had to look up and meet his gaze. Doing anything else was cowardly. “You knew I cared for you, a lot. But you needed to see if there was anything between you and Austin. If I took you back now ... ” Bash paused and met Sofi’s eyes, the longing in them clear. He shook his head before speaking once more. “Austin knew you cared for him. He needed to make sure he really could give you his whole heart to you. Be worthy of you. If anything, you should be grateful he went on that one last date. Seeing you run out of that bar ... that’s when he truly knew he couldn’t be without you.”

Sofi’s hand clenched the sides of her jeans. Her mind had been circling the same conclusion but her pride hadn’t allowed her to land on it.

But as much as Bash had a point, she had to argue her side. If she could make him see it, maybe she still had a reason to keep Austin at arm’s length.

“But why did he *need* that one last date? Couldn’t he have known I was enough when I basically fell at his feet?” Sofi asked, unable to keep the agony she’d experienced in the last couple of months out of her voice.

Bash’s eyes filled with concern, but he didn’t hold back when he spoke. “What does any of that matter when you’re right where you wanted to be now? You’re filled with fear that he has only chosen you because he’s afraid to lose you, not because he really loves you. But doesn’t the fact that he ran after you, abandoning that last date, choosing you over the person that personified every other future woman in his life, mean something?”

“I guess,” Sofi admitted. “But ... ” her voice trailed off and Bash continued.

“He’s still pursuing you even as he respects your need for space ... isn’t that enough for you? You’ve given him chance upon chance to walk away. Austin said he didn’t think he could give any woman forever.”

Bash paused and Sofi bit her lip, hanging on his words.

“But if he still felt that way, would he be pursuing you so hard? The last thing he wants to do is hurt you again. And he’s still here. Day after day. What else could that mean, except that he’s ready to give you forever? He’s sure of his love for you. His actions are speaking so loudly, how can you not hear them?”

“Oh,” Sofi breathed. When Bash put it like that ...

Sofi had been so intent on nursing her pride she hadn’t been able to closely observe Austin’s actions. She’d been hurt—and rightly so. When she’d seen Austin at that sports bar, she’d thought he was there for her and her heart had leaped with joy, only to be crushed at the sight of his date. In her shock and disappointment, she’d overreacted. Blinded by pride and pain, she hadn’t been able to see the truth. Austin had gone on that date to make sure that he never gave Sofi reason to doubt his love for her. And instead she’d told him he’d broken her trust. Which wasn’t fair, considering she didn’t know how things would have played out had she not witnessed the date. Knowing Austin, if he’d really gone through with the date and hated every minute because he wanted to be with Sofi, he would have come clean—told her every detail. And she would have loved him for it. But because she saw him during the date instead of after, everything had changed. She remembered the way his date snuggled up to him, the moment when her heart had gone cold, but she now recalled that she’d also seen Austin move away. She hadn’t let herself consider his action because the fact that he was on the date had been betrayal enough. At least in that moment it had felt like it. But now ... seeing it through Bash’s eyes had given her a different perspective. Bash was right.

“What was I doing? Telling him I needed time ... ” Sofi began to pace and Bash stood, resting a calming hand on her shoulder.

“Hold up. This isn’t all your fault. Austin still went MIA from your life for four weeks, and he could have—should have—given you a heads-up before the date,” Bash was now where Sofi had thought he’d start. Firmly on team Give-Austin-Heck-To-Pay.

“True.” Sofi’s pacing slowed.

“And you needed this time. You didn’t take it to get back at him. You took it because you were hurt. And you were hurt for a myriad of reasons. The date foremost, but that doesn’t mean you had no reason to take your space. You did so and now you’re able to approach the situation with fresh eyes.”

“Are you a therapist in your free time or something?” Sofi asked, astounded.

“Five sisters, remember?” Bash raised a perfunctory eyebrow.

“Right,” Sofi replied, unable to imagine a life with five sisters since she didn’t even have one. Sometimes she’d felt like she’d missed out, but Holland had in many ways been the little sister Sofi had never had. And she appreciated that she got to choose the women in her closest circle. Well, for the most part. The Tías would always have seats in that circle no matter what Sofi wanted. Thankfully Sofi would always want them.

Why was Sofi thinking about the Tías? Her mind had gone on a tangent and she needed to get back to the matter at hand. Austin really did love her. She’d been blinded by her injuries, but now that she could finally see it, she had to do something.

“So what do I do now?” Sofi turned to Bash. He had yet to lead her astray, although it was more than a little weird to ask him for relationship advice. But then she remembered why Bash had come. She’d become so consumed by the whole Austin situation that she’d forgotten Bash’s initial query. He wanted her. What if she’d gone to Austin and he’d asked her to help him win a woman back? She recalled that Bash had been the one to start the conversation about Austin, but still, enough was enough. Sofi needed to end it. “Don’t answer that,” she said hastily.

Bash nodded as if he too was just realizing who they were and what they were doing. He’d been a good friend to her, better than she’d deserved.

“Thank you,” Sofi said as she opened the door to let Bash out of the stock room. She had a feeling she wouldn’t be seeing him again since their paths had never crossed before their first date. She realized that she’d miss him. Not in the way he wished she’d miss him, but she would.

Bash nodded once more as he started for the door. “Make sure he treats you well, Sofi,” he said before turning and heading straight for the mercado’s exit.

“I will,” she whispered to Bash’s back, wishing him the best in her mind. She knew he’d find someone, a woman who was head over heels for him. He was too good not to. And she hoped they’d find one another soon.

Sofi slumped into the rolling chair Bash had vacated, sliding until she hit the back wall of the store room.

“He’s a good man,” Tía Rosa said, coming out from behind a row of boxes.

“Ah!” Sofi screeched.

*What in the world?*

“Did you really think we wouldn’t sneak in here from your dad’s office?” Tía Melinda laughed as she joined Tía Rosa.

Sofi’s mom was the last to enter as Sofi still clutched her racing heart. The Tías were going to be the death of her. She absolutely took back her thought about wanting them in her circle. At least for the moment.

“He is a good man,” Darla agreed. “But not as good as Austin.”

Sofi shook her head, raising her hands in front of her. “No apologies for sneaking in and listening to an obviously private conversation?” she asked, her eyes wide with indignation.

“Bash saw us and winked. It isn’t our fault you were too into your conversation to notice us,” Tía Rosa said with a shrug and a very unapologetic grin.

“Wait, and why are you all of a sudden Team Austin?” Sofi asked the question she’d been wondering ever since the Tías’ change of heart. “I believe there were threats of doing

something that would affect his child-bearing abilities just a few short weeks ago,” Sofi said pointedly to Tía Melinda, since she’d made the comment.

Tía Melinda shrugged as Tía Rosa cackled. “That would have been fun. But that was last month. Now we love him again.”

“Why?” Sofi asked as she stood. Had the Tías come to the same conclusion she had but much sooner? She doubted it, because it wasn’t like the Tías to keep anything to themselves. If they’d come to the conclusion that Austin hadn’t really done anything so wrong and should be forgiven, they wouldn’t have given up until Sofi felt the same way. Unless they were hiding something.

“Mom ... ” Sofi turned to the weakest link. At least when it came to giving her what she wanted.

“Darla,” Sofi’s tías said in unison.

Sofi’s mother glared at her sisters-in-law before turning to Sofi. “We thought about it and decided what Austin had done wasn’t so wrong. The same way you and Bash just did,” Darla said before turning and shooting a triumphant smirk at Rosa and Melinda.

“So why didn’t you come to me?” Sofi put a hand on her hip, her attention still on her mom.

“Because—” Tía Rosa tried to start.

Sofi raised her hand and shushed her aunt, causing Tía Rosa’s eyes to go wide as Tía Melinda gasped.

“I was speaking to my mother,” Sofi stated firmly, wondering how much longer her luck would hold. If the conversation was about anyone other than Austin, she would have already received a tongue-lashing on how to treat one’s elders. It was only because they’d seen her heartache that they were giving her this leeway, and Sofi was going to take it. Hopefully it would lead her to some answers.

Darla glanced from Sofi to the Tías and back again. Sofi saw out of the corner of her eye that Tía Melinda was

mouthed something so Sofi took her mom's chin gingerly and directed her gaze right at Sofi.

"We wanted you to—" Darla began.

Tía Melinda tried to move into Sofi's mom's line of sight.

Sofi turned, pulling her mom's face with her.

"I don't know what you're trying to mouth at me!" Darla declared, pulling away from Sofi to glare at Melinda.

"We wanted her to figure it out on her own. Love is hard, and when too many people get involved it can get messier. We didn't want to add to her mess," Tía Melinda said, as if the answer were the most obvious thing in the world. And as if they'd ever avoided getting involved before.

"Yes, that." Darla pointed to Tía Melinda.

"Too late," Sofi declared. "I know the three of you are hiding something." Sofi put her other hand on a hip as well and raised a stern eyebrow, a stance she'd learned from the Tías.

"Are we?" Darla said as the other two replied, "We aren't."

Glares slid back and forth among the trio and then Darla's eyes fell. Sofi didn't need to hear a word; their looks said it all.

"Out with it, Mom." Sofi turned to her mother once more.

"This one I can't. We made a promise," Darla said.

Tía Melinda sighed as Tía Rosa shook her head in defeat.

"What? I didn't tell her who I made the promise to," Darla said to her disappointed sisters-in-law.

"Austin," Sofi said. It had to be. He'd gone to the Tías, and that was why they'd forgiven him. But he'd kept it a secret. Because he'd promised Sofi space and that would have been encroaching on it? But now she didn't want space ... suddenly she remembered the texts and it all made sense.

"You guys are teaching him Spanish," Sofi said, her eyes lighting with joy. They weren't just phrases he'd googled. He

was learning the language of her heart. Something he'd said he'd never be able to do. Yet he was doing it. For her.

If she hadn't already forgiven him, she would have in that moment. She knew languages weren't in Austin's wheelhouse. For him to go so far outside of his comfort zone, just to prove to her he really cared?

"I have to find him." Sofi started out of the stock room, but a Tía clamped onto either arm.

"Maybe not yet," Tía Rosa said mysteriously.

"What does that mean?" Sofi asked but it was Tía Melinda who answered.

"You'll know soon. But let him do this for you."

Sofi glanced from tía to tía before turning to her mom in exasperation.

Darla nodded. "I know more time isn't what you want, but take it. Be sure of what you're feeling. Push aside all of your fears and make sure you're truly ready for what's next."

Her mom was right. The last thing Sofi wanted was to take more time. But Darla was also right in thinking that maybe Sofi wasn't quite ready for Austin yet. Yes, she'd worked through some of her emotions, but if he was taking this time to learn Spanish, she knew Austin well enough to realize he'd be bettering himself in other ways as well. She should do the same. And then when all the parts of his plan, whatever it was, fully came together, Sofi would be ready. Her stomach flipped as she faced the idea. Ready to start on a path together.

But even as she felt the happy butterflies of anticipation in her tummy, little tingles of apprehension threaded through her chest, warning her that she wasn't quite ready to be in a relationship as serious as one with Austin would be. She sighed as she realized she probably did have a few more things to work out. But she had no doubt she'd get through them. And when Austin came for her she'd be ready.

She bit her lip, excitement leaking into every part of her body. Yes, she'd be ready.

## Thirteen

TÍA ROSA GLANCED right and left before ushering Austin into the Castillo home with quick, furtive motions. Austin wasn't sure who she was looking for. It seemed like she was hiding that he was there, but Tía was aware that his giant red truck was parked right in front of the house, wasn't she?

"This one spilled the beans." Tía Rosa jabbed a thumb toward Sofi's mom.

"I did not. I told her we made a promise. That was all I said. Then she said Austin and learning Spanish ... " Darla's voice trailed off.

"You also mentioned you didn't tell her who we made the promise to," Tía Melinda added.

"Oh, that's why she said Austin." Darla began putting the pieces together but Austin was still lost.

"Bash came to visit Sofi and they hid out in the stock room together," Tía Rosa began to explain and Austin went from lost to jealous in about zero-point-two seconds.

"Who went where?" Austin needed clarification ASAP.

"We were hiding in there with them. Nothing happened," Darla promised as she put a hand on Austin's arm and he felt some of the tension leave his body although his confusion only grew.

"Has anyone told you your jealous face makes you look a little psychotic?" Tía Melinda asked, cringing.



Austin didn't doubt it. He'd felt a little out of control at the thought of Bash and Sofi alone in a stock room together.

But no one had ever mentioned it, maybe because Austin hadn't often been jealous in his past, so he shook his head to answer Tía Melinda's question and then turned to Tía Rosa.

"You were saying?"

"Oh right," Tía Rosa said as the four of them gathered around the dining table where the Tías had collected their supplies for that evening's Spanish lesson.

Austin's Spanish was getting better. His texts to Sofi had stepped up since he'd started, but he still wasn't fluent. Maybe if he was dropped into the middle of Mexico without a translator he'd be able to speak enough to find his way around, but he wasn't confident beyond that.

But what he had been able to do? Write most of a song for Sofi ... all in Spanish. The Tías weren't aware of that part of his plan. They knew that Austin wanted to use his Spanish to show Sofi how much he cared for her, but beyond that they weren't privy to the way he planned to show Sofi how much she meant to him. At least not yet. Partially because Austin was still developing his strategy. He knew he wanted to write a song for Sofi but he wasn't sure that he'd have the guts to sing it to her. He hadn't sung since his father had passed and Austin thought he'd buried that part of himself with Mitchell. But now, after almost losing Sofi, he realized he could do anything when it came to her. So maybe he could find the strength to sing what he'd written? He kept going back and forth, especially because he wasn't sure he was the kind of guy to show up on Sofi's front porch and just start singing until she noticed him. But how else would he find a way for her to hear his song?

So for now he was focusing on learning Spanish and completing the song. He'd deal with the rest later. The Tías had asked him what he'd wanted to learn in Spanish and he had started with what he would need for song lyrics. He'd asked for terms of endearment, then rhyming words. He'd moved on to translating some of his favorite country songs and

then food words—there was no way to write a song for Sofi without including food. The Tías had played along with every weird lesson and hadn't even acted like his requests were not normal. Granted, the Tías were pretty out there themselves, so maybe they respected Austin's unique approach to learning Spanish.

“Bash was trying to get Sofi back.” Tía Rosa's words interrupted Austin's thoughts as she offered the promised explanation.

“The psycho face is back,” Tía Melinda warned.

Darla's hand was on his arm again and Austin tried to ease his rigidity. If Tía Rosa moved on in her story, maybe he could too.

“But she told him she wasn't interested,” Tía Rosa said.

Austin felt like a balloon: inflated, deflated, inflated, deflated.

“She said she was still into you,” Tía Rosa continued.

Austin's back stiffened, but this time it was pride that filled his stance rather than jealousy. Sofi was still into him. He'd hoped, but to hear that she'd said it today, openly declared it to a guy she'd once hoped she might share a future with?

The longer they'd spent time apart, the more Austin had been able to reflect on their relationship. And what he'd found was that every part of him loved Sofi. Maybe he always had, but he'd put the definition of friendship to what he felt for her rather than facing the truth. But in recent days he'd been learning that it wasn't normal that he'd fantasized about making out with his best friend, thought his best friend was the most attractive woman on the planet, and thought no one was good enough for her. Well, maybe some people thought the last part about their best friends, but Austin didn't just feel that most guys weren't good enough for Sofi—he thought Sofi was too good for any man. Including himself. Thus his dilemma.

He knew most people didn't think about their best friends in this way, but he'd always thought it was because their best friend wasn't Sofi. That any man who was Sofi's best friend

would feel the same way. And now, with the analyzing he's done, what had he come to know? Yes. Maybe they would feel the same way, but that would be because they were in love with her. Because he was in love with her.

He'd loved Sofi for many years now; he'd just never put the right word to what he'd felt. He'd never loved a woman he'd dated, so he thought himself incapable of love. But the truth that he was finally ready to admit was that his love was already taken. By the most perfect woman for him on the planet.

"I don't know that we should be telling him all of this. This is between him and Sofi," Tía Melinda said as Darla nodded and Tía Rosa snapped her lips shut. Of all the times they decided not to gossip, they had to choose now?

But even as Austin wanted to beg to hear more, he knew they were right. These words hadn't been meant for his ears. But maybe one day they would be ... maybe one day soon? A man could hope.

"So on to our lesson?" Darla asked.

Austin nodded and Tía Rosa pulled out a book.

"Today we'll be reading some of my favorite poems in Spanish."

Austin grinned. The perfect lesson, considering he was almost finished with his song but still needed to polish a few things up.

From what the Tías had said, it sounded like Sofi was ready to hear from him. Or at least she was close. So Austin would finish this song and then ... he guessed he'd better finish his plan soon. He was more than ready to stop giving Sofi her space. Especially if she no longer wanted him to.



"UNCLE AUSTIN!" Amelie scolded.

Austin really had tried to understand the game they were playing. But it was something with shopping and fake credit cards and Austin had zoned out right about the time that Amelie had explained what to do with those credit cards.

To be fair, Austin wasn't even a fan of real credit cards and truly despised shopping. Playing a game that involved both was a form of torture for him. But Amelie had begged him to play with her most soulful look, and something Austin had recently learned about himself was that he was a sucker when it came to his nieces.

Heaven help him if he ever had daughters. Little girls with Sofi's dark waves and caramel complexion with just a splash of pink? Austin would be done for.

"I'm not sure what I did wrong this time either. Sorry, Amelie," Austin apologized with a frown, hoping Amelie would forgive him.

Amelie narrowed her eyes at him, arms crossed over her chest, looking much too grown up considering she was still barely nine. But then her face softened and Austin breathed a sigh of relief. Being in the bad graces of one girl he loved was bad enough. To add Amelie to the mix?

Speaking of which, he really did need to head home and finish up Sofi's song. Part of him had thought about asking Lake and Logan how he should apologize. It sounded like Sofi might have already forgiven him, but Austin wouldn't be absolved of his guilt until he gave Sofi the heartfelt apology she deserved. Until she knew he only had eyes, heart, and soul for one woman. Her.

And if he could kiss her again ...

Austin tugged at his collar as he recalled the steaminess of that kiss. He really should have known in that moment that he was lost to Sofi forever. He was a foolish man, to say the least. But he was here now, all of him. Hopefully it would be enough.

"Uncle Austin, did you hear what I said?" Amelie asked.

He was officially the world's worst uncle. Here he was fantasizing about ... he needed to focus on Amelie.

"I didn't. Repeat it for me please, Sweetheart?" Austin drawled with his most winning, apologetic smile.

Amelie rolled her eyes expertly before saying, "We don't have to play anymore. I wanted to talk to Mom about the fall fair anyway."

"Right," Austin said, grateful he was off the hook, and watched as Amelie ran to the kitchen.

He slipped out the back door, knowing neither Lake nor Logan would mind that he hadn't said goodbye. He'd likely see them both the next day anyway, and Austin was too wrapped up in his own thoughts to be good company.

The fall fair. He'd forgotten that it was already this weekend. Ever since he could remember, he and Sofi had gone together. He'd always win her a caramel apple and she'd take a bite and then give the rest back to him. It was an unspoken rule, even when they'd had significant others, that they would attend together. There had been some awkward double dates on those years when they both were dating someone. But the strangest year was the one when Sofi had had a boyfriend and Austin hadn't been with anyone. He'd trailed along behind Sofi and her date and the night had somehow ended with Sofi's date leaving early and Austin and Sofi just the way they wanted to be: together.

Looking back, he couldn't believe he'd been so blind for so long. He was sure it had been fear as well as the wrong timing that had kept him from seeing the truth, but now that he knew he had loved her all along, he couldn't imagine not being able to see the perfection of him and Sofi together.

Speaking of him and Sofi together ... should he ask her to the fall fair? Let that be their first date? Well, first real date. He'd gone to countless dances with Sofi when she couldn't find a better date and had filled in at friends' weddings and parties. They'd run the gambit of date nights together; they'd just never been together. Why hadn't they been together?

Austin knew he had to come up with a plan quickly or he'd drive himself nuts with how dumb he'd been. At least if he had Sofi as his forever, he could look back on all of this and be grateful that things had turned out well despite his foolishness. But right now? He wasn't where he wanted to be at all. He didn't even know if he could get Sofi to go to the fall fair with him. But breaking tradition seemed wrong. Although even if she said yes, he wasn't sure he could pull off an apology before then. And if he couldn't, he wouldn't go on a date with Sofi until he'd properly apologized.

But it would distress Sofi to go through that special night without him, wouldn't it? Unless ... what if Austin apologized *at* the fall fair? It was their night. It always had been. Just like two fifteen, this date had significance for them. He knew Sofi loved grand gestures and as her best friend he'd pulled off a few but as a plan finally came to mind, Austin knew this would be the best one yet. It would push him out of every comfort zone he'd ever put himself in and would be the apology Sofi truly deserved. Then and only then would he feel right about asking her to be his. Then he'd date her for a short while before making another request. The biggest of all. Because there was no question in Austin's mind that dating was short-term. Sofi was a forever woman, his forever woman. But he figured popping that final question would freak her out, at least unless they'd been boyfriend and girlfriend for a week or so first.

Austin grinned. If all went well, Sofi would be his and he would be hers in just a few short days.

Now all he had to do was finalize his plan to win back the woman of his dreams.

## Fourteen

SOFI SLUNK DOWN into the seat next to Leia, who was consumed by the book she read.

Sofi sighed, hoping to get her roommate's attention. Just a few days before, she'd been told by her aunts to hold on, that Austin was up to something. So Sofi had waited, deciding she needed time to get herself in order, anyway. But those few days seemed to have done the trick. She'd started journaling, delving into her feelings and thoughts, and once she was there all apprehension about being with Austin had fled. Instead she focused on the one thing time away from Austin had taught her. Her life was so much better with him in it. She hated life without him. So why were they still doing this? She knew she was ready to start her life with him—now. So where was he?

Sofi had never been known for her patience.

“Ugh,” she groaned when Leia failed to look up at her sigh.

Leia turned her page, engrossed in what she was reading.

“Leia!” Sofi tried and Leia finally glanced up, her eyes full of displeasure. Sofi felt badly for her friend—it must be a good part for Leia to give her that look—but she needed help or she'd go insane. Keeping her roommate sane was in Leia's best interest as well, so Sofi figured that by interrupting her, she was actually doing her a favor.

“Do I still just wait? Even though today is the fall fair?” Sofi asked, needing a second opinion.

“Have the Tías called and told you otherwise?” Leia asked with a sigh as she put a finger between the pages of her book, probably knowing she wouldn’t be getting back to her scene for a bit.

“No,” Sofi replied.

“Then you wait,” Leia said, a smile appearing on her face as she started to reopen her book.

“But why? I get that the Tías know something I don’t, but do I really just have to wait indefinitely? Can’t I call Austin? Text him? *Something?*” Sofi knew her voice was bordering on whining but she couldn’t help it. She wanted Austin and she wanted him now.

Hearing the words in her head didn’t make her feel any less like she was whining but they did spell out her feelings quite accurately, so Sofi wasn’t going to take them back, even if she did sound like a two-year-old.

Leia sighed, putting a bookmark in her place and setting her book to her side.

“Have the Tías ever steered you wrong?” she asked.

Sofi opened her mouth to tell her roommate all the ways in which the Tías had wronged her with their overzealous caring but Leia put up a hand. “Let me rephrase that. Do you think the Tías are steering you wrong this time?”

Sofi paused to think about that one. She quickly knew the answer, though she didn’t like it. The Tías were right. The fact that they knew she’d need some time to figure herself and her own fears out: right. The fact that Austin wasn’t quite ready to make contact ... since he hadn’t yet, Sofi was figuring they were right once more. And maybe if today weren’t the fall fair Sofi would be okay still waiting (she wouldn’t be, but one tended to justify their feelings by lying to themselves in these sorts of situations). But today *was* the fall fair, an event she’d attended with Austin for as long as she could remember. Sofi was done giving him time and space. How much did the man need? The Tías had said something about being ready? Sofi was unsure what that meant; she just knew she wanted to now



ignore their advice. But Leia was waiting for an answer so she said, “No.” Her inner two-year-old was still in charge and the word came out as a pout.

Leia smiled as Sofi frowned. “But it’s the fall fair,” Sofi added.

Leia nodded slowly. She may not have known Sofi for as long as Austin had but she was well aware of their long-standing tradition.

“I can go with you if you’d like,” Leia offered kindly but it wasn’t the fair Sofi wanted. She wanted to go to the fall fair with Austin.

Okay, now her whining was even getting to her. Sofi needed to buck up. Leia was right. The Tías probably knew what they were talking about.

But then again, was ‘probably’ enough when Sofi’s entire future was on the line? Because she needed Austin. That much she knew.

She stood up. She should go to him. The Tías were wrong about this. Maybe Austin wanted to do some kind of grand gesture or something but Sofi didn’t need it. During her time reflecting she’d come to realize that, as Bash had said, Austin had shown Sofi time and time again that he truly cared about her. Yes, the date had been a dumb move, but as she thought about it, she knew what he’d said was true. It was such an Austin move. And if she loved him she was going to have to love all of him. Including the times he was downright stupid.

“I know that look,” Leia said, pointing at Sofi’s face and shaking her head.

“I have to,” Sofi replied as she moved from the couch to gather her coat, her purse, her phone, and her keys.

Should she freshen up before declaring her love to the man of her dreams? Probably. Was she going to? No. Because this was Austin. He’d been there to dry her messy, mascara-filled tears after other men had broken up with her, he’d been there to wipe her feverish brow and hold her hair when she’d had the flu three times during their senior year of college, he’d

watched and laughed when she'd fallen into a cow patty on the ranch ... basically, he'd seen her at a lot worse than not freshened up. Sofi had gotten ready that morning and that was enough. She wasn't going to waste any more time she could be spending with Austin doing anything else.

She hurried to her bathroom to brush her teeth. She probably should at least do that since she was hoping there would be kissing in her near future.

Sofi then pulled on her coat and grabbed her purse as she walked toward the front door.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Leia asked, looking up from her book. She'd wasted no time getting back to it, but she was a good friend and paused once more.

Sofi nodded determinedly. Her patience had run thin and she was going after her man. Even as she remembered how Austin had declared his love for her, she was still wary and needed him to tell her again, preferably every day for the rest of their lives.

"Then go get your man," Leia said, waving toward the door.

The friends shared conspiratorial grins before Sofi yanked on the doorknob and rushed out. Straight into the chest she'd been dreaming about for all too many years.

She bounced back but didn't go too far since Austin caught her arms.

"Austin?" Sofi glanced up, feeling confused. Had her determination to find him conjured him up in her mind? Had she officially lost it?

"Austin?" Leia echoed. Oh thank heavens, Sofi wasn't the only one seeing him.

"I was coming to pick you up for our date," Austin said as he looked down at Sofi, his lips quirked up in a smile as if he knew what she'd been about to do.

"Our date?" Sofi was lost. Had the Tías forgotten to pass along a message?

“The fall fair. We haven’t missed it ever,” Austin reminded her.

Sofi nodded, still feeling a little confused.

It was true that they’d never missed the fall fair. But what she was so hung up on was the word ‘date.’ A term they’d both carefully avoided using, even in jest, when it was just the two of them. Sofi had always been cautious about using the word, because she knew if she said it Austin would see exactly how she felt. And she was sure Austin had avoided it because he didn’t want to lump Sofi in with all of his other dates. But now he was casually bringing up the term? Sofi guessed after they’d declared their love for each other, this really shouldn’t be such a huge leap. But since they’d both needed time and Sofi had felt so unsure for so long, it took her by surprise. This word was so certain, so bold. It clearly defined what they were doing. Together.

Her mind skipped ahead, wondering what this signified for their future. Did one date mean they were going to be boyfriend and girlfriend? Sofi felt her breathing go shallow as Austin tucked her under his arm and pulled her close.

“We’ve got this, Sof.” His voice reminded her just who he was. This was Austin. No one to freak out over. Yes, they might be moving into new territory, but the man by her side was still Austin. Her Austin. And with her Austin by her side, she could do anything.

Sofi nodded once and allowed Austin to usher her out of the house and toward his truck. He paused on the passenger’s side, opening the door for Sofi. She reminded her thudding heart that this wasn’t a monumental action; he often held her door. But today felt different.

As she climbed up, she felt Austin’s hand on her back, as if he wasn’t quite ready to let her go. Shivers ran up Sofi’s arms and settled as goosebumps before she rubbed them away.

She settled into her seat as Austin came around the car and pulled out of her driveway.

This was it. The moment she'd spent years waiting for. She was on a date with Austin Ashford.

Sofi tried to put on a serene front but internally there was just incoherent screaming and dancing.

Austin's laugh told her she wasn't doing a very good job of playing it cool and she glanced down to see that she'd been shimmying in her seat.

"I'm just a little excited," Sofi said honestly in a way she couldn't have with any other man. "I've been waiting a long time for this," she added.

Austin's laugh quieted as he nodded and then laced his fingers through Sofi's, her heart rate ramping up as her chest filled with warmth.

"I have too," Austin replied, meeting Sofi's gaze for a split second before he turned his attention back to the road.

Sofi swallowed. She'd imagined this date countless times but even her overactive imagination hadn't envisioned the way she would feel. She'd never felt so excited yet safe. So terrified yet thrilled. So happy and ... yeah, just happy.

Austin pulled into the parking lot of the park that was transformed into the fall fair every year and then turned off his truck before looking at Sofi. He had yet to let go of her hand and she hoped he never would. There was something just so right about this. About them. She'd known they would be, and yet living it? Just so much better.

Sofi turned to Austin, ready to ask him what he wanted to do, when she noticed the skin around his eyes was tight. Like every expression Austin wore, Sofi recognized this one. Austin was nervous, though she wasn't sure why.

They'd arrived. She'd taken nearly nothing to win over, just the word 'date' and she was here in his truck. She couldn't be the one making Austin nervous, so what was?

Sofi's heart dropped as she guessed what was bothering him. Though it was one of the hardest things she'd ever done, she looked up at the face she loved and said, "We don't have to do this."

Now that they were finally together, he was realizing he'd been wrong all along. He'd hoped he could give her what she longed for, but holding her hand and going on a date told him that he wasn't in love with her. He was here just to appease her, just so he wouldn't lose her, her most terrorizing nightmare come to life.

Sofi closed her eyes, waiting for Austin's admission. She'd been on cloud nine and to drop so far so fast sent her stomach into a nausea-inducing spin.

Austin tugged on Sofi's hand.

She waited for him to say something. Anything.

He tugged once more and she knew what he was asking. He wanted her to look at him. But she couldn't do it. She couldn't hear him say he was doing this for her with her eyes wide open.

"Sofi," Austin whispered as he tugged once more.

Sofi finally opened her eyes and saw that the tightness was gone. In its place his eyebrows were raised and pulled together, worry lining every aspect of his face.

"I want to be here with you. I want to be on this date. Dating you, Sofi," Austin said, so boldly that Sofi felt some of the pain in her heart ease. But she didn't want to make any assumptions. She realized Austin hadn't really said anything about the two of them. He'd said fall fair and she'd assumed. He'd said date and she'd assumed. She now needed him to spell things out and starting with *I want to be here with you, dating you* was a good beginning.

Sofi nodded once.

"I ... "Austin began and then paused. "This went a whole lot smoother in my head. But I didn't realize there would be so much time before ... "

Austin was now making no sense and Sofi wasn't sure what to make of it.

"I need to show you something," Austin finally said, jumping out of the truck and running to Sofi's door to let her

out.

He took her hand as he helped her down from his raised truck and then kept it, leading her right into the middle of the fair where a stage stood. He parked her just in front of the stage before saying, “Stay right here, okay?”

Austin seemed so uncertain, yet his words told her this was what he needed. So Sofi nodded even as she wondered what the heck was going on.

With one last squeeze of her hand, Austin left, jogging toward the stage. Sofi looked on uncertainly, thinking she hadn’t signed up for this. Austin hadn’t told her he’d be abandoning her once they got to the fair.

She knew she should be more confident in this. She was on a date with Austin. He’d said he wanted to be there with her, like this. But her hopes had risen and then popped so many times she was weary of the ache that followed. She was done with this roller coaster ride and just wanted to know exactly where Austin stood. She needed commitment, even if the word scared him. But now that he was gone she couldn’t ask for any reassurance.

But she would. When he got back from wherever he was going.

Maybe he’d gone to buy cotton candy. It was one of their fall fair favorites, and Sofi couldn’t count the number of times they’d shared the treat, playfully squabbling over the last mouthful. Since Austin was making such an effort to show how well he knew Sofi, he was probably trying to recreate their past with an old favorite. Then they’d stand on the grass and watch local performers showcase their skill, as they’d done so many times before.

Sofi wished she could just enjoy this date. She was on a date with Austin, for goodness’ sake. He was doing everything right. Yet at every turn she was reading too much into his every action and facial expression. Rather than enjoying the moment she’d dreamed of, she was wasting her time—their time—by questioning his motives, her motives, what they were, what they would become. It was too much for one single

date. But she couldn't just hope that by the end of this night Austin would know she was the right one. She had to prove to him that she was the only choice. Because she couldn't go on without him.

But how was she supposed to tell Austin all of that without scaring him away?

Sofi pondered that as an emcee came onto the stage and announced that the evening's performances were beginning. People began to fill in around Sofi. The stage never drew the whole crowd at the fair—some people came solely for the games and rides—but a good number of Blue Falls residents joined Sofi as she waited alone for the first act. Austin had better get back soon or he was going to miss it. Despite the jostling as the area filled up, Sofi resolutely kept her feet planted exactly where Austin had left her, hoping he'd be able to squeeze through the crowd and find her.

Sofi then heard the familiar tread of cowboy boots on the stage and her heart froze when she looked up and realized it was her cowboy on that stage, guitar strap slung over his shoulder, his eyes connecting with Sofi's.

Austin hadn't performed since his father had passed. The single time she'd heard that deep croon since then was his whispered singing to her as they danced at Logan's wedding. She'd only been able to get him to talk about it once, but he'd told her singing held no appeal to him now that his biggest fan was gone. Sofi had wanted to tell him she'd be the biggest fan she could, but didn't feel right trying to take the place of Austin's father. So she'd let it go, even as she'd wished she could change Austin's mind. His voice was an unbelievable gift.

Austin cleared his throat and stepped up to the microphone, the tightness around his eyes back. Oh, had this been why he was nervous? It hadn't been about Sofi at all. She breathed a sigh of relief even as her heart began to race for Austin's sake. He looked so terrified she wanted to leap past the barrier of the stage and join him.

But he'd asked her to stay here. So she would ... for now. If Austin ever looked like he needed her? All bets would be off.

"Some of you know I haven't sung in quite a bit. I've never performed for a woman, but here I am doing both." Austin chuckled nervously into the mic and others in the crowd joined him.

Sofi held her breath.

He was performing for a woman?

For her?

She couldn't imagine that he meant anyone else, but it was too much. He shouldn't be up there with the kind of fear he had to be feeling if this was all just for her. She'd never ask this of him.

"Sofia Castillo, this one is for you," Austin said then, pointing right to Sofi, his gaze landing on her as it felt like butterflies erupted from her skin.

Whistles and cheers sounded all around her so Sofi joined them, cheering for Austin as loudly as she could, until he started singing.

As his crystal clear voice filled the speakers, everyone quieted. No one wanted to miss a word.

*Empezamos como amigos.*

Her breath caught as the sweet sounds of her heart language met her ears. Sofi had suspected he'd learned Spanish for her, but to sing in it? As she was still marveling over the fact that he'd learned this for her, she recalled the words he'd just sung. It was nothing like any song she knew and she immediately realized the truth. He hadn't just sung the song, he'd written it. For her. Her chest felt almost painfully tight with pure elation as she continued listening.

*Pero estaba demasiado ciego para ver.*

*Eras todo lo que quiero.*

*Eres todo lo que necesitaba.*



*Mi corazón. Mi alma.*

Sofi felt tears in her eyes as Austin's love song for her continued, recounting the days they'd spent apart, the times they'd chosen the wrong roads. She laughed as he put in some of her favorite foods, the sentiment only making sense to her food-loving heart.

*Peros todos los caminos conducen a ti.*

His beautiful eyes glittered as he met Sofi's gaze and wouldn't let go, tenderly singing the chorus one last time.

*Eras todo lo que quiero.*

*Eres todo lo que necesitaba.*

*Mi corazón. Mi alma.*

Sofi clapped as soon as the last note of the guitar played, jumping to expend some of the crazy energy that had built up within her. Austin had performed a song for her. He'd boldly declared to her and the entire town that she was the one for him. That she was his heart and his soul, his forever. There was absolutely no doubt in Sofi's mind as to what they were.

The emcee got on stage to announce someone else, but Sofi tore through the crowd and ran around the stage, her eyes searching for one man.

And there he was. Stepping off of the stage with a look of apprehension on his face.

"What did you think?" Austin asked as he got near enough to Sofi for her to hear him.

She didn't waste another moment. She ran toward him and he had barely enough time to swing his guitar behind him before Sofi was in his arms, her lips pressed to his.

He'd written her a song. And performed it after he'd promised to never sing again. He'd done it all for her.

She blinked back tears as she pulled away from their kiss.

"So you liked it," Austin said, the cocky confidence that she adored back once more.

“I guess you could say that,” she said with a shrug, knowing she could tease him now that her kiss had said it all.

“I can’t believe you wrote me a song, Austin. In Spanish. And sang it to the whole town,” she added, unable to keep her admiration from being voiced.

“I need you to know, Sofi. This isn’t about not losing my best friend. This isn’t about trying something out. This is real for me. I wouldn’t be doing this if I wasn’t all in. It took me too long, but now I see the truth. You’re it for me. I’d been searching through all the wrong women because the only right woman was always right beside me. I was an idiot.”

Sofi nodded. She had to agree with that.

“And I was scared. You’re too good for the likes of me, Sof. But I realized I could do one of two things: let you date and marry some other guy who isn’t good enough for you because no man could be, or man up and do my very best for the rest of our lives and beyond to be the man you deserve. The man you think I can be.”

Sofi blinked away her tears. She’d spent so much time crying already, but she couldn’t help it. Her happiness was exploding through her eyes and tears were the only way her body knew how to deal with it all.

“I love you. I always have and I always will. Sofi Castillo, will you be my girlfriend?” Austin asked, stepping back as he took hold of each of Sofi’s hands within his own.

Sofi nodded and then burst out, “Duh!”

Austin laughed, bringing his girlfriend into his arms as he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. She savored the feeling for a moment before pulling back, because that kiss had felt like an invitation Sofi had to take.

And Austin lowered his head, lifting Sofi into his arms as his lips met hers. Pure elation that they were kissing again so soon filled Sofi from head to toe, and a sound of pure content escaped her lips. She felt Austin’s lips curl against hers before he deepened the kiss, replacing contentment with an altogether headier emotion.

“It is a fair full of kids,” Sofi heard Holland announce. The Sofi of years past would have pulled away from Austin, ashamed at being caught. But current Sofi was happy to ignore Holland and anyone else with her. She was busy kissing her boyfriend.

Austin must have felt the same way, because his tongue was lingering on Sofi’s lips when she suddenly felt herself physically being pulled away from him.

“Hey!” she managed as Austin looked around them, his eyes full of fire.

“That’s enough for now,” Tía Melinda announced, her hands firmly planted around Sofi’s waist.

Sofi glared at her mother and aunts, who grinned, unashamed of their actions as usual. Or maybe they were grinning because Sofi and Austin were finally kissing. Who knew? All Sofi knew was that she wanted to get back to the kissing.

But now that she was out of her Austin-induced haze, she realized that Holland and the Tías weren’t the only ones present. Leia was there watching, as well as Morgan, who stood, beaming at them, along with Austin’s brothers and their families. Thank heavens at least Sofi’s brothers weren’t—

“If we ever have to see our sister kissing a man again,” Mario groaned, joining the group as Daniel and Carlos trailed behind him.

Sofi was going to guess her brothers had made themselves scarce during the kissing portion of the evening.

“But the song was a nice touch, Austin. I’ll have to use that technique on Rachael,” Mario added, earning himself a glare from Sofi and punches in the shoulders care of each of the Tías.

She grinned up at Austin. He’d known she would want those she loved here. And he’d made it happen. If she couldn’t be kissing him, this realization was the next best thing.

Leia and the Tías surrounded her, each saying a variation of ‘I told you so.’ And Sofi guessed they did. But it wasn’t

quite fair, considering they'd known Austin was planning something while Sofi had been left in the dark.

But now that Sofi did know, she couldn't care less about the events of the past few months—heck, the last many years. All of the suffering had been worth getting to this point.

The families then turned to one another, each trying to take credit for some part of Austin and Sofi's love story. Even as she rolled her eyes she couldn't help smiling at the sound of the phrase 'love story.' But Austin interrupted her thoughts as he turned back to her, gathering her in his arms.

"I thought about proposing, but my brothers told me that would scare you off," Austin revealed.

Sofi's initial reaction of shock gave way to a rightness. "Definitely wouldn't have scared me," she replied, causing Austin to beam.

"So if it came sometime soon?" he asked, testing the waters.

"The sooner the better," Sofi challenged because she knew Austin never backed down from a challenge.

"Good," Austin said with a nod before lifting Sofi once more. Their lips barely met before she heard something being thrown and hitting Austin's back.

"We leave them for two seconds ... " Tía Rosa complained.

But Sofi was too busy relishing Austin's kiss. Triumph welled up inside her as she realized they'd fought a war and come out victorious. Her hope had often been battered and bruised from battle, but in the end they'd won and that was all that mattered. And it looked like even more hard-fought treasures were in her near future, she mused as Austin's strong hint of a proposal replayed in her mind. Mrs. Sofi Ashford had a nice ring to it. She had thought that ever since she'd practiced her signature back in the sixth grade. Sofi wondered what little Sofi would think of her now. And she immediately knew. Little Sofi would be wondering why grownup Sofi was

thinking about anything other than the fact that she was kissing Austin.

Sofi grinned against Austin's lips and he groaned as he held her even closer, embracing her until all thoughts fled from Sofi's mind and love filled her heart. Austin's kiss consumed her until she forgot about the past, the future, her family and his. Everything in that moment was about that kiss and Austin. As it should be.



Thank you for reading *Secretly Loving My Cowboy Best Friend!* This Ashford Brothers series has been in my heart for a looong time. For those of you who don't know, this is a revisit to the town of Blue Falls. If you want to read the first book I set in this picture perfect town you can grab a copy of [\*His to Save: A Sweet Billionaire Romance\*](#).

Want to know when Julia's next novel will be out? Join Julia Keanini's [newsletter here](#).

And just in case you missed it above, you *have* to read [\*His to Save: A Sweet Billionaire Romance\*](#). It's the story of Leo and Lottie. We got a sneak peek at their lives as well as into the B&B and the Heathcliff resort but fall in love with their story. Even though the two click immediately, they have to avoid one another. Because their families are at war. Romeo and Juliet have nothing on this pair.

## Julia Keanini



Julia Keanini is just a city girl living in a country world (and secretly loving it). She loves the mountains and would adore the beach, if it weren't for all the sand and salt (wait, that is the beach?). A good book, a great song, or a huge piece of chocolate can lift her mood, but her true happiness is found in her little fam. She writes about girls who deal with what life throws at them and always about love, cause she LOVES love.

