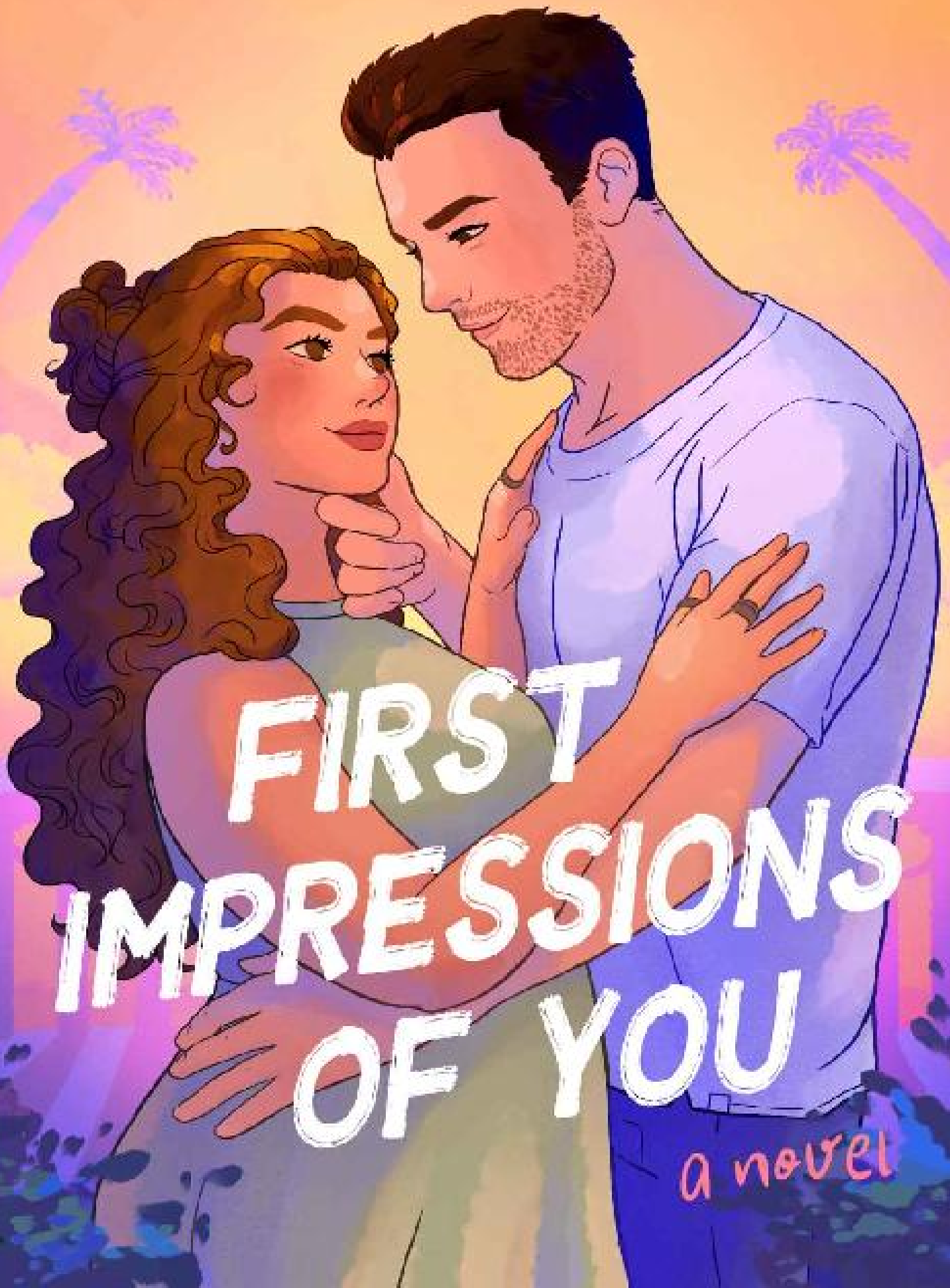


GABRIELA GRACIOSA GUEDES



FIRST
IMPRESSIONS
OF YOU

a novel

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Credits](#)

[Map](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 01](#)

[Chapter 02](#)

[Chapter 03](#)

[Chapter 04](#)

[Chapter 05](#)

[Chapter 06](#)

[Chapter 07](#)

[Chapter 08](#)

[Chapter 09](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About Gabriela](#)



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a novel

GABRIELA GRACIOSA GUEDES



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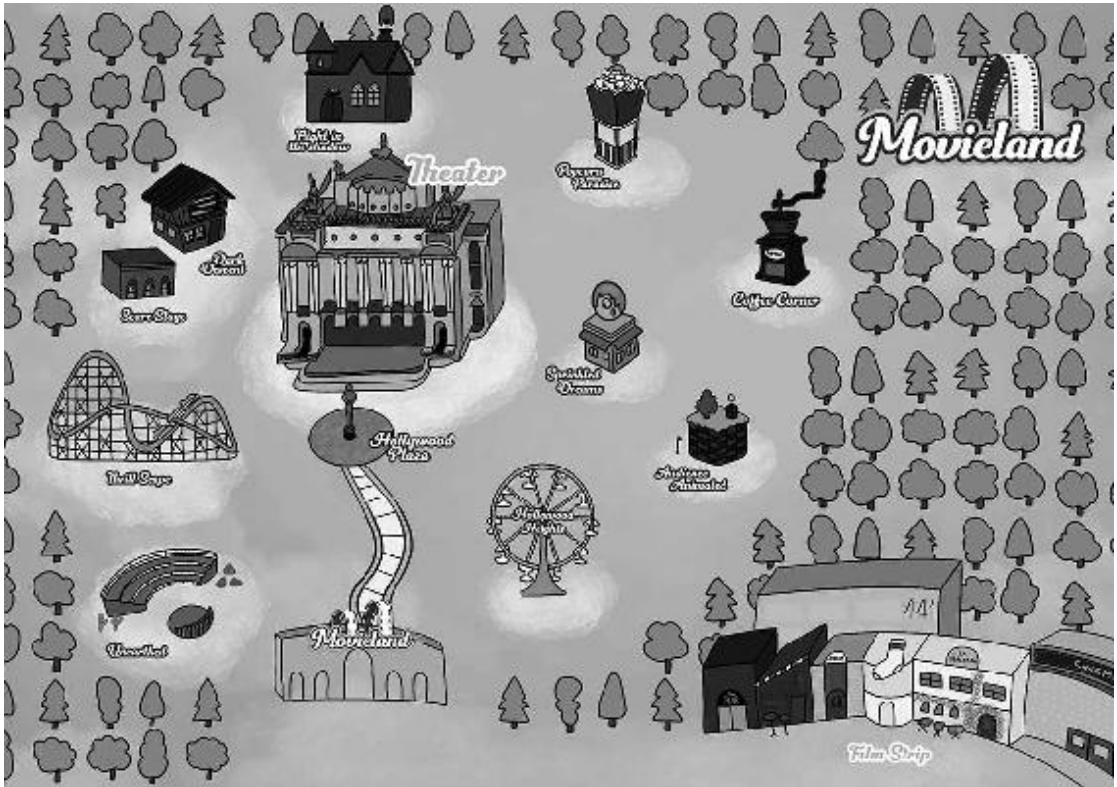
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*To my grandpa, who'd always ask "e o livro, Biboca?"
whenever he saw me.*

*Tá pronto, vô. Though I'd absolutely never let you read it, I do
wish you could've seen it.*



CHAPTER 01

IT IS A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED THAT AN immigrant woman, in possession of no green card, must be in want of a husband.

Actually, it isn't universally acknowledged, nor is it true, but it seems like I'm the only one who doesn't think so.

I've lost count of how many messages I've gotten over the past four and a half years from aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, former classmates with whom I hadn't talked in years, even the receptionists at my parents' clinic, all asking the same thing: have you found yourself an American boyfriend to give you the green card yet?

Has any of them ever asked me about my career? Of course not.

Romantic anecdotes make for good gossip.

No one wants to know about other people's job updates or professional accomplishments. If they did, LinkedIn would be used a lot more.

Not that I have many of those to share. Professional updates, I mean. Well, romantic anecdotes too, to be honest, but I'm not really looking for those.

I moved to the States with a goal and a plan. And that goal has nothing to do with finding a boyfriend. I don't have time for that. Not when my time is so limited.

Twelve months. That's all I have left.

Twelve months and a mile-high pile of odds stacked against me.

Making it as an actress in Hollywood is hard enough. Making it as a plus-size Latina actress? That much harder. Making it as a plus-size Latina actress in under a year? Virtually impossible.

But I'll take those odds against the alternative every time.

Going back to Brazil isn't an option.

It's month six, and I finally have an audition I might have a good shot at.



I tell myself this is just like any other audition. I say it again and again until I feel that my brain is at least pretending to believe it. I don't give in to the pressure of knowing this might be my last good shot.

Today's just like any other audition.

The sun is shining bright in a clear blue sky. It's a typical hot summer morning in LA, but I feel the temperature of my blood lowering in my body as I walk through the gate only employees are allowed to use into the Movieland theme park.

It's the middle of July and peak season. The park is already crowded, and it hasn't been open for more than an hour. The air is blanketed in a mixture of sweat and excitement, heat radiating and reflecting from every surface.

Sweet clouds of the heavenly aromas of baked cinnamon, sugar, and nuts swirl in the air coming from Sprinkled Dreams, but everyone seems to ignore it, lost in the frenzy of getting to the most thrilling rides and attractions. I consider stopping by to get a cinnamon roll and say hello to my friend Ellen, but I

think better of it and instead join the crowd on their journey along the main street that connects the park entrance to the Hollywood Plaza, where the imposing Palace Theater sits in all its glory.

As the house of the winter play every year, the theater is closed to the public during summer season, but that doesn't stop people from lining up to take pictures in front of the famous façade. The imposing architecture reminiscent of the Palais Garnier in Paris is the most recognizable sights in the park. The columns and pilasters adorned with luxurious elements of neoclassical and art nouveau styles make for the perfect backdrop for tourist pictures.

It's no coincidence the theater is not only the focal point of Hollywood Plaza, but also the most iconic building in the park. It's to Movieland what Sleeping Beauty's Castle is to Disneyland.

If today goes according to plan, in a few months I'll be performing inside this magnificent building. Just the thought of it cause goosebumps to erupt all over my body.

I'm at the end of Reel Road, the street that connects the main entrance to the plaza, and I still have some time to spare, so I round the plaza clockwise and stop to observe people taking pictures in front of the theater for a minute before I go in for the audition.

A family of five is next in line. I smile as I notice how they're all coordinating except for the youngest one. The older girl is dressed head to toe as Scarlet Armas, the warrior heroine of Movieland's latest blockbuster movie, *Shadowfall*. The brother, who looks about the same age or just slightly younger, is dressed as another revolutionary hero from an older movie. The parents are wearing matching T-shirts from *Raw Notes*, a musical considered one of Movieland's masterpieces. It's clear that none of them had a say in the

youngest's outfit as she's wearing a puffy yellow princess dress that belongs in Anaheim.

"Would you like me to take a picture of the family?" I offer, letting my front gate instincts speak louder. I've been doing this for six months; I can't just turn it off.

"Oh, that'd be wonderful. Thank you," the mother answers with relief. I wait for them to arrange themselves, then take a few pictures with her phone. "Thank you so much," the mom says when I return it to her. "Do you want me to get one of you as well?"

I'm ready to say no, but what comes out of my mouth is "Yes, please."

I stand under the marquee and look up to where it says, "Don't miss it: *Frostbound Loyalty*, a new show coming this winter." When I lower my eyes to face the mom, she's already clicking away. I thank her when she hands the phone back to me, and I start checking the pictures as I walk toward the back entrance of the theater.

It's still early. The auditions are set to start at 10:30, but I didn't want to be late. My phone says it's barely ten, so I find a place under the shade to sit while I look through the pictures. The ones where I'm looking up at the marquee take my breath away. There's something about them that make them seem almost prophetic, promising a better future.

I'm deciding whether or not to post them when I hear them.

At first, I think the voices belong to parkgoers just like everyone else around me, but as soon as they start talking about the play, I perk up my ears like a dog when they hear their favorite words.

I concentrate to try to make out what they're saying, but other than a few words here and there, I can't hear much.

Without even thinking, I scoot closer to the entrance, still sitting on the stonewall bench. There's a small part of me that questions whether I should eavesdrop or not, but if it really is a secret conversation, they wouldn't be having it out in the open, would they?

"You chose this, you know," a woman is saying.

"I know this, but you also said you'd..." The answer comes from a man with a deep, smooth voice. If drinking hot chocolate in front of a crackling fireplace on a cold night were a sound, it would be his voice. There's a crispness to it that reminds me of the winter, but there's also a husky warmth that envelops you like a warm blanket.

"I know what I said, Davis," the woman cuts him off. If his voice reminds me of winter, hers is a summer day, bright and silvery. "This is what we always do here. You can't just waltz in and try to change how the whole system works."

"This system is bullshit, Emily." His voice takes on a slightly colder edge as the exasperation becomes stronger. What system are they talking about? "These people were hired to work at the park. If they truly were good actors, wouldn't they be... you know, acting?"

Wait. What? Is he...

Who the fuck is this guy?

I can't see either of them from where I'm sitting. He called her Emily, so I can only assume he's talking to the director of the play, Emily Eddings. I have no idea who the guy is, but I already know I don't like him.

What kind of person says something like that?

He hasn't even seen the auditions, and he's already presuming none of us is talented?

The audacity.

My indignation is not just for me, though I do feel personally attacked by his comment. But it's for everyone who's been a cast member here.

Movieland is known for discovering new talent specifically through its live performances at the park. The shows basically exist for new actors to get a shot in this unforgiving industry. I've lost count of how many Hollywood big names came from being a cast member at Movieland.

Has he never heard of Hazel Williams? I've literally just saw a preteen dressed as Hazel's latest character, the heroine every girl wants to be right now. Hazel's been nominated for an Academy Award, for God's sake. And she came up from a live performance just like the one they're currently hosting auditions for—the audition that I'm about to walk into.

My rage spiral has caused me to lose track of their conversation. I have to keep myself from getting up to yell in this guy's face. I'm this close to doing it, but I don't. Only because he's talking to Emily Eddings, and I don't want to make a scene in front of the director.

“Go back inside,” she orders him. Now that I'm focused again, I can hear them clearly. “We'll start soon. Get your shit together, and fix this attitude.”

“You don't need me for the first round,” he says in that deep voice of his. It's a statement, not a question. He sounds so full of himself, I don't doubt I'd find him pushing a stroller to carry his ego with him.

“I thought you wanted to be a part of the process, Davis. *This* is the process.” I can hear the snark in her voice.

“I'm happy to be a part of the real process. The one with *real* talent.” Real talent? Who is he to judge what's real talent, anyway? I bet he's some nobody who's never acted for a minute in his life, ready to judge everyone based solely on his high-and-mighty opinion.

“I already regret asking you to do this, Davis. I swear to God, you...” Emily’s voice is laced with fury now.

“I’ll fill out the seats, and you know it. You said it yourself, Em. You needed a name to bring in the audience, and you basically coerced me into doing this. Now, forgive me if I’m not on board with the whole stupid process. Call me when you need me.”

A stroller might not be enough for his ego, I decide. A whole truck maybe.

The conversation ends without so much as a goodbye, but I don’t fault the director for slamming the door on his face. I would’ve done the same.

I wait a couple of minutes before getting up to follow Emily inside. I don’t want to risk seeing this guy and doing something that I might regret later and ruin my chance at this play.

The blood that had run cold with anxiety is now boiling through my veins. I’ve found new motivation, and it’s not like I was lacking before.

Too much is at stake here. This audition could very well be the chance to change my life once and for all. Being cast in this play is not just something I want, it’s something I *need*. This is my last chance to stay in the United States. My last chance to follow my dream.

And now, it’s also my chance to prove this guy wrong.



The back door opens to an anteroom with low lights and a set of furniture that looks four decades past its prime. It's very anticlimactic. A production assistant sits at a desk checking our employee IDs and crossing our names from an awfully long list. I wonder how many people signed up for this.

If the time I have to wait is any indication, the number is higher than I would've imagined.

After being sent to a crowded waiting room, we're soon told that they'll be bringing us out to the main stage in batches of ten, and at least a handful of groups are taken to the stage before my name is called.

I quickly follow the PA taking us through the labyrinth of hallways to the left wing, and then I gasp when I walk onto the stage.

I'm really doing this. This is it.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" The guys next to me look around, as if he too is awestruck by it. I can only nod in agreement.

I never imagined the theater could look better than how it does from the outside, but I was wrong. The interior is grandiose. Magnificent.

It takes enormous effort to peel my eyes off the ornate walls to focus on the person giving us instructions before us. The impressiveness of this place gives even Emily Eddings's commanding presence a run for its money.

She is the most powerful director I've ever auditioned for. She's of the rare breed of directors who can easily navigate both theater and film lanes.

And even if you're not a theater geek and have never heard of her, just by looking at her small yet imposing figure, you'd know she's important. At 5'2", she still makes herself noticed in any room she walks in. Her long blonde hair is

loose, curtain bangs framing her white face. She's wearing a dark purple jumpsuit that few people could pull off as well as she does.

I'm sucked into her words, paying close attention to the directions, thinking of the best strategy for this audition as she lets us know how it's going to work. A few of the people around me are so lost I have to wonder if they've ever been in a play in their lives. At some point, it almost feels like watching an elementary school production.

They give us a ballroom scene to play, which I was not expecting. But I have some dance training, so I think I can hold my own.

"We're good," Emily calls from the front row of chairs, where she's watching with two other people flanking her. I wonder if the guy on her left is the one who was talking to her outside, but I can't be sure. She calls a bunch of names before saying, "Thank you so much for coming in. Right now, we'll be moving forward without you guys, but I really appreciate you being here."

I'm relieved my name was not among those. Emily is really nice to everyone she lets go, even when they clearly have no idea what they're doing. It's almost like she's careful not to ruin anyone's dream, whatever they may be.

After they leave the stage, it's just me and two other actors standing in front of the director and her crew. Before saying anything else, Emily turns to the woman on her right and asks her something. They whisper back and forth for a while, and when she turns her attention back to the stage, her eyes lock on mine.

I take a deep breath, feeling my entire body tense. My stomach is in knots. I didn't have anything to eat before this, but suddenly my stomach feels heavy as lead. I fold and refold my hands together behind my body, my nails digging into my

palm to keep my entire body from trembling. I'm on the edge of a precipice, and Emily is the one holding the rope.

"Matthew and Amy," she finally says looking at the two actors to my right. I've known from the beginning that they would be good, that they had some experience with this. I could tell by their posture. I know the news is good for them before Emily says the words. "We want both of you for a few scenes, including the ballroom. Are you okay with that?"

I don't need to look at them to know they're nodding enthusiastically and thanking her for the opportunity. She tells them they'll be in touch, and the two actors walk out of the stage, leaving me alone to watch Emily scribble something on the paper in front of her.

"Luiza," she says, looking up at me. Her head cocks to the side as if studying me, eyes sweeping over my body, head to toe. Being the sole focus of her attention is wildly unnerving. Her ocean blue eyes seem to be looking right through me, searching for something. If I knew what it was, I could try to show it to her, bring it to the surface and present it to her on a silver platter. *Here, I can be whoever and whatever you need for this play.* But I have no idea what she's looking for.

All I can do is wait. And hope.

"We can't use you as an extra. We already have everyone we need," she says. I nod in understanding, trying my best not to let disappointment take over my face, but it's hard to school my expression to remain calm.

This is it.

Eu não sirvo nem para figurante.

The voice in my head telling me I'm not good enough even to be an extra in the play is so loud it's startling. It's so loud, I almost miss what Emily says next.

“But we want you to audition for Princess Melina.”

I look up.

What?

I’m not sure if I voiced the question or she could read it in my face, but Emily says it again, “We’re still looking for our princess, and we think you might be a good fit.”

The first thought that comes to my mind is that this is a prank. And I hate that this happens, but I can’t help it. In a fraction of a second, my brain forges a whole scenario. Someone set this up to prank me, and in a second, cameras will show up and someone will laugh at me with a mic in front of my face asking how I feel about having fallen for it.

But when I look around, I don’t see any cameras. All I see is three pairs of expectant eyes in front of me, and to my right, Matthew and Amy in the wings, smiling and applauding me.

When I don’t say anything because apparently I’ve lost the ability to speak, Emily asks me, “Do you want to audition for the role of the princess?”

“Yes,” I say, my voice a bit shaky. I clear my throat. “Of course I do.”

“Good.” She nods. A satisfied smile curving her lips. She writes something down on the papers in front of her. “Come back around three, and we’ll have you audition again.”



I know I should eat something before I go back to the theater, but I can’t bring myself to do it. Not even the wonderful smell

of perfectly baked goods from Sprinkled Dreams is enough to make me want to eat. My stomach feels heavy with anxiety. As soon as I get there, I turn around and walk back to the theater.

Auditioning for Princess Melina was not in my plans, but now that this is a possibility, I need it more than I need my next breath. Being hired for the cast would've been enough for me. It would've been a good start. But a lead? I would have never dreamed of it.

It's funny because this is literally what I'm here for, but now that it's within reach, it feels unreal.

The stonewall bench outside of the theater becomes my go-to place to wait, so I take out the script and start reading my lines when someone approaches, casting a shadow over the words. At first, I think it's just another parkgoer looking for a place to rest, even if this is a more secluded area, off the beaten path. But then the shadow stops moving, and I finally look up.

I'm not prepared for what I find. Casually standing in front of me is probably the most handsome guy I've ever seen. He's looking down at his phone, a soft frown twisting his face, but he still looks like he belongs on the cover of a magazine. I take in his casual stance, the plain white T-shirt against his sand-beige skin, the faintly worn-out jeans, the faded-blue baseball cap sticking out of the back pocket. No individual part of him looks remarkably beautiful, but somehow everything put together is devastatingly gorgeous.

I watch him for a little too long, definitely longer than socially acceptable, but he's so absorbed in the little screen in his hands that he doesn't notice. I suspect he hasn't even registered my presence on the bench right next to him. I wonder what he's seeing on his phone that has his sole attention.

As if conjuring his attention just by thinking of it, his eyes turn to me, and I quickly look away. Not quickly enough for him not to notice, though.

When I turn back to him, the cap is on his head, and he's staring at me, a little crease between his brows. For a second, I think he's annoyed to see me there, but I was here first, so that wouldn't make sense. Then his eyes dart to the script on my lap, and on instinct I pull it up to my chest to hide it from him. His eyes follow the movement, understanding dawning on him.

"You're here for the audition," he says. It's not a question. It's a statement. There's something familiar about his voice, but I can't quite place where I heard it before.

I nod. "I'm reading for Melina," I offer, realizing a second too late that I probably shouldn't be revealing it to a stranger who I assume is also in the play but have no evidence other than the fact that he looks too good not to be an actor.

Something immediately shifts behind his eyes. The crease between his brows ease, and his large shoulders slightly drop. The tension in his body seem to loosen up a bit, almost like knowing I'm auditioning for the role of the princess has earned me some trust points with him. But I have to rely on his body language to gather all of that because he doesn't say anything in response.

And I'm not the kind of person who feels comfortable in silence.

"I'm Luiza," I finally say, reaching my hand out to him. His eyes drop to my hand, then to my face, and back to my hand. He finally shakes it, just before the awkwardness of the moment was about to get even more awkward if he left me hanging.

When he doesn't volunteer his name, I cock my head at him, arching an eyebrow. "And you are..."

That seems to catch him off guard, as if I'd asked him if he's ever been to the moon. I know I'm not the person with the best game in the world—not even among my sisters would I be considered the best at small talk—but I never thought I could make asking someone their name so uncomfortable.

He studies me for a second, making me feel extremely self-conscious.

“Winter,” he offers in a quieter voice. I can see he didn't expect the word to come out at all. His eyes are laser-focused on mine, and I realize they're the same deep shade of brown as his short hair, the color of mysteries that I find myself eager to unravel.

I blink before I get so lost in his eyes, I'd need a map to escape them.

“Nice to meet you, Winter,” I say, trying to regain some self-control. “Are you auditioning too?” He opens his mouth to answer, but another question is already rolling off my tongue. “Do you also work at the park?”

His mouth shuts quickly, pressing in a firm line. His entire demeanor changes, his muscles tense up again, and I can practically see him shutting off, the depth of his chocolate eyes becoming nothing but a thin shell.

“You work at the park?” Winter asks, his eyes suddenly running all over me, his brain overheating trying to compute this new piece of information. From the way he's looking at me, you'd think I just told him I'm from Mars.

“At the front gate.”

His expression tells me it's the wrong answer. Whatever points I had earned by telling him I'm auditioning for Melina have been stripped away now that I told him where I work.

“And you're auditioning for Melina?” His voice is laced with disbelief.

Was that not what I said?

“Yes,” I confirm. He starts shaking his head as if I said something wrong, but when I open my mouth to tell him how this happened, the scowl in his face shuts me right up.

“Melina, the princess?”

Is this guy as stupid as he’s gorgeous? “That’s the only one in the play.”

“That can’t be right,” he hisses, his voice taking on an icy tone.

“What? Why?”

He opens his mouth but closes it before saying anything. His throat works with a swallow, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. I can’t say I’ve ever been attracted to necks, but this guy’s is entirely too lickable not to be noticed.

Where did that come from? I shake my head trying to get rid of the unwelcome thoughts.

“Do you have any experience?” I’m still too lost in the thought of licking his throat that for a moment I think he’s asking about another kind of experience. He sees the confusion in my face and adds, “Acting. Any acting experience?”

“I...” I stutter, trying to get a grip on the conversation. What is he even on to?

“Unbelievable,” he mutters under his breath. “They’re throwing us a bunch of amateurs and expecting us to put on a good show?” I’m positive he’s not posing this question to me, and yet I feel that I need to say something in response.

But it takes me far too long, longer than I care to admit, to understand the meaning of his words. To understand that it’s me who he’s talking about. I’m the amateur that can’t possibly put on a good show.

As understanding dawns on me, I stand up to face him, and only then I realize how tall he is. Even when I'm on my feet, he towers over me, his broad shoulders looking even bigger when he brings an arm up to pull the cap off his head. He rakes his other hand through his hair, leaving rebellious strands pointing in every direction.

Before I can open my mouth to ask him who he thinks he is, he turns around and leaves. And he doesn't wait to be out of earshot before he hisses, "What the fuck does Emily think she's doing?"

And at that, I finally realize why his voice sounds so familiar.



Chapter 02

IT'S A COUPLE HOURS BEFORE I GO BACK INSIDE. WHICH gives me plenty of time to shake off whatever this encounter was about and to study the script.

If I want to get this role, I need to find a way to stand out. The difference between a good and an unforgettable performance is always in the details, and this is what I'm looking for. A word that was chosen over another. A stage direction that tells me about the character's feelings. There's always a lot hidden beyond the lines written in the script.

Melina is a smaller part than you'd think for a princess, but it's still a much better opportunity than I ever thought I'd get. She spends almost half of the play offstage in captivity, but when she does come on, the scenes are both emotional and physically demanding. I read and reread the lines, searching for the best approach to this character.

For this audition, they've chosen one of the first scenes of the play, Melina's wedding.

One of the production assistants introduces me to the actor who's playing the prince, but I don't have time to get to know him well before he's escorted onto the stage to start reading with other actresses.

This time, we don't have to wait in a separate room. Instead, they let us watch all the auditions from the theater seats. I notice that some of the actress choose not to pay attention to the auditions before them, but I decide to watch carefully, trying to find that different angle that will put me ahead in the race.

I'm the last one called on stage, probably because I was a last-minute addition, and for the second time that day, I realize what a huge theater this is. When you think of a theater inside a theme park, you think outdoor amphitheatres and small productions, but this looks like it could rival some Broadway stages.

The overwhelming fear of not being good enough threatens to take over me as I take the steps up to get in place, but I try to shake it off as best as I can. I'm all too familiar with this feeling, and I know better than to believe I can get rid of it completely. Instead, I lock it in a hidden place in my brain and pray it won't find its way out before I'm done with this scene.

The actor who's playing Prince Leon is already waiting for me. Cameron, if I remember correctly from the brief introduction before. He's tall and lean and looks like he belongs on a runway. Everything about him seems perfectly arranged, from his methodically cut hair—fade on the sides and textured curls on top—to his symmetrical face with big hazel eyes, large nose, and full lips. It's like God designed the perfect specimen and sent him to Earth in the shape of the actor standing right in front of me.

“Hi!” he greets me brightly. If I hadn't been watching all previous auditions, I would've never guessed he's been here for hours, running the same lines over and over again. He looks as excited as if he'd just gotten here and not a bit tired of the whole process. I immediately decide I like him. “Luiza, right?”

He pronounces my name as most Americans do, as if there's an “o” between the *L* and the *U*.

“Luiza, yes,” I repeat, emphasizing the pronunciation.

“Luiza,” he repeats, tentatively. When he looks at me for approval, I give him a smile and a nod. “I love that name. Is it

Spanish?”

“Portuguese,” I correct him. “I mean, I’m sure there are Spanish speakers who are called Luiza too, but I’m Brazilian.”

His face lights up. “Cool!” I’ve never met anyone so excited about learning where I’m from. “I dream of going there. I’m Cameron, by the way. Cam.”

I shake his outstretched hand, the deep, warm brown of his skin contrasting with the rosy, cool beige of mine. I reach my second decision in as many minutes: I want to be friends with him even if I don’t get this role.

Emily tells us they’re ready whenever we are, so Cam and I quickly get in position to start the scene. In the play, the stage will be full of extras, playing wedding guests, but for the audition it’s just the two of us.

Melina and Leon’s marriage is a political union, arranged by their parents in an effort to strengthen both kingdoms. They don’t love each other, but they’ve resigned to their fate.

At least, that’s how every actress before me has played this scene.

When the kidnapper barges into the wedding, grabbing me by the wrist to take me away, I have a split second to decide if I’m going to follow the other actresses’ lead or my gut. I’m Robert Frost looking at the roads diverging in front of me, hoping I won’t regret choosing the one less traveled by.

As I’m being dragged out of stage by my kidnapper, I let my feelings of despair and fear tangle with one extra emotion no one dared to tackle: relief. At this moment, I’m Princess Melina, and I’m feeling her relief at escaping a loveless marriage. When I cast one last glance at Cameron’s Prince Leon, what I show him is not a plea for help, but an apology.

When I reach the wings, I feel equally proud and uncertain. My heart is thumping so loud in my chest I fear the

sound might reverberate in the huge, empty theater. My head feels light, and I realize it's because I'm not breathing properly. I have to force myself to count up to eight while inhaling and down back to zero while exhaling. I do this twice more before I walk back to center stage.

I'm alone now. Cameron's already confirmed in the cast, and so is the actor playing my kidnapper, whose name I can't recall now. I'm the last one here, and I'm scared of looking up. I already learned that Emily is the type of person that doesn't hide her feelings. If she hated it, I'll know it in a glance, and I'm not ready for that yet.

The silence in the auditorium is suffocating, and I dig my nails into my palm as I examine my shoes, unable to look up.

I don't know how long it is before I hear someone clearing their throat, and I know I can't avoid this anymore, so I meet Emily's eyes.

Then I chance a quick glance at the two people by her sides.

They all look at me with wide smiles on their faces and start clapping as soon as I give them my attention.

I let out the breath I was very aware I was holding, and thousands of kilos are instantly lifted off my shoulders.

Emily didn't hate my performance. None of them hated it. In fact, it seems like they even liked it.

"This was amazing, Luiza." It's Emily who speaks first.

"Truly out of this world," the stage manager confirms. I'm almost sure her name is Mia, but I'm not confident I'm remembering it correctly.

"I mean..." Emily starts, then looks at the two people next to her. They all smile and nod in a silent agreement. "We still need a chemistry test with Winter Davis because most of

your scenes will be with him, but I'm really happy you said yes to this audition. We're going to get him, and we'll get started in half an hour."

I don't have time to register the name she just mentioned. I don't even have time to celebrate being called back to the final round of auditions. As soon as I walk offstage, I hear two other actresses who've also auditioned for Melina talking in loud whispers.

"You know if they cast her, it'll only be because she's Latina and fat, and they need to show diversity in the cast," one of them says.

"For sure. God, it's getting hard to get a job now if you're pretty. It's like we're being punished for being white," the other one complains.

They don't even look embarrassed that I hear them talking. They actually stare at me as I walk past them as if they can make me feel embarrassed for getting called back for another audition.

The worst thing is that they can. As I walk through the corridors of the theater to make my way outside, I try my best to shield my brain from letting their comments sink in, but I don't know if my shield is strong enough for that.



I'm the first one called for the chemistry test. It's a whole ten minutes before Winter comes on the stage. All this time, I've been awkwardly standing here waiting for his royal highness to grace us with his presence.

He approaches me without ever looking up, the phone in his hand holding all of his attention.

And then he stops. Right next to me, he lifts his head, and our gazes meet. Under the warm stage light, his eyes look even more mysterious than they did outside. It's like looking at a forest in the middle of the night. You know it's not pitch black, but you can't see past that veil of darkness if you're not brave enough to keep looking.

A beat later, his brain seems to catch up, registering what he's seeing. Registering me. Noticing it's *me* who's standing next to him.

He turns his body to Emily, but his eyes linger for a second longer before leaving mine.

"I thought you were calling me for the final round only." His words may not seem so rude to everyone else, but I'm all too aware of the message left unspoken.

"This is the final round, Davis," Emily answers coolly. He cuts her an annoyed look and gets a mere shrug as an answer. "Luiza is in our top three. Barring not having any chemistry with you, she's our Melina."

What?

My jaw drops. I figured I was doing well if they asked me to stick around, but... I hadn't realized I was among their final selection. And now that I do, I also realize that the only thing standing between me and my dream is Winter fucking Davis, the gatekeeper of all talent.

I feel his gaze burning me before I turn to meet his eyes. He's as surprised as I am about this new development, but while I'm beyond excited about the opportunity, he looks like he's been sentenced to death.

Who the hell does this guy think he is? Does he really think he's so superior that having me as a costar would get this

reaction off him?

“You said you’d hire people from the park as extras,” he says carefully. “Extras,” he repeats in case it wasn’t clear. In case she didn’t get his message.

Rest assured, buddy. We all did.

“I did,” she agrees, adjusting her body in the chair. “But I also told you that I’d get the best cast for this show, and that’s what I’m doing.”

I can feel that he wants to argue, but something holds him back. If it’s Emily’s firm stare or my scowl, I’m not sure, but I like to think I’ve played a small part in shutting him up.

Defeated, he brings his hand to scratch the back of his neck and shakes his head slightly. “Let’s get this over with, then.”

We walk to position, but whatever small amount of confidence I had gathered for being chosen has been utterly shattered by Winter’s unspoken opinions. What if he’s right? What if all I will ever be is just a park attendant? What if getting this far in the audition process was a fluke?

That familiar paralyzing fear rears its surly head inside me.

I’m immediately taken back to the countless auditions I did in college and over the past six months. To the many times I was told I wasn’t skinny enough, fat enough, white enough, brown enough—just never enough, period.

It’s a feeling I can’t easily shake off. Not after so many moments that have cemented that truth inside me.

“Ready when you are,” Emily calls from her seat, an expectant look in her face. I can almost feel the hope emanating from her. She really wants us to be it. I hold on to

that, hold on to the one person in this room who seems to want my success as much as I do, and focus on the task at hand.

The scene we're doing for the audition is the moment Melina and Winter's character Arthur meet again after Melina's been kidnapped. I'm supposed to come on stage running between the trees in the forest until Winter catches me, but what ends up happening is that I somehow trip on my own foot and almost fall face first on the floor.

Except Winter's strong arms stop me midair, my body suspended inches from hitting the floor.

I feel the heat coming off his skin through the fabric of our clothes, and it's almost enough to make me forget where I am. My chest is heaving, his arm like a safety bar pressing on my ribs, making it harder to breathe.

There are two ways I can react to what might as well be the most embarrassing way to start this audition. I can apologize and start again. Or I can play it into the scene.

That's what I do.

I fight him off and ultimately end up on the floor, but at least I place my arms to soften the fall.

"Let go," I cry in Melina's terrified voice, the split-second moment forgotten. "Let go of me."

I see the moment Winter catches on, his eyes immediately changing from annoyed to worried, his hard edges softening into Arthur's caring expression. It's amazing to see the transformation happening in front of me. It's almost unbelievable how quickly he can fall into character. I hate that he's actually good at this.

"Melina," he says in a whisper. Fear and despair weighing the words. "Melina," he repeats, grabbing my flailing arms to steady me. "It's me. Please." His voice breaks at the request. "Please stop fighting me. Look at me."

I'm panting, channeling my character's emotions. Princess Melina has just broken free of her kidnapper and was running through the woods toward her freedom until she ran right into Arthur's hard body. After he failed to convince her that he wasn't a bad guy, she'd run for her life. This scene was supposed to happen with us both standing, but now we're on the ground. Me, trying to break free again. Him, trying to make me listen.

"Let go of me," I repeat. "Let go!" I put into those few words all her distress. She's terrified of being locked up again. She will do anything to keep her freedom now that she got it back.

"I'm sorry, but I can't." He uses his much stronger frame to pin my arms to the ground above my head, and as soon as he does that, we're face to face. His entire body hovering over me, one of his hands holding both my arms over my head, the other one supporting his weight.

My breath hitches.

Every time my chest expands with a short breath, I feel his hard body on top of me.

Suddenly, my panting has much less to do with my acting and much more with a reaction to the proximity. I don't know if this was supposed to feel so... sensual. I'm pretty sure we were supposed to keep this play G-rated. But all of this feels much more like an HBO show than a family-friendly theme park production.

From this up close, I can see every strand of his long, perfectly curved lashes. I can see the way his nostrils flare subtly. I can see the soft blush that starts to creep up his neck as the intensity of his gaze locks onto me. I can see that in the midst of the deep brown of his eyes, there are sprinkles of amber dancing around, almost as if they're reflecting fire. I realize that even though Winter's eyes are cold and empty,

Arthur's are sweet and make me crave chocolate. And they are looking right into mine, searching.

I wonder what he's seeing.

I wonder if he can see how affected I am by this proximity.

I wonder if he's looking deep enough that he can reach my carefully hidden fears.

I'm scared to realize that for a second, just a second, a small part of me wishes he could. Not because it's him, but because it's exhausting to carry them alone.

"Melina, listen to me," he begs. His voice takes a graver tone when he repeats, "Melina."

I don't remember what my lines are. I don't remember these words being in the script at all. But I do as he asks. I focus on him, pinned by his pained expression, which softens as soon as I stop fighting.

"It's me," he pleads, an infinity of emotions in those two syllables. "It's Arthur. Look at me."

I take in the man in front of me as if I'm rediscovering him. I trace every inch of his expression, studying every wrinkle on his face. I free my right hand from his grip, and I reach his skin with a whisper-like touch. He flinches, as if the contact burns him.

"Arthur?" I ask, trailing the line of his eyebrow with my thumb. "My Arthur?"

I hear his breath hitching when I add "my" before his name. His eyes close for a breath, and when they open again, they're darker.

"Yes, my love," he declares, years of longing lacing his words. "I've always been and will always be yours."

His chest expands with the deep breath he takes. I feel the vibrations in my skin, rippling through my body. His hand leaves my wrist and cups my cheek. I close my eyes as I lean into his touch. He closes his eyes as well, and I wait for the inevitable touch of his lips to end the scene.

I feel the warmth of his breath. I can almost taste his lips. He's a hairsbreadth away from my waiting mouth when the director calls, "And scene."



My body takes a second to understand the scene is over, and it's a second too long. Winter's already on his feet, and I'm still on the floor, chest heaving as I try to reconcile what just happened. My brain knows that it was all acting, but my body doesn't. No matter how hard I try to send it the message that none of it was real, my skin refuses to cool down.

I get up on shaky legs and go stand next to Winter, but it feels like we're magnetic fields repelling each other. The closer we get, the farther I want to be. It takes effort standing this close to him, but I try not to read too much into why. I'm pinning it on my dislike of him. It's less troublesome than thinking that maybe his proximity has a different effect of me now.

Hiding my frustration is hard when Emily doesn't make any comments. She dismisses us with nothing more than a thank-you and a promise she'll be in touch.

I want to ask her what she thought of the performance. I want to know if I stand a chance or if I ruined it all the

moment I decided to keep going after my fall. I want validation, and hers seems the most pressing right now.

But I get nothing. Not a single word of feedback.

Winter, I can see, is more than pleased to be quickly dismissed. He all but runs offstage, and I hate him for his lack of care. Doesn't he want to know who'll play his princess? Doesn't he care enough about this play to be interested in the cast? Does he really think he's so superior?

I follow him outside the theater, hoping to catch him before I lose him in the crowd of the park. As soon as the door opens, the brightness of the sun outside almost blinds me. I blink a few times to adjust to the light, then narrow my eyes to look for him.

He's pulling his baseball cap over his hair when I finally spot him near the stonewall benches.

"Winter," I call, but either he doesn't hear it, or he pretends not to. He keeps walking. In a few steps, he'll be out in the open, quickly engulfed by the crowd of park goers. "Winter Davis," I shout, and he finally comes to a halt.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he hisses, stumping towards me. There's a tightness in his eyes I hadn't seen before. His nostrils flare, and muscles strain against his skin. I take a step back, his reaction taking me by surprise. "Don't scream my fucking name."

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I shove a finger on his chest, but all it does is cause a bolt of pain to travel all through my body. How hard can a chest be? He looks down to where I touched him, a look of disgust in his eyes as if he hadn't just hovered his entire body over mine a minute ago.

"What is wrong with me? You're the one who followed me."

“I’m regretting that already.” I cross my arms in front of my body.

“What do you want?” he asks impatiently. I notice his eyes flickering around as if trying to gauge the situation of the crowd in the park.

“I was going to ask you if I’d done something to offend you, but you know what? I think you being rude has nothing to do with me and everything to do with the stick up your butt.”

His lips quiver at that. At first I think it’s in anger, but then I realize he’s actually trying not to smile at my comment. For some petty reason, his amusement at my expense makes me hate him even more. He considers me for a beat, then he takes a deep breath.

“It’s not you. It’s—”

“Oh no.” I wave my hand, stopping him. “Do not ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ me.”

“What?” His face contorts in confusion. “I wasn’t... I wasn’t going to say it’s me. It’s definitely not me. It’s—” He flails his hand around as if to show everything but never finishes the sentence.

“What is it, Winter Davis?”

“Stop—” He closes the distance between us, hissing as he pulls his cap lower. “Stop saying that.”

“Saying what?” I swallow hard as I tip my head back to look in his eyes. “Your name?”

“Yes,” he grumbles.

“Wh-why?”

“Just...” He runs a hand over his face, frustration coming off him in waves. “Just Winter, ok?” I nod, not trusting my voice to come out as anything but a shaky whisper. “And you didn’t.”

I give him a confused look.

“You didn’t do anything to offend me. It’s just that I’m used to working with professionals, is all.”

I scoff, not believing my ears. He didn’t just... Oh, the *audacity*.

“You know what? Fuck you, Winter.”

It’s his turn to give me a confused look, but I don’t dignify him with an explanation. I walk away, leaving the park having no idea what my future holds.

For the sake of my career, though, I pray this won’t be the last time I have to deal with Winter’s snobbish ass.



Chapter 03

IT'S BEEN A FEW DAYS SINCE THE AUDITION, AND I haven't heard back yet.

I'm trying my best not to freak out while I wait to hear. It could go either way. I'd gotten so lost in the scene that I had forgotten to be analytical about it. It was almost like I had turned my brain off and let the moment guide me. Let Melina's feelings take the wheel. Which was a very unfamiliar feeling for me. I've always been very aware of my every decision in auditions. I've always left knowing whether I'd done a good job or not.

More often than not, I left knowing I didn't.

Not this time, though. This time, there is a part of me holding out high hopes. A part of me I've tried my best to quiet down because I am scared of waiting for a yes only to be disappointed by another no.

I didn't tell my sisters much about the audition. About how it had felt to have Winter's body hover over mine. About how for a second, I'd forgotten we were playing characters and felt his touch so strongly, it readjusted my nervous system. I didn't tell them that when the director called cut, I felt frustrated instead of relieved that we didn't have to kiss.

I didn't tell them any of that because it didn't mean anything.

It was just a natural reaction to a very emotional scene.

I can't fault my body for reacting to the closeness of someone objectively attractive. Not when it's been so long. *So long.* My skin couldn't know that the hands that were touching

me belonged to someone who thought so little of me. Of my talent. It was all just a primal reaction.

A reaction that had been wiped off clean the moment I called out to him outside the theater, and he reminded me of his awful personality.

I can't figure out how to reconcile how I react to Winter in such different psychological and physical ways.

If only I could easily switch in and out of character, I could blame the physical attraction on Melina and not think about it offstage. But I can't do that like he can. I was bewildered by his ability to do so. Just as quickly as he'd gotten into character, he'd gotten out, getting up and leaving the stage without so much as offering me a hand to get up.

But now I knew it was for the best because every interaction with him just made me hate him more. The less we had to interact offstage, the better.

Which would be a lot easier if the mere thought of him didn't conjure him out of thin air in the middle of a Tuesday afternoon.

I'm sitting with Julia outside Cine Street Café on Film Strip, enjoying the rare chance of grabbing lunch with my older sister during my break when he appears. At first, I don't mind the person standing next to me because this is Movieland, and people tend to forget any sense of personal space when it comes to touristy places. But then I feel it.

It's almost like my body can't help but being aware of his presence.

I look up and find Winter and Cameron standing there, one of them smiling and the other frowning as if he rather be anywhere else.

"Luiza?" Cam's smile is so bright I mirror it without realizing it.

“Cam, hi,” I say with a gentle wave. Looking over his shoulder, I find Winter has glued his eyes to the ground, and despite all my first instincts, I make an effort to be nice to the guy. “Hi, Winter.”

He grunts something that I can only assume is *Hi*, but I can't be sure because of course he can't greet me as a normal person. He's too good for that. He won't meet my eyes either, so I look away, lest he catch me staring. But in my peripheral vision, I notice him adjusting the baseball cap on his head, pulling it further down almost as if to hide his eyes.

What is up with him? Am I not *professional enough* to even talk to informally?

Fuck it. He's not worth the time or energy. I quickly turn my attention back to Cameron, only to realize he's staring at my sister. When I follow his gaze, to my surprise, I notice Julia looking at him too, a rosy blush creeping up her neck. They hold their gazes for so long I almost feel like I'm intruding a private moment.

“I'm Cam, hi,” he says, flashing her his brightest smile, and I swear to God I hear her gasp.

“Hi...” Julia mumbles, as if that's all the English she knows.

I suppress a smile at the sight of my flustered sister. I can't recall ever seeing her so affected by someone. Julia is the biggest advocate for personality over looks. I didn't think it was possible for something like this to happen to her, and yet, here we are. She's completely awestruck by Cam's beauty. Not that I can fault her for that—he *is* gorgeous.

Under the table, I nudge her leg with mine to get her talking. When Cam's eyes fall to the tabletop, I remember a second too late that the mesh wrought-iron tables are see-through. He politely suppresses a smile. “This is my sister, Julia,” I offer.

“Cameron. Cam,” he repeats, reaching out his hand to Julia, who finally shakes herself out of her mental freeze and accepts his hand.

I know Cameron is tall, but now I realize that, somehow, he doesn't look it. When he slips his hands in the pockets of his jeans, his shoulders hunch as if he's trying to take up less space. The white of his jeans and the pale blue of his T-shirt produce a beautiful contrast with his rich brown skin. When he turns his upper body to Winter, I shoot Julia a quick glance. Her shy smile tells me all she tries to hide by looking down.

“This is Davis,” Cam says, but his eyes are already back on Julia, as if he can't help himself any more than a compass can help pointing north.

“Oh,” Julia lets out, eyeing me quizzically. I know what she's asking even if she hasn't said a word. I dart a quick glance her way to confirm that indeed this is the same guy I briefly mentioned before, the awful human being I had to audition with. “Hi,” she greets him with a smile because Julia can't fight her nature of being nice and polite to everyone.

“Hi,” he responds with a fraction more enthusiasm than he offered me. I don't want to read too much into it, but that's what my brain is best at. Is his problem only with me?

I had figured he had a problem with the world in general, like something in the way the planets were aligned the moment he was born had made him as sullen as he is. Now I'm debating if his problem is with me specifically.

It doesn't help that he keeps staring at me as if I'm committing a crime just by existing. The way he sizes me up makes me feel like a heavy cloud on a summer day. Unwelcome. Unwanted.

But what bothers me the most is how much thought I'm giving him. He doesn't deserve the time of day.

“Are you guys visiting the park?” I make sure to look at Cam while I’m talking. One attempt at being nice to Winter is enough for the day.

Winter lets a scoff out as a response, and I narrow my eyes at him, but Cam clears his throat. “Uh, nope. No. We’re actually here to talk to Emily.”

Of course. I think Winter would be caught dead before voluntarily visiting the park.

“You should, though. Whenever you have the time,” I insist. Now I’m doing it just to get a rise out of him. “It’s so much fun!” I pepper my voice with a little too much enthusiasm. I know I overdid it when Julia looks at me as if I’ve gone mad.

My bright smile is turned to Cam, but I can feel Winter’s glowering at my comment. That just spurs me on. “You definitely have to check *Unearthed*. The cast this season is unbelievable! They’re so *professional*.”

Unearthed is Movieland’s longest-running live show, full of stunts and visual effects. Of course, it’s where most aspiring action actors land when joining the theater department here. Marvel has plucked actors from this show to join the cast of some of their movies, but the biggest name to ever come out of the show has been Hazel Williams.

It must really get on Winter’s nerves that someone who started off doing theater at a theme park has gone on to become one of the most beloved heroines in recent years. It’s virtually impossible to meet a teenager who hasn’t heard of or wants to be Scarlet Armas. I smile at the thought of his insides churning every time he sees the character in promo material all around.

“I heard the Russo brothers have hired them all to be extras in the next *Avengers*,” he deadpans. I try not to react to

his voice. To the low, husky quality of it, which my memory didn't do justice.

“Oh, and you'll be their new superhero?” I snap back. I don't know if he realizes he's also a part of Movieland's team now, but if this is how he's playing this, then two can play at the game.

“Cam.” There's a warning in the tone of his voice. “We need to get going. Em's waiting for us,” Winter says, completely ignoring my remark.

“Shoot, you're right,” Cam agrees. “I...” Now it's his turn to be flustered. “It was great meeting you,” he says to Julia. Then he turns to me. “Both of you. I mean...” He shakes his head trying to clear his thoughts. “It was great seeing you again. Great job on your audition, by the way. You were amazing.”

When they leave, I'm left speechless, both because Julia is a bouncing ball of giggles by my side and because of his parting comment.



I don't run into either of them for another week. Nor do I hear from Emily. At this point, I'm starting to get comfortable with the idea that I'm not being cast in the play. The director didn't give us a timeframe for when she'd be contacting us, but I'm guessing I would've heard from her by now if I had gotten the role.

It's the next Monday, and I'm back at Movieland for another shift at the front gate with Olivia. Even though we're in the middle of July, the weather has taken an unexpected

turn, and it's kind of chilly. Instead of my usual extra-large T-shirt, I put on a loose cropped sweatshirt with my mid-thigh denim shorts today, hoping I won't regret it when it's time to come home in the afternoon.

Olivia has opted for a summer dress and a vintage cardigan that belongs in a Taylor Swift music video.

I don't understand her insistence in carefully choosing her outfits to come to work. It's not that I'm completely void of a fashion sense. I just don't see the point in wasting an outfit only to arrive here and have to change into our uniforms. I consider it a waste of effort, to be honest. No one cares what you wear. No one sees it.

Except today, of course.

Olivia and I are getting out of the elevator at the administrative building we all simply call 441, when I run right into Cameron on our way to the team wardrobe.

"I'm so sorry," he apologizes, holding my arm to keep my balance. His eyes find mine and his smile widens. "Luiza!"

"Cameron! Hi!"

"Just Cam," he reminds me.

"Right, sorry." Next to me, Olivia clears her throat. I give her an annoyed look. "This is Olivia," I tell him. "My sister."

"Another one?" he asks teasingly.

"We come in packs," Olivia jokes. Cam laughs at that, but his eyes roam around, looking for someone else.

"And Julia?" His voice is so soft when he asks about my other sister, I can't help but smile.

"She doesn't work here." His lips turn downward. "She was just meeting me for lunch the other day," I explain.

The fact that he doesn't hide his disappointment earns him some points with me. Julia's someone who wears her heart on her sleeve, and she deserves to find someone who's like that too. Especially when she hasn't had much experience in this department, which has made me very protective of her. She's my absolute favorite person in the world, and I want to keep anyone from ever hurting her.

"I was hoping to see her around," he confesses, earning a full-on smile from me. I didn't know I could like him more than I already did, but Cam is quickly rising in my ranking of favorite people.

It's like watching a teenager discovering love right in front of my eyes.

"You know what?" I make a very out-of-character decision. "How about I give you her phone number?"

That earns me a surprised look from Olivia, who's been watching the exchange with nothing but boredom in her eyes ever since she realized Cam wasn't someone she could flirt with.

"Would she be okay with that?" Cam asks, even though he's clearly excited with the prospect. I mentally give him a few extra points.

"Of course. Here, give me your phone." I put my sister's number in and return the phone to him.

"You know what?" He points his phone to me. "I really like you, Luiza." We share a smile.

"I like you too, Cameron." All I can do is hope he doesn't do anything to Julia that will change that.

"Cam," he corrects me.

"Cam," I repeat at the same time someone else calls him. A smoky voice I unfortunately already know very well.

The wardrobe on the third floor of the 441 building has always been a bit of a sanctuary for me. Whenever I don't feel like spending my break socializing in the break room, I come here. In front of the elevator, there's a little lounge area, right between the locker rooms, with a sofa and two armchairs that are perfect to spend some time doing nothing but resting.

Even though there's high traffic of team members coming and going, it's weirdly peaceful. No one stops by to talk your ear off. No one sits too close to you. No one brings smelly food.

It's my secret spot. My safe haven.

It's not a place I like Winter invading.

"Davis." Cam turns to his friend with a smile Winter doesn't deserve. I mentally take out some points from Cam just by association.

A loud clank draws my attention to the floor. Olivia crunches down to grab the phone she's just dropped. I take that excuse to turn my focus away from the two actors.

"You good?" I ask Olivia in a whisper when I noticed her weird expression.

"Holy fuck, is that Winter Davis?" Olivia's voice booms in the empty lounge. She has never understood the concept of whispering.

Winter looks our way, our eyes locking for a second too long before he moves on to my sister. If I thought his eyes were icy when he looked at me, they were nothing in comparison to the way he looks at her. He's shooting daggers her way, and although most of the times I want to do the same to her, I'm not about to let him treat my little sister like this. I don't care that he's annoyed that she knows who he is.

Come to think of it, *how* does she know who he is?

I turn to her, the question at the tip of my tongue when Winter's voice cuts through the air again.

"Cam, we gotta go. Em's waiting for us."

For the second time I've run into him, the only thing I hear him say is that he and Cam should go. It's almost as if he physically can't stand being near me.

Well, that makes two of us, Winter Davis.

"I'll see you around?" Cam says, giving me an apologetic smile. I have a feeling he gives out many of those if he hangs out with Winter that much.

"You bet."

With a short and awkward wave, he leaves us to follow Winter down the stairs next to the elevator. They aren't out of earshot yet when Olivia screams. "Oh my god, that was Winter Davis."

She used Portuguese, but I'm pretty sure they could make out his name from that sentence. If his groan is any indication, he not only heard it but also got annoyed by it.

"And who the fuck is Winter Davis, Olivia?" I start making my way to the uniforms because this little encounter took some precious minutes from our time. Her reaction makes absolute zero sense to me.

Her eyes go wide as saucers, a wrinkle forming in her forehead. "You're kidding, right?" She hands me a large black polo shirt as she says it.

"Thanks," I say, moving to the pants. "I'm not kidding. I have no idea who he is." Other than an asshole who thinks I'm not talented enough to even audition for his play, I add mentally. "Should I?"

"Sometimes I forget that you're old." She hands me a pair of size-16 pants. How does she find the uniform so much

faster than me? She's only been here a minute. I've been here for months, and I still take forever to find the uniform in these endless racks.

"Excuse me? I'm twenty-six, Olivia, I'm not ancient. And what does that have to do with Winter Davis?" I find a pair her size and hand it to her.

"Thanks." We walk to the register to have our uniforms beeped. "You're old enough that you didn't watch the show he did. It aired for like ten years, I think. I was obsessed."

I suddenly remember Olivia commenting something about a rumor that was circulating among team members that there was a Hollywood actor in one of the productions this year.

"Wait, you're saying Winter is famous?"

"Luiza, sometimes I wonder how the fuck you got into med school." I shudder at the memory. This is a part of my life I rather forget existed. We move from the wardrobe to the locker room and choose a locker, stuffing our things inside. "Yes. Winter Davis is famous. Like, Hollywood famous."

Olivia is taking off her clothes to change into the black polo we have to wear at the front gate when she stops suddenly, her face covered by her flowered dress.

"Hold on."

"Are you stuck?" I take a step toward her.

She pulls her dress back down. "I'm not stuck." She waves me off. "Have you met him before this?"

"Yes?" It comes off more like a question than an answer.

"Luiza Bento." She sounds so much like our mom when she says my name like that I take a step back. For a split second, I forget I'm the older sister here. Shaking off the weird sensation of feeling small, I square my shoulders.

“What?”

“You’re telling me you met Winter Davis, and you thought he was a regular person?”

“Yes? I auditioned with him for the play,” I say, even though I know for a fact he’s not regular. Snobby and rude aren’t what I consider regular.

Olivia yanks her dress off, as if it had personally wronged her. Her dark hair, miraculously, remains perfectly tamed in the Dutch braid I did for her before we left the house. She whips it off her shoulder.

“You... auditioned with him?” Her voice has gone softer, which, somehow, makes her sound even more like our mom when she’s so mad at her she can’t even bring herself to yell.

“Quit the drama.” I turn my back to her to end the conversation, even though there’s a part of me that’s really curious to know what the hell she’s on about.

If he is as famous as she’s saying, then what brought him to Movieland? The theater department here is known for being a pipeline for new talent, not for famous actors with established careers.

Wardrobe is unusually quiet today, so when Olivia speaks up again, her voice bounces off the lockers.

“Okay, here’s what we’re gonna do.” She waves her hand in front of her like a teacher in front of the classroom. “Somehow, Winter Davis is working here, and somehow, you’ve already met him before. I’m going to need you to introduce us so we can fall madly in love, have cute babies, and live happily ever after.”

A loud, rumbling laugh rolls out me. I can’t help it.

“Olivia, first of all, no.” I say, pulling my long wavy hair into a ponytail. My face contorts into a frown at the thought of

Winter becoming part of my family. “Second, he’s a snob. You really don’t want to be married to someone who can’t open his mouth to say more than two words at a time. That’s when he does say something and not just ignore your presence and acts like he can’t get away from you fast enough.”

“That’s... oddly specific.” Olivia quirks an eyebrow at me.

“He’s an asshole. Believe me.”

“Maybe he’s just an introvert.”

“That doesn’t give him the right to be rude.”

“Maybe he’s just shy.”

“Stop finding excuses for his poor behavior.”

“You know...” Olivia rolls her lips inward, considering whether she should say the next words or not.

“Out with it.”

“You can come off as pretty closed off yourself before people get to know you. What if he thinks the same of you?”

I close the door to our locker with a little more strength than I should’ve. The metallic sound is too loud in the otherwise quiet space. “Excuse me?”

“I’m not saying you’re rude.”

“Good,” I huff. “Because I’m not. I’m extremely polite, Olivia. There’s a difference, though, between being polite and flirting with any human being that crosses my path, but you wouldn’t know now, would you?”

I watch her face fall at the unexpected dig. There’s a part of me that regrets saying it. That knows how petty I’m being. The same part that tries to be a nice sister to her. But there’s also a part of me that resents her for getting away with so

much. For not having to deal with the consequences of her choices the way I always have to.

“Do you always have to be such a bitch? I don’t know what I did to you, Luiza, but God...” She lets her voice fall, not finishing her thought. Clicking the lock into place, she turns to walk away, but I can still hear when she mutters, “That was uncalled for.”

Olivia goes to clock in, and I let her go before me, knowing that I owe it to her to give her some space. I know I shouldn’t have said that. I wanted to take it back the moment the words came out, but... Olivia has a way of getting under my skin.

Before she moved here last month, it’d been over four years since we’d last lived together. Four years since I hadn’t needed to face the fact that my youngest sister can do no wrong in our parents’ eyes. Four years since I hadn’t had to pretend that the way they protect her and provide her with anything she wants, no questions asked, doesn’t hurt me.

Because that was never how they treated *me*.

And I know that’s not on her, but I can’t seem not to blame her for it.



Chapter 04

IT'S BEEN TWO DAYS SINCE I GAVE CAM JULIA'S number, and he has yet to contact her. I'm glad I didn't tell her about it so she doesn't have to be disappointed if he never does. I'm also glad Olivia had the good sense not to say anything either.

Neither Olivia nor I have brought up our discussion in the locker room, and if there's any weird vibe between us, it's no different from the usual. Julia hasn't picked up on anything yet, so she hasn't tried to meddle.

Today is a rare day when we're all home at the same time, so for the first time in a while, we're all having breakfast together. When I got the round table that sits only two from an online post I saw in one of these marketplace groups, I thought I'd only be sharing it with Julia. With Olivia moving in with us, we took to having our meals on the floor, around the coffee table I got from a neighbor who was moving out.

Our apartment in Burbank isn't small. We have the luxury of two bedrooms and in-unit washer and dryer. I'd go as far as saying that I snatched a much better deal than I ever expected moving out to the LA area. For the single month I had it all to myself, it even felt too big.

The plan had been to share it with Julia while she did her specialization here to care for patients with neuro-motor disorders. Like Maria, our oldest sister back home in Brazil, Julia followed our parents' footsteps into the medical field, choosing physical therapy. Upon her graduation, Mom and Dad proudly opened a new wing at their clinic especially for her. Now she oversees a team of physical therapists, and with

the specialization, she'll become the only PT in our hometown able to provide this method of treatment.

The plan had never included Olivia living with us. Yet, somehow, I find myself again sharing a roof with my youngest sister.

I still don't get why our parents let her move here. Olivia has never been an academic type, and when she dropped out of college in Brazil, I kind of expected her to stay home and work rather than coming here to start school again. I'm not even sure what she's studying now, to be honest, but I think I heard Mom mentioning something about a business degree.

Still, after four years sharing a minuscule dorm room with my college best friend and roommate Cecilia, a two-bedroom apartment felt like a palace for three people.

It took a while for me and my sisters to make it feel like home. I only got the essentials before Julia arrived, and then we started buying decorations together, carefully choosing each item to make the place look like ours.

My favorite spot is the combined dining and living areas. The wooden table I paired with red wooden chairs, the nut-brown leather couch the last tenants left behind, the IKEA floor lamp that looks like it belongs in an old theater, the pictures on the wall that hold so many memories sometimes I find myself staring at them for so long I miss half of the show episode I was trying to watch on Netflix.

Every detail in this apartment is a piece of me, Julia, and now Olivia. Every time I remember that I might need to leave it at the end of the year, I feel an ache in my chest.

This is my home. I made it my home. How am I supposed to walk away from it?

Thinking about leaving this place hurts, but thinking about what waits for me if I truly have to go back home to

Brazil... that makes me physically ill. It can't happen. Going back is not an option. Not when I gave my parents my word that I would hold up my end of deal. That I would go back to med school if I didn't make it as an actress in the limited time I had here.

"Can you pass me the butter?" Julia asks, reaching across the coffee table, snapping me out of my thoughts. I hand it to her before pouring some warm milk in my coffee mug. I place the jug with the rest of it close to me, as far away from Olivia as I can because I know she hates the smell of milk.

I might be a bitch to her sometimes, but I'm not that much of a bitch.

Our breakfast is a solid mix of American and Brazilian. Having lived here for over four years, I've gotten used to having eggs, bagels, bacon, pancakes, or cereal in the morning. But when Julia arrived in January, she brought back some habits I had forgotten I had, and I started craving toasted bread with butter, cheese, and ham. Pão de queijo when we're feeling fancy. Now, when we have the time to have a good breakfast like today, we go out of our ways to prepare what looks like a feast.

"So," Julia starts faintly. She's trying to hold a smile in, but it's a failed attempt. Her lips curve at their own volition. "When were you going to tell me that you gave Cameron my number?"

"Oh my God!" I can't help the excited squeak that comes out. "He texted?"

"Finally," Olivia says just as excitedly, but I give her a pointed look for her choice of word. She rolls her eyes at me.

Julia looks between the two of us, the tiniest of frowns cover her face for a split second before she decides to let it slip and focus again on the text. "Yes, he texted last night to ask me out."

She doesn't give us anything else until we look at each other in confusion and, in sync, look back at her with mirroring expressions of impatience. A sly smile curves her lips again. "We're going out tonight."

"Tonight?" Olivia and I say in unison. It's jarring how alike we can be sometimes.

Julia nods enthusiastically. "He asked me when I was free, and I told him the truth, so he was like, 'Why wait?'"

"Wait." Olivia's hands fly up, palm out. "You said he texted last night. What time?"

"I don't know the exact time, Liv." She eyes me quizzically, but I'm as lost as her. "Why?"

"It wasn't late at night, was it? What was the text?"

"Hello and a smiley emoji." Julia's answer sounds less certain, like she's being graded on a quiz she didn't sign up for.

"What are you on about?" I ask our youngest sister, confused by her line of questioning.

"Just making sure it wasn't like a 'u up?' text." She shrugs. "We all know what that means."

"Of course it wasn't." Julia sounds defensive.

I don't know what throws me off the most if it's Olivia thinking Cameron would be that type of guy or... "Have you been getting many 'u up?' texts in the middle of the night, Olivia?"

Her cheeks turn a faint shade of pink, but she refuses to look embarrassed by it. The look she gives me is almost proud. Before I can say anything to her, Julia interferes. "I'm gonna need your help."

"With what?"

“Clothes!”

“That’s not my department,” I say, brushing the crumbs of bread off my hands on the plate in front of me.

“I’ll help.” Olivia squeals with joy. I think there are very few things she gets more excited about than guys. Fashion is one of them.

We finish our breakfast talking about Julia’s date, and for a while it feels like we’re back home, gathered around the dinner table at our parents’ apartment, with zero worries in life.

Later, when it’s just me and Julia cleaning the kitchen, after Olivia offered her unenthusiastic help and we told her to go clean her and Julia’s room instead, the conversation veers into a territory I’m not sure Julia’s comfortable with.

“How are you feeling about it?”

“Nervous,” she confesses. She puts a plate away at the cupboard. “Excited.” She grabs another plate from the dishrack and starts drying it with the towel. “I don’t know.”

“Hey, it’ll be awesome.” I turn to her, making sure she’s paying attention to me. “And you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, but...” She drops her voice like she’s lost her strength midway through the sentence.

“But?”

“Ugh. I don’t know, Luli.” She covers her face with her hands. I can feel her frustration, and I wish I could scoop it out of her and take it for myself. Julia’s my very favorite person, and I’d trade my own happiness for hers in a heartbeat. “I just want to be normal.”

“What’s normal anyway?” I arch a questioning eyebrow at her.

This has always been a touchy subject for Julia. She's twenty-seven, a year older than me, but sometimes she feels like she's ages behind because she never kissed anyone before.

No matter how many times I've tried to tell her that there's no age limit for any of these experiences, she can't help but compare herself to everyone around her. And when you think of it, the entire world seems to be suggesting she's right to think she's not normal. If you haven't kissed anyone by the time you graduate high school, you're a loser. If you leave college without having had sex, you'll die a virgin. We're fed so many lies every day that it's hard to let them go.

"You know what I mean." Her shoulders are slumped, almost like she's trying to fold into herself. I brush her silky dark hair out of her face and over her shoulder and give her a gentle squeeze.

"What I know is that you are an incredible woman. And the guy who gets to have your first kiss will be luckiest in the world. Don't let anyone make you think otherwise, okay? Go out with Cam. Have fun. Enjoy this time you have here. No one knows you in the city, so you can do whatever you want here. Be whoever you want."

"You think so?" There's a glimmer of hope in her voice, and I hold onto it.

"I know so." I grab her hands, tossing the dish towel over the dish rack. "Look, if you're really going back home in December to follow that life plan you made for yourself when you were eighteen"—I try to keep judgement out my voice, but I don't think I'm totally successful—"then take these months you have here and have every experience you've ever wanted to. Be free. Live your life to the fullest. Then, when you go back, at least you'll be able to say you've lived a little bit."

“You know, not everyone wants a crazy life like you do,” she tells me, but there’s no hard feelings in her words. “Some people are happy with a calm, perfectly planned life.”

“I know that,” I say. “I just happen to think you might not be one of those people.”

“What makes you think that?”

“You’re my sister,” I reply, with a knowing smile spread on my face.



A knock on my door interrupts my rendition of one of Taylor Swift’s hits. Julia has just left for her date with Cam, so I know it can only be Olivia.

“It’s me, hi,” she sings through the door. My mouth curls in an involuntary smile.

“Come in.”

Julia and Olivia share the bigger bedroom, while I have one for myself. It was a no-brainer, really. Not because I was here first, but because the two of them are the messiest people I know, and I wouldn’t survive sharing a room with either of them again. Not after already having two decades of torture under my belt.

She walks in straight to my bed, sitting on the duvet and patting it almost reverently. I eye her reflection in the mirror in front of me. She looks like someone who’s never felt the comfort of a bed that’s been made before.

Although we couldn’t be more different in personality, physically, Olivia and I are the most alike out of the four of us.

We take after our mother, with round bellies and thick thighs. But while my hair is wavy and light brown, hers is as straight and dark as Julia's, the only similarity they share.

“Are you going out?” she asks once she realizes I'm not dressed in the usual oversized T-shirt and gym shorts I wear at home.

“Yeah, with Cece.” I pull my midi skirt up and fumble with the zipper on the back.

“Here,” Olivia says, beckoning me to step in front of her. I take a few steps back, and she quickly gets my zipper up.

Our gazes lock in the mirror. “Do you wanna come with?” The way her eyes slightly widen at the invitation gives me an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach. “We're just going to Porto's.”

“No, it's okay.” Her eyes find a pair of sneakers next to the door, and she starts examining with such attention, as if it were a rock that recently fell from the sky.

Only when I move away from her and stand in front of the white chest of drawers next to my window that she speaks again. “I'm sorry,” she says weakly. I stop immediately. I don't think I've ever heard these words come out of Olivia's mouth before. “I didn't mean to call you a bitch.”

The earring I picked up suddenly feels heavier in my hand. It takes me double the time to lift to my ear and even longer to latch the back.

I'm about to apologize in turn, but then my phone starts vibrating on the bed, rescuing me from a conversation I'm not sure I want to have. Olivia hands me the phone, a clear defeat on her face signaling she doesn't share my relief. I pick it up, but before sliding my finger on the screen to accept Cece's call, I look at her. “Talk later?”

She nods and leave my room, and I feel even more of a bitch for it.



Cece and I went to the same school in the middle of nowhere, Missouri. We were the only Brazilians in the whole student body, and it took us exactly forty-eight minutes from the start of Freshman Week to find each other.

The dean had given a forty-five-minute speech to start off the international students' orientation, and then they'd sent us on a break. They'd prepared a coffee break for us, with the same oatmeal cookies and sandwiches I'd become sick of eating less than a year later, orange juice, and coffee I almost spat out because it tasted like shit.

Julia had texted me nonstop that morning, but I kept my phone on silent and didn't check it once, even though all I wanted was a distraction from the boring speech the dean was giving. As soon as she dismissed us, I called my sister.

I was in the middle of telling her how bored I was when someone tapped my shoulder.

“Brasileira?”

I don't know who got more excited with the encounter. Me, Cece, or my sister on the phone. I told Julia I'd call her later and turned to the girl.

“Yes,” I answered in Portuguese. It felt so good using my native language with someone in person, it was almost like coming up for air after a long, exhausting swim. “I'm Luiza.”

“Cecilia,” she offered back. We hugged and became inseparable right there. Well, only truly inseparable a semester later, when we became roommates. But I’d very much like to forget that first semester and the terrible roommate I had.

When both of us decided to move to LA, we considered sharing an apartment. But then Julia told me she was coming for her specialization, and we made the decision to cut the umbilical cord, with a promise that we’d see each other all the time.

We don’t.

In the first months, we managed to meet at least once every two weeks, but these meetings became few and far between. I can’t remember exactly the last time we met, but it’s been well over a month.

As expected, Cece looks completely differently. A month is enough for her to have changed everything from the way she wears her nails to the color of her hair. As I approach the table she always manages to snatch for us at the busiest bakery in Burbank, her hair seems to be in its natural dark shade of brown, but once she turns to wave at me, I see the right side is dipped in a pastel shade of blue. And her locks are straight now, as opposed to their natural tight curls, cut sharply right above her shoulder.

I bet there’s at least two new tattoos on her arm since the last time I saw her.

“The pumpkin spice latte,” I say, holding her arm up by her wrist. “And...”

“Ouch,” she cries when I twist her arm too far to try to look for any other new pieces. “That’s the only one.”

“Bummer.” I flop on the seat across from her. “I expected more of you, Cece.”

As soon as we met, I told Cecilia I was fascinated by her tattoos. It was something I'd always wanted but never had the courage to do. I already have enough obstacles to overcome when it comes to being cast; I don't need to add any more. But Cece never hesitated in getting new designs on her light brown skin. They became a part of her just as much as her septum piercing.

I eye the cup in front of me. "Milk and sugar?"

She rolls her eyes at my question, but I give her a shrug in response. I know I don't really have to ask, but it does no harm confirming it. Cece learned very quickly that I can't stand black coffee. She has a coffee-stained white T-shirt from our first Starbucks trip years ago to remind her of that.

Porto's is her favorite bakery in the LA area, not only because it's where we can find food that is the closest to what we get back home in Brazil, but also because she feels freer to speak Portuguese here without getting glared at. The bakery is filled with the musical sounds of different languages, and Portuguese floats by as just another note completing the music.

"How's the job?" I ask her, taking a bite of the sandwich a waitress just delivered to our table. Cece ordered my favorite because she just knows me that well.

She lets out a long breath, and in that exhale, I read everything she's not saying. Frustration, disappointment, exhaustion. I recognize it so easily because I feel the same way.

"I talked to my boss last week," she tells me.

"And?" I ask carefully. The fact that she didn't volunteer more information tells me all I need to know. I still hang on to a tiny fraction of hope.

“He told me what I already knew. He appreciates my work. I’m a great employee. I added so much to the team.” She lists off all the praise as if they were death sentences. “Unfortunately, he can’t afford to sponsor my visa at this time.”

I’m more pissed than sad for her. Even though we knew this was coming, he had told her the chances were good when he first hired her. He knew back then. He was aware that she needed this, and he still promised her something he knew he wouldn’t be able to deliver.

“What are you going to do?”

“Drink my weight in alcohol and cry?”

“Let me know when.” I raise my coffee in a mock toast.

“What about you, Luli? Have you been auditioning?” I knew this was coming, and still I don’t feel ready to talk about it. I take a huge bite of my sandwich, which doesn’t go unnoticed by her. Our silent communication is too effective for my own good, though. She reads right into my silence. “What are you hiding from me?”

“Moi?” I feign offense. “I’d never.”

“Luiza Maria Bento.” Whenever she wants to pretend to be mad at me, she adds a nonexistent Maria to my name. She claims Luiza Bento is too short to sound mad at me.

“I’m waiting for the result of an audition.”

“How are you feeling about it?”

I take a moment to consider the answer. How am I really feeling about it?

“I think...” I try the words, but they’re so unfamiliar, they get stuck in my throat. I take a sip of coffee and try again. “I think I was good?”

“Oh my God!” The way she reacts, it seems like I just told her I was cast.

“But I don’t know,” I add quickly. “It’s just...”

“It doesn’t matter,” she cuts me off.

“What do you mean? Of course it does.”

“No, it doesn’t. I’m happy you’re confident about an audition for once. I’ve never heard you say that before, Luli. You know how fucking happy that makes me? You’re amazing. I’m glad to see you’re finally seeing that too.”

I don’t have it in me to correct her. But the truth is I can’t see myself the way she does. Yes, I don’t think the audition totally sucked, but I’m still not confident I’ll get the role. In fact, I’m almost sure I won’t, but that’s frustration for future Luiza to handle.

For now, I’ll just enjoy the company of my best friend and try to bask in the feeling her confidence gives me for as long as I can.

We spend hours catching up, and we only leave when we’re basically kicked out of the bakery. Before we go, though, I make sure to grab a handful of chicken croquettes, which are basically what we call coxinhas in Brazil and one of Olivia’s favorite pastries, a pistachio strawberry tartlet.

I’ve never been good with heartfelt conversations, but I know the ball is in my court. Olivia apologized for calling me a bitch, and now it’s my turn to apologize for the mean comment I made to her at the locker room.

When I get home, I call her name, but she doesn’t answer. The door to their bedroom is open, and there’s no one inside. I walk in to leave the apology gift on her nightstand, and I swear I don’t mean to snoop around, but I can’t pretend not to see the official-looking green envelope poking out from under a pile of disorganized papers.

I leave the paper bag with the pastry on her nightstand and turn to leave, but then my eyes catch on the logo, or what's visible of it. It looks familiar, but I can't quite place it. I hate myself for what I do next, but I can't help it. Moving some papers out of the way, I finally see the entire logo.

The Golden Quill Awards.

What is Olivia doing with an envelope from a screenwriting award?



Chapter 05

THAT GREEN ENVELOPE DOESN'T LEAVE MY MIND FOR the next few days, but I avoid asking Olivia about it because that would entail admitting I'd been snooping around, and the last thing I want is to start another fight with her.

And it's her birthday week, and even though I'm slightly terrified of her turning twenty-one, I don't want to ruin her moment.

I do wish she had given me the same consideration, though. When Friday rolls around and her birthday with it, I learn that she has invited everyone from Movieland to celebrate with her at The Reel Pub, the bar located at the south end of Film Strip. And everyone from Movieland apparently includes the actors too now. With Cam around because of Julia, Olivia decided to extend an invitation to the theater department as well, and I'm sure that it's reached Winter.

If he'll make it or not, that's another question.

I don't believe he will, though. Every interaction he's had with Movieland employees so far has been out of obligation, and he always looks like he'd rather be anywhere else. I don't see why he'd voluntarily come to a birthday party surrounded by people he considers so beneath him.

With that in mind, I walk into The Reel Pub a little past seven. The bar is already full, team members mixed with park visitors, everyone wanting to have a good time in this hot summer evening.

The AC is on full blast, but it's still not enough to keep the heat away. I feel the humidity cling to my skin as soon as I

get past the host stand along with the smell of beer, sweat, and fried goods—exactly what you’d expect a bar to smell like. The music blasting through the speakers is a pop hit that has everyone inside singing along, setting the tone for the night.

It doesn’t take me long to locate Olivia. She’s wearing a bright pink birthday girl sash over a minidress that resembles a disco globe. God help me, she already has a tall glass of beer in her hand. And she doesn’t even look shy about it when our eyes meet across the sea of people between us.

“Luuuli,” she yelps, splashing the amber liquid over a friend who’s glued to her side as she tries to make her way to me. I quicken my steps, trying to reach her without more people getting sloshed on in the process.

“Feliz aniversário, mana.” I wrap my hands around her middle, wishing her a happy birthday in Portuguese. I haven’t used that term of endearment in such a long time, I’m surprised it’s slipped so easily.

“Obrigada,” she says, her voice an octave higher than usual, her face pulled in a bright smile. “I love you. You know that?” Her mixing the two languages tells me this isn’t her first beer of the night.

“I do,” I assure her also in English, planting a kiss on her temple and following her lead in mixing both languages. “Eu também te amo.”

It is true. I do love her. I want to kill her most of the time, but I’d kill for her at any time.

“Guys,” Olivia calls to no one in particular, turning back to where she came from, an arm firmly wrapped around my waist. “Look who’s here. It’s my favorite sister!”

“Hey!” Julia complains in mock offense. I make my way to her and am not surprised to see Cam already there, standing next to her, looking at my sister like she hung the moon.

“Cam.” I give him a quick hug.

“Hey, Luiza,” he greets me cheerfully. “Have you heard anything about the audition yet?”

“Not yet, no.” He seems to want to say something else about it, but I don’t want to think about it. Not today at least, so I tell them I’m going to get something to drink.

The place is crowded, and it takes me twice as long as usual to get to the bar. There are people dancing to the music, people gathered in small circles talking, people too drunk to be moving and end up bumping into everyone and everything, making it harder for anyone else to move.

I’m hit by one of those drunks when I’m almost at the bar. I have my eyes laser-focused on the tiny space between two stools that I intend to squeeze into so I can place my order. My eyes are set on that spot, and that’s why I don’t see it coming. My peripheral vision doesn’t register the drunk dude stumbling his way to me until it’s too late.

He’s a big guy, and even though I’m no small girl, all of his weight crashes on me, sending me down sideways.

Bracing myself for the full impact of my hips hitting the floor, I close my eyes and helplessly flail around, trying to grab something to hold on to. I don’t think I’ll actually find anything, so when my fall is broken by a strong pull on my arm, a surprised gasp leaves my lips.

For a second, I hover just above the floor, then I’m pulled upright.

I don’t feel the pain until I’m standing up straight again. As soon as it hits, though, I take my right hand to my left shoulder trying to ease the ache.

“Are you okay?” a low voice asks from behind me, so close I can feel the vibration of the words on my skin.

Why is my brain so attuned to his voice? Why is it that I don't have to turn around to know who's standing next to me?

My brain tries to signal to my body to stay alert, but my traitorous system runs a chill down my spine at the sound of his low, raspy voice.

I turn and find a familiar pair of dark brown eyes staring back at me. Winter meets my gaze from under the brim of his cap and holds it for a second too long before his eyes trail over me, searching every inch he can see in the dim light of the bar.

For the briefest moment, I wonder if he's checking me out, but I quickly banish the thought. No. He's looking for injury. If he were anyone else, I'd think he was concerned, but this is Winter. I'm sure he's not familiar with the concept of worrying about anyone but himself.

"You need to be careful, Luiza," he says, confirming my thoughts. He's not worried. He's pissed that I almost fell right in front of him. He should've left me drop to the floor.

"He slammed right into me," I protest. "It wasn't my fault."

"You're at a bar, full of drunk people. You have to be aware of your surroundings."

Why is he such an asshole? What, he thinks I *wanted* to fall?

"Fuck you, Winter." The words are out before I can stop myself. Apparently, after uttering them the first time, it's become easier letting them out. "You think I fell on purpose? This might shock you, but not everything in the world happens for the sole purpose of annoying you."

Though I'm deciding now that annoying him will be one of my goals in life.

“I didn’t—” He’s so frustrated with me that he can’t get the words past his lips. His throat working overtime as he swallows back the words. “Fucking hell,” he mutters. “Are you hurt?”

He eyes my left shoulder, where my right hand is gently massaging the sore spot. At this moment, both of us realize something at the same time: he’s still holding my left arm. He lets go as soon as our eyes land on the place where we’re touching, and his hand leaves a burning circle around my wrist where he was holding me.

“I’m fine,” I say, trying to sound firm. My brain is sending a command to my body to turn around and leave, but my legs refuse to obey. I’m paralyzed.

The sea of people moving around have pushed us close, our bodies almost touching again. I can feel the heat from his skin like waves breaking through the thin fabric of his white T-shirt.

I somehow choose this moment to compute that this is all he ever wears. Jeans and white tees.

I’m cataloguing this new piece of information, when I’m hit again, this time by a small drunk girl on her way to the bar, but even her tiny size is enough to send me off balance, and suddenly, my chest is glued to the hard shape of Winter. His hands fly instinctively to my waist to keep me straight, and my skin all but catches fire.

The flimsy pale green dress I chose to wear today does nothing to block the heat of his hand from reaching my waist and spreading all over my body, awakening parts of me that should definitely not be responding this way to Winter Davis, of all people.

This isn’t right. I feel like his proximity defies some law of physics. I should want to rip his hands off me and dart out. Instead, I want his hands to rip my clothes off.

What the fuck is wrong with me? I haven't even had anything to drink yet.

Our magnetic fields are malfunctioning. They should be pushing us apart, but instead it feels like they're pulling us together.

I open my mouth to apologize for slamming into him, but I'm cut off by the sudden uproar coming from where I left my sisters just a few minutes ago.

"I'm going to..." I say and nod in the general direction of the commotion.

He blinks like he, too, has just woken from a weird trance. "Right."

I find my sisters before I can let myself freak out about what just happened. When I turn around, I see Winter's back as he moves away from the bar, head bent down and a hand on his cap.

My eyes are pulled away from him when a rendition of "Happy Birthday" starts, followed soon by Olivia's high-pitched voice.

"Stop, stop, stop," she whines. Julia's holding the cake in front of her, and her eyes search for me. I arch an eyebrow, just as confused. "We're doing this the Brazilian way. This is too fucking sad for my taste."

My lips curl in a knowing smile. This is such an Olivia thing to do. Julia passes the cake on to Cameron, who promptly takes the position in front of our youngest sister.

"Just follow Luiza and Julia's lead and clap along," Olivia orders, and all her friends laugh at her absurd request but they do as they're told.

Julia and I start singing "Happy Birthday," clapping along to the rhythm like we always do at Brazilian birthday parties.

Quickly, the mood changes from a somber chanting to a celebratory song, every guest joining us, clapping in rhythm.



I make a conscious effort not to think about Winter for the rest of the night. I don't know if he's left or not, but I try not to keep looking for him in every corner. I take turns sitting with my older sister and Cam, then moving to talk to some of my coworkers from the front gate and some of the cast of the theater department. Olivia has managed to gather so many people for her birthday that I wonder if there's anyone at The Reel Pub who's not here for her celebration.

Not thinking about Winter gets easier when a guy approaches me after I've finished my first mojito. I'd lost track of Olivia's whereabouts a few songs ago, and Julia is so entertained in her conversation with Cam that I don't dare come between them. This is why he finds me sitting on a stool at the bar.

"This will sound like a line, but I promise it's a genuine question," he says, leaning towards me to be heard over the loud music. "Have we met before? You look so familiar."

I can't say that I get that a lot. I'm not someone who looks like a lot of people. Olivia looks the most like me, but our resemblance is in our body shape, not our face. I've heard one too many times the expression "exotic beauty" thrown around to refer to me.

There's something in the way he says it, though, that makes me wonder if he's actually telling the truth. Before I

can say anything, he snaps his fingers at me as if he's just solved the world's greatest mystery.

"Do you work at the park?"

Probably ninety percent of the patrons here do, but I'll indulge him.

"I do, yeah."

"That's where I must've seen you before." He rakes a hand through his wavy blond hair, and I might be wrong, but I think he flexes his bicep when he does it. He's so not the type of guy I'd usually give the time of day, but I'm alone, I've had a couple of drinks, and he doesn't seem harmful.

"Probably," I agree.

The guy eyes the empty stool next to me then cocks his head at me. He only takes a seat after I give him a quick nod, and then he places his beer on the bar, our arms grazing when I lift my cup for another sip of my mojito.

"I work at the 441 building," he says. I give a sheepish smile from behind my glass, and his eyes drop to my mouth. "But I promise I'm one of the fun ones."

So he knows what we think of the people who work at administration instead of the park. His knowing smile confirms my suspicion.

"I'm Graham, by the way." He leaves the beer on the counter and offers me his hand.

"Luiza." I take his hand, but instead of shaking it, Graham brings our connected hands to his lips and drops a soft kiss on my knuckles.

"I have to say, you caught my attention earlier tonight, Luiza. I was just working up the courage to come talk to you."

"I'm glad you did."

“How do you know Olivia?”

“How do you know I’m here for her birthday?”

“Like I said, you caught my attention a long time ago.” Graham brings his beer to his lips, his eyes locked on mine. “It’d be impossible not to notice you.”

“She’s my sister,” I answer, ignoring his comments because I don’t know what to make of it. His eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “How do *you* know her?” I volley the question back.

He shrugs. “We’ve run into each other around the park before.”

I don’t even doubt him. Knowing my sister, that’s really all it’d take for her to invite him to her birthday. I mean, she invited Winter of all people.

And just like that, the person I’ve tried so hard to keep away from my thoughts invades them again like a gust of wind scattering things around, leaving a mess in its wake.

Damn it. I thought this guy was going to help keep me distracted.

“I’m—” I roll a curl around my finger. “I’m gonna go keep my sister company.”

Graham looks around, his eyes finding Olivia in the dancefloor surrounded by a lot of friends and having the time of her life. He cocks an eyebrow at me.

“Not this sister,” I explain. He follows my gaze to where Julia’s sitting by herself, a goofy smile on her lips. “That one.”

“How many of you are there?”

“That’s a topic for next time,” I tease and start walking away, but he stops me with a hand on my wrist. The same wrist that just a few hours ago was circled by another hand, belonging to a man I forced myself not to think about the

whole night, whose image is now stuck on my brain as if it's been tattooed inside my eyelids.

Flashes of our brief encounter burst in my mind. His hard chest pressed to mine, his lingering eyes swimming over my face in search of...something—I'm not sure what. And the burning feeling his hand left on my skin. A feeling I can't find now that I have Graham's fingers wrapped around the same spot.

“Next time?”

I lift a shoulder in a noncommittal response, hoping for a flicker of anticipation. Chasing what I felt before by being so close to Winter. But it's fruitless. It's like the moment he came back to my mind, my body entered a state of coldness not even the proximity of a man as hot as Graham is able to break through.

“I should get your number, then.” He raises from the stool stepping closer to me. “To make sure there is one.”

I give him my number. I let him raise my hand for a soft kiss on my knuckles again. All the while cursing myself for not being able to feel anything.

“What's with the face?” Julia asks when I finally get to her. “I thought you were having a good time with that guy. He was cute.”

“I was.” I shake away the sour taste of the memories of Winter. “I did have a good time with him.”

“Then what's with the face?” Julia repeats the question.

“It's the only one I got,” I say forcing a smile. I don't want to have to explain what's gotten to me because I'm not even sure I understand it myself. My sister can read me too well to fall for it, but Cam approaches the table, saving me from a conversation I don't want to have right now.

“You ready to go?” he asks her, his eyes bouncing between the two of us.

“You’re leaving?” I wail, draping my arms around her shoulder as if I could keep her here.

“I have an early class tomorrow.”

“I hate your classes.” I give her a goodbye kiss on the cheek.

“You’re going to stay here?” She places a stray lock of her behind my ear. I nod, promising to let her know when I get home. Sometimes Julia acts exactly like our mom.

I wave them off and go find some coworkers to keep me distracted, pretending I’m not wondering if Winter has already left too.



I find out that Winter hasn’t left yet when I’m on my way to the bar to grab what could be my fourth or fifth mojito. I’ve stopped counting.

This time, I don’t run into him, which is good because I feel like my balance is not at its best right now, and I wouldn’t want to give him any more reasons to hate me. Not that he needs them. He already hates me plenty.

“I thought you’d left,” I say, but I’m not sure why I’m starting a conversation with him. It must be the alcohol talking.

“I didn’t,” he states the obvious.

“Too bad. You should’ve.” I shrug and try to walk past him, but he places a hand on my arm, my skin prickling at the touch.

“You’re drunk.”

“Not enough to want to stay here talking to you.” But apparently enough to have lost all my filter.

And maybe enough to shiver under the touch of his gentle hand going down my arm to circle around my wrist.

He tries to move me, pulling my body behind him. “What are you doing?”

“Helping you to find your sisters.”

“Olivia’s with her friends, and Julia’s left.” It was a little past ten when she told me she was going home, and I have no idea what time it is now.

“Wait.” I pull my arm back, forcing him to turn on his heel to face me. “Cam’s left too. What are you still doing here?”

“Fucking hell,” he cusses. Even though it’s not directed toward me exactly, I take offense.

“Fuck you,” I respond in equal measure.

“I didn’t—” He exhales loudly. “You’re infuriating, you know that?”

“Thank you.” I take a mock bow. “I work very hard on that. I appreciate you noticing it. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” I free my arm of his grip and motion to the bar. “I was going to get myself a drink.”

“You—”

“Nope,” I cut him off with a finger on his lips before he can say anything that will make me madder at him. “Do not say it.”

He looks down at my hand, and suddenly all the alcohol evaporates from my body, and I am too damn sober. His Adam's apple bobs up and down with a hard swallow as I lower my hand, but somehow it ends following the hard curves of his biceps. My eyes drop to the floor, too embarrassed to look up. And yet, my hand can't seem to move away from him.

Winter presses a gentle finger under my chin, tipping my head up to look at him. A lump forms in my throat when his gaze meets mine, the amber in his irises dancing like flames.

“Are you sure you're okay to stay?”

“Y-yes,” I mumble with a shaky voice, but all the determination to stay and have more drinks have left me. I shake my head, breaking the contact that has seemingly made my brain malfunction and dropping my hand from his arm. I take a step back. “No.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “No?”

“I'm gonna go.” I pull the hem of my dress down, suddenly too self-conscious. “I should go home.”

He nods. “How are you going? Are you driving?”

“I don't—” I stop myself before I tell him I don't have a car. He doesn't need to know that. I've already given him too much ammunition tonight. “I'm getting an Uber.”

“Let me drive you home,” he offers, and now I know for sure I'm definitely too drunk. I must have heard him wrong.

I laugh. “Sorry,” I say. “I thought I heard you offering to drive me home.”

“I did,” he confirms, the words smooth, patient, as if he were talking to a child. I straighten up, irritated by the condescending tone of his voice.

“Why would you do that?”

“Because contrary to what you believe,” he says, fishing his car key from the front pocket of his jeans, “I’m not a terrible human being. Let’s go.”

He turns and starts walking away, never looking back to check that I’m following. But I do. For reasons that are beyond me, I let him drive me home from the bar.



Chapter 06

THE RIDE I GOT FROM WINTER AFTER OLIVIA'S birthday becomes a secret I decide to hide even from myself. If I pretend hard enough that it didn't happen, I can make myself believe it.

I don't tell anyone about it. And I certainly don't talk to him about it. Winter doesn't show up at the park again, at least nowhere I can see him, so it's easy to keep myself from thinking of him.

Again, if I lie hard enough to myself, maybe I'll believe it.

Who am I trying to fool? The reality is that more often than I care to admit, I remember Winter standing in front of me, tilting my chin up and asking if I'm okay. I can basically feel the press of his finger on my skin every time I close my eyes.

When I get a text from Graham, I wait for the butterflies to take flight in my stomach, but... nothing happens. Not a single flap of a wing.

Still, I agree to go out with him someday, in the hopes that something comes out of it. If nothing else, just for the sake of getting Winter out of my head.

The only thing that is truly effective in distracting me from the unwanted thoughts of my possible costar, though, is Julia's constant giddiness.

She can't stop talking about Cam. Everything is a reason to bring him up. It's ridiculous and cute at the same time. I've never seen her like this, but I'm living for it.

I haven't asked, but I don't think they've even kissed yet.

Every time she mentions Cam, I feel a tug inside my chest. I'm happy for her. I genuinely am. But I can't remember ever feeling this way about someone, and I can't help but wonder if I ever will.

I can't avoid comparing her reactions to Cam's texts to mine when I get one from Graham. I get none of that tingly feeling that spreads all over your body just by reading his name on your phone.

But she does.

Every single time Cam texts, Julia reacts in the same way. Except one time, when a loud gasp leaves her lips instead of the usual giggle.

"What is it?" I ask striding towards her on the couch. "What's wrong?"

"Cam invited me to go to San Diego with him tomorrow. To spend the weekend."

"You're going," I declare when I notice her hesitation.

It takes some convincing, but she finally texts him back saying she'll go.

We move to her bedroom to pack her an overnight bag, and I wish Olivia were here and not working right now. She's the one who's better at coordinating outfits. I'm a basic clothes kind of girl. Whatever is comfortable is what I'm wearing. But I'm guessing bike shorts and cropped tops shouldn't be the first choice for a romantic getaway.

Even if she insists this isn't what this trip is.

"Are you sure you can't come with?" she asks for the millionth time.

"I'm not going to barge in on your couple's trip."

“It’s not a coup—”

“It is,” I interrupt her because we’ve already been through this. “Try Olivia again,” I ask, and she grabs her phone to call our sister, but a text comes through, distracting her.

“See? I told you it wasn’t a couple’s trip.” She waves the phone in front of me, but the way she’s shaking it, I can’t read anything. I grab her wrist to stop her movements and read.

“What the hell is Winter doing there too?”

“They’re promoting the play, Luiza. It’s a work trip. He just asked me to come along.” She raises her brows at me, all superior for being right all along. “Come on, you should come with us.”

“You know that now that you’ve told me Winter’s coming too, the chances of me tagging along have dropped into negative numbers, right?”

I can’t imagine being trapped in a car with him for an hour and a half, let alone spending the whole weekend with him.

“I...” Julia swallows back the words she was about to say.

“What?” I ask, knowing my sister isn’t one to usually hold back with me.

“Don’t you think that maybe...” She pushes a lock of her silky-smooth hair behind her ear. “Cam seems to like Winter. They get along pretty well. Don’t you think that maybe you’ve judged him too quickly?”

“He’s the one who judged me without even knowing me, Julia.”

She sighs. “Forget I said anything.”



I have shifts at the front gate on Saturday and Sunday, and without Julia at home, I use my off time to watch some master classes on acting that I bought online and never got to.

Julia's first text comes on Saturday afternoon.

He kissed me

That was all it said. No emojis, no punctuation. Just three words that I knew meant the world to her. I squeak in excitement as I read it, bringing the phone to my chest not able to contain all the joy I feel for my sister.

Whenever you're ready, I want to know everything! Te amo

Not even Olivia's insistence on going out with some friends on Saturday night was enough to sour my mood after that. She promised she'd be back before midnight so she wouldn't be dead asleep for her shift Sunday morning, and she kept her promise.

She walks home earlier than expected, a smile on her face, but not nearly as drunk as I expected her to be after her first night out being twenty-one. Maybe I should start giving my sister some credit.

"Hey," she says when she finds me lying on the couch watching a questionable dating show on Netflix to decompress

before I go to sleep. “You should’ve come with us. I ran into Graham there.”

“Oh really?” I feign surprise. He’d told me he was going to The Reel Pub tonight and asked if I wanted to come with him, but I said I wasn’t feeling like going out tonight. It wasn’t exactly a lie. I just didn’t know how to tell him I was still waiting on the butterflies to make an appearance.

“He asked about you.”

“Um...”

“He’s really nice, you know?”

“Are you insinuating something?” I arch an eyebrow at her.

“Jesus,” she huffs as she drops her body on the couch next to me. “I’m just making conversation, Luiza. Why are you like this?”

I feel a slight tug at my chest. Why am I like this with her? It’s not like our relationship has always been this strained. I can’t exactly pinpoint when it changed. Being the two youngest out of the four of us, we were partners in crime for a while. Even though I was much closer in age to Julia, she was never one to like playing with dolls or putting on performances for our parents. Julia had always been a tiny adult. Olivia and I, on the other hand, gave our parents enough reasons not to want any more kids.

She used to tell me everything. I used to be her confident.

And somehow, we grew so far apart, I’m not sure I know a single thing about my youngest sister that Julia doesn’t already know.

As soon as the thought crosses my mind, the image of a green envelope appears behind my eyes. An image I had forgotten until now.

“Can I ask you something?”

She gives me a confused look at the sudden change in the conversation. She just nods.

“What’s that Golden Quill Awards envelope you have in your room?”

“Did you go through my stuff?” She sits up straight, eyes accusing me.

“No,” I tell a half truth. “The day I left a desert from Porto’s on your nightstand, it was sitting there, and I saw it.”

She searches my face for any signs of a lie, but I don’t let her see that I’m just partially being honest. She doesn’t need to know that I moved some papers around to be able to see the logo. Her room is always such a mess that it’s plausible enough she would’ve forgotten the envelope in plain sight.

“Wait.” It’s my turn to sit up straight. “What are you hiding from me, and why does Julia already know?”

They share a room. Even if it was under some papers, it wasn’t exactly hidden. Why didn’t I realize this earlier? I’m the only who doesn’t know what this is about, and I feel more sad than angry about it.

“I…” She pulls her legs under her. I notice she’s hesitant to talk about this, and I hate myself for making her feel this way.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me.” I give her my most reassuring voice.

“Do you promise you won’t tell Mom and Dad?”

What is Olivia up to? I open my mouth to verbalize that question but close it as soon as I realize that this is not the way to go about this.

I nod, instead. “I won’t.”

“I’m majoring in screenwriting.”

“Okay?” I don’t know exactly what I’m not supposed to tell our parents.

“They think I’m studying business.”

“You lied to them about your major?”

“They wouldn’t let me come if they knew about it.”

“Olivia, they’re paying for your education. Don’t you think they should know what they’re paying you to study? You can’t lie about something like this!” I get up from the couch, too much energy running through my body to sit still. “What were you thinking? That they’d never find out? What are you going to do when you graduate? Photoshop your major out of your diploma and replace it with a business degree?”

“This is exactly why Julia knew and you didn’t,” she screams at me, frustration dripping off her words. “She didn’t judge me when she found out. She understood why I did it.” She storms off, slamming the door of her bedroom behind her and leaving me standing alone in the middle of the living room.



I can’t wait for Julia to be back home.

The good sister part of me is happy that she’s enjoying her time with Cam, but the selfish part of me wants her to come back already so I don’t have to go another minute pretending not to notice the hurt I caused Olivia.

I wish I could just go to her and apologize. I don’t know why I can’t. I know I’ve been too harsh on her. If there’s

someone in this family who should understand her reason to lie to our parents, it's me.

When I was in my second year studying to become a doctor back in Brazil and realized that I was never going to be happy if I continued on that path, it felt terrifying coming clean to my parents. I pushed the conversation back so many times, I ended up having to enroll in my fourth semester just because I didn't have the guts to talk to them.

When I finally did tell them I was dropping out, the news was met with a lot of resistance, as I'd expected.

There were some threats before we finally reached a deal. But we did reach one.

Because we talked. Because I was honest. I faced the consequences of my choice. I didn't just lie to them and chose to hide what I was truly studying like Olivia is doing.

She's simply avoiding the backlash that she knows she'd face because it's what I went through, and part of the reason why I can't bring myself to apologize to her is because I wish I'd had the guts to do what she's doing. To just say fuck it and live my life how I want it.

The sound of my phone vibrating on the arm of the couch pulls me out of my thoughts, and when I see an unsaved number on the screen, a chill runs down my spine. Even before picking it up, I know something happened to Julia.



I wish I could make this bus go faster. My legs won't stop bouncing as I will the driver to speed up.

Convincing Olivia to stay home was like trying to tell a kid they can't go on the playground, but eventually she acquiesced. I needed her to cover my early shift tomorrow if we didn't make it back in time. And something told me it was very likely that we wouldn't.

When I answered the phone and Winter's voice filled my ear, the cold feeling of dread that took over my body had nothing to do with my distaste for him. I already knew he was going to say something had happened to my sister.

"She's okay," he said first. But I knew she wasn't. "She just had an allergic reaction. We didn't know she couldn't have coconut."

Okay. I tried to breathe. An allergic reaction wasn't that bad. She had her medicine with her at all times.

"It's just that..." he continued after clearing his throat. It almost felt like it pained him to keep talking to me, but I didn't care that he was annoyed about having to call me. I just wanted to know about my sister. "She didn't tell us she wasn't feeling well, so she had a fall." He gave out the information in tiny pieces. I wanted to crawl into my phone and make him spit it out. "And she hit her head. We're at the hospital, and they've run all tests. She's good, but they want to keep her for a few more hours just for precaution."

"Where are you?" I demanded immediately. It was such a Julia thing to drop dead because she didn't want to cause anyone any trouble.

I got on the first bus out of LA to San Diego. I told Winter to keep me updated and to not let her leave before I got there.

Now, I'm ten minutes away from the station, and all I want is to run to my sister. I can't stand this bus anymore. The putrid smell of cheap perfume and sour-cream-and-onion-flavored chips is causing my stomach to churn.

When you're in a different country, a place that doesn't quite welcome you as one of its own, it's funny how everything seems scarier. Rationally, I know she's okay. But I won't rest until I see her.

The bus finally comes to a stop in what looks like the middle of an avenue. To my left, there's a tram station. To my right, a parking spot, and beyond that, Old Town San Diego.

My phone buzzes in my pocket before I can think of taking it out to call an Uber. Winter's name, which I saved after his first call, appears on the screen.

"I'm in the black Jeep," he says, skipping any greetings. At the same time, a car in the parking lot flashes its high beams and then turns off completely. The light inside the car is on, and I squint my eyes to see his silhouette. "Are you coming, or are you going to stand there staring at me?"

What the hell?

I walk to the car and yank the door open. "What are you doing here?"

"I think you mean, 'Thanks for the ride, Winter.'"

"I was gonna get an Uber," I say, refusing to get in. I don't know why I'm being so difficult. He's being helpful, which is completely throwing me off. Maybe that's why. I don't know this Winter, and I don't feel like getting to know him now of all moments. For all I know, he's just keeping me from getting a car to go see my sister.

"Yeah, well." He lifts a shoulder. "I'm here. Get in."

"I'm getting an Uber," I repeat, already unlocking the screen.

"No," he says, more firmly this time. "You're not. Get in the car, Luiza."

I think this is the first time I hear him say my name. I don't know how my brain can register this right now. My name on his lips sounds like a lock clicking into place. It feels just right.

And I hate it.

"Luiza," he repeats my name like an incantation, softly, and I hate him even more. Because his voice has no right to cause this kind of reaction on my body. "It's almost midnight. It's late. You don't need to get an Uber alone. I'll take you to your sister."

I hate how irrational he makes me. I know none of this discussion makes sense, but for whatever reason, it pains me to concede. But I do. Because I need to get to Julia.

I don't remember this from my drunk ride after Olivia's birthday, but Winter's car smells good. Like leather, wood, and cinnamon. It's like walking right into Christmas in the middle of August. I huff in annoyance and try to breathe only through my mouth so I won't get a whiff of the amazing smell every time I inhale. He really needed to smell like my favorite holiday, didn't he?

There are virtually no cars on the roads at this time of night. The city is empty as I watch it whiz by through the window of the car. We don't take any roads that go by the coast, but just being near the ocean I can feel its energy. The breeze that comes from the sea brings a familiar smell I didn't know I missed so much. It takes me right back to my hometown.

I'm so distracted by the memories of my childhood that I don't see anything until it's all happened. All I register is the loud screech of tires and a heavy weight on my stomach, like a safety bar keeping me from fly out the windshield.

"Motherfucker," Winter growls. "Son of a bitch."

The heavy bar across my stomach starts to move, and I realize it's Winter's arm. He slows the car to a stop, pulling over near a park. Then he turns to face me. "I'm sorry. He didn't stop. He should've stopped. I should've seen he wasn't slowing down, but he appeared out of nowhere. I'm sorry."

He's talking a million words a minute, and I'm in such shock, I can't say anything in return. My heart is beating impossibly fast inside my chest.

"Are you okay? Did you get hurt?" His voice is so much softer, it takes me a second to register it's him talking to me again. My head's still spinning, but I force myself to focus.

"I'm okay," I affirm. Then I repeat more to myself, "I'm okay."

"I'm sorry. He came out of nowhere. He was supposed to stop. He didn't," he repeats. He's so distraught he doesn't sound like himself. The car suddenly seems way too small. Our distress too big to fit here.

"I'm okay," I reassure him. "We can go now."

"Right." He takes a deep breath. "Okay, right."

We drive in silence the rest of the way to the hospital.

When the brightly lit up building comes into view, I instantly forget the almost accident, eager to finally see my sister. Winter pulls up by the drop-off area and stops the car.

"Thank you," I say more genuinely thankful than I thought I'd be when I first got in his car. "Have a safe trip back to LA." I don't give him time to respond before I shut the door and walk into the hospital.

I ask for Julia as soon as I reach the reception desk. A nurse that looks eerily like my oldest sister Maria walks me to Julia's bed in the ER.

As expected, Cam is glued to her side. They're in the middle of a conversation when she stops, surprised to see me.

"Luiza?" She looks between me and Cam, but he looks just as surprised as she does. "Am I hallucinating, or is my sister standing right there?" she asks him.

"Nope," he confirms. "Your head's good. That's really her."

"Why are you here?"

"Did you really think I wouldn't come? You're in the fucking hospital, Julia." I go to hug her tight but hesitate, not knowing the full extent of her injuries. She smells faintly like hospital alcohol, but mostly like herself, like vanilla and roses. I cup her face and examine every inch of her. "Are you okay?"

"I am." She holds my wrists pushing me an inch away. "Who told—"

"Winter," Cam guesses. "He asked you for her number when we got here, remember?"

"He called me," I confirm. "He called to tell me what happened. What were you thinking eating coconut, Julia? Are you trying to die on me?"

She shakes her head vehemently. Cam clears his throat next to her. "That's on me, actually. I'm so, so sorry."

"Cam, it's okay," Julia soothes him. I imagine they've had this conversation a few times already. "You didn't know."

"I made her eat a desert that had coconut milk in it."

"You didn't make me do anything," she corrects him. "You offered, and I accepted."

The way they both are trying to take the blame while comforting the other is disturbingly cute. I can't even be mad at them for being this irresponsible. I'm just glad she's safe now.

My stomach makes an embarrassingly loud noise, and Julia half laughs, half scolds me.

“You didn’t need to come. I’m really okay,” she says. “Go grab some food, Luli. If you won’t let me die, I won’t let you either.”

“The doctor said we should be here a few more hours,” Cam says. “There’s a cafeteria down the corridor.”

I leave them at the ER after dropping a kiss on Julia’s forehead and making me promise she’ll call me if she needs me.

“You’re going to the cafeteria, not back to Brazil. Chill, Luiza.” She waves me away.

My body starts showing signs of exhaustion as I make my way down the corridor. Now that the adrenaline has dropped, my muscles start aching, complaining about how tense I’ve been until now. A big yawn escapes my lips, and I decide I need coffee as well as food.

I make my way to the cafeteria counter, where a kid is so busy watching something on his phone he doesn’t even look up. The buffet doesn’t look that appetizing, but I manage to find a couple of items that don’t seem so tasteless.

“Can I also get a latte, please?”

The kid finally looks up, his eyes sending me a message that would get him fired if he said it out loud. He’s clearly annoyed I interrupted whatever it is he was watching during his late-night shift. He fills a cup with steaming hot black coffee and hands it to me, telling me my total.

“I wanted a latte,” I repeat.

“We’re out of milk,” he says simply and repeats the total. “There’s creamer over there.”

I'm too tired to argue, so I grab a few cups of creamer and two packets of sugar. It's only when I'm walking to the tables that I notice Winter sitting there, watching me.

"What are you doing here?"

"Is that how you always greet everyone, or do you save that just for me?" We're back to our normal selves, the little scare we had in traffic already forgotten.

"I thought you'd be back in LA by now." I ignore his question.

"How's Julia?" he asks, also ignoring my comment. It's like we're throwing sentences at each other instead of having a full conversation.

"She's okay. She'll be discharged soon."

"Good." He nods once, then he taps the table and gets up. His arm touches my shoulder as he walks away, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind.

I blame my exhaustion for what I do next.

"Winter," I call out. He stops but doesn't turn around. "What is wrong with you?"

I'm tired of him leaving as he wishes all the time. He doesn't owe me anything, but I hate how small he makes me feel every time he walks away without as much as an acknowledgement.

I see his shoulders rising and falling before he turns. His dark eyes are even smaller, trapped inside his frown.

"You have to be more specific than that."

I ignore his attempt at a self-deprecating joke. "Ugh," I huff. "Why are you... like this?"

"Like what?" He starts walking towards me again.

“You always leave without saying anything,” I blurt out.
“As if you can’t be bothered to be around me.”

His face changes, the shadow of something I can’t identify crossing his eyes. Against the bright white lights of the hospital, he looks almost ethereal standing tall, towering over me in his white T-shirt.

He cocks his head as if he’s trying to read me but can’t quite figure out where to begin. He opens and closes his mouth a couple of times but doesn’t say anything.

Then, the door to the cafeteria opens, a group of people walks through the door, filling the quiet space with loud chatter. I swear I see Winter flinch before he turns around and walks away.

Without saying a word.

Again.



Chapter 07

IT'S ANOTHER COUPLE OF HOURS BEFORE JULIA IS discharged. We all feel like sleep-deprived zombies, but I'm the only one that's wearing signs of exhaustion all over my face. My eyes are puffy and sporting dark circles. There are more strands of hair around my face than in my ponytail, but I'm not worried enough about the way I look to fix it.

Cam, Julia, and I walk out of the ER in the dead of night. Even in the summer, there's a cool breeze coming from the ocean nearby. I expect Cam to walk us to his car in the parking lot, but instead, he stops by the entrance, checking his phone.

Did they Uber here? Did he leave his car at their hotel?

I get my answer when a silver car pulls over in front of us, Winter behind the wheel.

Doesn't he ever leave for good?

I fight the urge to ask him what he's doing here for the third time in less than a few hours, but when he gets out of the driver's seat, keeping it open for Cam to take his place, I realize no one seems in a hurry to explain what's going on.

"Weren't you driving another car just a couple of hours ago?" I ask him when he rounds the car to help Julia into the passenger seat. I pretend not to see his nice gesture to my sister because it doesn't match the evil image I have of him in my mind.

"This is mine," Cam says, helping Julia with the seatbelt. Both of them are treating her with such care, I feel my heart warm up a little.

“Then what are you still doing here?” I turn to Winter. If they drove in separate cars, he could’ve been well on his way back to LA by now.

It’s Julia who answers my question. “I think he stayed to give you a ride,” she says it serenely. I shoot her a deathly glare, but she just shrugs. “Cam’s car only seats two.” She motions to the interior of the vehicle that only now I notice is ridiculously small.

You have got to be kidding me.



There’s no traffic this early in the morning, so we make it to LA in a little under two hours, but it’s already too late for me to arrive for the opening shift. I sent Olivia a text half an hour ago, letting her know I wouldn’t make it, so before we get home, she texts back saying she’s on her way to the park.

If there’s one thing I can’t fault Olivia for, it’s her willingness to help. At any time. She might be a little too ready to party and flirt all the time, but she’d never deny us help if we ask for it. Even in the middle of a fight.

Olivia 7:51 am

You still need to make it to the 9 am shift, though. I was scheduled for it.

I take a deep breath when I read her text, but I don’t say anything when Winter gives me a questioning eye at my loud sigh.

We pull over right behind Cam's car in front of our building. The sky is painted lilac with splashes of white clouds dancing around. The sun isn't visible from here yet, but I can already feel its warmth creeping in when I go to their car and tell Cam to go ahead and help Julia up to our apartment, that I'll bring her bag from the car. Winter comes to the trunk to help me, but I tell him I got it.

"I know you got it." He heaves a sigh. "I'm just helping."

"I'm fine," I repeat, but I can't keep a yawn locked inside, and he has the audacity to smirk at it.

"You're dead tired," he points out the obvious. "You should get some sleep."

"Thanks, Captain Obvious," I retort. "But someone of us gotta work."

"Didn't Olivia take your shift?"

I don't remember telling him that, but then again, I don't remember much of the drive here. I felt like I was stuck in a haze between awake and asleep. God only knows what else I told him in those two hours.

I guess I could blame exhaustion again for going the length to explain myself to him. "She did. But mine was the early shift, and she was scheduled for nine a.m., so I need to take that one for her."

He doesn't say anything in return. And I feel like an idiot for even trying to have a conversation with him. I should've learned by now that he only talks when he wants to. He pulls his phone from his back pocket and starts typing, ignoring me completely.

"Okay, then," I say to the car because I refuse to look at him. "Bye."

He finally looks my way, but I turn around and start walking. I don't stop even when he speaks up.

“Cam's going to stay with Julia to make sure she's okay. Go take a shower and get ready. I'll drive you to Movieland.”

“No, you won't.” I say over my shoulder. “Bye, Winter.”

I close the door to the building behind me, but I notice that he doesn't move. He stays exactly where I left him, leaning on the side of his car, watching me walk away.



Sure enough, when I come back downstairs, Winter is still there. I only have thirty minutes to take the bus, make it to the park, go up to wardrobe, get changed, and run to the front gate to clock in.

Accepting his offer would be the wisest choice, but I never claimed to be wise.

I walk out of the door and keep walking in the direction of the bus stop. Winter doesn't say anything, but I can hear the loud groan that comes out of him.

The sound of the engine starting is my only warning that he's actually leaving, but then the car slows next to me, and he lowers the window.

“You won't make it in time if you take the bus,” he warns me. He's right, but no way in hell am I letting him know that. I'll wait for him to drive away and call an Uber.

I don't answer him. I give him a taste of his own medicine and keep walking, ignoring his presence altogether.

“Why do you always have to be so difficult?”

“*I’m* difficult?” I turn to him. I let out a dry laugh that sounds scary even to me. “That’s a good one.”

“I’ve done nothing but try to help you,” he grumbles.

“I don’t need your help.” I’ve reached the bus stop, but the sun is too low for the cover to protect me from it. It’s too hot for this hour in the morning, but this is the price of living in LA.

“Get in the car, Luiza. I’m already going there anyway.”

“I’m taking the bus. Thank you,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest in a clear sign to end the discussion.

A notification pings on my phone at that exact time, and I pull it away from the waist of the gym shorts I changed into after taking the quickest shower in the history of showers.

“Fuck.”

“Will you get in the car now?” He gives me a look as if he already knew there is a delay on my bus line before the app notified me. Did he cause it? Did he somehow sabotage my bus in the twenty minutes that I took a shower and changed?

I eye the avenue in front of me, considering going to the park on foot.

“It’d take you at least an hour on foot,” he says as if he can read my mind.

“Fine.” I yank the door of the car open and am about to slam it shut when I think better of it. I don’t have the money to pay for any damage in a car like this.

“Was that so hard, Sunshine?”

I should’ve slammed the door. I should’ve slammed it so hard it would come out the other side.

“Do not call me that,” I hiss.

“But you’re always so bright, so full of life. Just like a ray of sun,” he teases, putting the car on drive and hitting the gas.

“Oh my God,” I groan. It’s too early and I’m too tired to deal with Winter right now. This is quickly becoming the worst day of my life.

At least the drive to Movieland is short. Less than twenty minutes later, we’re pulling up to the gates. Winter scans his employee ID, which I notice is slightly different than mine, and the gate opens to him, but instead of driving ahead in the direction of the employee parking lot, he takes a left in the first entrance.

“Where are you going?” I eye him quizzically. “We can’t park here.”

“*You* can’t park here,” he clarifies. “I can.”

Snobby motherfucker.

He’s pulling into a parking space, a reserved one for that matter, when my phone starts ringing. I don’t have the number saved in my contacts, but from the first digits I can tell it’s from Movieland.

“Are you not gonna get that?” he asks impatiently after it rings for the third time.

“Hello?” I’m hesitant to answer the call because I’m afraid it’s someone in management complaining about the musical chairs my sister and I pulled this morning, one taking the other’s shift.

Instead, it’s something much, much more terrifying.

“Luiza?” A smooth voice comes from the other side. It’s vaguely familiar, but I can’t quite place to whom it belongs. “It’s Emily Eddings. I’m calling about your audition.”

I gasp, loud enough to make Winter hit the brake hard.

“What?” Winter mouths next to me. “What happened? Are you okay?”

I shake my head, ignoring him.

“Luiza?” Emily repeats on the other side.

“Yes,” I say, finding my voice again. “Yes, it’s me. I’m here. Hi.”

“Hi,” I can hear the smile in her voice. “I wanted to personally call you to invite you to join *Frostbound Loyalty* as our Princess Melina.”

There’s a long silence before she adds, “What do you say?”

“Holy crap” is the first thing out of my mouth. Then, I slap my own forehead. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t expecting this. Yes. Of course. I’d love to.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She laughs, and it’s my favorite sound ever. “I love the enthusiasm. I just wanted to give you the news myself. We’ll arrange a formal meeting for the offer this week, and then we’ll let you know the next steps, okay?”

“Yes. Okay, yes.”

“Awesome,” she says. “Welcome to the cast.”

She hangs up, but I can’t look away from my phone, afraid I’ll realize it was just a dream or a figment of my imagination.

It’s the weight of Winter’s hand on my left arm that makes it all real. “Hey. What happened?”

I’m so excited about the news that I don’t even care he’s the first person I’m sharing it with. “I got the part! I’m in the winter play. I’ll be Melina.”

He looks at me like I told him I’m going on the first excursion to Mars. He blinks a few times, then he shakes his

head, trying to get rid of whatever emotion just overtook him. I can see a shadow of something behind his eyes, but I'm not sure what. When he finally opens his mouth, he congratulates me in what's probably the least enthusiastic voice I've ever heard from him, and that's saying a lot.

Then he parks the car, opens the door, and walks away.



My next three shifts at the front gate fly by. Everyone has already heard the news—thanks to my little sister—so people are stopping by to congratulate me all the time. I feel a mixture of pride and paralyzing fear.

I haven't even officially switched departments yet. Everything could still fall apart before it's even real.

There are moments when the anxiety gets so high, my brain blacks out. Minutes will go by, and I'll be functioning on autopilot. Then someone or something calls me out of my trance.

I've never felt this kind of panic before. The amount of weight I'm putting on this role is probably not healthy, but I can't help it. Not after so many rejections. So many failures. This *has* to be the one that works out.

Getting this role is just the first step, but without it, I can't even dream of getting that sponsorship I need for my visa. Without this role, I can't prove to my parents that I *can* make it as a working actress in LA.

But our deal was clear: I get to stay if I get a sponsored visa and a paid job as an actress. I have the job now, but I still need the visa.

And just because I know how important this job is, I'm terrified of losing it. Maybe when I finally sign the papers to transfer from the park team to the theater department, I'll be a little more confident, but I doubt it. Knowing myself, I'll still expect to be ripped of this opportunity even when I'm on stage playing the princess, bride dress on and all.

Holy shit. I'll be on stage. Playing the princess.

This can't be real.

I'm not good enough for this. I don't even have enough experience. What were they thinking when they cast me?

There has got to be a mistake. Emily Eddings meant to call someone else to give the news. Not me.

I can feel the freezing cold of fear swirling inside of me. It starts low in my belly and quickly spreads through my whole body.

"Luiza." I hear Olivia's voice, but it sounds distant, muffled through the fog of panic. "Luli," she repeats.

"Yes." I snap out of it at the touch of her hand on my shoulder. "What?"

"I'm taking over for you. You're good to clock out." Olivia examines my face, her eyes searching. "Are you okay?"

"I don't think I can do this," I blurt out, catching myself by surprise at my honesty.

If Olivia is surprised, she doesn't let it on. "No," she says firmly. "Don't do this. You can. You're great, Luli. You were chosen because you were the best. Don't you doubt that."

The words I heard backstage rush back to me.

You know if they cast her, it'll only be because she's Latina and fat, and they need to show diversity in the cast.

What if that girl was right? What if I'm not the best but the most convenient?

"I'll always be your number one fan," Olivia continues. "Okay, I think Julia would fight me on that. Maybe number two," she jokes. "But I can't wait for thousands of other people to join me. You're just nervous because you're signing the papers today. But hey." She cups my face, forcing me to meet her eyes. "It'll be amazing. Okay?" She waits for my nod. "Good. Now go. Clock out for the last time, and go be a superstar."

I'm so out of it, I don't even realize I just got a pep talk from my young sister. And what's even worse is that it actually works.

Fake it till you make it is the mantra I repeat in my mind all the way to the 441 building, where I have to go to HR to make the transition happen.

I debate stopping by wardrobe first to change back into my street clothes but decide to get this done with lest I chicken out. I'm stepping out of the elevator on the second floor when a voice I hadn't heard in forever calls my name.

"Luiza." My name is being pronounced like 'Louisa', and it grates on my nerves. I see Colin standing up from one of the armchairs in the lounge. "Oh my God, it's really you." He opens his arms expecting a hug. I'm usually a hugger. I love hugs. I believe in their healing power. But I save my hugs for people I actually care about. Colin is not included on that list.

When I first interviewed for a position at Movieland, I was among a group of twenty candidates. Colin was among them. From the very first time he opened his mouth, I realized all I needed to know about him: he's the most annoying person I've ever met. There's not one thing he does that doesn't annoy me. From the way he pronounces my name, to the loud noises he makes when he chews. For the entire month we had

shifts together as newcomers in the team, I avoided him like the plague.

I hadn't seen him in months, ever since he changed teams.

I awkwardly pause outside of the elevator, waving my hand in front of me to greet him from afar. He quickly readjusts, pretending he never intended to hug me in the first place.

“Colin.” I force a smile. “Hi.”

His eyes roam over my body, taking in the uniform. “You're still at the front gate?”

The way he says it, like it's a job that's beneath him now that he moved on to the MovieTour, makes me defensive of my job. How dare he look down on it when he was hired for exact same position back in January?

“It's my last day, actually.” That nugget of information sparks a new interest in him, like my climbing to higher places suddenly makes me worthy of his time again. So, I make a point to add, “I'll miss it, though. I loved it there.”

His face contorts in a mixture of disapproval and disgust as if he can't possibly conceive the idea of someone liking their work at the front gate. But I did. And I'm grateful for it.

I wait a second to see if he's going to try to argue, but he completely loses track of our conversation when he sees something behind me that has his jaw dropping to the floor and his eyes going wide.

Confused, I frown at him before turning to see what has caused such reaction from him, but before I can do that, an all-too-familiar voice calls my name.

“Luiza?”

I haven't seen Winter in a week, since he dropped me off at work and so unenthusiastically congratulated me on being cast. Not that I had expected to hear from him again, but I didn't not expect it either. He'd been the first person to learn I had gotten my dream job. He's the person I'll be working the closest with. He has my number.

And yet it's been radio silence from him ever since.

"Winter Davis?" It's Colin's voice that breaks the silence, as I stare at Winter waiting for him to say what he wants with me. Only then I remember the guy I was just talking to. "Oh my God. It's really you. Right here, in front of me."

Winter's eyes bounce between me and Colin, trying to size up the situation.

"He's your friend?" he asks me.

Colin speaks before I can. "Yes. Yes, Luiza and I are friends. Do you know each other?" He's talking so fast his voice has gone up an octave. "It's so nice to meet you, Winter. I'm a huge fan."

"It's Davis," Winter corrects him in a polite but terse manner, accepting his outstretched hand for a quick handshake.

After Olivia had told me about Winter being famous, a former child star from one of Movieland's biggest TV hits, something had been nagging me. Everyone called him Davis. Not Winter. Or Winter Davis. He was Davis to everyone.

Except, when he first introduced himself to me, he said his name was Winter.

And the day of the audition, when I called him Winter Davis outside the Palace Theater, he corrected me and said, "Just Winter."

“Davis, sorry,” Colin apologizes, looking flustered. He brings his hand, the one Winter just shook, close to his chest if he to safeguard it. I picture him never washing his hand again just so he can keep Winter’s germs with him. That’s how stupidly starstruck he looks right now.

Apparently, everyone knows Winter Davis. I’m the only Martian who’d never heard of him before.

“Winter,” Colin starts but quickly corrects himself. “Davis, would it be okay if I asked for a picture? I’m a huge fan of *School Hallway*, and oh my God! I can’t believe I’m working with you now—”

“You’re not. You work at the park,” Winter cuts him off abruptly. I whip my eyes his way, indignant. Yes, Colin is probably the most annoying person to ever walk this planet, but Winter doesn’t need to be this rude.

“So do you,” I remind him.

“It’s different.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Of course it is, and you know it.”

“How so?”

“It just is.”

Colin watches our exchange like he’s at a tennis match.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” Winter hisses, tired of the childish back-and-forth.

“No,” I say, and Colin gasps at my side. “I’ve got somewhere to be.”

Then, I leave both of them speechless as I walk to wardrobe to change and collect myself before I go see the theater department manager.



Chapter 08

“WE’RE SO EXCITED TO HAVE YOU IN THE CAST,” ANNE Marie, the theater department manager, says after I’ve signed a ridiculous amount of paperwork a couple of days later. Signing an NDA kind of makes me feel important, but all the other release forms make it feel like I’m selling my soul to Movieland. At least while I’m in the play.

She stands up, reaching her hand across her large desk for me. I take it as I stand up too.

Anne Marie’s office stands in a corner, overlooking the east side of Film Strip. From here, she can’t see the park, but there’s no way to forget where we are. Even in this marbled-floor space with an elegant glass-and-steel desk, Movieland’s signature colors, deep violet and gold, pop up on the fabric of the couch. On the standing lamp. And, of course, on the logo displayed on an accent wall, with the curved film strip forming a letter ‘M’ also resembling a roller coaster above the name of the park written in a vintage font. The three golden stars to the right complete the logo. Right under the focal piece, a set of pictures depicting the evolution of the park throughout the years since the opening in 1985.

“We’ll talk more about promo later on.” She rounds her desk, beckoning me to follow her to the door. “Right now, you can go to wardrobe so they can fit you for costumes.”

“Thank you, Anne Marie.” I offer her a smile. “So, wardrobe now? On the third floor?”

“Oh.” She stops as she opens the door for me. “No, no. I’m sorry. We are an entirely separate department. Theater

wardrobe is on this floor.” Nodding to a place down the hall, she continues, “Third door down. On the right.”

Somehow, it’s knowing that the theater department has even a different wardrobe room that makes this feel real to me.

It dawns on me that I’m never getting out on the third floor again. I’m never going to desperately look for a size large women’s polo shirt on the rack, only to realize they’re all out. I’m never going to have to hunt for a free locker to leave my stuff in again. I should be ecstatic about it, but there’s a part of me that kind of mourns that life.

It’s been all I’ve known since I moved here, and it feels terrifying to leave it behind. To replace the familiar with the unknown. To take a risk .

Ultimately, I know where this feeling is coming from, and I know it has nothing to do with saying goodbye to the job I’ve had at the front gate for six months. It’s not even about starting at a new one.

It’s about this dangerous sense of hope that I’m starting to feel again after so long. A feeling I had all but considered dried out after so many rejections, but somehow, it’s starting to sprout back to life with just one drop of a *yes*.

The problem with hope, though, is the risk of disappointment that comes with it. And if I’m knocked down again, I’m scared I won’t be able to get up this time.

Lost in my thoughts, I realize I got lost in the real world too. Tracing back my steps, I finally find the door Anne Marie indicated and give it a gentle knock. When I don’t hear an answer, I try opening it slowly. The scene revealed behind the door takes me by surprise.

Right there, in the middle of the room, on an alteration stand, like a statue on a pedestal, Winter stands half naked, looking like he too might belong in a museum. Like he

could've been sculpted by Michelangelo himself, dashing away all my hopes that somehow his body wouldn't be nearly half as beautiful as his face.

Boy, how I was wrong.

Neither Winter nor the two ladies surrounding him have noticed me yet, so I take the moment to creepily watch him, praying I'll find an unforgivable flaw in him. But as my eyes roam over his body, I find nothing. His defined torso tells me he visits the gym frequently but not so much as to earn him a six-pack. The light hair on his chest matching the happy trail right under his navel takes my imagination to places I shouldn't allow it to go.

But damn if the feeling that spreads through my body isn't a good one. I'm basking in the warmth of this tingling sensation running in my veins when a sound cuts through the air, pulling me out of this lust-induced trance.

It's such an unexpected sound that it takes me a second to place it. It's laughter. The kind of laughter that comes deep in the belly, gaining energy as it travels through the throat until it finally explodes out of the lips. It's the kind of laughter that makes you fold your body in half and cross your arms around your middle.

Which is exactly what Winter is doing.

Winter is laughing. With his whole body. A body that is currently half naked right in front of me.

And all I can think about is how I'd do nameless things to hear the sound of his laughter again.

I feel like I'm in one of Movieland's sci-fi movies, and I've just been transported to an alternate universe, one where Winter Davis doesn't have a diabolical personality. One where he can... actually enjoy himself. And look stupidly good doing it.

The whole scene is so bewildering, I don't even notice one of the seamstresses approaching me.

"Hi," she greets me with a friendly wave. I take her in, noticing her young she is and wonder if she should be here at all.

"You must be Luiza," the older seamstress calls from the floor where she's marking the hem of Winter's walnut-brown pants. "Anne Marie told us to expect you." There's a familiar curl to her words that make me wonder if, like me, English isn't her first language.

"Yes," I answer, and it's like my voice is the counter spell to the scene in front of me. The tap-tap-tap of Dorothy's heels. Like a switch flipped, and we're back from whatever alternative universe we were just in.

Winter unfurls his body to his full height, his shoulders looking even broader without a shirt to cover them. The hands that were wrapped around his belly drop to his sides, curling into fists. His face changes entirely. Gone are the wide smile that forms dimples at the sides and gleam in his eyes from when he was laughing just a second ago.

Good to see you too, buddy.

I walk to the center of the room alongside the younger seamstress, approaching them carefully, my eyes on Winter as he tracks my steps. "Hi. Yes, I'm Luiza."

"Hi, Luiza. I'm Adriana." She stands up from her knees and waves me forward. "Come, come. It's good we have you both here. We can see the full effect of the costumes since you'll be together in a lot of the scenes."

"Have they found the shoes yet?" the younger one asks Adriana, who's clearly the one running the show here.

"Ay Diós, we need the shoes for her." She stops for a second, hands in her hips as she makes up a plan. "Bella, go

over and ask Anne Marie about the shoes. Tell her they haven't been delivered yet, and we need them if we're fitting Luiza for her wedding gown. If she tells you to talk to Richard..." Adriana sighs. "Come get me, and I'll deal with him myself."

Bella hurries out the door, and Adriana places a hand on the right side of Winter's hip. His comfort around her makes me wonder if they knew each other before, or if this is how he is with everyone but me.

"Honey," she says to him, "let me get Luiza in her dress, and I'll be right back with you, ok?"

"Don't worry, Adri." His voice is like honey when he speaks to her. It's so different than what it sounds like when he's talking to me, I have that weird feeling he's been dubbed. "I'm good here."

She gives him a light tap on his arm. "I know you look good up here like a Greek god and all," she teases, giving him a smile, and I swear to God I think I see his skin turn a pale shade of pink. "But you can step down for now if you want to. There's coffee right there. Help yourself." She nods to a table I hadn't noticed right by the door.

"C'mon, sweetie. I've got your gown ready for you to try, and it's so gorgeous you'll cry when you put it on."

Adriana beckons me to an area isolated from the rest of the room only by a folding screen. She's a tiny woman, quite a few inches shorter than me, and she's most likely in her sixties, but her small figure barely contains her loud energy. Or her strength, for that matter. She takes the dress off the hanger that's placed a good foot above her head and drapes it over a table.

"Here, you take off your clothes and put this on. I'll be right outside if you need me."

She walks away before I can say anything. Adriana is intense, moving around at a speed that belies her years.

I close my eyes, as I take a centering breath. Counting to ten, I open them again and stare at the wedding gown.

I can only see its back, but it already looks as beautiful as Adriana described it. I wonder if she made it.

I'm only wearing a summer dress today, so it's quite easy to strip off my clothes. In my underwear, I debate whether I should keep my bra or not, but when I lift the dress and see the neck, I realize the bra I'm wearing today won't work with it. I take it off too and hang it neatly over my dress on a hook on the wall.

Finally stripped down to my panties, I step inside the dress. All the fabric pooling around my feet weighs much more than I'd expect. I pull it up, and it glides smoothly over my hips. I push my right arm through the sleeve, and with a little bit of effort I manage to tuck in my left arm too.

I haven't even zipped it up yet, and the image reflected on the mirror is already breathtaking. Adriana was right. This gown is so beautiful I could cry.

I've never put on something so gorgeous before.

The dress is crafted in a mixture of luxurious fabrics, ivory brocade threaded with golden to create a delicate pattern of vines on the entire length of the dress. The shoulders and sides are covered in an overlapping layer of velvet in a soft and ethereal champagne hue. The velvet bodice laces up under my chest to accentuate my curves, giving me a regal aura, and the sleeves of the same material are long and flared, flowing in cascading ruffles from my elbows down to my hands. The square neckline is adorned with intricate lace and dainty embroidery, resulting in an image that reflects the grandeur, enchantment, and romanticism of the occasion.

The full effect of the dress is majestic. It makes me feel sophisticated, and I'm not even styled to wear it yet.

Reaching behind me, I blindly try to find the zipper I know is hidden somewhere between the many layers of fabric, strategically placed so it disappears when I'm fully dressed. But even when I turn around to look in the mirror, I can't find the zipper in my reflection.

"Adriana?" I call out weakly. I doubt she hears me, but I can't bring myself to call her any louder. Not knowing who's also standing right there on the other side of this folding screen.

Only silence meets my calling.

Weighing my options, I decide to poke my head out to try to get her attention, but the first thing I see is a pair of eyes looking right at me. And they don't belong to the seamstress.

"Where's Adriana?"

"Stepped out," he replies in a clipped tone.

"Shit," I murmur.

He arches an eyebrow at me. "Need help with something?"

I consider saying yes, but I'd rather dive headfirst into a pool of needles than ask Winter for help. I hide behind the folding screen again and decide to wait for Adriana.

Surely, she won't take too long. And she'll come looking for me.

"Luiza." Winter's voice is much closer now. "Do you need help with the dress?"

"I'm fine."

"Luiza," he repeats, impatiently.

I turn around, ready to tell him to leave me alone, and gasp when I find him standing right there, looking at me with his eyes narrowed in impatience.

“I could’ve been naked!” I yelp, my hands instinctively going to my chest.

“You’re clearly not,” he points out, eyeing the gown. His eyes lingers on my body a little too long, and I feel like I’m naked under his gaze.

“You didn’t know that.” I tighten my arms in front of me, but with the low neckline of the dress, the movement only pushes my boobs further up. Winter’s eyes drop to my chest for a fraction of a second before he catches himself.

He clears his throat. “You need help,” he states, forgoing the question this time. He steps forward, the distance between us uncomfortably short for two people who despise each other. “What can I do for you?”

“You can leave me alone.”

Why is it that he brings out the worst in me every time? I always feel like a petulant child when I talk to him.

“Why do you always have to be so difficult?”

He closes the distance between us. If I raise my arm, I can touch him. I’m glad he’s put a robe on because I don’t know what would happen to my body if I had to be this close to his shirtless abs. “Turn around.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to argue. He places both hands on my shoulders, turning me on my heels as a yelp escapes my lips.

“Hey,” I complain, but the rest of the words get stuck in my throat once I find his gaze in the mirror and realize he’s looking at my naked back with darkened, lust-filled eyes. I watch as his throat works with a swallow, and he slowly raises

his hands to reach for the fabric of the dress. I close my eyes, not sure I can watch any longer without combusting in flames.

The moment his knuckles make contact with my naked skin, I have to stifle a gasp and command my lungs to take full breaths instead of the short ones that do nothing to lower my heartbeat.

Winter adjusts the fabric, pulling both parts closer, and the force of the movement makes me lose my balance and take a step back, right into his hard chest.

He grunts, placing a hand on my waist to steady me and move me away from him.

If goosebumps erupting all over my body at his proximity hadn't thrown me so out of sorts, I might have taken offense, but I don't have it in me to read too much into it.

Winter meets my eyes in the mirror.

The hunger that was there has been replaced by a look of pain.

I'm the first to look away.

His right hand finds the zipper again, and when he tugs it upward, it slides smoothly for a second, and then stops.

His left hand leaves my hips, and even through all the layers of fabric, it leaves a burning sensation trailing behind. Pulling the bottom of the zipper down with his left hand, he tries to tug it upward with his right one again. It moves a little more, but it gets stuck around my ribcage.

A cold dread starts at the base of my spine. I do my best to shake it off. I know if I get nervous, I'll start to sweat and make it that much more difficult.

This dress doesn't fit me. It won't close.

"Just leave it," I say, stepping forward to put some distance between our bodies. The proximity to Winter has my

brain in a fog.

For the first time, he does as I say without fighting me. It almost feels worse. The idea he might be pitying me making the situation infinitely worse.

“I don’t get it,” he says, and I turn to face him, a quizzical look on my face. What doesn’t he get? That the dress is too small for me? That I wish he hadn’t been a witness to it? “Why would they make the costumes before getting our measurements?” he asks in a casual tone. “It feels like a waste of time, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t.”

He pretends I didn’t say anything.

“They had to change so much of some of mine that they might as well have started it all over again.”

I pretend he didn’t say anything.



“It’s okay,” I tell Adriana for the millionth time.

It isn’t the first time this has happened to me, and I’m sure it won’t be the last.

“They didn’t give us any directions other than to get the costumes made. Every princess so far...” She shakes her head in shame. “I shouldn’t have assumed. I’m so sorry, Luiza.”

I do appreciate her for taking accountability. For understanding that by assuming characters are thin by standard, she is perpetuating the problem.

“It’s really okay,” I tell her with the most genuine smile I can muster. I’m dying inside, but hell will freeze over before I let Winter notice that. “You’re fixing the dress, and it’ll look great, I’m sure.”

“It will,” she promises me. “You’ll be the most gorgeous princess this park has ever seen.” She turns to Winter. “Don’t you think so?”

My traitorous heart skitters inside my chest.

Without missing a beat, Winter’s eyes find mine and he says, “I know so.”

Is he joking right now? Teasing me? He must be.

Right?

Then why do his eyes look like he’s never been more serious in his life? Why are they looking at me so intently, like they’re trying to trap me inside their scorching darkness?

“Oh,” Adriana coos. “You two will look so good on stage together. I can’t wait for this show to start.”

“That’s true. And your outfits will be amazing. You’ll see. Good thing Winter’s costumes fit him like a glove. We can spend more time working on Luiza’s and making sure hers are perfect too,” Bella comments.

I look at Winter, but he’s looking down, averting my eyes. He lied to me. Back behind the folding screen, he said his outfits were totally altered too.

I hate that he did that. I hate how condescending this feels like.

But there’s a part of me that knows he did it so I wouldn’t feel bad, and this part, however small it is, feels inclined to be grateful. What no part of me understands is why he would do that.



Chapter 09

IT'S THE DAY BEFORE OUR FIRST REHEARSAL, AND Adriana has already fixed my dress. She wouldn't let me leave before promising she'd prioritize it, even though I assured her I was fine waiting for the next fitting.

She called me yesterday asking if I could come in today to try it on again. She also told me she had my other outfits ready for the first fitting.

When I got to wardrobe, I found Adriana and Bella chatting excitedly, waiting for me. It's clear that the two women share a special bond; they work perfectly in sync, Bella always foreseeing Adriana's needs a second before she voices them.

"You arrived at the perfect time," Adri calls when I open the door slowly, my knocking going unanswered again. "We were just going to get a piece of cake. Do you want some?"

I smile at them. "I'm good, but you guys go ahead and have some. I can wait."

"Nonsense." Adriana waves the idea off. "We can eat later."

"Please, I insist." I feel bad keeping them from their snack. "The cake looks delicious. Go have a bite."

"It does, doesn't it?" It's Bella who says it. "Davis just dropped it here this morning because Adri told him yesterday this was her favorite. I didn't expect famous people to be so nice, you know?"

Adriana cuts her a firm glare, and Bella closes her mouth quickly. I move behind the screen to change into the gown

while they eat, pretending I didn't see any of that interaction, but the knowledge of Winter going out of his way to bring them cake takes up an unbelievable amount of space in my mind.

Looking at the mirror, I don't even try to hide my excitement. Being dressed as Melina makes this seem much more real.

The grandiose gown has been opened up, and now it fits me perfectly, both in my torso and my arms. The bodice hugs my curves tight around the waist, pushing my breast up under the lace neckline. The effect is so outstanding I almost wish I could wear something like this all the time. Almost, because despite looking lavish, the dress isn't the most comfortable.

The next outfit I try on, the one I'll be wearing in the scene we did for the audition, is a grey wool skirt that cuts around my ankles, paired with an off-white, button-up shirt under a light brown vest. The fabric is worn out, the colors faded as if they've seen better days. I look like someone who hasn't showered in a long time when I'm wearing it. I guess it makes sense, since it's for Melina escaping her kidnapper.

"They'll have to work on your hair," Bella says, and I reflexively bring a hand to smooth down my waves. "It can't look this pretty after God knows how long Melina is held captive."

I give her a shy smile.

"That was a very weird way to compliment my hair, but thanks." I'm not good at receiving compliments. It was so rare growing up, I don't think I've ever learned how. Whenever I was complimented, it was always attached to a criticism on my body and ended up doing more harm than good.

You have such a pretty face.

If you just lost a few kilos, you'd be the most beautiful girl.

This outfit is so slimming.

I wish I had your confidence to wear tight clothes like that.

You don't look fat in your pictures.

After a while, I began dreading any comments on my appearance at all, even the positive ones.

It was part of the reason I loved acting so much. When I was in character, none of these comments were about me. And in someone else's skin, I could just make believe that criticism didn't affect me at all.

When Adriana and Bella finally dismiss me after trying on all my outfits and marking them up for adjustments, it's almost five in the afternoon.

The elevator stops on the fourth floor, and I'm so tired I barely notice someone walking in. It's only when my name is called that I look up to find Graham watching me carefully.

"Wherever you were just now," he jokes, pointing a finger in the general direction of my temple. "that's where I'd like to go too."

"If I'm being honest, I'm so tired I had nothing in my mind. It was just blank. Standby mode."

"That's a bummer." He presses the button to the ground floor. I guess I hadn't even thought of doing that. "I was going to ask you if you were up for a coffee or something sweet. Maybe Sprinkled Dreams, and we can do both."

I've been promising him a date ever since I gave him my number at Olivia's birthday. He didn't call this a date exactly, but I guess if I do it now, I'd stop feeling bad about always telling him I'm busy.

And it's Sprinkled Dreams. My favorite.

"Sprinkle Dreams sounds great," I say.

He lights up like a kid getting a gift. "Really? Awesome. Now?"

I tap on the screen of my phone to check the time. "You're off already?"

"It's no biggie." He shrugs like leaving work early is something he does all the time.

We make our way to the park through the hidden employee gate that leads right next to my favorite bakery.

At this time of day, the place is almost empty, save for a guest here and there stopping by for a much-needed energy recharge on their way out of the park after a day of fun.

We stand in line behind a couple of teenagers, Graham running a restless hand through his hair that's already messy in that I-spent-the-whole-day-raking-my-hands-through-it kind of way. He's wearing a plaid short-sleeve shirt, buttoned all the way up to the collar, and his khaki pants are made fresher by the jogger cut, wrapping tightly around his ankles. On his feet, white sneakers finish the outfit. He could've easily walked straight out of a California lifestyle magazine.

As always, I get a banana and dulce de leche waffle and ask them to sprinkle cinnamon on top of it all. I order a vanilla Frappuccino to go with it. Graham chooses a peanut butter low carb brownie and coffee black that makes me stifle a judgmental sneer.

We take seats at an outside table, letting the bustle of tourists serve as backdrop for our conversation. I can sense he's nervous, but I doubt it's because we're out together.

"So," he starts, scratching his nonexistent beard, "there's actually something I wanted to talk to you about."

“Oh?” I hope this isn’t about us dating because that’s not a conversation I’m looking forward to.

“Yes. Yeah, I—” He fiddles with his coffee cup a couple of times. “Look, I want you to know this isn’t because I’m... I mean, we’re not—”

“Graham,” I say, trying to sound welcoming. “Take a breath.” I inhale, encouraging him to do the same. “It’s okay. What do you wanna tell me?”

“Yeah, so, I know this...” This time, his voice sounds firmer as he motions between us. “This isn’t happening. Like, it’s okay. I got that after like the third invitation you turned down.”

Shoot. “Sorry.”

“No, no. It’s okay. For real. So, like.” He says one *like* every three words. Has he always sounded this immature? “I don’t want you to think that like I’m telling you this because I’m jealous or something like that, you know?”

“Okay...”

“It’s about Davis. Winter Davis.”

I freeze, the fork midway to my mouth.

“He’s not who you think he is. I know...” He purses his lips, seeming uncomfortable talking about this. “I know you’re working together now, but like I needed to tell you what I know. Maybe... I don’t know, maybe you can keep a certain distance. I’m just telling you because like I worry about you, you know?”

He has my full attention. My beloved waffle forgotten on the plate. I wasn’t even aware Winter and Graham knew each other, let alone that they had history. Bad history, it seems.

“We were friends in college,” he says. I didn’t know Winter had gone to college. He must see the surprise on my

face because he explains, “Yeah. It was after *School Hallway*. He’d already been out of the public eye for a while before he started. Anyway, we were roommates. Super close. Like, we wouldn’t do anything without the other. We chose our gen-eds together and everything. He was like my best friend.”

I sit straighter. Whatever he’s about to tell me, it won’t be good.

“When his father passed away, I went home with him. It was the beginning of our sophomore year. We were like super young. I helped him in the week of the funeral. Was by his side when he buried his father. I stayed around for another week just so he wouldn’t be alone. It was like half a month away from school, but I didn’t care. He needed me, so I was there. He was like a brother to me. We were inseparable.”

“That semester, he barely made through his classes. He was a mess. But I helped him in any way I could. I studied with him. I made sure he was completing his assignments, attending classes. I didn’t let him drown. He was...” His voice shakes, and he pauses then, adjusting himself on the chair.

I can’t picture the Winter I know going through something like this. It’s like two images I’m trying hard to overlay, but they don’t match. Winter seems so tough all the time, it’s hard to imagine him so... vulnerable.

“He was a mess. The guy you’ve met,” Graham says, answering my unvoiced comments, “he’s nothing like the guy he was back then. The guy that I had to pull out of the gutter so many times would’ve never made it this far. But he did. And he did it by stepping all over the only person that offered him a helping hand.”

“What do you mean?”

“Davis was a film major. He had to write a feature for one of his classes, but he couldn’t find it in him to do it. It was one of those mandatory classes, and if he didn’t, he wouldn’t have

the pre-req for a bunch of other classes in his senior year. I was studying screenwriting, so I offered to help him.”

“Together, we wrote the script. The movie was based on our friendship. Think Ben and Matt but in feature film format. One couldn’t write it without one another, and we didn’t want to. Like, we had such a great time writing that movie. For the first time in over a year, I saw my friend come back. He was smiling again. He was happy. He had found his footing, and I was so damn happy for him. It killed me to see him the way he was. But I was so busy being happy for him, I didn’t realize he was planning on selling the movie without me. Without giving me credit for it. He never consulted me. He just went behind my back and talked to producers he knew from his time in *School Hallway*. In the blink of an eye, I saw all the work I’d put in that project become nothing.”

“Oh my God,” I gasp. I’d be livid if anyone did something like this to me, let alone my best friend. I can’t imagine Cece hurting me this way. “What happened?”

“Nothing. I couldn’t prove anything. He started pre-production earlier this year, but from what I’ve heard, it fell through. I don’t know if he’ll try again.”

“Que filho da puta.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. It’s a natural reaction, defaulting to Portuguese when I’m overcome by feelings. That earns me a sheepish smile from Graham.

“Somehow, that sounded extremely cute and dangerously aggressive at the same time.”

“Graham, that’s so awful. I’m so sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” He reaches out and strokes his thumb over the back of my hand soothingly. “There’s only one person to blame here, and it’s Davis.”

My first impression of him wasn’t wrong.

I should've known to trust my instincts. He was starting to fool me. I was starting to believe that I had been too quick to judge him, but now I know I was right all along. Winter isn't a nice person. And he isn't just a rude, snobby asshole.

What he did to Graham is on a different level. It's unforgivable. He stole his work. His art.

I feel like screaming. I want to purge all this frustration from inside of me. I feel betrayed. Used. I feel stupid. I should've never trusted him.



Chapter 10

REHEARSALS START THE NEXT DAY, AND TO SAY IT'S awkward is underplaying it. I don't think I can look at Winter. I'm afraid I'll want to wrap my hands around his throat. Or snap at him for being so cruel.

The entire cast is supposed to meet at the 441 building, but fate decides to play a little joke on me, and I end up running into him right at the Sheriff's Gate, the employees' entrance on Film Strip.

I haven't seen him since that day at wardrobe, and somehow, I'd forgotten how fucking handsome he is. I think after yesterday, I'd expected him to look more like a cartoon villain, so I'm even madder that he still looks this good.

"Good morning," he says, but I pretend I don't hear it and just keep walking. I feel him following close behind. "Good morning," he repeats, louder.

I keep walking, and Winter quickens his stride until he's walking by my side. He turns to look at me, but I keep my eyes straight ahead. "Good morning, Sunshine."

"Don't call me that."

"So you did hear me."

I turn around so quickly my hair whips him in the face. His smug smirk makes my blood boil. Gosh, how I want to wipe that smirk off his face.

When we reach the meeting point, nobody's there. I look around, confused.

"Were we supposed to meet here?"

Winter is by my side, but when I look at him, he's pretending to read a flyer pinned to the bulletin board by the entrance.

"Winter," I call his attention.

"Oh, now you're talking to me?"

I roll my eyes. "Emily told us to meet here, didn't she?"

He looks at his watch. "She did. But she also told us to meet here at a quarter to nine. You're late."

"No, she said a quarter past nine."

He pulls his text thread with the production assistant and shows me the last text. "A quarter to nine."

"Fuck." I check my email inbox because, unlike him, I'm not in texting terms with the crew. Sure enough, right next to meeting time, it says a quarter to nine. "Fuck."

"That's not a very professional look for your first rehearsal, now is it?"

"You're one to talk. Didn't you just get here as well?"

"I was just grabbing my phone in the car. Apparently, I'm the only one who has Princess Melina's phone number saved in my contacts, and we had to figure out why she was late for the first day of rehearsal."

"Fuuuck," I say one more time. This definitely does not look good for me. I start walking in the direction of the employee gate, but Winter holds my wrist, stopping me.

"Let go." I yank my arm free. "You've already stalled me long enough. I bet you weren't going to say anything at all, were you? You'd just keep me here waiting, so you'd look good, and I'd look like the unprofessional, inexperienced, amateur—"

“Fucking hell, I was joking,” Winter says. “I’m also just now getting here too. If you’re looking bad, so am I.”

“I don’t give a shit if you look bad.” It’s not true. I do. I really want him to look bad. “I just want to go and apologize for being late.”

He opens his mouth to respond but thinks better of it. Shaking his hand, he turns around and starts walking in the opposite direction.

Whatever.



When I get to the theater, Winter’s already there, and I have no idea how. But I don’t ask. And I don’t ask why he was waiting for me outside, either.

The entire cast and the director are gathered in a rehearsal room, and they all look our way when we walk in. They were clearly in the middle of something, the disruption pulling everyone’s attention away from what they were doing, but it isn’t me they’re looking at. It’s Winter.

Every pair of eyes in the room is immediately drawn to him, like moths to a flame. Even the air shifts. The only person who doesn’t seem affected by Winter’s presence is Cam, who smiles and waves at me. I give him a shy smile in return.

“Get back to the exercise, guys,” Emily orders before walking to us. Slowly, the groups resume their talking, and the quietness of the room fades into a chaotic cacophony of voices. “What happened?”

“I’m sorry, Em. I thought call time was a quarter past nine, and I told Luiza so yesterday,” Winter lies so easily I’m a second too late to understand what he’s doing. He’s taking the blame for the both of us.

“Look, Davis, I know how you feel about this,” she whispers, but the terse tone of her voice makes it sound loud as a yell to my ears. “But I need you to take this seriously.”

“I will,” he promises.

She looks at me then, and all I can do is give her a quick apology for being late, which she accepts easily, believing the blame is on Winter.

Emily looks much more approachable today than she did on the day of the auditions. She’s wearing a jumpsuit with short, flowy sleeves, and a messy ponytail that makes her look casual and friendly.

I wasn’t sure how I should dress for this. I know there’ll be running in my scenes, so I chose to put on some comfortable clothes. The best I could do that wasn’t gym shorts was a pair of black cotton gaucho pants and a tank top in the same color.

I finally take a good look at the room and realize it looks pretty much the same as the one they used as a waiting room during auditions about a month ago, except that one was on the ground floor and this one’s on the top floor. With its grey carpet and basic-looking desks, the room looks more like a cheap college classroom than a well-respected theater.

“Guys, thank you all for doing the warmup exercises,” Emily calls everyone’s attention to her, standing in front of the U-shaped set of tables. Winter and I quickly find the last two empty chairs, which happen to be side by side. “I’m really excited for this project, and I’m sure we have the best cast for it right here in this room. Your auditions blew me away, and

you wouldn't be here if I didn't believe in your talent. Every single one of you.

“Let's get started. We'll do a read-through of the play, just to warm up our engines, and then we'll do a brainstorming session to discuss the script and how we're approaching it from each character's perspective. I want you to know that I'm open to your opinions. Your suggestions are always welcome.”

I risk a glance Winter's way to see what he thinks of Emily's openness to receiving ideas from such *inexperienced* actors only to find him already looking at me.

“I'll read the directions and the narrator,” Emily explains, picking up the script in front of her. I do the same with the one in front of me. “Luiza, you're up first.”

I take a deep breath, look down at the pages in my hands, and immerse myself completely in the life of Princess Melina.



Having a part with only a few scenes during the first act means a whole lot of waiting for me. When the time comes for Arthur to rescue Melina about halfway through the play, I can't wait to get back in the game.

After I'm back, we finish reading everything way too quickly, and then we're sent on a break before we have to come back for another pass of the text.

I don't imagine we'll have crafts every day for rehearsal, but today being our first day, we're met with a banquet as soon as we leave the rehearsal room.

I grab an apple and a chocolate chip cookie and make my way to a window at the end of the corridor, skipping the coffee even though I could really use some. I don't see any milk around, and I've learned my lesson a long time ago about trying to drink American coffee without it.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Looking up, I find Winter standing in front of me. His eyes dance between me and something out the window. He looks uncomfortable, but I don't feel like making it easier for him. I only arch my brows in response.

He takes it as a yes. He opens his mouth but closes it without saying anything. Then he takes a breath before trying again. “I... You...” He rakes a hand through his hair. “Can you move, please?”

“What?”

He places both hands on my shoulders, like he did a few days ago at the fitting room, and moves me away from the window.

“What the fuck, Winter?” I shrug his hands off me, trying to ignore how my skin quickly responds to his touch.

“This is glass.” He points to the window where I was leaning. “And we're very fucking high up. You fall, you die.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” I argue. “I fall, I sue Movieland, and I become a billionaire.”

I don't know where that answer came from. Winter and I are not joke-sharing friends. We're no sort of friends. But when a genuine smile curves his lips upward, and I get a flash of those dimples again, something tugs at my chest and a weird feeling happens in my stomach.

“What was the question, Winter?”

He gives me a confused glare. He clearly forgot why he approached me. “Right.” His right hand goes to the back of his neck. “You had a fitting yesterday, right?”

I nod but don’t say anything. Is he going to talk about the dress? Is he going to ask if they managed to make it close?

“Did you meet with Graham afterwards?”

“What?” I blurt out, taken by surprise. This was *not* where I was expecting this conversation to go.

“How do you know him?” he asks, as if this is a totally normal conversation. A topic we discuss every day.

“He works here,” I offer as a way to try to understand where he’s getting at, but I can already feel rage starting to boil in my blood. Is he really going to bring this up? Right now?

“He’s working here?” He’s clearly surprised by this piece of information, and I wonder if he’s afraid his little secret will come out with Graham being around.

“Why?” I arch an eyebrow in challenge.

“What— Are you—” He shakes his head, thinking better about what to say next. “How did you meet him?”

It’s practically the same thing he already asked me, but I know what means.

“At a bar,” I answer honestly. Then, a memory flashes in my mind. Winter’s body pressed to mine as he kept me from falling. I quickly shove it away. “You were there. At Olivia’s birthday.”

“That’s what I thought,” he explains. “He must have seen us there together.”

“Why do you ask?” I don’t know what I expect him to say. I don’t know if I’m expecting him to prove me right by lying or to come clean. Either way, he’d come out looking bad.

But he's saved by Emily calling us back inside the rehearsal room.



The Reel Pub is always crowded no matter what day of the week. Even today, a Tuesday, usually the least crowded day at Movieland, the bar is full. Team members are the majority, but there's a good number of tourists too. And today, the theater cast has joined the crowd.

To celebrate our first day of rehearsal, Cam decided to get everyone together for a drink or two, and because it's Cam, they all came.

"Has Julia arrived?" he asked me about half an hour after we get there. "I asked her to come, but I don't know..."

It's adorable, really. How obviously enamored he is.

"She'll be here, I'm sure," I comfort him. Knowing my sister, she's home freaking out about leaving her studies, or getting up the courage to make her way here.

Ever since I started at the theater department, with all the paperwork, tests, and fittings, I feel like I haven't seen much of her. Or Olivia, for that matter. Julia's classes are getting harder and harder every month, and she just buries her face in her textbooks from the moment she gets home to the moment she goes to bed. Olivia's classes are about to start, but she's already getting fewer shifts at Movieland, and because we never go in at the same time anymore, we're not coming together either.

When Julia arrives at The Reel Pub, with Olivia and Cece following behind, I feel like I haven't seen them in weeks.

“Oh my God! What are you doing here?” I hug my best friend, surprised at her presence.

She hugs me right back. “I stopped by your house, and they were on their way here.”

“I thought you’d like the company. How was the first read-through?” Julia asks, hugging me when Cece lets me go. Her enthusiasm is so genuine I feel my heart squeeze in my chest. No matter how hard she’s studying, how focused she is in her own career, she always makes time to worry about everyone else too.

“Kinda hard to believe it’s actually happening,” I tell her but leave it at that. I don’t need to tell her how hard it was to play opposite Winter. I haven’t even told her what I learned about him, and this isn’t a conversation to have at a bar.

Soon, Julia leaves to find Cam, and Olivia turns to ask me if I’ve seen Graham.

“I haven’t, but I don’t know if he knew about this,” I say. “I’ll text him. Graham is always game to come here.”

Winter chooses this exact moment to walk by and stops when he hears Graham’s name. He can’t stop himself. Olivia notices the awkwardness between us and decides she wants none of that, so she leaves to go find her friends from the front gate team, taking Cece with her.

“Are you friends with Graham now?” he asks, sounding irritated.

I scoff. “What if I am?”

“You...” He rakes a hand through his hair and scratches the back of his neck. “Just be careful around him.”

I snort a laugh. One of those short, loud sounds that come from deep within. He cocks his head at me. But I don’t say

anything because if I bring up this topic, I'll end up saying more than I should after promising Graham I'd keep his secret.

Colin, of all people, shows up to save me from the growing silence between us. "Olivia told me you were here with Davis."

That explains why he looks like he ran here. I think Winter's got himself a fanboy, and right now, I could use a buffer. Even if it's Colin.

"Why don't we go grab a table?"

Quickly, the table fills up. Cece and my sisters have joined us, my friend sitting on my left, Julia right across from me with Cam to her right and Olivia on his other side. But it's more than that. Almost every cast member has followed suit, some even choosing to stand up around our table just so they can be close to us.

To Winter, I quickly realize.

He's got a magnetism about him that just draws people in. I bet it has more to do with his fame than his charming personality.

Because he definitely doesn't have one of those.

He becomes a target within a couple of minutes, questions being thrown at him at such speed I almost feel sorry for the guy.

"How was working with Vin Diesel when he was a guest on the show?"

"Is it true that Victoria Justice was supposed to play your love interest but she rejected the role?"

"Did you hook up with Ali Hoang?"

"Fucking hell, no," he says so quickly and emphatically all questions come to a halt. "She played my sister in the show. And she's like a real sister to me."

“My bad,” Matthew apologizes, bringing his hands up, palm out. He actually looks like he’s not sorry at all, but he also knows better than to be on Winter’s bad side.

“So, what about you?” It takes me a while to realize that the question is directed to me, but it takes me just a second to recognize the owner of that high-pitched voice. It’s one of the girls that auditioned for Melina. The one that made the comment about diversity hires.

What is she doing here?

“What about me?” All eyes have shifted from Winter to me, including his, and I don’t like the weight of this attention. It feels different than the one offered to him. He was being admired. I’m being scrutinized.

“Where have you worked before? Anything we might’ve seen?”

“If you’ve been to Movieland in the past six months, you might’ve seen me in the front gate.” That earns me laughter from some of the growing audience around our table. Fellow front gate friends holler and clap as if I just scored for our team.

“Isn’t it weird, though,” the girl insists, “that they’d hire someone who doesn’t have any experience for the lead?” She drops her eyes to my body, slowly moving them up. “I wonder if there was any other reason for them to hire you.”

“There is,” Winter says next to me, and I prepare for his commentary, which can’t be good. His knee moves when he turn to her, and the brief contact is enough to send my body aflame. I move away, refusing to accept the way my body reacts to his. “They hired her because she’s a good actress.”

My jaw drops as I turn to him, but he quickly places a finger under my chin and closes my mouth.

“What?” he whispers, just for me to hear. “It’s true.”

“So, are you staying in the country forever now? How does it work?” The question comes from a guy I used to work with at the front gate.

“Well—” I start answering, but Olivia cuts me off.

“Of course. We’re all looking for husbands so we can stay,” she says, delivering the joke with a straight face. “Julia’s gotten ahead of us, but we’re all gonna get there someday.”

“Wait, you’re all Brazilians?” Colin asks the three of us.

“We’re sisters,” Olivia confirms. “And our mom sent us here to marry rich, you know?”

“Oh my God, Olivia.” Julia gently slaps her arm.

“I’m not opposed to the idea,” Cece says next to me. I turn to her. “What? It’s not like we never talked about it. You know a lot of people from school did it.”

“I’d marry Luiza if she wanted to,” Colin blurts out, and Winter’s head whips his way, eyes narrowed so close together, I’m not sure he can see in front of him. “For the right price, of course.”

“Isn’t that illegal?” Olivia asks.

“So is marrying for the green card,” Colin counters.

“Not if you actually love the person.” Olivia runs her eyes between Julia and Cam, and they both blush under her gaze. It’d be adorable if the whole situation wasn’t so ridiculous.

“It’s not the only way to stay,” I try to explain, but no one wants to know about grad school or visa sponsorship, and soon the conversation moves on to the next topic.

Still, every now and then, I have a feeling I’m being watched, and when I look his way, I find Winter staring at me, but I don’t like what I see. It’s like his eyes have gone back to

looking like a cloud of darkness, and the amber flames have been subdued.

Winter's barely finished his beer when he stands up, grabs his baseball cap and puts it on, then drops a fifty-dollar bill on the table. He looks at Cam to ask if he's ready to go, but it's clear Cam is as confused as I am by his leaving so abruptly.

"I... Uh... I was gonna give Julia a ride home." Cameron's eyes sweep over us as if asking for help, but Winter's fierce glare keeps us all from interfering.

"She can get a ride with her sisters," Winter grunts.

"I can give them all a ride back," Colin offers. I have no fucking idea how this night turned so crazily on its head, but apparently Colin will be driving me and my sisters home. When Julia tells Cam it's okay, he finally gives in.

"Great," Winter growls. "Let's go, then."

"We're splitting the check," I say because none of this makes sense.

"I got it." Winter doesn't look my way when he says it.

"You shouldn't have. We're splitting." I stand up too.

"I said I got it, Luiza."

Everyone stands up now, the joyful mood of the night ruined because of the annoying grump. The people who were standing around have scattered, leaving us to deal with the awkward silence as we walk out of the bar, everyone fully aware that something's going on, but no one knows what. I, for one, have no idea what happened to sour Winter's mood.

As we say our goodbyes, Cam turns to give Julia a quick peck. "I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Okay," she agrees.

“Love you, bye.” Cam freezes. Julia’s eyes widen. He opens and closes his mouth. Then, Winter places a heavy hand on his shoulder, beckoning him to leave, and Cam does, without saying anything else or looking back.

“Have you two...” Cece asks her, but Julia shakes her head.

“Nope, first time.” We all squeal in joy for her, our spirits lifted in the blink of an eye thanks to Cam.

“Alright, who’s ready to roll?” Colin asks, and not even he is able to ruin our night.



Chapter 11

AFTER THE FIRST DAY, REHEARSALS ARE MOVED TO THE real stage. For a few days, it's easy to pretend Winter and I aren't in the same play. I rehearse my scene with Cameron a couple of times, but we haven't moved on to more of my scenes yet, so I don't need to exchange words with Winter.

And he seems okay with that. He doesn't look for me.

The following week, when our first scene together is on the schedule, I put on a brave face. I need to be professional about this. My personal feelings for Winter cannot come with me to the stage.

Unless, of course, I can channel them into Melina's feelings. When she fights back with him before recognizing her long-lost friend, I put all my rage into it. Emily cuts me off in the middle of the scene.

"Luiza, sweetie, Melina is scared, remember? Not angry. She's just scared, and she doesn't recognize Arthur. Let's try again."

We take it from the beginning of the scene again. Winter chases after me on the stage where later there will be trees, and I run away from him. When he finally reaches me, I fight him off without using all my strength this time.

Emily cuts in again. "You're holding back now."

I sigh, frustrated. I need to find the sweet spot. I can't be too angry, but I can't be too meek either. I have to find a way to forget this is Winter and see him solely as Arthur. I can't risk losing my job because of him.

He's already ruined Graham's career. I won't let him ruin mine too.

On the third time, Emily cuts us again, and I can see that her frustration is on the verge of becoming irritation.

"Winter, you're reuniting with the love of your life, for god's sake. Where's that chemistry we all saw in your audition, guys? There was so much tension we could've cut it with a knife, and now you're giving me nothing."

I hang my head low, feeling like a child being chastised. I hate that he's affecting how I perform. But I'm not the only who's doing a poor job. Winter's not in his best form either. Emily is right; we need to find a way to get back to what we showed in our chemistry test.

I just don't know how to do that.

"Let's take a break," Emily calls out. "Be back in twenty."

Sprinting out of the stage, I don't even stop to grab my homemade coffee from where I left it on the crafts table backstage. I make my way out the theater and into Movieland as fast as I can. I need to feel grounded again.

I wish I could make it to the front gate to see my former coworkers, but twenty minutes is too short a break to do that. Instead, I take a seat on the stonewall bench and watch as people come and go, stopping to take pictures with the theater.

Once, I was one of them. Walking around here with my eyes glued to every detail that makes this place magical. The lamp posts that look like they came straight out of a cartoon, the shops that sell props from favorite movies, the rides that make hearts race, the immersive live shows that put viewers in the action. Everything in Movieland is designed to fulfill the promise in its slogan: *Lights, Camera, Fun: Live the movie experience at Movieland!*

I used to be in awe of this place, but somewhere along these last months, I lost track of the wonder.

Movieland became my workplace, and the magic gradually faded away.

I can't pinpoint the moment I stopped being amazed by everything the park has to offer, but as I sit on this bench, I try to remind myself of the feeling of walking in here for the first time. That feeling of hope and excitement. That feeling of not knowing what's ahead but hoping for it to be something amazing.

The spark I had in my eyes when I came here for the first time probably left around the same time I started to doubt that the future held something good for me.

My timer buzzes on my phone, and I make my way back inside again, ready to make this scene work, no matter how many feelings I have to pretend don't exist.



The next day, when I get to rehearsal, Winter is the first person I see. He's standing by the door, as if guarding it, but as soon as I walk in, he turns away and finds Cameron across the backstage area.

But when I rest my coffee on the crafts table for the break, I notice he's watching me. My body still reacts to him, as if it didn't get the memo that we hate him. The disconnection between my brain and my body is clearer than ever.

He and Cam seem to be having an argument, but when they look my way, I avert my eyes, pretending I'm not paying

attention. I wish I could hear what they're saying. I wonder if Cam knows about Graham, if he's aware of Winter's wrongdoings.

I realize I need to talk to Julia. My sister needs to know that her boyfriend's friend is a scheming liar, who'll do anything to get ahead. Even betray his best friend.

Emily calls us to start rehearsals, and we do a run through the whole play. When we get to the second-to-last scene in the first act, where Melina escapes her captivity and starts running through the woods, I don't hold back.

My elbow accidentally hits Winter, and he doubles over in pain.

"It wasn't that hard," I complain, but then I see where his hands are, and the look of misery in his eyes.

"You hit my dick," he hisses, low enough that only I can hear him.

"I didn't mean to," I say. I know I should apologize, but I can't make myself do it. It wasn't on purpose, but oh well, the universe is clearly sending a message. "Believe me, touching your dick is the last thing I'd want."

He stares at me, and for a brief moment I see surprise in his eyes. It's a brief flash that I wouldn't have caught if I weren't looking.

Just as briefly, he closes his eyes tipping his head back, as he pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a deep breath.

"Are you good to go again?" Emily asks impatiently.

Winter's eyes find mine, and they're really dark. I think I might've pissed him off for real this time.

"Sorry," I say under my breath.

"No, you're not," he replies, stepping away.



When you have a dream job, you think you'd give it all for it. You like to imagine when you get the chance, you will not hold back. You'll do whatever it takes. At least, that's what we're told. That sacrifices have to be made. That we only learn how to value things when we have to give something up for it.

I can't count how many times I dreamed of becoming a paid professional actress. I wanted this ever since I realized that when acting, I could always be enough. That slipping into a character's skin made me feel confident, like it was a mask, a shield. No matter who I was playing, I could just tell myself that they were enough. And for the briefest of moments, for an hour or two, I'd feel it. I'd feel that I, too, was enough.

Regardless of the struggles my characters were put through, I'd always make sure that they felt they were enough. They were pretty enough. They were smart enough. They were talented enough. They were good enough. In doing so, I somehow tricked my brain into believing that, while I was them, I didn't have to worry about being enough myself.

It's always felt so good.

Acting is my safe haven. It's the only time in my life where I feel truly comfortable. I can be my truest self when I'm playing someone else, because in those moments I feel that I'm enough.

And I've already sacrificed so much for this career.

My mother's admiration. My father's companionship. I had to let go of so many invaluable things when I decided to

pursue this career in a different country that I'd like to think I wouldn't let anything else get in the way.

Not when this job is my only chance at a visa. And getting this visa is the only thing keeping me from having to go back to Brazil to work at my parents' clinic.

So, when I realize that this animosity between me and Winter is putting my dream at risk, all I want is to kill him. He doesn't get to take this from me.

"Luiza, sweetie," Emily starts after she resets the same scene for the third time.

"I know, I know." She doesn't have to tell me that I'm butchering it. I can't focus. I can't bring myself to get over my loathing for Winter. "I'm sorry."

When she sends everyone home for the day but asks me to stick around, I can't help but feel that this is it. My dream's been cut short. I'm not cut out for it. I'm not good enough. I just don't have it in me to get over my personal feelings and pretend everything is fine for the sake of the job. This is the one sacrifice I can't make. Maybe Winter was right, and I'm not professional enough. Maybe I didn't deserve this role after all.

Maybe my mother was right and this whole thing was a dream too farfetched to ever become true. Maybe that was why she agreed to it, in the first place. Because she knew that in the end, I'd go back to Brazil. Back to med school and to my parents' clinic.

"Is something wrong? Is there something I can do?" I never expected Emily to be so comforting. But then again, I've been accused a time or two of judging people too quickly. I did expect Emily to be the kind of director who says something once and only once. She's already called me out for not showing her the chemistry she expected. I thought for sure

she'd be firing me today after such a terrible performance. I didn't expect her to sound... worried about me.

"No, no," I try to reassure her, but even I can tell how uncertain my voice sounds. I try again. "It's okay. Everything's good. I promise."

"Hey, look," she says, holding my right shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze. "I know how much pressure you're under, okay?" She doesn't, but I nod, nonetheless.

"I'm good. I'm sorry." My voice sounds a million miles away. "I'll be better tomorrow, I promise."

"Did you know I was born in Uruguay?" she asks, and my eyes widen in surprise. She gives me a heartfelt smile. One I don't see her sharing around.

"I didn't know."

"Yeah, I don't..." She exhales a long breath. "I should talk more about it, but we all have our ways of dealing with things. Anyway, I know what it feels like not knowing whether you can stay or not. I remember how helpless I felt after I finished college. There wasn't much I could do to change my situation, but whatever I could, I did with my whole heart. I didn't hold back. I directed around fifty plays that year I was on my OPT. Most of them were unpaid gigs. I know it was a privilege being able to work for free, but I took every opportunity I could and held on to it. Fiercely.

"No one sponsored my visa after a year. I hadn't made lasting connections. But what I did have was my passion. And the growing portfolio I was building. For a few years, I stayed illegally. I was terrified ICE would knock at my door at any moment, but somehow, I still had the hope that one day I'd change my situation."

"How..." I don't need to finish the question.

“I’d love to say that it was the Ovation Awards nomination that granted me a O-1B visa. I tried, though. Right after I was nominated, my lawyer started the process of petitioning for the visa, but it was denied. By then, I was already engaged to my now-husband, so we just... decided to get married earlier rather than later. I became Mrs. Eddings, and I’ve been a legal resident for six years now. But look, I know how terrifying it is. And I vowed I’d never forget all I went through.”

If her speech is supposed to motivate me, I’m not sure it’s working. I understand where she was coming from, but all I can think is that even an O-1B visa is out of my reach. Those are only given to outstanding professionals with proven extraordinary abilities. I have nothing extraordinary to offer. And even when Emily did, she was still denied it.

Emily gives me a knowing smile, perfectly reading my mind. “You’ve created a good, established relationship with this company. Movieland has sponsored visas before, Luiza. All we have to do is show them you’re worth it. I’m here to help you do that, but there’s just so much I can do on my side. The rest is up to you. Get some rest and come back tomorrow ready to show them why they should sponsor your visa.”



I’m a completely different person when I arrive at rehearsals the next day.

I feel every single emotion Melina is feeling when she’s being forced into a marriage she doesn’t want. I can sense her dread as she makes her way down the aisle, and I translate it

into my body, every look, every wince, it all says the same: this is not the future I want for myself.

When Melina's kidnapped, there's a single moment of surprise. She's startled, scared. But once she realizes what's happening, relief washes over her. She's being freed from a fate she doesn't want. And even though this isn't how she imagined it would go, at least now she's got a chance to choose something else for her.

I understand Melina like I was never able before.

When my part is done, I'm beaming with excitement, and I leave the scene under the admiring applause of my castmates. It feels exhilarating. Emily is nodding approvingly, and at this moment, I feel like there's nothing I can't do.

On the side, I watch as the first half of the play unfolds without me. Leon and the King trying to come up with a plan to rescue Melina. Arthur finding out about her kidnapping through town gossip and deciding to look for Melina, the love of his life, on his own.

And then it's my turn again. I enter stage left, panting as Melina breaks free. I run through the woods on the stage, hitting my mark seamlessly. Arthur reaches me, and that's when everything changes.

There are many ways to play off this scene. I realize that maybe what we've been doing isn't working and decide to improvise a little, changing their encounter. So, when Winter's strong hands hold my arms to stop me from running, I don't fight back. I don't struggle to break free.

Instead, I lean on to him and let out a loud sigh of relief. I give Melina the hope of finding someone who's willing to help her.

I wasn't sure how Winter would react to it. He could freeze and not know what to do. He could follow my lead and

improvise the rest of the dialogue. Apparently, he could also push me back and give me a death stare.

“What are you doing?” Winter snaps.

We’re so close I can see the wrinkles in her eyes when he narrows them at me. His chest is heaving, but I don’t know if it’s because of the scene he just interrupted or because he hates me.

“I actually like that,” Emily calls from her place across the stage. “Let’s try this approach because I think maybe it’s the *click* we’ve been missing in this scene. So, instead of having Melina fight you, she’ll lean on you for help. And Arthur can be a little...”

“What if she’s relieved to find him? Not because it’s Arthur, but just because it’s someone to help?” I suggest. “And then he’s hurt when he realizes that because he thought she’d recognized him. We’d still have that moment of not knowing who he is.”

“That’s perfect.” Emily beams at me, and I feel my chest expand in pride.



Chapter 12

IT WOULDN'T BE AN EXAGGERATION TO SAY THAT FOR the next couple of weeks, my entire focus is on the play and getting it right. We're slowly advancing through the script in rehearsals, and the only thing I have in my mind is the need to nail every scene.

If I don't leave my all on that stage, I'm not doing my job right.

That means I'm leaving earlier in the morning and staying out later in the evening. I've barely seen my sisters since rehearsals started, but I'm sure they understand. This is what I've always wanted, and now that I have the chance to do it, I have to work my ass off for it.

It's an unlikely rainy day at the end of August, grey skies and heavy clouds throwing all Angelenos off. I swear, the first drop of water to fall from the sky seems to send everyone in SoCal in panic. Traffic becomes ten times worse, if that's possible. People get moody. The only good side to a rainy day in the middle of summer is that Movieland gets exponentially less crowded.

And the drought and wildfires, of course. The rain is important for them too.

Olivia finds me at the 441 building right after she clocks out. She's on her way to wardrobe and I, to one of the rehearsal rooms on the sixth floor. I'm having a hard time with a few lines that I want to go over, so I'm staying a little bit longer for that.

“Good, I was gonna look for you,” she says walking into the elevator behind me.

“What’s up?” Olivia hasn’t looked for me once since she started working here.

“Are rehearsals over?”

“Yeah, but I’m—”

She doesn’t even let me finish. Holding the door to the third floor open, she says, “You’re staying late.”

“Yeah, I need to go over some lines.”

“Can you come over early today? We haven’t seen you in forever.”

“I know, but I can’t.” I look at her hand still holding the door open. I want to tell her to let me go because I have things to do, but I don’t want to start another fight.

“Just once. I know you’re working super hard on the play and all, but just today. It won’t hurt to cut rehearsal short just once, right?”

I run a hand over my face, impatient.

“Olivia, it’s called working hard. Every day counts. When you want something hard enough, you’ll get it. You might not understand, but I can’t just decide not to work whenever I want.”

The words are out before I can hold them in. The plan not to start a fight flying over the window and landing with a splash dead on the floor.

“You know what? Screw you, Luiza. You’re so quick to throw stones at me, and you don’t even know me anymore. You haven’t for years. I don’t fucking know what I did to you, but I know damn well I don’t deserve the way you’ve been treating me. But even if I did, Julia sure doesn’t. And she needs you. She’s been miserable, and you haven’t even

noticed. Your sister is hurting, but I guess you're too busy working to care."

Her hand finally drops away from the door, and it slides close as I watch Olivia walk away.



I arrive at our apartment soaked. After trying and failing to rehearse for half an hour, I finally gave up and decided to go home.

Not that I hadn't believed Olivia, but she does have a flare for the dramatics. I don't think Julia's actually going through anything other than probably a hard time with her classes, but a heavy feeling in my stomach kept nagging at me until I got a bus home.

The house is quiet and gloomy. Almost as if the grey from outside had found its way in. Apart from the shower running, there's no sign of life inside. I'm not even sure Julia is home. What if I just wasted a few hours of rehearsal for nothing? For a tantrum my younger sister decided to throw?

But then I hear the soft sound of a page turning, and I know I'll find Julia buried in her textbooks in their bedroom.

Sure enough, I poke my head inside, and she's sitting at her desk, one hand holding her head and the other skimming over the page of a textbook.

"Hey."

Julia jumps in her chair. "Oh my God. You scared me. I didn't know you were home. What time is it?" She

immediately grabs her phone to check the time. I realize she's surprised to see me home so early.

"Came home early today. Studying?"

"Yeah, but I'm tired."

"Take a break. Let's get a bite to eat."

"You're wet," she points out, just now realizing the state I'm in.

"Have you looked outside?" She does, following my gaze out the window. "Is it too early for dinner?"

She shrugs. "When in Rome."

I get worried immediately. If there's one thing Julia hasn't adapted to since moving here, it's early dinner. Back in Brazil, we have dinner around eight or nine in the evening, but I've had some years to getting used to dinner when the sun's still out. Julia hasn't. And the fact that she doesn't have a problem with having dinner now, when it's barely six, lights up a warning sign in my brain.

"You okay?" I ask once she gets up to follow me into my room. I change out of my wet clothes before going to the kitchen.

"Yeah, why?"

"You said yes to dinner at six."

She rolls her eyes at me.

We start preparing the meal in companionable silence. Brazilian pancakes resemble crepes but are mostly eaten with savory fillings. I'm making Julia's favorite, pulled chicken with Catupiry, a creamy cheese we can only find at the Brazilian store. The smell of garlic and onion sizzling in the pan is like a portal transporting us back to our parents' home. Dad couldn't make anything without garlic and onion. He said food was tasteless without it. I never dared to disagree.

Olivia walks out of the bathroom drying her hair in her towel. She doesn't say anything, but she gives me a knowing look before shutting herself in her bedroom. I think she's giving me and Julia time to talk on our own.

"So," I start, handing Julia the first flat disk for her to fill up with the filling and roll it the way we do in Brazil. "Did anything happen?"

"Did Cam tell you?" Her question catches me by surprise.

"He didn't say anything to me. What's going on?"

"I..." she tries, but her voice breaks. My chest aches knowing that whatever she's about to say won't be good. "Remember that night we all went to The Reel Pub?"

The night he told her he loved her.

"Well, no. Let me rewind. Remember that weekend I spent at his place? It was a little after San Diego." I nod, encouraging her to keep going. "We... Well, it happened. We had sex."

Her lips start trembling. My shoulders tense immediately.

"Did he hurt you?"

"What? No." She shakes her head vehemently. "He was... It was good. Perfect. He was so gentle. I told him I'd never done it before, and he was so patient." There's so much love in her words, so much affection.

"I didn't tell you because I wanted to have that moment just for us. At least for a while. I would've told you eventually, of course. But for now, I wanted that to stay between me and Cam."

"Of course," I agree. She takes a few more breaths and tries to speak again, but the next words are caught in her throat. I reach for her hand and squeeze it lightly, reminding her I'm here with her.

“That night at The Reel Pub, he told me he loved me. Remember? He was leaving, and he just blurted it out. It kept me awake the whole night. I wanted to say it back, but I wanted to do it in person. I asked him to meet me the next day, but he said he had rehearsals all day long.”

I search my brain for the rehearsal schedule to confirm this, but I can't remember. These last few weeks have been a blur.

“I didn't think much of it. Not then, at least. But then he started making excuses every time I asked to see him. And he wasn't texting me as much anymore. At some point, I realized he was only answering when I texted. He was never the one to text me first. So, I decided not to text him for a day.” She shrugs. “I didn't... I wasn't playing a game or whatever. I just wanted to see if I was right. And I was. That was over a week ago, and he hasn't texted me since. We haven't talked at all. He told me he loved me, and then he ghosted me. And I don't know what I did wrong.”

“Nothing,” I assure her. “You did nothing wrong, Julia. It's not your fault that Cam did this to you. That he isn't kind enough to give you a proper goodbye. That he isn't brave enough to end things if he doesn't want to see you anymore. You are not to blame.”

“I can't help but think that if I...” She hides her face in her hands. “If I'd been more experienced, then maybe he wouldn't have...”

“No.” I snatch her hand from her face and hold it firmly between mine. “Don't do that. You could've been a sex goddess, and it still wouldn't be about it. Cam being an asshole has nothing to do with sex. These guys... they just take whatever they want. They don't think about who they're hurting in the process.”

A familiar feeling of guilt starts to creep in. I knew what a bad person Winter was, and I never told Julia about it. Maybe if she'd known what kind of company Cam kept, she would've been more cautious.

Maybe Olivia was right, after all. I was too busy trying to be a good actress that I forgot to be a good sister. My heart shatters inside my chest. For Julia and what she's going through. For Olivia and how badly I've been treating her. For myself and my understanding that I just won't ever be good enough.



If I thought working with Winter was hard, I had no idea how challenging it would be working with the person who's responsible for hurting my sister. Especially knowing he's been hiding this from me for a while now.

Winter at least doesn't hide his game. He wears his assholery with pride. Cameron hides behind the good boy façade. That's infinitely more dangerous.

If it'd been me who was hurt by him, maybe I wouldn't be so mad. But he played the person who least deserved it. The person I care most about in this world. Just looking at his face right now is giving me a headache.

I don't let it show, though. I do my best to go through our scene as if nothing is the matter. If Cameron notices I'm mad at him, he doesn't say anything. As rehearsal progresses, though, I can't stop thinking about the pained look in my sister's eyes as she told me she thought she'd done something wrong.

My determination to hide my feelings and lock them in a place that they can't come out from during rehearsal fails the moment I see one of the ensemble girls plaster her hand on Winter's chest as she laughs at something he said during our break.

I have no idea what takes over me. The feeling comes from so deep inside, I can't stop it if I tried. A mixture of indignance and rage that makes my blood boil. A feeling I rationally know has no reason to exist, and yet I can't get rid of it.

It doesn't help that we're starting a new scene today, and that always makes me more anxious. We're doing the moment when Melina confronts Arthur after finding out he's wanted for treason. We haven't done blocking for this scene yet, so I know we'll probably stay on it for a while.

This is an emotionally charged scene, and it's just me and Winter on stage. Melina feels betrayed by the person she loves and thought she could trust, and I'm so immersed in her feeling of anger that I end up getting carried away the first run through the script.

"That was not in the script," Winter complains after I finish a short, improvised monologue about placing your trust in undeserving hands. He's clearly pissed that I changed the scene again, but I'm particularly proud of what I came up with on the fly.

"No, but I think it fits with the moment. Melina's really pissed, right?"

"Yeah, well, she shouldn't be. She's wrong about Arthur because she'd rather be angry than stop to listen to him."

I turn my body fully to him. "He wouldn't tell her the truth even if she asked, and you know it. He's been hiding his secret forever, and he's just mad that she's having none of it anymore."

“He doesn’t have any secrets!” He opens his arms and drops them so quickly, the sound of his hands slapping his legs echoes in the empty theater.

“He doesn’t?” I laugh, and the sound reverberates in the space. “He’s wanted for treason against the kingdom and didn’t think to mention that to her.”

“That has nothing to do with her. He wants to help her, and she can’t accept that. She doesn’t know how to let anyone in.”

He’s standing a feet away from me. I don’t know how or when we got so close together, but I can smell his cologne. A fresh, citrusy fragrance with warm spice and wood notes. It’s intoxicating.

That has to be it. His cologne must be fogging my brain. That’s the only explanation as to why I think we’re not talking about Melina and Arthur anymore.

“Luiza, sweetie,” Emily breaks the silence. “I appreciate the passion, but I think we can tone it down a notch. Just follow the script on this one.”

“Okay,” I agree, nodding for good measure.

“Good,” Winter murmurs.

“Good,” I snap back.



Chapter 13

“DAVIS, PUT YOUR ARM AROUND LUIZA. HOLD HER LIKE you’re trying to take her away from Cameron.”

I take a deep breath, waiting for the warm weight of Winter’s arm on my body. We’ve been in the studio taking promo pictures for an hour now, and the photographer keeps shouting directions at us. The whole time, Winter’s been handling me like a porcelain doll, only light touches as if I’m bound to break anytime.

I wish my body wasn’t so drawn to him. I wish that magnetic field around us hadn’t flipped on its head. It was just a short time ago that I could feel it repelling us, and now it seems to push us together. I’m aware of his every move, so aware that I can feel the way he’s holding back.

He doesn’t want to be too close. He doesn’t want to touch me.

My mind goes to that little discussion we had a couple days ago, when it felt like we were talking about us and not our characters. Had that made him push away like this? I know *my* reasons to be mad at him, but stupidly, I don’t like that he seems to be mad at me too.

It’s the first time the three of us are in full costume. My wedding gown has been perfectly adjusted for my body, hugging my curves in all the right places, the bodice pushing my boobs up to create the illusion they’re much fuller than they really are. The loose sleeves give an ethereal air to the look, creating flow and movement with the champagne velvet.

Cameron is in full prince costume. His three-piece looks impeccable on him, tight in all the right places to display his fit figure. The pearly quality of the heavy fabric contrasts beautifully with his brown skin, his image a perfect counterbalance to Winter.

It doesn't matter how regal Cam looks, it's Winter who takes my breath away. He's wearing one of his costumes I hadn't seen yet, a heavy grey wool vest that cuts mid-thigh wrapped around his torso, tied in place by a dark green ribbon. His pants are also grey, one shade darker than the vest, and the shirt he's wearing underneath is off-white.

He looks like someone who's about to steal the princess away and make her forget she's ever wanted to marry a prince in the first place.

"Perfect," the photographer calls out. "I think we got all we needed with the three of you. We just need to get some shots of Luiza by herself, and then a few of just Luiza and Davis."

The photographer places me in the position she wants. At first, I'm facing the camera, then she asks me to turn around and look at her over my shoulder. I keep changing poses, following her directions, hoping that we can get this done with quickly.

The room is full of people, and everyone's looking at me. I'm in my full bride costume, hair and makeup done. I should feel that confidence I always do when I'm in character, but somehow, I don't. I'm self-conscious. I can't help but wonder what everybody's thinking. Does this pose make me look bad? Is the dress okay? Do I look enough like a princess?

I catch a glimpse of the previews when we're done, and I breathe a sigh of relief seeing that the pictures look amazing. In every single one of them, I look like a princess. For the first time, I feel like I actually am the star of this play. I get

goosebumps just thinking about my pictures on promotional material.

This is really happening.

Then, there's only me and Winter left.

Suddenly, everyone else disappears. Ironically enough, the studio feels smaller with just the two of us here. The lights too bright. The temperature too high. I feel trapped, knowing the photographer is about to ask us to pose like a loving couple.

I step out to change into my second outfit, the one I'm wearing in the scene Melina and Arthur reunite in the woods, taking the time to center myself. It's easier to breathe when I'm not in the same room as him. When his cologne isn't mixed in every breath I take.

Winter has changed too, I realize a second too late, when I walk back inside the studio. He's wearing the pants I first saw him in when I met Adriana that first day. The white shirt he's got on is so flimsy, it barely covers anything, his torso all but naked for anyone to see. It's understandable why they wouldn't want him with a shield or helmet for the photoshoot. Why hide a picture-perfect body like that behind metal?

"We're gonna do some short clips like we did with Cameron," the photographer announces, nodding to the cinematographer next to her. "Then we'll start on the pictures."

"I'll be ready in five," the cinematographer says. "Eat something or get a coffee. You've been here all day long."

Winter and I share a look, one waiting for the other to move first. Finally, I sigh and make my way to the small table set at the back of the room with some cookies, crackers, fruits, water, and coffee. I curse myself for forgetting to bring mine from home.

I grab a cookie and a bottle of water and get out of the way so Winter can take his pick too. When he sees my choices, he arches an eyebrow at me.

“The coffee here not good enough for you, Sunshine?” It’s the first thing he’s said to me since our argument in rehearsal yesterday.

I give him a narrowed-eye glare.

“I can’t have black coffee. I bring mine because I put milk in it,” I say, then realize I own him no explanation. “And it’s none of your business what I drink or not.”

The cinematographer call us to start the shooting not long after I’ve finished my cookie.

These short clips are something new the park is doing this year. With the rise of video-based social media, they realized they could take advantage of it to promote the show. The clips don’t reveal much about the plot; they’re just teasers designed to leave the audience wanting to know more about that play.

They have us basically run through our entire scene together, asking us to repeat some movements, to gaze into each other’s eyes, to stop mid-motion. It’s such repetitive, mechanical work, I almost forget it’s Winter who’s playing opposite me. For a few minutes, I’m immune to his presence.

When the cinematographer says he’s got enough material, the photographer steps in again for the posed pictures. She places both of us on the right spot for the best lighting and turns us to face each other.

“I want some shots of the two of you just looking at each other,” she explains, a hand on my left shoulder and the other on Winter’s right one.

Taking a deep breath, I turn my head up, our gazes locking together. His breathing falters for a split second before he’s back in control. I swallow a sudden swell of feels. We

haven't interacted at all outside rehearsals, and suddenly I have to look into his eyes and pretend I'm in love with him. Again, my traitorous body goes against my brain and reacts to him in a way that makes me hate myself. But I'm not the only one suffering through this. I can see in the way his jaw is clenched that Winter's not enjoying this either.

"Davis," the photographer calls out, "can you look at her like you love her, not like you want to get away from her?"

I hear a snicker coming from her assistant, but I don't find it funny. I'm uncomfortable as is, knowing he'd rather be anywhere but here with me. Especially because right now, when it's just the two of us, standing so close to each other, his cologne flooding my senses, I forget why I hate him so much.

"Sorry," he says, clearing his throat. "I was distracted."

Like he so easily does when we're rehearsing, Winter flips a switch in his brain, and suddenly, the eyes that are looking at me are the eyes of a soulmate who's finally reunited with his other half. He's Arthur. But when he raises a hand and places on my chin, tilting it up slightly, and my own hands move at their own accord, resting on the firmness of his chest, it's hard to remember that it's Melina who he's touching, and not Luiza.

"Great." The photographer's voice cuts through the silence, snapping me out of the spell that Winter's eyes have cast on me. Just like that, his eyes harden again, the look of love and longing disappearing from his face.

I wish I could turn my feelings on and off so easily like that. Maybe that's what great actors can do.



I'm on my way out of the dressing room when I start hearing voices drifting down the hallway from the studio. We're in a different building today, a production cabin located on the front lot, where the big sound stages are spread out and actors come and go all the time.

I never felt so important like I did today, showing my pass at the front gate and walking right alongside the lead of one of Olivia's favorite TV shows. Well, she was in her car while I was walking. But still, we arrived at the same time, at the same place.

The grey production cabin we're in consists of two photography studios, a kitchen area, four small dressing rooms, and a waiting lounge. It isn't so small that two productions can't happen at the same time, but it isn't too big either that from the lounge I can't hear what they're saying in the studio when the door is open.

"Davis is much better-looking in person," a high-pitched voice says. I scoff, a part of me refusing to acknowledge that I agree with her. "And I was expecting him to be a douchebag, but he's so nice."

"I know," another voice replies. This one is more affected by a valley accent. That fried effect crisping the words and grating on my nerves. "And you won't believe what I heard," she says, clearly excited about the gossip she's about to share. There's a tiny part of me that feels bad for eavesdropping, but I'm too curious to care.

"What?"

"Apparently," the affected voice continues, "Winter kind of like saved Cam from a gold digger. I didn't get names, but I heard it was someone being with him for interest, you know? Then, like, Winter told him that. Opened Cam's eyes. Apparently, they're like super close. I didn't know they were

friends like that. Anyway, Cam broke it off with the girl, so he's back in the market."

I don't listen to anything after the squeal of excitement they share at the news. My blood turns icy in my veins. I don't need the names to know who they're talking about.

It's Winter's fault that Cam dumped Julia. It's his fault that my sister is hurting like I never seen her hurt before. She's brokenhearted because Winter is a piece of shit with trust issues.

I feel my heart beating in my throat. I see red. If I could, I'd find Winter right now and...and... I'm not sure what I'd do because I can't harm him physically, not with him being a good foot taller than me and a lot stronger, but I'd make him regret the day his path crossed with mine.



Chapter 14

“HOW WAS THE PHOTOSHOOT?” EMILY ASKS AS WINTER and I walk into rehearsal the next day. Neither of us say anything, and she eyes us with question marks floating above her head.

“It was good,” I finally answer, and that seems to appease her.

I’ve put on my mask, and I’m determined to not let Winter ruin this for me any more than he already has. If I can just keep my distance and remember that this is all about Melina and Arthur and not about me and Winter, then I think I’ll be fine.

Except that I’m not.

Because Melina is feeling betrayed, she’s hurt, and unlike Winter, I have a fucking hard time separating my feelings from hers. This stupid body of mine can’t discern when I’m acting from when I’m not. I feel every emotion down to my core, and my body feels drained out of energy halfway through the scene.

I blame the exhaustion for what happens next. When Arthur tries to convince Melina that he’s not the villain she thinks he is, Winter’s voice is so soft, his eyes so warm and inviting, a tear slips down my cheek, and he catches it with his thumb.

“I know you’re scared,” Winter says, his eyes searching. “But this”—he pretends to peel off the mask he’s not wearing—“I had to put this on to protect myself. To protect my... I didn’t...” His voice shatters here, and my lips start to tremble

as Melina's emotions overwhelm me. It's too much. It's all too much. "I never thought I'd find you, Luiza."

It takes the two of us a fraction of a second to realize his slip-up. His eyes widen, and he looks everywhere but at me. I close mine, unable to trust myself, but the tears won't stop coming.

"Let's take a break. Ten minutes," Emily calls, breaking the uncomfortable silence that has fallen over the room. Today it's just me, Winter, and the crew here, and I'm grateful no one else is witnessing my breakdown.

I all but run outside. I need air. I need to get away from him. From these confusing feelings. From the way my body responds to him even when all I want to do is hate him for what he's done. To Graham. To Julia.

To me.

For the way he judged me so quickly even before he knew me. For installing self-doubt in me, as if I needed any more of that. For the way he's making my job infinitely harder.

I need distance, but it's the only thing I don't get because Winter follows me outside.

"What happened?" he asks behind me. I don't turn around.

"Nothing."

"Hey."

"Don't."

I don't know if I'm relieved or disappointed when I hear the door close after Winter gets back inside, leaving me alone to process this tsunami of feelings. Except ten minutes are not nearly enough, and when I get back inside all I can do is put on a brave face and get back inside Melina's mind.

We reset the scene. Winter calls me Melina this time, but when I say my lines, when Melina tells Arthur she can't forgive him for lying to her, for hiding something so important after she trusted him, it takes much more effort for the words not to come out hollow.

"Melina, please," he pleads. "Please, believe me. I would never hurt you. You need to believe me. Tell me you know I would never hurt you." His words feel like a punch in the gut. "It's me. I'm your best friend. I would never do that to you. It's me, Melina. Please, see me."

His smooth, low voice cracks in the last sentence and along with it something snaps behind his eyes. Like a rubber band pulled too tight. One second, he's pouring his heart out; the next, he's retreating behind an armor thicker than Arthur's.

"Everything I ever did was for you," he finishes his lines, but the words come out with no emotion, like he'd used up all he had.

It's such a quick change from the way he just was a second ago, I get whiplash. It paralyzes me. I try to evoke emotion, a drop of it, but I can't find any. It's like I'm holding a mirror in front of a black hole, expecting it to reflect light. I can't return feelings I'm not receiving in the scene.

This is such an emotionally charged moment in the play, and when Emily calls cut, I know it's fallen flat. I know she's not happy before I turn to see the expression in her face as she walks up the stage.

"You guys have a lot at stake here," she reminds us, her eyes running between me and Winter. "Both of you. And you know it."

We nod in understanding. I want to know what's at stake for Winter, but I don't dare ask. I know what's at stake for me, and that's plenty.

“I hired you because you were the best for these roles. You were the best together. Your chemistry test was off the charts, something we so rarely see in productions this size. I can’t begin to tell you how many times I had to work with leads that had less chemistry than Sandra Bullock and Bradley Cooper in *All About Steve*. What you two showed me...” She takes a step towards us. “It was magical. And I want to see that again. I don’t want another rehearsal like this. I don’t want to end this play without believing you’re madly in love with each other. No one wants to leave Movieland without witnessing a happily ever after, and you’re responsible for giving that to the audience. I don’t care what you have to do to get that chemistry back, you’ll do it.”

It’s not a question. She’s not asking us to do it. She’s telling us we will. The “or else” is implied.



I go back home feeling terrible and hating Winter for putting us both in this situation. If he wasn’t such an awful person, we would have no problems acting together, but it had to be him. I had to get the worst fucking scene partner for my first big job. For my one chance at the career of my dreams.

Walking home under the sun is my way to decompress. I live about an hour away from Movieland on foot, and many times when I worked at the front gate, I’d just walk instead of taking the bus.

Burbank is a nice city to live. Close enough to LA that in just a few minutes I can be in Hollywood, but far enough out that traffic isn’t insane. As I walk along a calm street, passing

by Tudor, Spanish, and colonial-style houses, I try to come up with solutions to the problem at hand.

No matter what my feelings for Winter are. I won't let him destroy my dream. I just need to find a way for us to manage our hatred of each other while we're on stage. That's what a good professional would do.

I think back to the conversation I had with Emily. To the story she told me of her journey from Uruguay. All the hoops she had to jump through to get to where she is now, and I can't help but compare myself to her.

What do I have to show for myself? Other than a collection of rejections and a job at the front gate, I spent eight out of the twelve months I have accomplishing nothing, and now that I finally have a chance, a good one, I'm basically throwing it away because of a guy.

Was my mother right when she told me I couldn't do it? Was she right all along? Am I really not going to make it?

“What happens when things get difficult, Luiza? When you realize that what you want won't fall on your lap? That you have to work hard for it? Huh? Will you give up like you're doing with med school?”

Is that what I did to med school? Did I convince myself that I was quitting because it wasn't what I was passionate about it when the reality was that I didn't want to work hard for it?

No, I know that isn't true. I know my future was never at my parents' clinic. I know this is just my mind playing tricks at me.

It's just hard to convince myself of that when I have to work the hardest for something I actually want and, it seems like I can't find it in me to do so. Maybe if I were good enough, I would've come up with a solution by now, but as I

walk into my apartment after an hour-long walk, I'm no closer to solving this problem with Winter than I was when I left Movieland.

Neither one of my sisters is home when I arrive. They're both in class. Olivia's finally started college, and now she's only taking weekend shifts at Movieland. I'm alone for the next couple of hours, so I decide to go for a swim in the pool that no one in this building ever uses.

I just hope the water helps my creativity flow better.

Changing into my bikini, I wrap myself in my colorful sarong that I bought on a trip to Recife years ago and go to fill a bottle of water to bring with me. It's the first week of September, but the heat hasn't let up yet.

I'm so distracted, I jump when there's a knock at my door. Apart from Cece, no one ever comes unannounced, so I just assume it's her and go to the door without thinking to check before opening it.

Then, I get my second surprise in as many minutes.

Winter is standing on the other side, eyes wide as if he, too, is surprised to be there. Like he blinked and showed up on my doorstep.

"For fuck's sake," he huffs under his breath. Then he turns around.

"What the fuck? What are you doing here?"

"Put some clothes on before you answer the door," he barks.

I look down at my body, only then remembering I'm in nothing but a bikini, the sarong loosely wrapped around my waist.

"It's a bikini, Winter. I bet you've seen one of those before."

“I know it’s a bikini,” he growls.

“Then you’re just being an ass because you can’t help it?”
He says nothing in return. “What do you want? What are you doing here?”

“I wanna talk,” he replies to the palm tree in front of him.

The last thing I want right now is to talk to Winter, but he’s here, and Emily’s warning flashes in my mind. We have to fix this. If I haven’t been able to come up with a solution on my own, maybe we can brainstorm together.

“Come in,” I say reluctantly.

“Have you put clothes on?”

“Are you serious right now?”

“I can’t talk to you in that,” he grunts. My arms go to cover my stomach, but I drop it just as quickly, refusing to let him make me any more self-conscious than he’s already made. “It’s distracting.” His voice sounds strangled when he says it.

I stomp to my bedroom and pick up the first thing I can find. A pair of gym shorts and a loose G’n’R black T-shirt a college friend gave me a few months ago. It just so happens to be cropped a couple of inches under my boobs, not covering much skin.

“There,” I say when I return. “You can come in now.”

He slowly turns on his heels, a pained look on his face. When he sees my still-exposed belly, he glowers at me.

“I put some goddamn clothes on. Now talk.”

Winter is uncomfortable. I can see it clear as day. He’s standing still, not sure whether to commit to what he came here to do or bolt straight down the hallway. Ultimately, he walks into the apartment.

“What did you wanna talk about?” I ask, closing the door and turning to him. Suddenly, I become too aware of the fact that Winter Davis is standing in my living room.

“You know what.” His low voice is even raspier now, the frustration he’s clearly holding back slipping out with the words. The sound reverberates through my whole body, sending sparks to places that have been neglected far too long. I feel it settle heavy in my core.

“I don’t,” I lie.

We stare at each other in silence. In challenge. It’s the most tension-filled game of chicken I’ve ever played. Winter takes a step forward, his eyes never leaving mine. I feel caged between him and the door.

I gulp. It’s all I can do to keep myself from looking away.

“Here’s what you have to do,” he starts, but I cut him off.

“Nope.” I pop the sound with my lips. “You’re not putting this on me. You know very well *you* messed up today.” I take a step forward, finger pointed at his chest.

“I wasn’t the only one. You couldn’t get your lines out. You were distracted.”

“I got them right just fine. You were the one who turned all your emotions off. You were so done with all of that you simply couldn’t get to the end.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, Sunshine.”

“I told you not to call me that, *Davis*,” I say even though I have kind of missed hearing the annoying nickname. If I weren’t so close to him, I wouldn’t have noticed the way he flinches at my use of his last name. I can’t deny it leaves a sour taste in my mouth, but it’s worth it if it makes him mad. “And you know I’m right.”

“You’re not.”

“Tell me you didn’t give up halfway through that last scene. Tell me you didn’t shut off. I could see it in your eyes. Don’t put this on me when you’re the one who’s always felt too superior for any of this. I know you hate that I was a mere park employee before this. I know you despise Movieland’s policy to hire within the team to give people opportunity they might never have otherwise. I know you’ve never considered me a good enough actress to play Melina. I know you loathe the idea of playing opposite someone who isn’t famous like you are because you—”

I don’t get to finish the sentence. Winter seals my lips with his. I don’t know when or how, but the distance between us disappeared. His lips meet mine with ease. I’m paralyzed. I’m afraid to move because if I do, he might break apart, and I cannot think of anything I want less right now.

His lips are soft. And warm. They taste slightly of cinnamon and mint, and they infuse my bloodstream with jolts of electricity. My entire body suddenly feels awake. Like I can feel each and every single nerve ending. Our lips are the only point of touch, and yet I can feel Winter in every inch of my skin.

He finally takes in my frozen reaction, and he starts to pull away. Instantly, I throw my arms around his neck, bringing him back to me. It feels like I’ve been swimming aimlessly in deep waters and have finally found my way to the surface. I refuse to go down again. His kiss is the air I didn’t know I needed.

I feel the weight of his arm wrap around my waist, his forearm burning the exposed skin on my lower back as he walks us backwards, my back slamming against the door. Our bodies are glued together now, all of my soft curves pressed to his hard planes. His hand rises to cup my face, and I sigh into his lips, leaning to the touch.

He growls in response, a primal sound from the back of his throat that he follows with a trace of his tongue across the seam of my lips, asking for entrance. I open to him, he slips his tongue into my mouth, and I feel fireworks explode in my chest.

If I thought Winter's lips tasted good, his tongue tastes like divine nectar. He's sweet, hungry, careful, devouring. I want nothing more than to let him have me. His tongue explores mine in a mix of hot, wet urgency and tender longing. I let myself get lost in him, in the deliberate movement of his tongue, in the exploring quest of his hand on my back, tracing the curves of my body.

When he reaches the cut-off hem of my cropped top, he hesitates. And it's enough for my brain to catch up on what's happening. That brief moment of hesitation pulls me from this foggy state of mind, reality slapping me right on the face. I push him away from me, both hands planted firmly on his chest.

“What the fuck?”

I half expect Winter to turn around and leave without saying anything. It'd be so on-brand for him to do it. To come over, turn my life upside down, then walk away as if he'd done nothing. As if he owned me no explanation at all.

Instead, he looks me in the eye. “Shit. I'm sorry.”

And he undoes me with those three short words.

“I'm sorry?” I repeat his words back to him, ten times louder. “I'm sorry? What *was* that?”

He takes a good five steps away from me as if he needs the space to clear his head and be able to talk. I realize I need it too, so I can finally take a full breath with his body not glued to mine.

“I...” he begins, but his voice sounds gruff, like he’s throat has suddenly turned into sandpaper. “You’re right. I did shut off. I did give up in the middle of that scene.”

“Why? Why do you hate me so much that you feel the need to hold back like that?”

“You think I’m holding back because I *hate* you? I’m holding back because I don’t trust myself around you, Sunshine.”

There’s something different in the way the nickname comes out of his mouth this time. For the first time it sounds almost like a term of endearment.

“Wh-what?”

“I don’t trust myself around you, and I have to hold back because I don’t know if I’ll be able to control my feelings once I give in.”

“Give in?”

“Give in to this attraction. To this pull you have on me. I told myself from the beginning, I wouldn’t let this happen, but it did, and I don’t know what to do with it. Every time I’m around you I have to fight the urge to touch you. To kiss you. I’ve been scared to death that we’d get to the final scene, and I’d taste your lips and—”

“So, you decided to taste it beforehand? To get it out of the way?” I feel an ache in my chest like I never felt before.

“What? No. That’s not...” He takes a few steps, closing the distance I’d put between us. “I didn’t want to feel this way. Trust me. I tried not to. You’re the kind of person I swore I’d never get involved with again—”

“The kind of person?” I ask. “The not-famous kind?”

“Yes,” he replies. It feels like a punch in the gut. “I know the problems this can cause. I know the risks. But I can’t help

it. I can't help the way I feel about you."

"The way you feel about me?" The words come out laced in sarcasm. "Despite all the reasons you have not to want me. That's what you're saying?"

"Against my better judgement," he confirms. "I want you. I want you so much I'm scared of being near you. You make me feel like I'm not in control of my own feelings, and..." He brings his hand to my face, his index finger tracing my jaw with a feather-like touch. "And I'm scared of it. I'm scared of how much I want you, but I can't hide my feelings anymore. And I... I want to be with you. Not because of the play. Not because Emily told us to fix our chemistry, but because I want you."

My skin is burning at his touch, and I can't think straight. His hand drops to his side when I take a step back and the lost of contact is enough to clear my thoughts.

Winter thinks he wants me. He thinks he's got feelings for me.

He's lost his mind.

"Aren't you gonna say something?" he pleads.

"Say something?" I scoff. "Winter, what do you expect me to say? You come over to my house to tell me I'm not doing my job right. Then you kiss me out of nowhere. You *kissed* me," I repeat more to myself than to him. "Then you tell me you have many reasons not to want me, including me not being famous, and still, you think I need to say something? What exactly do you expect me to say? Did you think I'd be flattered by this? That I'd jump at the opportunity to... to be with you? Despite your 'better judgement'?"

"I didn't—"

"I can't think of one reason why I would want to be with you. Not one. But I can think of many for why I don't. And

even if you hadn't come here and said all the atrocious things you said to me, do you really think I would want to be with someone who caused my sister's heart to be broken?"

"That was not—"

"Do you deny it?" I ask, cutting him off again. "Are you really gonna stand here and tell me you didn't convince Cameron to break up with her?"

"I did," he admits. "I did tell him to do that."

"Why?" I cry. Of all the things he's said to me today, this is the one that makes me the maddest.

"You know why. Everyone knows about the hunt for husbands. I couldn't let my friend be used like that. He had real feelings for her. He loved her, and she was using him."

"Did Julia say she was with him for the green card? Was it her who said that?"

"You know it was Olivia."

"Exactly. Did you give Julia the benefit of the doubt, or did you so quickly make up your mind? Did you judge her before giving her the chance to say her piece like you love doing?"

"I..."

"And Graham? Do you have an excuse for why you ruined his life as well? Why you took from him the best opportunity he ever had?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," he hisses, his eyes darkening in anger. "You accuse me of being quick to judge, and yet you do the same. Whatever he's told you, you took his word for it and never asked for my side of the story. You decided what to believe in based on how you feel about me."

“I have reasons for the way I feel about you. From the first moment I met you, you have done nothing but show your disdain for me and where I worked. You judged my lack of experience and equated it to lack of talent without even seeing my performance. You’ve been arrogant and a snob, and you expect me to—”

“Forget I came here,” he snaps. “Forget this ever happened. I shouldn’t have come. I shouldn’t have thought you’d be willing to get over the first impression you had of me and see...” He turns and walks to the door. “Just forget it.”

He walks out and closes the door behind him, leaving me with the lingering taste of his lips on mine and the impossible challenge of forgetting all about it.



Chapter 15

WHEN OLIVIA AND JULIA ARRIVE HOME, I'M ALREADY in my bedroom. I tell them I have a headache, and they leave me be. I've never hidden anything from Julia, but I'm still trying to process everything that happened, and I feel that I need to do it on my own before I share it with her.

Winter's words play on repeat in my head.

You accuse me of being quick to judge, and yet you do the same.

They're so similar to what Olivia told me once. Even Julia said something about this before when she asked if maybe I hadn't judged Winter too quickly.

He proved me right, though, didn't he? My first impression of him was right all along.

Then why can't I shake the feeling that maybe there's more to him than I let myself see? Why do I keep hearing the hurt in his voice when he told me to forget he'd ever come here? And why can't I stop feeling the taste of his lips on mine?

Just a few hours ago, our biggest problem was working on our chemistry, and now it feels like we have a much, much bigger question to solve. How am I supposed to walk into rehearsal tomorrow and act like nothing happened? Like I don't know how his tongue tastes when it invades my lips? Like I don't know how his hands feel on my skin, burning and unforgiving?

I consider calling in sick.

I must be. If I'm having these kinds of thoughts about Winter, I'm definitely not okay.

For a long time, my mind doesn't stop running, working overtime until exhaustion takes over, sending me into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Hours later, when the gentle sunlight of dawn bathes my bedroom in a golden hue, I wake up, and for a second, it's like none of it happened. Then it all comes crashing back, the memories hitting me hard.

Until the moment I arrive at the Palace Theater, I'm not exactly sure I'm coming in. A part of me still considers the possibility of making a run for it. Calling sick. Coming up with any excuse not to have to face Winter today.

But the universe is clearly not on my side. As I pace back and forth in front of the door, trying to decide what to do, Emily arrives.

"Luiza, I'm glad I caught you here." She has a smile on her face that catches me off guard. I half expected her to still be angry with me and Winter about the disastrous rehearsal yesterday. "We're not rehearsing today."

I sigh in relief. Maybe the universe is on my side indeed.

"Oh, okay."

"I was thinking about yesterday, and maybe I'm at fault too. I shouldn't have skipped the icebreaking dynamics I usually do with the cast, and maybe that's what's missing for you and Winter to really hit it off."

"Oh," I say again.

"I called in the entire cast, and we're going back to the beginning today. We're doing our icebreaking dynamics to get you guys all in better shape."

The exercise Emily proposes is pretty straightforward. She takes us to the room where we had our table read, but now each desk sits between two chairs facing each other. In pairs, we're supposed to take turns asking each other questions. Everything is fair game, but if we don't want to answer a certain question, all we have to do is get up and look for a new partner. This way, no one has to share anything they're not comfortable sharing, and there's a better chance everyone will get to know each other better.

Winter chooses me as his first partner, and I don't know what's his plan. After yesterday, I expected him to avoid me, but instead he's sitting in front of me ready to start the exercise as if none of it happened.

Forget this ever happened.

His words echo in my mind. Maybe that's his plan. To pretend he didn't say all the things he said yesterday. To ignore the fact that his kiss might have ruined me for any other kisses. To make it so he never said he wanted to be with me. Perhaps if we pretend long enough, both of us can eventually forget it for real. I decide it's worth a try at least.

The questions start innocent enough. Age: him, 29. Me, 26. His favorite color: forest green. My go-to drink at Starbucks: white mocha. The first big play he ever watched: the *Oklahoma!* revival on Broadway. My favorite discipline at school: grammar. A food he hates: corn. My favorite discipline at school, for real: grammar, for real. His favorite costar in *School Hallway*: Ali Hoang and Henry Borison, who played his siblings. My go-to song at karaoke.

“Who says I like karaoke?”

He arches an eyebrow in a knowing way.

“Natalia Imbruglia's ‘Torn,’” I concede. “What's your dream role?”

“I don’t have one.” He lifts his hand to pinch his chin as he thinks of the next question, but I cut him off before he can open his mouth.

“That’s not an answer. That’s a cop-out,” I accuse.

“It’s an answer. An honest one. What’s yours?” he returns the question.

“An Avenger.”

“Really?” There’s no judgement on his voice, only pure curiosity.

I smile despite myself. “No. I want to be in a movie adaptation of a book. There’s something so exciting in knowing there are passionate fans eagerly waiting for the movie.”

“It doesn’t scare you? The expectations they might have?”

“My turn,” I remind him. “If you don’t have a dream role, do you have one you’d hate doing?”

“I’d never do another kids’ show like *School Hallway*,” he says bluntly, the answer ready and loaded. He leans forward, placing his elbows on the table. The distance between us significantly shorter while I get more restless. “Did you watch *School Hallway*?”

I scoff. “You really are that conceited, aren’t you? No, Winter, I didn’t.”

His question reminds me of something I’ve been meaning to ask for a long time. “Why does everyone call you Davis?”

“Because that’s my name.” I give him a pointed glare. He sighs. “I was seven when I first started on *School Hallway*, and kids can be pretty mean at that age. They’d make fun of me because my name was Winter. I got tired of the puns and jokes, so I started going by Davis. Once the director and EPs

started calling me that, everyone followed suit. I've been Davis ever since. In public, at least."

I open my mouth to ask him why he introduced himself as Winter to me, but he shakes his head. "My turn. What made you move to the US?"

"I wanted to study acting."

That's the short answer, but that is all he is getting. He glances at me, knowing there's more to it, but he doesn't insist.

"Why did you choose me for this exercise?" My question catches both of us by surprise. Asking it feels dangerously close to talking about yesterday, and neither of us seems eager to do it.

"Emily told us to form pairs. Didn't you hear her?"

"I heard her fine. But you didn't need to pair with me. Seriously, why me?"

"Because I had to," he argues. "She said she wanted us to get to know our scene partners better. You know damn well she came up with this whole thing because of us." He leans forward again, meeting my gaze. Those amber flames dancing in his eyes and making me hot. "Even if I didn't need to. What if I just wanted to?"

I feel like I'm walking on a tightrope. A soft breeze could threaten my balance. I shouldn't have asked that. I shouldn't have opened this door. It'd be too easy to jump right into a conversation about yesterday, and our plans to forget all about it would go up in flames.

"My turn," he says, adjusting his stance in the chair once again. I brace myself, but then he does a one-eighty, changing the topic completely. "What made you want to be an actress?"

“I, uh...” The question catches me so off guard I stutter. He doesn’t hurry me. He doesn’t show impatience. He just waits.

I’m not sure what to say, so I spit out the most mediocre answer. “I like acting.”

Even I know this is a cop-out, so when Winter cocks his head at me, I make sure to hold his stare.

“It’s an answer. An honest one.” I use his words from before, even though they’re not one hundred percent true.

He takes a deep breath, running a hand through his hair. “Alright, your turn.”

“What made *you* want to be an actor?” I return his question.

“I didn’t,” he confesses so quickly I’m not sure he really meant to say that. Even he looks surprised by the words that come out of his lips. He scratches his stubble, then rests his hands on his legs.

“I remember doing these plays at my parents’ house,” he continues, his gaze lost in a memory far in the distance. “I’d get my sister, and we’d put on a show for them right there in the living room. I was the older one, but I’d always let her take the lead. Somehow, I always ended up being the mailman, the one pulling her invisible chariot, or her son.” A tiny smile appears at the memory.

“I loved acting, playing different people, imagining different lives so much that when my father asked me if I wanted to try doing it at a special place with some cameras around, I felt like I’d just found a golden ticket to Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory.”

I watch him perfectly still. The air has shifted between us. I don’t dare say anything. It feels like we’re under a spell that might break if I move so much as a finger, and for a reason I

can't explain, the last thing I want is for it to break. His story is eerily similar to mine. I can almost see myself playing the same way with Olivia in my parents' living room.

"A year later, *School Hallway* premiered, and I became a professional actor." I wait for him to continue. I see there's more to the story than that, but he doesn't, and I don't insist. In the last ten minutes, I've learned more about him than I did the whole time we've known each other.

I'm not sure what to say next, so I just nod. There's more I want to know. I want to ask if he liked it. I want to ask what he meant when he said he didn't want to be an actor. I want to ask if he regrets it. In the middle of it all, I forget to be scared about the topic of yesterday coming up.

"What really made you want to be an actress?" he asks again, but this time I feel compelled to be more honest in my answer.

"I liked acting," I say again. He shoots me a glare, but I give him a sheepish smile in return. "I..." I adjust my position in the chair and clear my throat. "You know those plays you used to act out with your sister? I did the same with mine."

"Julia?" he asks.

I shake my head. "Olivia."

I think this is the first time I open this door. This memory of me and Olivia playing in the living room of our parents' apartment has been tucked away in a forgotten corner of my mind.

Our differences in the last years have been screaming so loud, that I'd forgotten she was once my partner in crime. The two youngest sisters in a house full of chaos.

"She was five, and I was ten. She tried to pull that same shit your sister did, but I wouldn't let her." A guilty smile curls my lips at the memory. Olivia would always ask me to let her

be the princess, but I always said no. I'd use some misguided logic to explain to her why I needed to play the princess that day, and then the next day, I'd do the same. She was too young to see right through my bullshit.

"I did let her come up with the stories, though. She was a great storyteller," I joke. Then the smile drops from my face as I remember the green envelope and the conversation we had. Olivia's always loved creating stories, hasn't she? Was I too busy being annoyed by her that I forgot to pay attention?

"Luiza?" Winter says my name so gently, it feels like a warm caress. I shake my head. I'll think about Olivia later.

"I never..." I try, but the words get stuck in the lump that has suddenly formed in my throat. I start again. "I was always very shy. At school, I lived under my older sisters' shadows. I always kept to myself. When I was in my first year of high school, our literature teacher gave us a semester-long assignment. We had to put together a short film telling the story of a book. My group got *O Filho Eterno*, *The Eternal Son*. I can still remember that book so well. I guess she was right that telling the story is the best way to never forget it. Anyway, I played the mother. I hadn't acted since those plays Olivia and I put together when we were kids. I had forgotten how much fun I had doing that, but it was different then. When I was playing the mother, I felt like..." I fail to find the right words to describe it.

"Like you could finally step out of your sisters' shadows?" Winter offers. His eyes are soft, comforting, those amber flames more like a warm fireplace in a cold day than a wildfire. We've both leaned onto the desk without realizing, our voices low, only for each other.

"Yes," I answer quietly, holding on to the lifeline he gave me. There's more to it, but I've already shared too much. He

nods in understanding. “After that, I joined a theater group in my city and fell madly in love with it.”

“Did you always know you wanted to pursue a career?”

I arch an eyebrow. “It’s my turn to ask a question.”

“Right.” He seems to have forgotten we’re in the middle of an exercise in rehearsal. For a moment there, I forgot too. It had all felt like a natural conversation. It had even felt... good talking to Winter.

“Did you know Emily before this?”

“Yes.” He doesn’t elaborate, and I don’t have time to ask more. “Did you really not know me before? Or about me?”

“Hate to burst your bubble, Winter, but nope. I was not president of your fan club. I didn’t even know you existed, and...” I drop the sentence before I finish, thankfully realizing what I was about to say before I said it.

“And?” he prompts, but I shake my head. “Just say it. I guarantee you I can take it.” He gives me a suggestive look, and I easily fill in the blanks of what he’s not saying. After yesterday, he can take anything I throw his way.

“After what everything you said to me when we first met, I kind of wished I had never met you at all.”

He winces. “You still do?” When our eyes meet, I see a flash of the same vulnerability I saw yesterday. “Wish you’d never met me?”

“The jury’s still out,” I give him the only honest answer I can before realizing it wasn’t his turn to ask.



Chapter 16

NEITHER WINTER NOR I END UP TALKING TO ANY OTHER cast member. We spend the entire time asking each other questions, and somehow we manage to avoid the elephant in the room. When Emily dismisses everyone after I have no idea how long, I breathe a sigh of relief.

We managed an entire day without fighting. That's cause for celebration.

"Luiza," Winter calls me before I can make it out of Sheriff's Gate. Maybe I celebrated too early. "Can I talk to you?"

I pretend to check my phone. "Sorry. I... If I don't catch the bus now, it'll be another hour."

"I can drive you home," he offers, and I curse myself for the lousy excuse I came up with. "It'll be quick. I just... About yesterday, there's somet—"

"Not here," I cut him off. Wherever it is he wants to say, it's better that we don't have this conversation where anyone can walk by and eavesdrop. "We can talk at my place."

He hesitates for the briefest moment, then nods.

It's only when I walk through the door of my apartment that I realize the reason for his hesitation. I'm quickly swarmed by memories of yesterday.

"Do you want something to drink?" I offer, trying to dissipate the tense energy that has me crawling out of my skin.

"I'm good," he says, but the huskiness in his voice says otherwise.

I nod to the couch, and we both make our way there, sitting on opposite ends.

“I need to apologize,” he starts. His body is bent over, his elbows resting on his knees, as his eyes turn to me. “I want to apologize,” he corrects himself.

I wait in silence for him to keep going.

“For what I did to Julia and Cameron.” His legs bounce up and down, and I feel a sudden urge to rest my hand on his knee to calm him. But I don’t. I stay right where I am and wait for him to continue. “I’m sorry. I should’ve never said anything to Cam. I shouldn’t even have thought that Julia was capable of something like that. You were right. Olivia made a comment, and I jumped to conclusions. Wrong ones. I’m sorry.”

He rakes a hand through his hair, and I follow the movement. When his gaze meets mine, there’s a shadow of pain behind his determination.

“I had something similar happen to me once,” he says looking down on the carpeted floor. “I had someone be with me only because of my status. My fame. She threatened to go to the press. She said she would ruin my life.” He takes a deep breath. “And she could’ve. She could’ve done it. When your sister said you were all looking for husbands, I...”

“Olivia was *joking*,” I tell him.

“I know. I know that now. I just couldn’t think straight. At that moment, all I could see was that girl and what she did to me. And I couldn’t let that happen to Cam too. Not when he’s just getting his career started. I just wanted to protect him.”

“You broke my sister’s heart in doing so.”

“I’m sorry. I... I didn’t think her feelings were that strong. I didn’t think she’d be hurt.”

The thing is, I believe him. I believe he didn't think of the consequences of his actions beyond how they'd affect him and the people *he* loves, but that just proves to me that he can't think of anyone but himself.

"It's not me you should be apologizing to," I say.

"I know," he repeats. "I'll talk to Julia and Cam. I'll tell them I made a mistake. I'll take the full blame. I just needed to talk to you first."

"Why?"

"Because you matter the most," he says simply as if his words aren't arrows shooting straight to my heart.

"What about Graham?" I ask, watching him carefully. I can understand him doing something out of love and worry for his friend. But what he did to Graham is not excusable, and I won't believe he truly regrets his actions if he won't take responsibility for betraying his friend as well.

"What did he tell you?" he volleys back, dodging my question.

"Everything." I turn my body to fully face him, my left leg resting on the cushion, crossed under my right knee. "About your friendship. And your father. How lost you were following his funeral. How he helped you through it. How he helped you with the script for your class. And how you sold the movie about your friendship without crediting him." He listens to me without interrupting, his eyes hardening the more I say.

He remains in silence, gathering his thoughts.

"How could you do that?" I ask.

"Graham has..." Winter takes a breath and clears his throat. "Will you let me tell you the story? The real story?"

I search his face for any sign of deception, but his eyes are giving me nothing but the truth. I nod, encouraging him to tell me his version of the story.

“I met Graham in our freshman year. We had geology together, and neither one of us wanted to be there. It was an eight a.m. lab, and we hated it. Nothing like hatred for a class to bond two college freshmen together. We became friends quickly. I was trying to fly under the radar. I asked all my professors to call me Brian—that’s my middle name—but it didn’t take long for people to realize who I was. The one thing I wanted for my college experience is for it to be normal. I’d been out of the public eye long enough to be able to pull this off, but as soon as word got around, everyone wanted to meet Winter Davis. I only found out much later that Graham was the one to told everybody about me.”

A memory pops into my head. Winter asking me not to call his full name in public when we’re right outside the theater. At that time, I thought he was just being annoying, but now I wonder if he was just trying to do the same thing he wanted to do in college. To fly under the radar. To go unnoticed in a crowded place.

“He didn’t lie about my father. My father did die our sophomore year, and Graham was by my side the whole time. But when we returned, I wasn’t the mess he told you I was. He was the one who dragged me through the gutter. He kept saying I needed to get out. I needed to party in order to move on. As if a bottle of beer was the recipe for getting over grief. It got to the point we were missing more classes than we were attending. And I had a girlfriend back then.”

“The one...”

He nods, confirming. “That’s the one. The one who threatened me. She started saying that I wasn’t the guy she fell in love with anymore. And she was right. I wasn’t. I’d become

a mess. But that was not what she meant. She was mad that I wasn't giving her the clout she was chasing. That being my girlfriend didn't give her status any longer. She threatened to go the press. She had pictures. Videos." He brings his hands up as if reading the next words from in the air. "Former child star gets drunk and flunks out of college." He eyes me to make sure I'm following. I give him a quick nod. "That's front-page material right there. It was a wakeup call for me. I sobered up. Went back to focusing on school. Graham was barely getting by, but I carried him through his classes. We made it to our junior year, but only by a thread. I knew we couldn't go on like that.

"I was a film major. He was studying screenwriting. I decided to take a writing class with him to help him get on track. We never wrote that script together. I wrote it by myself. It wasn't centered on our friendship as he made you believe. It was the story of my relationship with my father. It was about a boy who resented his father for all he put him through. For carrying the weight of supporting an entire family from the age of seven. For not having a childhood like all other kids. Graham didn't add a single comma to that script. My mistake was showing it to him. I let him read it after I'd turned it in, and then he stole it."

Winter shakes his head, his entire body tense as he recounts what must have been the toughest years of his life. He seems defeated, as if he can't believe he could be so stupid. As if he blames himself for showing the script to Graham.

"He stole it from you?"

He nods. Then he pulls up his phone and shows it to me. "Here's the e-mail I sent to my professor with the script, if you don't trust me."

I shake my head. "I do." God only knows why, but I do believe him.

I feel my heart squeeze as I hear the pain in his voice. Winter might be snobby and arrogant, but he still didn't deserve that. No one does. My art is in my body; it's me. But how would I feel if someone could simply take it away from me and claim it as their own?

"That's awful," I whisper.

After a minute of charged silence, he clears his throat.

"I... I should go. I just needed you to know this. I needed to tell you."

"Thank you for telling me," I say when he's already halfway through the door.



Chapter 17

TELLING JULIA ABOUT WINTER'S INTERFERENCE IS A decision I struggle over the entire weekend. I'm not sure how good it'll do to know the reason when the result remains unchanged. Her heart was still broken.

Ultimately, I realize this is not a decision for me to make. Even if I want to protect her and keep her from ever hurting again, I need to trust her to know what's best for herself. Give her all the information so she can decide for herself what to do with it.

On Sunday afternoon, after we've stuffed ourselves with chicken stroganoff, and I watch Julia bake her third cake of the week, I know I can't put this off any longer.

The baking is a clear sign of her distress. While I'm the cook among the sisters, she's the baker. And she tends to stress bake. A lot.

"Ju," I say softly as she sits on the couch waiting for the oven timer to go off. I haven't seen her touch her textbooks the entire weekend, and that, even more than the baking, makes me worry.

"Uhm?"

"I wanna talk to you," I start, waiting for her to catch on my serious tone. When she doesn't, I continue. "There's something I need to tell you."

That catches her attention. She sits upright and looks at me. "Is everything okay in the play?"

"Yes," I tell her, even though I'm not sure that's the truth. I haven't seen Winter since Friday, when he left our apartment

after dropping a bomb and leaving me to deal with the aftermath. I don't know how rehearsals will be tomorrow, but all I can do is hope that we've fixed the animosity between us that has Emily so frustrated with us.

"Then what is it?" Julia asks, bringing me back to the problem at hand.

"It's about Cam."

To the untrained eye, it'd seem like she has no reaction to the name of the guy that broke her heart. But I know my sister better than I know myself. The subtle tremble of her lip, the way her eyes dim—I see every tiny bit of evidence of how it hurts her hearing his name.

"What about him?" She feigns a nonchalance that neither one of us buys.

Taking a deep breath, I recount everything Winter told me yesterday. I don't go into details about his ex, but I do explain to her that he had some history that made him worry about her intentions with Cam. That he had realized the error he made. That it wasn't Cam who had broken her heart in the end.

"Except it was," she corrects me. "Even if it was because of what Winter did, Luli, it was Cam who decided to believe him. It was him who chose not to ask me and act on some misguided information he had. If he did love me the way he said..." Her voice wavers and catches at the L word. "He wouldn't have done what he did to me."

"I understand that, and I don't think you're wrong." I grab her hand and squeeze it gently. I need her to know I'm on her side, no matter what. "But I also know you're hurting, and that you like him even if you don't want to."

Her eyes water at that.

"So I needed to tell you. What you'll do with this information is up to you, but I'll support any decision you

make.” I search her eyes to make sure she sees the truth in mine. “It’s just... I don’t want you to have any regrets. Or let pride get in the way of something good. When you go back to Brazil at the end of the year, I want you to know you did everything you wanted. That you lived this experience to the fullest.”

“Thank you,” she says simply, as if those two short words summarized all of her feelings.



On Monday, I’m nervous as I make my way to the theater. It feels like the first day all over again. I’m not sure what to expect. I don’t know how I’ll react once I see Winter. And I sure have no idea what he will do when I arrive.

My qualms are proven unfounded when I arrive backstage, and Winter is nowhere to be founded.

“We don’t have rehearsal today?” I ask Emily when I notice how silent everything is.

“We do, we do,” she assures me. “We’re doing the scene where Melina and Arthur reunite again, so it’s just you and Winter today. He let me know he’d be a little late, but he should be here soon.”

Perfect. So I was right in being nervous after all.

I sit on the edge of the theater with my script in hand, trying to concentrate on the words in front of me, but it’s fruitless. My mind is restless, and I’m focusing all my energy in not letting it show. I think I even overdo it—I sit so still, Mia, the stage manager, asks if I’m okay when she passes by me on her way to her seat.

Winter arrives a couple of minutes later, his breath short when he apologizes, as if he'd run here. When I stand up and turn to him, I think I might have gotten up too quickly and the blood has failed to reach my brain. That would maybe explain why I suddenly feel lightheaded. Why the sight of him, of what I've learned to be his everyday uniform, worn-out jeans and white T-shirt, takes my breath away.

He looks exactly like he did the last time I saw him, and yet completely different.

There's an ease to his shoulders and a lightness to his step that weren't there before. As if he'd been carrying a heavy load for a long time and finally got rid of it. Even his eyes look brighter. The deep brown of his irises look more inviting than scary.

I realize that at this moment, if I did get lost in his eyes, I wouldn't want to find my way out.

"Are you good to go?" Emily asks, and the abrupt break in the silence pulls me away from this weird trance I was in. We both nod, and the stage manager gives us our starting positions.

We nail the scene in the first try. I give Melina all the anguish of being betrayed by the person she loves, adding a pinch of hope that he might still be the person she knew. Instead of having her totally angry at him, she's betrayed but sad that he would throw their relationship away for political gains. And Winter...

Winter pours his soul into Arthur. When he pleads with Melina to believe him, I can hear the desperation in his every word. When he asks me to look at him, to see him, I have a hard time remembering we're Melina and Arthur. He's good. He's really good.

"Everything I did was for you," he finishes his line in a breathy plea. Then he adds, "It's always been you."

My breath hitches.

Emily and Mia clap so enthusiastically it sounds like there's an audience watching us. The sound reverberates around the empty house.

“Yes!” Emily hollers, unfolding her body from the chair to give us a standing ovation. “Yes, yes, yes.” Mia's laughing at her side, but both of them look like we've just given them a Tony-worthy performance. “That's exactly why you were cast. This is the chemistry I saw in the test, and that's the only thing I want to see from now on. You two.” She closes her fist and brings it to her mouth, unable to contain herself. “You two will bring this house down. I just know it.”

We share a look, and for the first time, I see a gleam in his eyes. Joy in doing this. Like he's finally here on stage with me for real. Until now, a milder version of Winter had come to rehearsal, but now it's the real him. In all his force and power.

And the way he looks at me, it's like he's seeing me for the first time. Like he's lifted the curtain that he was hiding behind, and now not only can I see him clearly, but he can see me.

I tug my lip between my teeth as my heart thuds in my chest. I'm overwhelmed by a wave of feelings. But this time, instead of fighting it, I choose to ride the wave and let them wash over me, basking at the moment.

“You've earned a break after this mind-blowing performance,” Emily calls. “Take ten.”

I don't expect to have craft service today, being just me and Winter at rehearsal, but when we walk backstage, sure enough there's a table set up with coffee, crackers, and granola bars. The huge first-day banquet was a one-time thing, but I'm surprised they served anything at all today.

My homemade coffee sits exactly where I left it when I arrived, on the far corner of the table, but I notice that today there's one thermos carafe more than the usual. In front of it, a small plaque reads *milk*.

"Oh my God," I yelp in excitement. "About time."

"What?" Winter asks a few steps away.

"They finally have milk here," I explain. Holding my own cup up, I say, "I don't have to bring coffee from home anymore."

"Oh," he says, but the way the sound comes out of his mouth makes me cock my head at him. When his lips twitch in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it flash, I arch my brows at him. "What?" he asks innocently.

"Nothing." My voice trails off, as I shake my head. "It's just funny that they have milk here all of the sudden."

"Is it?"

"Uh-huh."

A sly grin starts teasing his lips. "Maybe someone asked craft service for it."

"Maybe," I agree. "I wonder who."

"Wasn't it you?" he asks, pretending to be surprised. "If I'm not mistaken, you're the only one who wouldn't drink the coffee here. And I think I recall you telling me it was because they didn't have milk, even though I still suspect it's because you are a coffee snob."

"You remember an awful lot for someone who doesn't even drink coffee."

"Who says I don't?" he asks.

"The only time I ever saw you with a cup of coffee in your hands was in San Diego, and only because it was the

middle of the night and you needed to stay awake.”

“Have you been paying attention to me, Sunshine?”

“No,” I quickly say, realizing how that sounded. “I...”

I’m saved by Emily calling us back onto the stage.

“Sure, sure,” he teases behind my back. “Don’t worry. I feel flattered.”

I turn to roll my eyes at him, but he just smiles at me. I stomp away, making sure he can’t see when my own lips curl in a smile without my permission.



Chapter 18

THE MOST ANTICIPATED DAY FOR EVERY MOVIELAND employee arrives at the end of September, and there's a part of me that is sad to not experience it with my former front gate teammates.

I'm happy where I am, of course. Being in the cast, a part of the theater department, was the whole reason I even applied for a job at the park. But now that the Nights of Terror preview night has arrived, I realize that for months I thought I'd still be working the front gate when this day came.

I feel awful for feeling sad about it when I should be happy for having my dream job.

"Just because you miss it there, it doesn't mean you don't love where you are now," Julia says when I tell her about my conflicting feelings. "You guys talked a lot about this employee-only night, so it's normal that you're feeling nostalgic now that it's here."

"I feel ungrateful," I confess.

"You shouldn't." She squeezes my shoulder as she finishes up with my hair. She's braided it in a French braid that looks just on the acceptable side of messy. "There, all done."

"Thank you."

Olivia runs to the couch to take the spot in front of me.

"My turn," she says, untying her hair and shaking it loose. "You do it, Luli." She looks at Julia who's faking offense. "Sorry, Ju. You're terrible at it."

Cece arrives not long after, and as soon as she sees mine and Olivia's hair, she grunts.

"Damn, I was gonna ask you to braid my hair."

"Do I look like a hair stylist by any chance?" I ask, giving the three of them a glare. They all shrug at the same time. I roll my eyes. "I can do boxer braids for you. Come here."

"I don't think I've ever been happier that you got a job at Movieland back in January," she squeals, shaking her entire body as she does it. Cece's sitting on the floor between my legs as I work on her blue hair.

"You'll make me ruin this," I warn her.

"Sorry." She lowers her head with her apology, as if her squeal wasn't enough. I tug slightly at her hair. "Ouch. Sorry. I'll sit still. But hurry up. I wanna go already."



Tonight, the park's only open for employees and their friends, so when we get there, the energy is noticeably different. There's less helplessly roaming around and more intentional walking. Everyone knows where they're going. Everyone knows what's waiting for them. And everyone is excited about it. It's certainly a different feeling than coming to the park as a guest.

Before the gates are open, the park's manager steps onto a makeshift podium and starts to address us. The loud noise slowly fades out, a low murmur of excitement persevering among the crowd.

I quickly tune her voice out, letting it serve as background noise as my mind wanders to questions it has no business asking. *Is Winter coming? Will I see him tonight?*

As if my thoughts have conjured him, I feel a presence behind me, and my heart trips inside my chest. I don't have to turn to know who's there. My body knows. It is so painfully aware of his presence that goosebumps break out all over me.

We haven't talked since rehearsal yesterday. We went over the scene countless times, and every run was better than the last. Emily gave us some directions, small changes to try here and there, but overall, it was hands down our best rehearsal yet.

We were attuned to each other in a way we had never been before.

"Hey," Julia's voice cuts through the air.

I turn to see her giving Cam a small wave, which he returns with a megawatt smile that could light up this entire park. I catch Winter watching them, a shadow of guilt crossing behind his eyes.

"Hi," Cam says back, and I'm surprised to hear so many emotions hidden in a two-word letter.

I wonder if they've talked. If Julia gave him the chance to apologize for his mistakes. Their bodies say everything their mouths don't. It's clear to anyone who sees them that there's something between them, but I don't want to force her to do anything.

Olivia comes to my side and whispers in my ear, "You know it pains me to say this, but I think you were right."

"What are you talking about?"

"Winter. What he did to them and..." Her voice trails off. "You were right about him. He's a terrible person."

“Where did that come from?” I turn to question her.

“Just...” She waves me off. “Never mind. Have you seen Graham? I thought he’d be here.”

A warning bell goes off in my head. Her sudden change of opinion about Winter and her interest in Graham can’t be unrelated, but before I can ask her anything, the crowd breaks out in applause as the manager opens the main gate to let us into the park.



It takes exactly three seconds for me to scream at a jump scare. A zombie sprints out of a hidden spot behind a bush, coming straight to me. Everyone laughs at my expense, and after my heartbeat calms down, I’m laughing too.

I should’ve known this wouldn’t be the best place for me. But no, I had to go and think because everyone thought this was fun, I’d think so too. I don’t even like horror movies.

I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve startled before we make it to the first maze. At some point along Reel Road, before we even make it to the Palace Theater, I just give up on keeping up with the group and tell them to go ahead without me for now.

I feel like my heart is going to fly out of my mouth every time a monster jumps at me. Rationally, I know they won’t do anything to harm me. They’re actors, and they can’t touch me. But tell that to my body.

Counting back from ten, I wait for my breathing to normalize before I unfold myself. My hands are resting on my knee after I all but ran from a masked guy wielding a

chainsaw. When I stand up straight, I look for my group in the crowd, knowing they won't be more than a few feet away.

A quick sweep of the place, and I find Cece's blue hair. Cam's walking beside Julia, not touching her but ready to provide a safe place if she needs him, and I can see in the way her body is slightly leaning his way that she wants to get closer to him. Olivia and Cece are walking right behind them, their arms intertwined, seeking solace in each other as their eyes take every detail of the apocalyptic scene around them. I smile despite myself. A warm feeling blankets my heart at the sight of my sister and best friend becoming friends.

I realize Winter's not with them.

I look around and find him lagging behind the group. His head turns, eyes searching under the brim of his baseball cap, and our gazes meet. He quickly looks away as if I caught him doing something he shouldn't.

As I quicken my step to reach my friends, realization sinks in. He was looking for me. Staying behind to make sure I didn't get lost.

"Luiza, c'mon!" Cece yells for me. "The line is already huge."

I'm just a few steps behind them now, Winter walking by my side. He leans towards me, and this time the goosebumps that erupt all over my body have nothing to do with any scare.

"You don't need to go in the maze if you don't want to, Sunshine."

I turn to eye him, a sense of challenge washing over me. "If you're scared to do this, you can sit this one out, Winter." I nod to the bench where some people wait for their friends who are brave enough to go in the maze, then I eye the line and announce, "But I'm going."

Winter just shakes his head. I arch an eyebrow, challenging him, but he just shrugs and follows me into the line.

“Your call.”

Way too soon, we’re entering the maze. I didn’t have nearly enough time to mentally prepare. It’s all far too realistic for my taste, and I have a feeling something horrible is about to happen.

I feel like we’ve just walked into an *Inception* dream. It’s so meta, it confuses my brain.

We’re standing inside a movie set, three walls up, and the fourth one missing, replaced by a line of old cameras and flickering light fixture. The set is made to look like an old motel room, blood stains all around—on the floor, bed, and wallpaper. The scene of a massacre.

It’s when I notice the blood stains on the cameras that a chill run down my spine. I forget I’m in a maze, and I want to run away as far as I can, when my brain catches on to what my eyes are seeing. The massacre wasn’t part of the movie being shot here. It happened to the crew. While they were filming it.

This is fake. All of this is fake. I have to keep reminding myself. There was no crew. This isn’t a real movie set.

I’m trying to remind myself that none of this is real over and over again when an earsplitting scream and the sound of shattering glass makes me jolt and cover my ears. A second later, a body falls from the sky onto the bed. And I jump higher than I ever thought possible, one hand flying to cover my eyes, and other searching around for something to hold onto. I grab the closest person and feel a bulk of muscle under my touch.

When I finally make myself stop screaming and open my eyes, I find Winter rolling his lips inward, trying to keep

himself from smiling or laughing at me.

I let go of his arm and smooth off inexistent wrinkles off my cropped sweater.

I'm glad I didn't listen to Olivia when she suggested I wear a dress tonight. I don't know how many people would've already seen my underwear after so many jump scares. The wide-leg jeans I chose are proven a much better option for this experience.

We move on to the next room, and I recognize it as a dressing room. The only light comes from the few light bulbs that are still working around the mirror. There's makeup spread all around, a wig left forgotten on the floor, toiletries spilling out of a torn bag on the chair.

Suddenly, the lights turn off, and we're left in pitch-black darkness. I'm not the only one who screams this time.

When the lights turn back on, there's a fucking clown standing behind us, looking right at us in the mirror, a diabolical smile on his face.

The sound that comes out of my mouth isn't human.

This time, I don't use just one hand to grab onto someone for help. I full-on wrap both my arms around the person standing next to me, who just happens to be Winter again, of course. I only let go when I'm sure I'm not having a heart attack.

This time, he doesn't hold his smile in.

I try to prepare myself mentally before we walk into the next room. *I will not be startled. I'm a grown woman. I am not a scared little girl.*

Repeating that over and over in my mind, I follow the group to the next scene. We're now in the middle of an award show. Actors playing dead sit at round tables that are set up

with fancy silverware, crystal glasses, and flowers that probably once looked gorgeous. Now they're as dead as the attendees, petals falling on the linen tablecloths.

The music playing overhead feels almost ghostly. Static interrupts the rhythm here and there, but contrary to the first two rooms, this one isn't set up to look like it's been abandoned for ages. No. This looks like a party just happened. And that something terrible was the reason for it to end.

A spotlight appears on the stage, casting an eerie glow over the lonely microphone stand. Just like it happened in the dressing room, we're plunged into darkness for just a second before the spotlight flicks back on, and a dead-looking woman is standing right under it, her bloody hand wrapped around the mic.

She opens her mouth and lets out a chuckle that gradually evolves into a manic laugh.

"I told you this trophy was mine," she screams from the stage, pulling an Oscar-looking statuette from behind her frail body.

As soon as she says her line, the entire room rises from the dead screaming and running towards the stage, eyes set on her, a thirst for revenge in their expressions.

I pat myself on the back for not being scared. Okay, *that* scared. I think I'm getting better at surviving this maze.

We continue on to the next room. An editing booth. There are computer screens displaying editing software, as if they were abandoned in the middle of a job. In front of it all, a huge TV shows raw footage of what's supposed to be the movie they were working on.

I'm watching the scene, trying to understand what's going on. There's a couple of doctors meticulously working on an

open-chest surgery. Three nurses work with them, handing them tools, and helping along.

Then, suddenly, the actor whose back is to the camera stops. The others keep looking at her, asking her what's going on, why she stopped.

Slowly, she lifts a scalpel. Everyone else steps back, their eyes glued to her. The doctor's head does an impossible 360 on her neck, and the camera catches a glimpse of her blacked-out eyes, a second before all hell breaks loose, and she starts stabbing her costars. She leaves the nurse next to her to last, sinking the sharp tool right in her jugular. When she pulls it out, blood squirts out, clogging the view from the camera. At the same time, a splashing liquid comes off the wall as if the blood is right there in the room with us. We all scream and turn to leave, only to be met with the killer doctor blocking the door, scalpel at hand.

“Who needs surgery?” she asks in a sickening voice.

My hands fly to Winter's arm again, and I turn my face to hide behind him. A double door opens on the side opposite where we entered, and the group starts to run in that direction.

When I try to let go of his arm, he places his much-larger hand on top of mine. I eye him, but he doesn't say anything, just holds my hand there, letting me use him for support.

I walk the rest of the maze glued to his side. When we get to the last room, my body is tired of so much tension. All my muscles are tight, my shoulders up to my ears. I don't think it can get any worse, until the last number they pull threatens to scare my soul away from my body.

The doors finally open into a souvenir shop, and the lights hurt my eyes after so long in the dark. The sound of people chatting and laughing about their experience in the maze is music to my ears.

“Oh god, there are pictures!” Olivia notices people gathering around a counter to check the images taken inside the maze. “Let’s find ours.”

We hurdle up to one of the computers, waiting to see ourselves on the screen.

“That’s us!” She points out, recognizing us in one of the four pictures they show at a time. She clicks on it, and the image fills up the whole screen.

The six of us are all in different states of despair.

Cece and Olivia are both jumping, mouths open and eyes closed. Their torsos curled in towards each other. Julia is hiding her face in the crook of Cam’s arm, hands covering her eyes, while he has his arm wrapped around her waist, his right hand stretched out as if to stop danger from reaching them. His face is frozen in a hilarious expression of fear.

Then there’s me and Winter at the back. His right arm wrapped tightly around my waist, my left hand gripping the back of his T-shirt as if my life depended on it. I’m hiding my face in his chest, which I have zero recollection of doing. But what’s most surprising of all is that he’s not scared at all. Winter looks like he couldn’t be more comfortable in the middle of that scary-ass scene. He’s looking down at me instead, as if nothing is happening around us. His eyes are focused on me using him as a safe place to hide. And under the brim of his baseball cap, I can see his lips curved in a smug smile.

“Look at you.” Cece laughs, nudging my ribs and nodding to the picture. Then she gasps. Loudly. “Oh my God. You know what I just realized? You’d actually be a good-looking couple if you didn’t hate each other.”

I snort a short laugh, trying to hide the way my heart skips a beat at the thought of me and Winter being a couple.

When I turn around, he's right behind me. Cece looks between us, then gives me a quick apologetic look and scampers away.

"Hate each other, huh?" Winter gives me a knowing look.

"I... I haven't talked to her in a while."

"Huh." He pretends to consider my answer. "But I agree with her, you know?" I give him a quizzical look. "We do look good together."



If this had happened just a few weeks ago, I would have hated when Winter decides to join us for a late-night bite after we leave Nights of Terror. Right now, though, I can't deny the lightness in my chest. The way my pulse quickens and my insides vibrate at the thought of spending more time with him.

Who would've thought that Winter's company would one day spark joy in me?

The six of us walk along Film Strip looking for a restaurant that doesn't have park employees spilling out of its doors. It seems that everybody had the same idea as us, and the promenade is more crowded than it usually is this late at night.

"I never realized," Cam starts saying. His hands are in the pockets of his jeans, his shoulder slouched in that posture I began to recognize as his. His eyes travel around, studying the storefronts, the cartoon-like façades, the shop windows that could very well belong in an animated movie. "Film Strip reminds me a lot of Horton Plaza."

Julia looks over at him, then her eyes follow his gaze and go back to him. “It does,” she agrees, and they share a smile.

“What’s that?” Cece voices the question I, too, want to ask.

“A place in San Diego,” Cam answers, but his eyes are fixed on Julia, who’s looking at him with a dreamy expression in her face.

This girl can deny it all she wants, but there’s no way she isn’t dying to forgive him.

We end up getting a table at La Serenata, an Italian trattoria inspired by Movieland’s Oscar-winning movie, *Whispers of Roma*. As we step inside, we’re immediately transported to 1960s Rome in all its elegance and opulence. The hues of dark green and rich gold scattered around the restaurant create an ambiance of warmth and intimacy, as the black-and-white pictures of Rome adorning the walls display the most iconic scenes of the movie.

Everything in this place is designed to make you forget you’re in the middle of a theme park just north of Los Angeles. From the soft jazz playing in the background, to the bar area reminiscent of Italy’s most exclusive cocktail lounges, and the chairs upholstered in luxury fabrics, everything looks chic.

We place our orders after a chaotic minute of debating how many dishes we should get, and then Cece breaks the silence by making the last joke she should make around us.

“Damn,” she blurts out. “This place is fancy. I should come here more often, and maybe I’d finally find my green card.”

There’s a clear shift in the air. The silence takes on a different tone after her voice quiets down.

“She’s joking,” I intervene before the awkward escalates.

Cece doesn't get it, though, and she insists, "Just a little. I'd definitely be up for it."

"You should talk to Colin," Olivia, oblivious as always, suggests. "He said he's marry Luiza. If she doesn't take him up on his offer, I bet he'd marry you."

"Cece doesn't date men," I remind my sister.

"I don't have to be attracted to him to marry him. It'd be purely transactional." She shrugs as if she's talking about buying a T-shirt that doesn't fit perfectly, and not marrying someone who's not even of the gender she's sexually attracted to.

I rack my brain for something to say. Anything to change the topic. I can already sense Julia's discomfort, and Cam looks like he'd rather be anywhere else but right here in the middle of this discussion. The wound is still too fresh to be adding salt to it.

"So, Olivia." Winter comes to the rescue. "Your classes have started? What are you studying?"

My sister is visibly annoyed by the question. If it's because of the sudden change in topic or because it's Winter who's asking, I'm not sure.

"Screenwriting," she says. I knew it. Of course I did. We had a whole fight because of it. Still, as soon as I hear the answer I react as if I've just learned that. "Don't," Olivia says when she sees the look in my face.

Winter watches the interaction, curiosity tugging his brows close together.

"I didn't know that. I write too," he offers, and now I turn to him. That's news. He never said he went back to writing after what happened with Graham. "Well, I haven't in a while, but lately I've been feeling inspired to get back to it." He looks

at me when he says the last part, and my heart trips under the full force of his gaze.

My throat works with a swallow, and I have to turn away in order to regather my senses.

When I find Olivia on my other side, I can practically feel the tug-of-war happening inside her head. She doesn't want to give him the time of day, but at the same time she's dying to talk to him about writing. I wonder if she has anyone to talk with about this. A little piece of my heart breaks at the thought of her not having anyone to share her dreams with.

Guilt chips away at me, and I make a mental note to pay more attention to her.

"Yeah, I..." She hesitates, but ultimately, the urge to talk about something she loves wins. "I actually submitted a script to the Golden Quill," she confesses in a low voice.

The green envelope. I'd asked her about it, but we never got to the part she told me about the envelope because I started fighting with her before she could.

"Olivia," I speak her name in a soft whisper tinged with admiration.

"I've been shortlisted for a nomination." She sounds so proud of herself. So happy for her accomplishment. Across from me, Julia shares a smile with her, and again I find myself asking why I'm the only one who didn't know about it. But I know the answer without having to ask that question.

"That's amazing," Winter says sincerely.

"Congratulations," I say at the same time. "Oh my God, Olivia, this is awesome. I'm so proud of you." I hug her tightly, but I think I catch a watery gleam in her eyes at my words.

Later that night, when we're back home, ready to go to bed, I turn to her and hug her once more.

"I really am proud of you. You know that, right?"

"Thank you, Luli." She hugs me back, and her next words sound muffled because she has her face on my shoulder. "You don't know how much that means to me."

I sigh, feeling like the worst sister in the world. Holding her arm, I push her away just enough to look into her eyes.

"I wish you didn't feel like you need to hide things from me. I wish you'd told me about your major."

"I knew you wouldn't like it. I... I didn't want to disappoint you."

"I'm not—" I have to swallow the sudden swell of emotion that's lodged in my throat. "You can never disappoint me. We just... we have different approaches, that's all. I won't always understand your choices, but that doesn't mean I'm disappointed in you. I think..." I take a deep breath. "I think sometimes I kinda wish I had the guts you do to do things the 'Olivia way'."

"Messy and unpredictable?"

"Creative and effective," I affirm, and the smile she gives me in return repairs one of the little fractions in my heart. "So, since when did you want to write?"

"Uhm, since we used to come up with stories to perform for our parents," she answers as if it's obvious.

Julia joins us not long after we make ourselves comfortable on the couch, taking a trip down memory lane. For the first time in years, my sisters and I stay awake talking and gossiping until the sun rising on the horizon tells us we're way past our bedtime.



Chapter 19

“THIS CALLS FOR A CELEBRATION,” CAM CALLS AFTER the cheering applause dies down. We’ve just completed the last full rehearsal before we start the boring tech rehearsals next week.

It’s the last time to have fun for a long time. We all know that the next couple of weeks will be tedious. The tech process is so tiresome, I have yet to meet an actor who doesn’t dread this step of the production. Lots of standing still and doing nothing wait for us.

So it’s no surprise when everyone takes up the invitation, and soon we’re all back in our favorite bar on Film Strip.

I’ve been to The Reel Pub so many times in the last months, I’m starting to think the waiters can already recognize me, but I’ll only be worried when they start asking if I want my usual. Since that doesn’t happen, I’m good.

“Did you invite Julia?” I ask Cam after he brings a pint and three glasses to our table.

“I didn’t know if I should,” he confesses, shoulders moving up and down.

“You should,” I affirm. He gives me a hopeful look, and I just nod to confirm. He steps away to call her, leaving me and Winter alone.

We haven’t had many opportunities to be alone. Not since the last time, when he was at my place, telling me his story. Making me realize that I had been wrong in judging him so quickly.

“Look at you playing Cupid,” he teases.

“Just trying to fix your mess,” I tease back, but as soon as I say it I realize I shouldn’t have. His body tenses up, and he casts his eyes down. “Hey. I’m joking. Sorry.”

“You didn’t lie, though.”

“No, I didn’t.” I poke him to show I’m not being serious. When he doesn’t respond, I add, “I shouldn’t have made that joke.”

“It’s good that you did,” he says, turning on his stool to face me. His entire body is turned to me, and I find myself turning to face him too, my legs easily finding their way between his as he uses my stool to support his feet, caging me in.

“Yeah?”

The beginning of a smirk tugs at his lips as he cuts me an intense stare that I feel down to my core. The sudden weight of his gaze on me sends a tingle between my legs.

“As long as you’re joking, that means you probably don’t hate me that much anymore.”

“I don’t think I could hate you if I wanted to,” I confess in a whisper.

His smirk turns into a full-on smile, his eyes gleaming at me, and then, all at once, they shift, darkening, consuming. His gaze drops to my lips, and I have to fight a full-body shudder. Slowly, ever so slowly, he leans forward. His hand comes up to tug a stray curl behind my ear, and they stay there, brushing feather-light strokes on my jawline.

His eyes keep dropping to my lips as if he can’t resist it any more than a river can stop flowing downstream.

Any moment now he’s going to kiss me. I can already feel the cinnamon taste of his lips on mine. The taste I haven’t been able to forget since that first day he appeared at my

apartment. But so much has changed since that moment. I wonder if the kiss will taste different. If I'll be able to get just one and not crave more.

He seems to read in my expression that I want this just as much as he does.

But the moment he places his hand flat on my hip to get leverage as he leans closer, I remember where we are.

Placing a hand on his chest I stop him, and he immediately draws back.

"I'm sorry," he stutters.

"Don't be," I say because the last thing I want is for him to think that I'm not on the same page. That I don't want this as much as he does. "It's just... not here."

He looks around as if only now realizing where we are. Then he nods. "Yeah. Right."

But I don't miss the way he has to readjust his jeans with a pained look on his face as he turns ninety degrees on his stool, facing the bistro table instead of me.

I hate the break in contact. I hate how much my skin misses the closeness of his. I don't think before I act, my hand resting on his bouncing leg before I can stop myself. He doesn't miss a beat. His hand covers mine in a second, as if it to lock it there, no chance of getting out. Which is exactly how I feel right now. No chance of getting out of these feelings. I'm powerless against them, and I'm not even sure I want to fight them.

When Cam gets back to our table, Winter gently softens the grip on my hand, giving me the chance to pull it away, but I don't. I can't. I need to touch him like a plant needs the sun. It's inevitable. He suppresses a smile when he realizes I'm not moving.

“So?” I ask Cam, trying to ignore how my entire body is so aware of Winter by my side. How every inch of my skin seems to be drawn to his, needing to close the distance between us. “Did you talk to her?”

“She’s on her way.” He gives me a winning smile.



I should’ve known this was going to happen, and yet I’m not prepared when it does.

I remember too late that Cam’s car is a two-seater, and I can’t ride home with him and Julia. Even if I could, I wouldn’t. Not when she confessed to me that he’d ask her to come over to his place and she wanted to go. I rather die than cockblock my sister.

So, here I am, standing in front of Winter’s car as he opens the door for me. That intense smell of leather, wood, and cinnamon invade my senses the moment I climb into the passenger seat. Instead of closing the door, he holds it open as he stares at me.

“What?” I ask, suddenly self-conscious. I pull the hem of my dress down my thigh, but it doesn’t change much. Most of my leg is exposed, and Winter doesn’t hide that it’s exactly where his eyes are roaming.

“I just really like seeing you in my car,” he confesses, his sultry voice sending my blood boiling. When the door closes, I take the few seconds before he climbs into the driver seat, my heart beating so fast I’m afraid my ribcage won’t be able to contain it.

The tension inside the car is palpable. The silence sits heavy between us, and when Winter places his arm behind the back of my seat to back out of the parking spot, I have to restrain myself from jumping him right then and there.

The fabric of his T-shirt pulling against his broad chest, the smell of his cologne wafting in the air, the weight of his eyes on me. It's all too damn much.

I clear my throat.

"So," I say.

"So," he repeats, a lopsided smile teasing his lips.

Think, I order my brain. *Think*. Find anything to talk about. Any topic that can clear this tension.

"Tell me about your writing," I blurt out.

He chuckles. "You wanna talk about my writing?"

"Yep." Writing seems like a safe enough topic.

"What do you want to know?" He scans his employee ID at the gate and looks at me while he waits for the metallic barrier to lift.

"Will you ever do anything with that script you wrote? The one about your father?" I consciously choose not to mention Graham stealing it. If he notices it, he doesn't acknowledge it.

"I don't think so, no."

The answer disappoints me. "I wish I could read it."

This script feels like a window into Winter. A chance to get to know him a little more, past the barrier he seems to always have around himself.

"You do?" he sounds surprised at my confession. "Why?"

Because knowing you seems essential to my survival. Because I feel this strong need to find the missing piece in this

puzzle that is you. Because I don't think I can go on living knowing that you exist in this world and there's a part of you, any part, that I haven't discovered yet. Because I think that if you let me read this, you'll be letting me in. Because I think you're scared to do that, and if you allow me in, I'll never want out.

“So I have something to sell when reporters come asking me for gossip about you,” I say instead.

He laughs, a loud, belly laugh that reverberates in the car, and I know I'm irrevocably doomed when the first thing I think is that I want to earn more of this laughter. That I always want to be the one to make him laugh like this. That if I can have the sound of his laughter forever, I might never have another bad day in my life.

Fuck.

I like Winter Davis.

“You're lucky you're so cute,” he says, oblivious to the world-shaking realization that I've just had. “If I didn't like you so much, I would drop you off right here just for saying that.”

“No, you wouldn't,” I quip, my brain too focused on not malfunctioning to register what he just said.

“Yeah, you're right,” he concedes. “I would never not like you. There's no chance that would ever happen.”

“Winter.” His name comes out like a warning.

“Sunshine.”

Just like that, the tension is back even stronger than before. If I as much as look at him, I might combust. The sound of that nickname in his lips is like a shot of desire straight into my bloodstream, carried through my entire body.

“You can’t say things like that,” I say without an ounce of determination in my traitorous voice.

“You want me to lie to you?” He quirks his eyebrow in a teasing challenge.

I don’t know what I want. I want him to stop saying things like that. I want him to never stop saying things like that. I want him to tell me he feels it too. I want him to pretend none of this is happening.

Hiding from all of this seems like the easiest solution, but, for reasons beyond me, I don’t want easy right now.

“Will you let me read it? The script?”

“Of course,” he answers so fast I don’t have time to back out.

“Now? Will you let me read it now?”

“Now?” he asks, casting a quick glance my way then back at the road ahead. We’re on the I-5, and in a few miles, he’ll take the ramp off the highway to take me home. But I don’t want him to. I nod.



I didn’t know it was possible to get to Brentwood so fast, but in too short a time, we’re driving by The Getty and getting off on the next exit. Winter drives through the winding, uphill roads with the familiarity of someone who’s lived here for a long time.

When he finally pulls up to a stone driveway, I don’t know how far up we are, but I notice that the houses have become more private and spaced out.

Winter's one of the few houses not hidden by tall walls or hedges. Instead, the front yard is wide and open, displaying a clear view of his gorgeous single-level stone house. The building looks straight out of a fairy tale.

"This is your house?" It's a ridiculous question, but I need to make sure.

"Can't take credit for choosing it. If it were up to me, I'd be in the apartment I first lived when I moved to LA, but I like it."

He opens the door and my jaw drops. The open-concept area stretches so long, I think my entire apartment fits here. On the far corner, a fireplace sitting in front of the white L-shaped couch gives the room a cozy feeling, balancing out the high vaulted ceilings.

"This place is gorgeous."

"Again, I can't take credit for it." He places a hand on the small of my back beckoning me inside and sending my skin on fire. "Most of the decorations were either Ali or my mom who chose."

"Ali?" I've heard the name before, but I can't remember who she is.

"Ali Hoang," he explains. "She's like a sister to me. She played my adoptive sister in *School Hallway*."

A memory flashes on my mind of Matthew asking him if he'd hooked up with her. Winter had been angry at the suggestion, and I understand why. If she's like a sister to him, he must be very protective of her. Like I am with mine.

"She has really good taste."

He smiles, satisfied with my approval of his place. He leaves me by the couch and makes his way to the connected kitchen on the opposite side of the room.

“Do you wanna anything to drink? Water? Wine? Beer?”

We’ve already drank some at The Reel, but I could use some wine now.

“Wine’s good.”

“Red or white?” he asks. What kind of guy has so many options to offer?

“White,” I answer, knowing I can’t trust myself with red wine on a couch so luxurious and white.

Winter brings two glasses of cold wine, hands me one, and rests the other on the reclaimed-wood coffee table in front of the couch.

“Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right back,” he says, disappearing into a hall next to the couch.

Taking in the place, I start to realize there’s likely so much I don’t know about Winter. This is the house of someone who has the type of money I’m not familiar with. And it’s not like my family wasn’t well-off. Both my parents are doctors, and they have their own practice. Money was never a problem growing up, or they wouldn’t have been able to send us to study here. But this... this is a different level of money.

Winter returns before I can start spiraling. Before my mind decides to convince me that I shouldn’t be here. That we’re too different. That he’ll never really want anything to do with me.

That I’m not enough for him.

He sits on the couch next to me and hands me a pile of paper bound together by a rubber band. His script. I take it with caution, as if it’s a prized possession. As if it’s a museum artifact that should be handled gently.

I feel like I’m holding a piece of Winter in my hands.

“Are you sure you’re okay with me reading it?”

“Not really,” he says, and I stop taking the rubber band out. “But I still want you to.”

“Who else has read it?”

He gulps. Loudly. Running a hand through his stubble, he adjusts himself on the couch, turning to me with a leg folded under the other.

“My mom, my sister, Ali, Henry, and a few executives.”

I nod, understanding the magnitude of being allowed into such a select group. He’s only ever showed this to his family and best friends. And now me. Carefully placing the wine glass on the table, I sit back on the couch and start reading.



“This...” I start, but I don’t know if I have the words to describe what I’m feeling. This script is beautiful. It’s poignant and moving; it broke my heart and put it right back together at the end.

“Sucks?” he asks with a feigned chuckle.

“No. Winter, it’s amazing.” I carefully lay the pages on the coffee table and turn to him. “Did... did all of this really happen to you?”

“Not all, no.” He keeps watching me, studying me, as if waiting for me to change my mind. “A lot of it did happen, but I fictionalized a lot. Changed places, people. It’s loosely inspired by my life, but it’s not autobiographical.”

“Was it hard? Writing all of this? Putting it all on paper?” I can’t imagine the strength it must take to create art out of

moments that caused so much pain. To turn something that hurt you into something so beautiful.

“It was harder showing my mom after I’d finished it. I actually only showed it to her last year. I thought she would hate it. I thought she’d hate the way I portrayed my father.”

I understand why he’d think so. The father in the script is a heartless man. Someone who cares more about money and status than his own family. The things he put his son through are unimaginable. The fact that those things have happened to Winter, even if they were altered, it breaks my heart.

For years he had no control over his life. I can see the parallels even without him disclosing them to me. He wanted to leave *School Hallway* soon after he joined the show, but his father made him stay. There’s a project he was in, probably a movie, that he never wanted to do, but he didn’t have an option. He was a mere pawn in his father’s plan to become rich and important through his son.

“What did she say?” I ask, scared of the answer.

He smiles. “She apologized. Cried a lot. Then went on to apologize again for letting him do all the things he did. I don’t blame her, though. Never did. We came from a simple life. She never worked, always dependent on my father. He was the typical guy who felt the need to provide for his family.” He lets out a dry laugh. “At least until he could have his son to do it for him.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, scooting over to reach his hand. I squeeze it gently, and he strokes his thumb over the back my hand. “I’m sorry he did this to you.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not. He was your father. He was supposed to protect you, not hurt you.”

“Yeah,” he agrees weakly, his eyes focused on the movement of his thumb over my skin. “At least he couldn’t get to my sister. I wouldn’t let him.”

“He tried?” I feel an anger rising inside of me. I never thought I’d have such rage toward a dead man.

“Once. He took her to an agency, but I told him I’d quit if he signed her up with an agent.” He shudders at the memory. “It wasn’t a risk he was willing to take. Not when I was already bringing so much money home.”

“And your sister? She didn’t want to be an actress?”

His eyes change, the darkness giving place to a softness I rarely see there.

“She never wanted anything to do with it. She’s a biologist in Seattle now. I visit her sometimes, and all she does is make fun of me for being in Hollywood. She pretends not to take my job seriously, and I pretend I don’t know she’s lying.”

I smile, imagining him bickering with his sister. I picture them growing up together, him as a protective older brother, her as a mischievous little sister.

“What did she say about the script?”

“I think it was the first time she ever said she was proud of me.” I can hear in his voice how much that meant to him. How his sister’s approval was important.

“I don’t think you can let this go to waste, Winter,” I say, and he cuts me a questioning look. “You need to make this movie happen.”

“Thank you,” he says softly.

“What for?”

“Reminding me that I don’t suck at what I do?” he jokes.

“Winter.” I roll my eyes at him, but then I notice a shadow of vulnerability in his eyes and realize he’s not joking at all. “You’re really good at what you do. Are you kidding me? You’re the best actor I’ve ever worked with.” I raise a hand stopping him before he can say anything. “Don’t you dare say I don’t have much experience to begin with. I’ve done a lot of auditions. I’ve shot many student films.”

He laughs. “I wasn’t going to say anything,” he argues, his hands coming up, palms out.

“Yeah, sure.”

“No, but really.” He becomes serious again. “I don’t know if I wanna keep acting. In fact, if you had asked me a couple of months ago, I’d say for sure that I didn’t. But I do want to make movies. I want to write and direct. Put my work out there. You... you made me remember why I want that.”

There’s so much to unpack in what he said, I don’t know where to start.

“What changed from a couple of months ago?”

“You,” he says simply as if that answer didn’t tip my world upside down. “You made me fall in love with acting again.”

“Can I ask you something?”

He nods, eyes cast down, following the movement of his hand, that has left mine and is now slowly caressing my thigh. Up and down. Up and down.

Focus. I need to concentrate to get the question out.

“Why are doing this play? You could be doing any project you wanted. Why the park?”

He looks a little embarrassed now, shaking his head from side to side.

“I made a deal with Emily.” When he looks up, I can see a gleam of joy in his eyes. “She knows the director I wanted to bring in for the movie. I asked her to introduce me to him, but Em’s a tough negotiator. She’d just gotten hired for this play, and she wanted to make her name at Movieland and make sure she’d have a full house all the time, so she offered me the introduction in exchange for me doing the play.”

“Oh,” I yelp, a scene flashing back in my mind. “The day of the audition, I overheard a conversation you had with her —”

He lifts his eyebrows.

“Not proud of that, but I did hear you boasting about how you’d fill up the seats.”

“Well,” he says, extending the syllable with a cocky smile spread on his face, “I wasn’t lying.”

“Oh my God,” I cry. “You’re so full of yourself.” He laughs, and I think this moment right here will be one of my favorite memories of LA when I have to go back to Brazil.

The thought of going back to Brazil suddenly comes crashing down on me with so much power I have a hard time filling my lungs with oxygen. I try to breathe in, but every breath feels empty.

I don’t see Winter getting closer, before I can register it, his hands are cupping my face, his eyes searching mine.

“What happened?” His voice is frightened, his eyes apprehensive.

In just a few months, I might leave. There’s a very good chance that this upcoming Christmas will be my last one in the United States. I have three months left on my visa, and no prospects of getting a sponsorship. Movieland hasn’t so much as mentioned the possibility of sponsoring my work visa, and

every day that passes, I feel like the chances get slimmer and slimmer.

The words I said to Julia a couple of months ago come back to me in a flash.

Take these months you have here and have every experience you've ever wanted to. Be free. Live your life to the fullest.

I close the short distance between us and seal my lips on his.



Chapter 20

WINTER IS CAUTIOUS AT FIRST. HIS LIPS ARE GENTLE against mine, savoring me with calm and patience. But I'm neither calm nor patience. I need more. And I need it fast. I feel like a ticking bomb running out of time.

Opening my lips, I invite him in, and he doesn't hesitate. He explores my mouth thoroughly, a primal groan escaping his lips when my tongue meets his in a wild dance between us.

In a quick move, I bring one my legs over him, straddling his lap and causing a deliriously gratifying friction right where I need it. Winter responds with an almost involuntary buck of his hip, and a soft moan escapes my lips, but he is right there, ready to swallow it. When his hands grip my ass to bring me closer, I want to melt into him. Become one with his body. I feel like I can't get close enough.

"I can't get close enough to you," Winter echoes my thoughts, his words hitting me like shots of pleasure. Somehow they find their way into my chest, and I feel my heart grow in size, and I realize how much truth he's put into those words. I see it in his eyes.

I answer in the only way I can right now, wrapping my arms tightly around his neck and kissing him with all I have.

One moment I'm on his lap, the next I'm on my back on the couch, Winter hovering over me. He deepens his kiss, the delicious taste of cinnamon and mint consuming my every thought.

Then, as quickly as it begins, it all stops.

Winter pulls away and sits back, his breath quick and short, his chest heaving and the obvious evidence of his desire straining his jeans.

“I...” He starts, but his voice sounds hoarse, gravelly. He clears his throat and tries again. “We shouldn’t.”

I sit up. “Why?”

“Don’t... Don’t look at me like that.” He cups my face, but the gesture feels like a consolation prize I don’t want. He drops his hand when I pull away. “Remember... remember what I told you at your house?”

“Wh-what?” I have no idea what he’s talking about.

“That first time. You accused me of holding back. Do you remember what I told you?”

“That you didn’t trust yourself around me?”

“That hasn’t changed. If anything, it’s only gotten worse. If we keep going like this...” His words are strained, as if he’s forcing them out when he really doesn’t want to be saying them. He rakes a hand through his already messy hair. “You make me lose control,” he finally says.

“Then lose it. Throw it out the window, for all I care.”

“Sunshine,” he warns me.

“What are you so afraid of?” I ask in a whisper, closing the distance between us again.

“I’m afraid,” he says, but his breath hitches when I bring my hand to his chest, tracing a path up to his shoulder then down his arm. I bring his hand to my waist, and he doesn’t take it away. “I’m afraid that if we do this, I’ll won’t ever stop wanting you. I’m already addicted to you, Sunshine. Every fucking day, I count the hours until I get to be with you. Being on that stage, getting to act with you is the highlight of my day, but even if we were working in fucking telemarketing, or

doing maintenance for Movieland, or, God forbid, filing paperwork. Anything. I could do anything, and it'd still be the best part of my day if I were doing it with you."

The way my heart responds to his words can't be healthy. It's beating so fast inside my chest, I'm genuinely worried something might be wrong with me. My brain is foggy, my entire body tingling as the butterflies in my stomach take flight all at once.

For reasons that are beyond me, all I can say is, "What about doing another kids' show like *School Highway*?" I ask, referencing his answer months ago, when I asked him a role he'd hate doing.

He chuckles. "It's *School Hallway*, Sunshine." His hand slides down my leg, caressing my thigh in soothing movements. "And you got me. I wouldn't wanna do that with you."

"You wouldn't?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "These shows... they are all family-friendly." He brings his free hand to my face, and his thumb strokes my cheek, pulling a soft moan out my lips. His throat works through a swallow before he continues. "And there's nothing G-rated about the things I want to do to you right now."

"No?" I ask, my breath suddenly matching his, as he moves his other hand to my hair, gripping it with pressure. He grunts when I gasp, the rough sound shooting desire right into my veins, the place between my legs aching with need. "What do you want to do with me?"

His thumb hovers over my lip, never making contact, leaving the ghost of his touch and the promise of what's to come as he moves on to my jawline, then trails up to rest on that sweet spot behind my ear. He plays with my earlobe as his other hand massages my scalp before tugging gently, tipping

my head back. My hands explore the fabric of his white T-shirt without my realizing it. He responds to my touch by inching closer to me, our legs battling for room as we invade each other's space.

"For starters," he teases, bringing his free hand to my neck, his thumb tracing a featherlight touch over my already sensitive bottom lip, "I want to kiss you until you forget every other kiss you've ever had." He brings his lips close to mine without touching. I feel close to imploding under all this teasing.

"Winter," I cry out. My body is catching fire, and he has the extinguisher in his hands but wants to leave me to die. I grab his T-shirt and yank him closer, but he turns his face away.

"What?" he asks, feigning innocence. "Is there something you want?"

Something I want? I want him to take me. Right here and right now. I want him to kiss me senseless like he promised, and I don't want him to stop there. I want to rip his clothes off. I want to trace every inch of his skin with my lips and have him do the same on my body.

"Sunshine?" he calls me, that smug smirk painted on his stupidly handsome face again. "Tell me what's on your mind."

I shake my head. I can't.

"You were thinking about something. I know you were. Tell me." His husky, commanding voice doing nothing to assuage the ache between my legs. "What was it that made your heart speed up?" He replaces his thumb with a soft kiss on my pulse point. "I can feel how fast your heart is beating right now." His skilled fingers glide the front zipper of my dress down, his knuckles hovering over the sensitive skin that isn't covered by my lace bra. A little moan escapes my lips as he keeps sliding the zipper down, exposing my stomach. His

eyes go hungry at the sight. “Tell me,” he commands, and I hear in his voice how he’s losing his battle with his control. “What did you imagine that made your nipples this hard?”

When his hand cups my breast, thumb rolling over my peaked nipple, I know I’m a goner.

“This,” I gasp. “I was thinking about this.”

“I need more words than that.” His lips trail down my neck. His fingers slipping the spaghetti strap of my dress off my shoulders, giving him all access to my bare skin. “Tell me what you want. Whatever it is, Sunshine, I’ll give it to you. Just tell me already because I’m dying here.”

My hand slides down his chest to the front of his jeans to check just how bad he’s dying, and—

Oh God.

My mouth waters as I palm him over his jeans. He’s big and hard, and he grunts when I rub him lightly.

“Don’t,” he reprimands me, holding my hand still. “It’s hard enough as it is,” he says.

“It’s hard, alright,” I tease. My laughter is cut with a gasp when Winter wraps an arm behind my back and flips us so I’m lying on my back again, and his body is on top of mine. He holds his weight in just one arm.

“Where did your laughter go?” He grinds me, the bulge in his jeans creating a wonderful friction between my thighs. “Weren’t you finding this funny, Sunshine?”

A soft moan escapes my lips as his hip presses against mine again. He pulls his arm from under me, circling both my wrists with his large hand and pinning them above my head.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he says punctuating every word with a kiss on my neck. “I love the sound of your laughter. There were so many moments I would’ve have done anything

just to hear it and know I was the one making you laugh, but right now, there are other sounds I much rather hear coming from those lips.”

“You know,” I say, noticing how dark his eyes have gone, how he looks like he’s in the brink of losing the control he’s been trying so hard to hold onto. I enjoy the power I have over him. “This,” I say, nodding to the place where he’s holding my hands over my head, “this reminds me a lot of our chemistry tes—”

“Don’t remind me. That was fucking torture,” he growls and grinds his hips again. He lets go of my wrists and holds my face, forcing me to look into his eyes. “Having you pinned under me like that... Sunshine, I hate to say it, but I kind of wished you wouldn’t get cast.”

“Asshole,” I complain, fake-shoving him off me.

“Hands up,” he orders, his voice back to sounding sultry and commanding. He grabs both of my wrists and place them above my head again. “Don’t fucking move them.”

“Bossy.” I smirk at him.

His fingers trace down my arms in a whisper of a touch, leaving goosebumps in their wake. I need his hands to keep moving lower and lower. I need his touch more than I need air right now.

“Winter,” I gasp.

“What?” He continues to move his arm down, tracing the right side of my body. He stops at the band of underwear and tracks back over my belly up to my lace bra that’s doing nothing to cover my pebbled nipples.

“Please.” I’m not above begging right now. He strikes his thumb over the lace, and I arch my back at the touch. When I threaten to move my arms, he shakes his head, tscking with his

tong and pinning me back with a stare. I stop, a frustrated breath leaving in a huff.

“Tell me,” he says, snaking his arm under my torso again. “What,” he continues, pulling me up. I keep my back arched for him. “You need.” He unclasps my bra with a flick of his wrist.

His hand never leaves my skin. He opens his palm on my back as if trying to cover the most space. When he slowly brings his hand to my front, he does so under the band of my now loose bra, reaching my breast and palming it as if it’s a valued prize.

“I need—” I try, but my breath catches when he lowers his mouth on my left breast, sucking on my nipple. His tongue circles the sensitive peak, tasting it like it’s his favorite dessert.

“Hm?” he asks, his mouth full of me. I feel the vibration on my skin, shaking me to my core. He sucks one more time, nips it, then leaves a kiss before he lets go. His eyes find mine. “You were saying?”

“Huh?” My brain is pudding. No thoughts. I’m a just a million nerve endings on overdrive.

“Stay with me, Sunshine,” he urges, leaving a trail of kisses from my chest to my mouth. His tongue sweeps over the seam of my lips, and I open for him, wrapping my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. He devours me with unforgiving passion, his mouth demanding the answers my brain refuses to articulate in words.

“I’m here,” I breathe. “I’m here,” I repeat, kissing his jaw line.

“What do you need?” The words vibrate on my pulse point as he licks my neck, biting it with tenderness.

“Touch me,” I beg. “I need you to touch me.”

“Fucking hell,” he grunts. “I thought you’d never ask.”

When Winter slips his hand down my body and teases me over the fabric of my underwear, I’m sure it won’t take much to send me over the edge. My entire body is already electrified—a single spark, and I’ll explode.

“You’re so wet.” He palms me over my panties, his voice low with desire. “Is this all for me, Sunshine? Is this how much you want me?”

I nod, unable to trust my mouth to make any sounds other than moans.

He hooks a finger on the edge of my underwear and pulls it to the side, exposing my glistening pussy to his skillful hand. With one finger, he teases my entrance, sliding up to coat my clit in my own wetness.

“Oh,” I pant. “Oh, God. Yes, right there.”

“Is this good?” I can’t answer him, I’m too lost in the feeling of his finger on me, the sensations running through my entire body. “Sunshine, I need words.”

“Good,” I manage to say.

His smug smirk tells me he’s all too satisfied with himself. He’s drunk on the power he holds over my body, but right now I don’t have it in me to care. He can have all the power he wants, as long as he keeps making me feel this good.

And he does. He circles in an increasing rhythm exactly where I need him too. When he notices I’m almost there, he slows the pace, leaving me hanging, my orgasm just out of reach.

“Fuck it, Winter. Don’t you dare stop now.”

His response comes quickly.

He inserts two fingers in me, bending them to hit just the right spot. His thumb keeps working my clit, circling until I’m

gasping, my back arching off the couch, my thighs closing, pressing on both side of his hips.

I can already feel that delicious tingling sensation at the base of my spine, as I ride his fingers unabashedly.

“Come for me, Sunshine. Don’t hold back.”

Just like that, my body responds to his command, and I fly over the edge. Waves of pleasure rolling into me as I cry his name, my entire body shaking as Winter’s fingers keep working me through the waves of pleasure that don’t seem to ever end.

When my body finally stops trembling, he pulls his hand away, bringing them up to suck his fingers clean, and I’m about to explode again at the mere sight of him feasting on the evidence of my pleasure.

“Fuck,” he murmurs, lowering his body onto mine, the sweet pressure of his weigh helping me regulate my still erratic breathing.

“What?” I ask into his mouth, as he presses a series of kisses on my lips.

“I’m ruined.” He kisses my temple. “Sunshine, you’ve ruined me.” He kisses my jaw. “Whenever you say my name,” he says in a low voice, dripping of desire, “from now on, all I’ll be able to think is this moment right now. You crying my name as I make you cum with just my fingers.”

I tangle my fingers in his hair, pulling him to me. He lowers his lips to plant kisses on the place my neck meets my shoulder, then he simply lays his head on my chest.

“Would you rather me call you Davis instead?” I tease.

He snap up so quickly, I laugh.

“Don’t you fucking dare.”



Chapter 21

WINTER INSISTS ON TAKING ME HOME AFTER WE SPEND some time cuddling on his couch. I'm not shy about telling him I want to stay, describing all the things I still want to do with him.

I see he's struggling, but he still tells me it's better I go.

"Why?" I ask like a child who's been denied a candy.

"Because," he says against my mouth. He sucks on my lower lip slightly then kisses it better. "I don't want to rush this."

"I do," I say, but he just chuckles and slaps my ass after pulling me up the couch. "No," I whine and try to pull him back to the couch, but he's too strong and I can't move him in the slightest.

"Come on." He pulls me in the opposite direction. "I'll drive you home."

"You're no fun," I complain but follow him.

He pauses and turns suddenly, and I slam right into his body.

"I think what we just did was lots of fun," he says close to my ear, sending shivers down my body.

"Ex-exactly," I stutter. "And we could have lots more fun tonight."

"Next time," he promises with a laugh.



Rehearsals the next week are unbearably boring and extremely long. We're on the technical rehearsal stage of the production, which means long days when we come on stage to stand still for extended stretches of time so the sound and light teams can get their shit done.

It also means we're very close to opening. Just three more weeks.

And, unfortunately, it also means I don't see much of Winter. He's got the most scenes on the show, so he has the longest days of all the cast. One day, when I see his start time on the call sheet, I actually feel sorry for him. I have two back-to-back days off, and he'll be going in both days.

On Wednesday, a week after tech has started, we're finally on the same shift, blocking the scene Melina and Arthur reunite in the woods. But we don't get to see much of each other offstage. When he's sent on a break, I stay behind, and vice versa.

It's like the universe is conspiring to keep us apart.

And my body isn't at all happy about it.

I'm constantly aware of his presence, as if there's a magnet inside me that tracks his every move. Our magnetic fields have now irreversibly flipped to keep us together instead of apart.

When I go on my second break of the day, I find a text waiting for me on my phone.

Winter 14:21

Remember when I told you the chemistry test was torture? THIS is torture.

I can feel a stupid smile tugging on my lips.

Luiza 15:03

Can't you pretend you need to use the bathroom next time I'm offstage?

Winter 15:41

Why can't YOU do this on MY break?

Luiza 16:37

Because I gave you the idea. If you don't want to...

An arm wraps around my stomach, making me scream and jump in place.

"Shhh," Winter shushes me as he spins me around. "They're right there. They can hear us."

I open my mouth to say that I wouldn't have screamed if he hadn't startled me, but he doesn't give me the chance, closing his lips on mine with urgency. I respond hastily, taking advantage of every second we have together.

Which isn't nearly as many as I'd like. Way too soon, Winter's lips withdraw, and he clears his throat.

"Fuck," he groans. "We need to stop before I go back on stage sporting a semi."

Luiza

16:40 Never mind



At least both of us are dismissed at the same time. Winter holds the door open, and I step outside, the sun already low in a sky painted in shades of orange and purple. He promptly turns left, towards the back of the theater instead of right.

“Where are you going?” I ask, confused.

“To the 441 building?” he answers, sounding even more confused.

“The building is this way.” I point with my thumb over my shoulder.

He follows the direction I’m showing, then frowns at me.

“You come through the park?”

“You don’t?” Is this a joke? Is he about to tell me he teleports here?

“I use the tunnels,” he says, pointing with his thumb behind his back.

Now I’m convinced he’s really joking. “What tunnels?”

I never in the ten months I’ve been working here ever heard of there being tunnels in this park.

“Luiza, please tell me you know about the theater tunnels.”

“I...”

He grabs my wrist and pulls me behind him, rounding to the back of the theater, where a small door is hidden behind a tall hedge. The door unlocks with a beep after he scans his employee ID, revealing stairs going down.

“Every theater stage in the park has one of this. How did you not know about it?”

“Because no one told me!” I protest. “How was I supposed to know the theater department had secret passages around the park?”

I’m so outraged about being kept in the dark, that it takes me a second to realize something.

“Wait,” I pull his arm to make him stop. “That day we both arrived late. The second day of rehearsal. That was how you got to the theater before me! You knew about the tunnels, and you didn’t tell me?”

“I thought you already knew!”

“So, it’s your fault I’ve been crossing the park, sometimes running through the crowds, for months?”

“We were not exactly friends back then, Sunshine.”

“Still,” I insist because I don’t have a good argument against that. The truth is, I probably wouldn’t have given him the chance to tell me about it anyway. But he doesn’t have to know that.

“Anyway,” he says, realizing I’m not fighting back, “I have an invitation.”

“No,” I snarl. “You’re not gonna charm me out of being mad at you.”

“You find me charming?” he asks, raising an eyebrow at me.

“I think you find yourself charming,” I retort like the fifth grader I am.

At least that earns me a laugh from him. And the laugh is made even sweeter when he follows it with a quick, chaste kiss on my lips.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the tunnels,” he says cupping my face.

“You’re forgiven,” I tell him trying my best to sound solemn but failing miserably because he’s giving me puppy dog eyes, and it’s just too adorable not smile at him. “What’s this invitation you have for me?”

“Ali wants to meet you,” he says casually, resuming his walk through the tunnel. I follow him.

“Your best friend? You told her about me?”

“Sunshine, Ali has had to hear me talking about you since the day you auditioned.”

“Oh boy,” I tease. “So, she can’t have a good image of me.”

“On the contrary.” He looks at me with a smile on his face. “She’s dying to meet, and I quote, ‘the girl that has finally thawed Winter’s heart.’”

“Ha,” I snicker. “I knew it.”

“What?”

“I knew there was a good reason why your name is Winter.”

“You know what? I don’t think I want to introduce you two.”

“Oh, now you have to. I already know I’m gonna like her.”



I was right. Ali Hoang is the best.

We met her at her place because, unlike Winter, she never left the public eye, and trying to go out for a simple dinner always ends up in a headache and lots of paparazzi following her.

When she opened the door to let us in, I realized my mistake was not googling her. Maybe I could've avoided the "Oh my god" I squealed when I saw that she was the protagonist of Olivia's and my favorite show. Her stage name is Alice Soo, so I never made the connection.

A couple of hours later, and now I'm almost used to the idea of hanging out with someone I see every week on TV. She makes it easy, though.

Ali acts like we've been friends forever.

She tells me so many stories of Winter's childhood, it's almost as if he lived two parallel lives. The one with his father making his life miserable, and another where he could be a kid, or as close to it as a Hollywood star gets to be.

When a few hours later we decide we're all craving pizza, Ali asks Winter to go to a very specific place to bring her favorite food.

"It's literally just a window where you pick up your food. Super low profile. They don't deliver. They're not on any apps. You have to go grab your order yourself," she explains after he's left promising to be quick.

"How did you find out about it?"

“An ex,” she spits the word out with disgust. “Only good thing he did for me was introducing me to Pepe’s Pizza.”

I laugh at her dismissive tone, and soon she’s sharing stories of exes, and they get worse and worse.

“Oh my God, Ali,” I cry after she tells me of a guy who only communicated in dialogue from a movie she had just done. “Did he memorize it all?”

“Yeah. It was actually quite impressive because for a long time I didn’t even notice he was doing it. He’d find lines that fit in the conversation. It was only when he said something—I don’t even remember what, but it was an iconic line from the movie—that I started catching on.”

“Jesus, I thought being hot and famous was supposed to make dating easier.”

“Oh, it’s the opposite. Winter has some horrible stories too to prove me right.”

“He does?” I ask impulsively.

“Uhm, where to start?” She places a hand on her temple as if trying to choose what to say. “Okay, I’m not gonna name names, but once there was an actress, she was new to the scene. She’d been in a couple of episodes of some procedural shows, but she hadn’t had her break yet. Winter was seventeen or eighteen then, and she was a bit older. You already know how this goes, right? Older woman paying a teenager attention? He didn’t stand a chance. I was the one who had to open his eyes and show him she was selling their stories to the tabloid to make her name.”

“Jesus, that’s...” I don’t have words for it. An overwhelming rush of anger for what this woman did to him crashes on me, followed close by the hit of a sudden realization.

His father, this woman, Graham, his college girlfriend. They all used him for their own benefits, not caring for him at all. And worst of all, they all made him feel like he wasn't in control of his own life.

Winter returns with the pizzas soon after, and I can't help but look at him in a different way. Like a fog has finally cleared. Like I've found the missing piece to his puzzle.



Chapter 22

WINTER'S UNWAVERING PATIENCE IS STARTING TO GRIT on my nerves. Especially when it keeps me tossing and turning in bed after he insisted on taking me home when we left Ali's.

I take forever to fall asleep, my body still coming to terms with the absence of Winter. It's like I'm an addict going through withdrawal.

The sun slips through the curtains, bathing my bedroom in a soft warm glow, but it's not the light that is waking me up. There's a constant knock on my bedroom door followed by the high-pitched voice of my younger sister calling my name.

"Luiza, get the fuck up." I groan into my pillow, placing it over my head to try and pretend I can't hear her. "I'm opening the door," she warns me. I let her, even though my body is screaming for at least a couple more hours of sleep. I'm not on the call sheet today, so I could actually sleep in for the first time in ages.

The mattress dips with the weight of my sister dropping her body next to me as she shakes me awake. "Luiza, wake up."

"What?" I bark into my pillow.

She continues to shake me relentlessly until I uncover my face, tossing the pillow at her.

"It's here."

"What's here?"

"The promo posters!" She waves her cellphone in front of me. "Graham sent them to me early, but they'll be posting

them soon.”

“What?” I sit up so quickly all the blood rushes down my body, and my head gets lighter. Or maybe it’s the excitement of finally seeing myself as Melina. “Wait, who sent it to you?”

“You look amazing, mana.” The admiration in her eyes is so genuine, I don’t focus on the question she doesn’t answer.

“If you stop moving, I can see it,” I reprimand, wrapping my hand around her wrist to hold her phone in front of my eyes.

My breath catches. My eyes instantly tear up. I look... I look like a princess. The poster has one of the pictures of just me in my wedding gown. I’m looking back, and somehow my tight shoulders and clenched fist show fear, and at the same time my gleaming eyes show relief. The exact emotion I imagined Melina to be feeling in that moment.

After a while, I start taking notice of the details. My right hand is being pulled by a hand covered in leather gloves. I don’t recall having anyone in those shots, so it must have been digitally added. It’s almost hidden, and I think that’s what they were going for. If you’re not paying attention, you might miss it. And then the poster has a completely different meaning.

Even the hand pulling me looks ambiguous. If you don’t know the plot of the play, you might think it’s a lover with whom Melina is running away.

Either way, the image is enticing. The entire composition of the poster, with a castle digitally added on the background, and the multiple elements surrounding my body, looks amazing.

My heart is about to explode in my chest.

And then I see it. The two lines at the top of the poster.

Movieland's first Latina Princess

*Meet Melina in Frostbound Loyalty this holiday season,
only at Movieland*

My stomach drops. My chest constricts, threatening to squeeze all the air out of my lungs. I can hear the words that have haunted me. Words I had somehow managed to banish to a dark, forgotten corner of my mind. They all come blasting out into the spotlight.

You know if they cast her, it'll only be because she's Latina and fat, and they need to show diversity in the cast.

“Luli?” Olivia asks. The smile on her face turns into a concerned frown.

“This... I...” I have a hard time putting my feelings into words. My brain can't process so many emotions at once. “This is not... what I wanted.” It finally comes out in a breath.

“What?” My sister's eyes are rounded in surprise that slowly changes into annoyance. “You look beautiful. I don't know what you're complaining about.”

““First Latina Princess’?” I point out, irritation lacing the words.

“Well, you are,” she argues back.

“But I don't want to be reduced to that.” I sling my legs out of the bed and march out of my bedroom. I need coffee if I'm going to deal with this.

Olivia follows me out to the kitchen. “You're not being reduced to that. They're just stating a fact. I don't know why you're making such a big deal of it.”

Of course she doesn't. Olivia has never had to worry about anything in her life.

“Of course you don’t,” I repeat the words out loud. “Nothing is a big deal to you. You’re not the one who had to fight tooth and nail to be here and have your first opportunity be about some diversity token instead of your talent.”

“I know it’s been hard for you, Luiza, but it’s not been easy for me either. Don’t make it sound like you’re the only one who’s doing something difficult here.”

An incredulous laugh whooshes out of me. “That’s rich. You’re lying to our parents about your major so you don’t have to face their harsh opinions, and you’re telling me it’s not been easy for you? What exactly hasn’t been easy?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” She takes a step back, uncomfortable with my tone.

“It has everything to do with it, Olivia. Every damn thing. You don’t get what I’m feeling because you’re floating through life avoiding any responsibility. If you ever worked hard for anything in your life, you would understand. You wouldn’t want to have a label plastered on to you, reducing you to just one thing. But you don’t. You don’t because you don’t know the concept of making tough choices. Of facing consequences. Did Mom and Dad ever question your choice to come study here? No, because you lied to them. I didn’t. I never ran away from the consequences of my choices, and you know what that got me? It got me a month of Mom giving me the cold shoulder. It got me endless discussions with Mom and Dad, both of them telling me how I was taking for granted all the investment they’d done at the clinic so we could have a career in the future. It got memories I can’t erase from my mind, no matter how hard I try, of Mom telling me I’m making a mistake. That my dream is ridiculous. That I’ll give up the moment things get hard. That I’ll never be good enough to make it.”

I'm yelling by the time I'm done. My eyes are filled with angry tears that I'm trying hard to hold in.

Olivia is looking at me scared by my outburst, and a sudden swell of guilt starts growing in my chest, but I'm too angry at Movieland, at my parents, at the world, at myself to do something about it.

"I didn't know," she whisper, her voice wavering.



I don't know where I'm going. I leave the house without a plan. I keep walking without noticing where I'm going or how long it's been. But as I roam around, I force myself not to think about the poster.

Or my fight with Olivia.

Instead, I focus on the city around me. The cars driving by, the sound of a honk here and there, the bright rays of sunshine painting the entire city in a flaming gold. I love it here.

When I first arrived in LA, fresh out of college, I had hopes of staying in here forever. Hollywood is every actor's dream. At least, it's supposed to be.

But then I remember one of the first actors I met earlier in the year.

She'd been here for a little over a year, and we met at a Trader Joe's. She was in front of me in line but had forgotten to get her tofu, so she asked me to watch her cart for a second.

When she came back, she started a conversation. It felt like we were old friends who just happened to run into each

other at a grocery store. When she learned I was an aspiring actress too, she gave me an apologetic smile.

“Oh, honey.” She placed a hand on my shoulder. I don’t know what caught me by surprise the most, the gentleness of the gesture or the fact that she was touching me, a complete stranger, in the first place. The thing I had taken the longest to adjust in moving to the US was the lack of physical contact. And suddenly, there she was, petting me like it was the most normal thing in the world.

“I don’t want to ruin your dreams, but everyone says LA is where dreams come true until they arrive here and learn that LA is actually the city where dreams come to die.”

The cashier called her at that moment, and she left without telling me her name. The only thing she left behind was the paralyzing fear that I’d made a mistake coming here. A big mistake.

That was March, seven months ago. For a long time, I think I believed her. I had been trying to get a job other than the one at Movieland’s front gate, but nothing was happening. Even auditions were becoming more and more scarce.

If the city was determined to ruin everyone’s dreams, who was I to try and beat the odds?

But now I have, haven’t I? I’ve got a job. An actual paid acting job. So why can’t I just be happy about it? Why do I still feel like... like I’m not enough?

When I come to it, I find myself at Film Strip, mere feet away from the front gate of the park.

I don’t know what I’m doing here. I don’t know why this is the place my mind chose to look for solace when I’m feeling so lost, but I’m here. I take a couple of deep breaths as I look around, trying to find what brought me here, but it’s only when

I see Emily in the distance, walking into the Sheriff's Gate, that I realize I'm in the wrong place.

Finding Emily isn't easy, but I manage to track her down on the sixth floor of the 441 building.

When she walks out of Anne Marie's office a good half hour later, she's surprised to find me waiting down the hall.

"Luiza," she calls, walking toward me. "What are you doing here? Aren't you off today?"

"I..." What *am* I doing here?

"Is everything okay?" Her voice takes on a worried tone now. "Do you wanna talk?"

I simply nod, afraid if I try to talk a sob might come out instead.

"Let's go to my office." She beckons me to a door down the hall. Closing the door behind us, she takes a seat at the armchair facing the small couch and points for me to sit down.

When I get comfortable, she asks, "What happened?"

I don't know what I plan to tell her, but next thing I know, I'm telling her everything. About being cast, about what I heard from the girls backstage, but also about my parents and my past. And finally, I tell her about the poster and my fight with Olivia.

"Look, I get it, okay?" she says, her eyes holding mine in a comforting way. "I understand how you feel. I can't say I've been through exactly the same, but trust me, I know what you mean."

"Exactly. You wouldn't—"

"Now," she cuts me, her voice taking a slightly different tone, "that doesn't mean I necessarily agree with you."

"What?" Instinctively, I sit up straighter.

“You seem to have this belief that you’re not enough. Maybe because your parents didn’t support your dreams, or maybe there’s something else. Whatever it is, you hold that close to your heart. And now it seems like this is the only truth you know. I don’t think it matters if you were hired because of your talent or because you’re Latina, Luiza. And believe me when I say it was because your talent. It had nothing to do with where you’re from. But I don’t think that’s the problem. I think that no matter what, you’d find a way to tell yourself that you don’t deserve this. Because you believe you’re not enough.”

“That’s...” She raises a hand, quieting me again.

“Being Movieland’s first Latina princess isn’t something to be embarrassed about.”

“I’m not!” I jump in.

“Aren’t you?” she asks, raising an eyebrow in challenge. “What did you think when you first saw that on the poster?”

“That people would think I was only hired because I was Latina,” I answer honestly. “Not that I’m ashamed.”

“You want people to know you were hired because of your talent.” I nod in agreement. “But where in that poster does it say you’re not? Yes, you’re Latina. But that’s not all you are. What got you cast was your talent. Yes, it sucks that diversity still needs to be advertised like that, but think about all the other girls who will now know that they, too, can be a Movieland princess. Or a spy or a pirate or whatever. Someone has to be the first. And I’m damn happy that it was you and proud that I get to direct you.”

“I just...” I sigh. “I didn’t want it to be a thing, you know?”

“Yeah, I do. But it is, and it’ll keep on being until it isn’t anymore. So use this opportunity. Grab it and spin it in your

favor. Maybe one day people will stop othering every character that isn't white, able-bodied, cis, and straight. But until then..." She gives me a reassuring smile. "Until then, we do our best with what we got."



After I leave Emily's office, I spend the day at the park like a tourist, going on the rides, taking pictures of the shops and places, and watching the shows. I'm in line for the four p.m. session of *Unearthed*, the last showing of the day, when the strangest thing happens.

A family of three preteen girls and their parents stand behind me in line, and I keep hearing them whispering and giggling. I don't know what makes me turn my head in their direction, but when I do, they immediately stop. I become uncomfortably self-conscious then because it's clear that whatever they were whispering, it was about me.

"Excuse me," the mother calls as soon as I turn my back to them again. I'm not sure she's talking to me, so I pretend not to hear it. But then, she gently taps on my shoulder and says again, "Excuse me?"

"Yes?" I answer, now turning fully toward them.

"Mom, it's her," the girl in pink says. The three of them look so much alike, I wonder if they're triplets.

"It isn't," the girl in green argues.

The one in yellow just roll her eyes at her sisters, clearly not having it. "Just ask her."

The mom beckons the girl in pink to talk to me. The girl's cheeks turn the color of her outfit.

"I'm sorry," I say, making sure to give them a polite smile, "but who is it you think I am?"

"Princess Melina," the girl in yellow says impatiently. "She thinks you're Princess Melina."

"Oh." I don't know what to say. The mother takes my surprise in the wrong way, thinking I'm lost on what they're talking about.

"I'm sorry. The girls are obsessed with Movieland. Every year, they wait for the winter play with more enthusiasm than they wait for Christmas morning. They just saw the poster this morning, and they thought you looked like the new princess."

"Oh," I repeat. Then I force my brain to form words. "Well, yeah, I am." The way their faces glow when I confirm their suspicion is almost blinding. "I'm Melina. Princess Melina."

I hold my hand out, and they take turns shaking it, a starstruck look in their eyes I never thought I'd see directed at me. It feels surreal. Like I'm watching this scene unfold from afar. It just doesn't seem possible that this is happening.

"Can they get a picture?" the mom asks because apparently the girls have lost their ability to form words.

"Of course," I agree, holding my arms open to embrace them for the photo. The three girls quickly turn, facing their moms with huge smiles coloring their faces. I quickly sweep my eyes between them at my sides, only now noticing that we all have pretty similar hair, unruly curls cascading down our backs.

"Thank you," the three of them say in unison after their mother's captured a few photos on her phone.

“You’re very welcome.”

“Okay, girls, let’s go. The line is moving.” It’s their dad who makes them start walking again, but I’m too surprised by all of it to make my legs move. They pass by me, and we share smiles as they go.

“They literally screamed when they saw that the princess looked like them.” Their mom stays behind to tell me this when they’re out of earshot. “They’re so excited to see this play.”

I let the easiest smile I’ve ever given curl my lips as I say, “I’m happy to hear that.” But they will likely never know how truly happy they made me.



I don’t want to go home yet. I don’t want to face Julia because I’m sure she’ll want to know what happened today. I don’t want to talk to Olivia or think about the fight we had this morning. Especially not after meeting those three girls in line for the show.

But Nights of Terror is starting in half an hour, and I definitely don’t want to stay for that experience again.

It’s almost time for dinner, and even though I’m not hungry, I know I should eat something because I haven’t eaten the whole day. I consider grabbing something from the park, but not even Sprinkled Dreams sounds appetizing.

I’m still trying to decide what to eat when I walk through the employee gate, round the 441 building, and make my way to Film Strip. As soon as I walk through the gate, I see Winter, leaning on the slim column between the Sheriff’s Gate and

Socks Sensation. His arms are crossed in front of his chest, but his eyes are worried, not impatient.

“What are you doing here?” I ask and get a sincere smile in return.

“You haven’t greeted me like that in a while,” he points out. I’d forgotten about this. “Julia called me,” he answers. “She asked if I knew where you were, then I tried to call, but I couldn’t get hold of you. I was worried.”

I walk to him, unable to stop the pull he has on me.

“How did you know I was here?”

“I...” He takes a sudden interest in the window displaying a wide variety of printed socks. “I know how much you love it here. I figured this is where you’d come. And then I just asked around until someone told me they saw you.”

“How long have you been waiting?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he affirms. “I’d wait all day long.”

“Winter,” I say his name on a sigh.

“What happened?” he asks tenderly.

“I...” My throat clogs as I try to get the words out. “I rather not talk about it.”

He nods. A surge of relief instantly rushes through me like a tidal wave.

“Are you hungry?”

I shake my head, realizing the only thing I wanted is already right here.

“When was the last time you ate?” he insists.

“I don’t know.”

“Alright, we’re getting you some food.”

I'm so tired, I'm not completely aware how I get to Winter's car. All I know is that the moment I climb in, a feeling of calm and familiarity sweeps through me, relaxing every muscle in my body. I'm so comfortable, I fall asleep before we get to the highway. One second, we're in Burbank, the next the car is stopping, and I'm not exactly sure where we are.

Opening my eyes, I turn to find him watching me with a smile on his face.

"Did you know you talk in your sleep?"

"What? No, I don't." I might, though. Julia's said something about that before.

"You sure do."

"I don't," I insist. He cocks an eyebrow at me. "But, hypothetically, if I did... what would I have said?"

"Hypothetically, you would've said that you were really, really, *really*," he emphasizes the word as if repeating it multiple times wasn't enough, "happy that I came to pick you up."

I don't know if I believe him or not. But if I'm honest with myself, I really am happy that he came. I'm happy that I'm with him right now.

"And," he continues, "you said you were really hungry. Like, if I didn't give you food in the next hour, you'd commit murder. I figured I'd be the victim, so I'd like to avoid that." He looks out the windshield. "That's why we're here."

I follow his gaze. We're at a Vons parking lot.

"You're feeding me... at Vons?"

"Nope," he says simply, unlocking the car and getting out. All I can do is go after him.

“What...” I have to run a bit to catch up with his large steps. “Winter, wait. What are we doing here?”

He stops and waits for me to get to him. “Buying food so I can cook you dinner.”



Never in my life has a man other than my father cooked for me. And damn if Winter can't cook. He made us my favorite type of risotto, with Parma ham and brie, and when I told him that, he simply smirked at me as if it was old news.

Now I'm sitting on his couch, waiting for him to return with our glasses of wine. White again, because I still don't trust myself on this couch that looks like it costs more than a month's worth of rent. He didn't let me move a fork. Not even to do the dishes after he'd cooked everything. I'm being totally spoiled tonight, and I'm not complaining.

Julia called while he was preparing dinner, and I stepped onto his backyard to answer the call. I told her that I was okay, but for whatever reason, I didn't tell her who I was with. She didn't press me, and after a couple of minutes, we hung up.

As he makes his way to where I am on the couch, I finally realize he's not wearing his usual worn-out jeans and white T-shirt. Instead, he has a deep burgundy Henley on, and I hate how great he looks in it. Does he ever look bad? I bet he could make even a bumblebee costume look hot somehow.

It suddenly clicks in my mind.

“Were you out when Julia called you?” I ask out of the blue.

“Huh?”

“When she called you asking about me,” I explain.
“Where were you?”

He gives me a quizzical stare. He’s trying to understand why I’m asking that question. And I can see he’s pondering how to answer it. For the way he sighs, I must assume he’s going with the truth. “I was at a bar. Why?”

“It’s nothing. I just... why did you leave, then? You didn’t have to come looking for me.”

“I didn’t have to,” he repeats. Then he leans down to rest his wine glass on the coffee table. As he moves back, he leans towards me. His lips touch my pulse point, and I’m sure he notices when my heartbeat goes through the roof. “But I wanted to.”

“Why?” I ask, my voice coming out breathier than I expected.

“Because I needed to see you,” he says, kissing the spot behind my ear. His teeth nibble at my earlobe, and a shiver runs down my spine.

“Why?”

“Because...” He nips at my shoulder, leaving an open-mouth kiss afterwards. “The thought of you hurting hurts me. Because I’ll take any excuse to be with you. And because,” he says, with a certain finality in his voice, “I’m done with being patient when all I can think about is all the things I want to do with you.”

“Like what?” I manage to ask, as I feel the little control I still have over my brain snap when Winter’s mouth starts exploring every inch of skin his lips can reach.

“I’m better at showing than telling.” He smiles against my mouth.

“Show me then.” I want it to sound like a challenge, but it comes out more like a plea.

Winter is on his feet in a second. Bending over me, he nudges his arms under my ass, and I instinctively hold onto his neck. He pulls me up without much effort, guiding my leg to wrap around his body.

“Winter,” I gasp. “I’m heavy.”

“Just the perfect weight,” he replies, walking to his bedroom with me glued to him like a koala bear.

I haven’t been to this part of his house before, but I don’t have it in me to pay attention to anything but him and the way he looks at me like I’m a glass of water in a desert.

His hungry eyes show me exactly how much he wants me. His desire feeds my own, and I’m afraid I’ll overdose in lust. Is this a thing, to want someone so much that your body shuts down?

I hope it isn’t because I’m at risk of that happening to me right now. And if it does, I’ll be unbelievably mad for missing what I know is about to happen.

Winter drops me on the bed, my back touching his cloud-like mattress. He lowers his body on top of mine, his lips never more than an inch from my skin.

“Do you have any idea,” he asks, distracting me as his free hand explores my body, “how many times I thought about doing this?”

“Not as many as I did.”

“Oh, Sunshine.” He shakes his head. “Impossible.”

This time, when his mouth claims mine, there’s nothing tender or sweet about it. It’s desperate, passionate, hungry. Our tongues clash in a battle where both of us leave as winners.

Winter's hands never stop touching me, mapping my body as if it could guide him to a treasure chest.

It dawns on me that not once did Winter ever make me worry about what he thinks of my body. It's never been a question how much he wants me. Being with him feels so natural, I hadn't realized it also feels so different from my previous experiences.

As if he can read my mind, he grabs the hem of my top. "This," he says, pulling at the fabric, "looks great on you, but I much rather see you out of it." He helps me to sit up so he can take it off, and then he quickly reaches behind me to unclasp my bra. "This too."

I grab his burgundy Henley. "Only fair this goes too, then." He doesn't wait for me to help him. In a smooth move, he yanks it off and throws it somewhere I don't bother to register.

With a quick push, he sends me falling on my back again, his hands palming my boobs, as his eyes focused on my mouth. I pull my lower lip between my teeth, trying to hold a moan in, but he watches me do it and takes it as a challenge.

The moment he starts teasing my nipples, circling his fingers around it, then pulling on them and twisting, I know I won't last long, but I do my best as he watches me gingerly, waiting for a moan to escape through my lips.

"Don't hold back on me," he presses.

"I'm not," I lie. "I'm just waiting for it to get good for real."

His eyes turn the darkest I've ever seen. I swear I could get lost inside them, trapped in the depths of its darkness. And I'd love it there. I'd love it so much, if someone handed me a map to find my way out, I'd shred it to pieces and stay right there.

“You’ll regret saying that,” he warns me, sliding off the bed and pulling me towards him. His voice has taken on a sultry, huskier quality, lust dripping from his every word. “I love that you almost never wear jeans.”

“Why?”

“These are so much easier to take off.” He yanks my leggings off me, sending them flying somewhere behind him. He palms my inner thighs, his eyes hungrily zeroing on the place where I need him the most. “Open your legs for me, Sunshine.”

This is the moment I’m most thankful for all the Pilates classes I’ve gone to. Time to show off my flexibility. I do as he asks, opening my legs all the way.

“That’s my girl,” he says, an impressed smirk on his face. “Now keep them that way. Don’t move.”

Easier said than done. The moment he starts trailing kisses up my right thigh, I’m already trying to inch them together, but Winter’s hands keep them down, as he shakes his head at me in mock reprimand.

“You try keeping still when I’m the one doing this to you,” I argue.

If I thought Winter’s eyes were dark before, at the mere suggestion that I might take him in my mouth, they turn pitch black. He doesn’t even respond. Not with words, at least. His answer comes in the form of one swooping pass of his tongue over my pussy.

My back arches off the bed, my body moving without my command, as if his magic tongue had short-circuited my nervous system in one swoop.

“Winter, please,” I moan, suddenly forgetting any other words in English, Portuguese, or any other language.

He uses his fingers to open me up, and his tongue finds the exact spot I need it. He licks and swirls his tongue around as if I'm his favorite flavor of ice cream. A profound need to feel him, to have him closer, to be connected to him suddenly washes over me.

“Win—” The word dies in my mouth when he sucks on my clit, sending my hips bucking toward his face. “Oh God.”

Winter notices my every move. He changes the rhythm as my body responds to him, never leaving me hanging. He quickly learns what I like, reading me like I'm an open book. Like I'm a language only he is fluent in.

His tongue keeps working me, teasing my entrance, lapping my slickness up to my clit and savoring it like it's his last meal.

“Almost,” I cry, not able to form complete sentences. “Don't stop.”

He doesn't. Winter's mouth keeps devouring me at the precise rhythm I need for him to wring my orgasm out of me. My control over my body snaps, as I unravel in a flood of sensations, rocking my hip under him, riding every aftershock wave.

“Need you,” I whimper. “Now.”

He doesn't need to be told twice. Reaching for his back pocket, he takes a condom from his wallet and quickly gets rid of his pants. I scoot up on the bed, my eyes focused on the man stripping in front of me.

When his pants drop to the floor, his white boxer briefs do nothing to hide his erection. My mouth waters before I even see him naked.

“You look like you're about to eat me, Sunshine.”

“Not my fault you look like this,” I say, eying him up and down.

“How do you think I feel having you naked on my bed, looking like this?” He mirrors my gesture.

“Why don’t you come over here and show me?” I cock an eyebrow at him. Winter basically jumps on top of me. I pull at his boxer briefs. “These have to go.”

The moment he gets rid of the last barrier between us, my senses overflow. Feeling his skin on mine, the hard planes of his body connecting with the soft curves of mine, it’s too much. It’s not enough. I need to feel him closer. I need him in me.

Reaching between our bodies, I wrap my hand around his hard cock and stroke it once. He groans at the touch, the sound spurring me on. My thumb rubs the tip, precum starting to leak.

“You need to stop,” he warns me, but I don’t. I can’t. Feeling how much I affect him is turning me on. Knowing how I’m about to unravel him is making me drunk on power. He holds my wrist still. “Sunshine.” His voice is but a hiss.

“Condom,” I ask. He hands me the foil packet, and I rip it open. As I start to unroll it on him, I feel his chest expand on top of mine.

Looking up, he grunts, “Fuck.”

“Look at me,” I urge him, holding his face so he can’t avert his eyes. “Don’t look away. Look at me.”

“I want this to be good for you,” he confesses in a whisper. His eyes searching my face. “But I don’t know I can last long.”

I don’t say anything. I don’t need to. I lower his face to mine, claiming his mouth in a kiss that tells him everything I

can't verbalize. With my other hand, I guide him to my entrance, and the moment Winter fills me, a moan rises from deep in my chest, and he swallows it in a passionate kiss.

Our hips rock together in perfect tempo. He thrusts in tiny movements at first, finding the way I like it best. His hand glides over my ass then slides down to my leg. He helps me wrap it around his body, changing the angle and—

“Fuck,” we both say as the new angle lets him hit me deeper.

“I knew you'd feel good, Sunshine,” he pants. “But I had no idea it'd be this incredible.” He lowers his hand between us and starts working my clit as his hips continues to thrust in a crescendo.

I feel the orgasm building inside, tension coiling in my body, like a rubber band pulled taut to the point of snapping. As Winter uses his finger on my clit, changing techniques to match the rhythm of his thrusts, I grab on his shoulder, my nails raking the skin on his back.

“Come for me, Sunshine,” he asks, taking my mouth with his. “I'm—”

“Don't stop,” I cut him off. He responds immediately. Sucking on the hollow of my throat, nipping at my shoulder, finding my lips again. He shows me how much he wants me in every way he can.

“What do you need?” he demands.

“I need...” I need him not to stop. I need him not to let me go. I need him not to give up. I need him to want me the way I want him.

“Whatever you need, Sunshine. I'll give it to you.” He sounds on the edge himself, like he's holding with every ounce of strength he has. “Tell me what you need, and it's yours. I'm yours. I've been yours the moment I saw you. You're it for

me. Tell me what you need, and I'll fucking give it to you." He kisses the corner of my mouth, and for some reason, despite his cock being buried inside of me, it's that kiss on the corner of my mouth that seems like the most intimate act we've ever shared.

"You can ask me anything. The only thing you can't ask of me," he continues, his fingers stroking my hair, "is to let you go because I don't think I can do that."

The little control I still have snaps at his words, rocking me into orbit as I cry out his name.

"That's it," he says, still working my clit, dragging out my orgasm. With a few more thrusts, he's groaning too, his body stilling over mine until he drops his weight on me, like the world's hottest, most comfortable blanket.

"Winter?" I call, and he supports his weight on his forearms again so he can see me.

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Did you not hear a word of what I just said?" he teases.

"Why do you call me Sunshine?"

He rolls over to the side, his right arm pushing me with him so we're lying face to face. He tries to put my hair behind my ear, but there's no taming this mess of curls. Not after what we just did. I quickly grab my hair and twist it into a knot on top of my head.

"You know what the best kind of day is?" he asks me, his fingertips tracing a lazy pattern on my arm. I shake my head. "Cold winter days when the sun is shining. During the summer, the sun can be a bit too much, and winter without the sun is just depressing. But winter and sunshine?" He kisses the tip of my nose. "The best combination."



Chapter 23

I WAKE UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT WITH WINTER'S arm draped across my waist. He senses my movement and snuggles closer to me. I smile despite myself. I'd never have guessed Winter was a cuddler. But I'm not mad about it. Sleeping with his body wrapped around mine has quickly jumped to my number one favorite way of sleeping.

I grope around to find my phone on the nightstand to check the time. It's a little past three, which gives us a few more hours of sleep before we have to wake up. I'm almost locking my phone again when my eye catch on the notifications on the screen.

Five missed calls from Julia.

Julia 20:21

Hey, where are you? Are you coming home?

Julia 21:04

Can you come home? Something's happened, and I could use your help.

Julia 22:43

Luli, please call whenever you see this. It's Olivia. We need you.

I jump out of bed as I read the text. Shit. Shit. Shit. I need to get to my sisters. I need to know what happened to Olivia.

Yesterday, I was yelling at her, but right now I have my heart in my throat at the thought of something happening to her. I try to call Julia, but she doesn't pick up. I don't know what's happening, but fear is coursing through my body.

"Sunshine?" Winter's voice is husky from sleep. "What are you doing?"

"I need to go," I tell him, searching for my discarded clothes.

"What? Now? What time is it?" When I don't answer him, he stands up hastily. "What's going on?"

"Where's my bra?" I cry out, desperate to get to my sisters.

Winter rushes to my side, placing his hands on my arms. "Sunshine, look at me." I don't. I keep sweeping the room with my eyes in search for my bra. "Hey, hey. Breathe. Look at me."

"My sisters," I say, my voice cracking. "It's Olivia. She needs me."

"What happened?"

"I don't know," I shout, my fear echoing in the silence of the night. "They didn't say. They didn't tell me what's going on. They needed me, and I wasn't there. They called me." I'm sobbing now, and I only notice it because Winter has pulled me to him, his arms firmly wrapped around my body, and my tears are dripping down his chest. He's rocking me in a soothing rhythm, letting me pour all of my despair onto him.

When my sobs finally seem to ebb, he cups my face, his eyes holding mine. "It's going to be okay." He bends down to pick something from the floor and hands it to me. "Here it is."

It's my bra. I could cry all over again, but I hold myself.

Winter starts moving around his room too. At first, I think he's helping me find my clothes, but he's actually looking for his.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"I'm coming with you," he answer. The way he says it, like it's so obvious, like he can't imagine doing anything other than being there for me, loosens a band that's been tightly wrapped around my heart. I feel it expand in my chest, filling spaces I never thought would be filled.

"Thank you," I whisper, not trusting myself not to start crying again if I try to say more.



There's never a better time to drive around LA than the middle of the night. There are no cars around, no traffic either on 405 or I-5, and we make it to my apartment in record time. My legs are shaking as we climb to the second floor, and I half expect to find Olivia bleeding out on the floor.

What I didn't expect was to find the apartment in absolute silence and normalcy. I turn the lights on in the living room, searching for evidence of what might have happened. I see nothing. I tiptoe to my sisters' bedroom and open the door a bit. The light from the living room is enough for me to see that they're both sound asleep in their respective beds.

I close their door again, and Winter moves quickly to my side. "They're okay," he whispers. "They're safe."

I know I should believe it. I've just seen both of them with my own eyes, but still, I can't shake the feeling that something really bad has happened. Julia wouldn't text me that if it weren't something big.

Still, I nod in response because right now they are. Okay, I mean. And there's nothing I can do expect wait for them to wake up and tell me what's going on.

"You should get some sleep," he says, planting a kiss on my head. "I'm gonna go."

On instinct, I wrap my arms around his waist, grabbing onto his T-shirt. "Stay," I mumble into his chest.

"What?"

I look up. "Can you stay with me? Just a little?"

"Of course," he answers.

We go into my room, and I strip off my clothes. I put on my pajamas and climb under the blankets. When Winter makes to lie on top of them, I shake my head.

"I lied," I tell him. "I don't want you to stay a little. I just want you to stay." *Forever*, my heart says.

He simply nods and takes off his clothes, climbing into bed after me in nothing but his boxer briefs.

"Thank you," I whisper into the darkness of the room.

"No need to thank me." He finds my hand on his chest and intertwines our fingers, bringing them to his mouth so he can kiss my knuckles. "Whatever you need, I'm here. Always."



Winter sneaks out of my bedroom a few of hours later when the sun's just beginning to rise.

“Thank you for staying,” I tell him as he leans in to give me a kiss.

We decided it'd be better for him not to be here in the morning to avoid the interrogation from my sisters, but as soon as he leaves, I'm all too aware of his absence next to me. I toss and turn, but I can't go back to sleep, so I decide to get up and make some coffee.

I feel restless as I wait for Olivia and Julia to wake up. I need to talk to them. I need to know what's going on. And I need to apologize. I know I was too harsh on Olivia, and all she was doing was trying to make me see the glass half full.

Julia's up first, unsurprisingly. She closes the door carefully, and she halts when she sees me in the kitchen.

I offer her a mug filled to the brim with black coffee, no sugar. She takes it without saying anything, and this is how I know she's mad at me.

Julia's the sweetest person I've ever met in my life. She will go out of her way to make everyone feel good all the time. She ended up in the hospital because she didn't want to tell Cam and Winter that she wasn't feeling good, for God's sake. So, when she doesn't even say thank you for the coffee, I know I'm in big, big trouble.

I nod to the couch, and she follows me.

“What happened?” I ask.

“Where were you?” she asks at the same time, both our questions come out in whispers, so as not to wake Olivia up.

“Did Olivia tell you about our fight?” She nods and waits for me to say more. “I was unfair to her,” I admit. “But I was

so mad about the poster. I think... I know I said some things I shouldn't have said."

"Do you know why Olivia wanted to move here?" Julia takes a sip of her coffee. I shake my head. "She looks up to you, Luli. She always has. Moving here, studying screenwriting—that's all because of you. She worships you, and it kills me that you don't see that."

"Did you always know she was studying screenwriting?" Julia confirms with a nod. "Why did she never tell me?"

"Did you ever ask?" she volleys back, and I feel a pang of guilt hit my chest. "What Mom did... What she and Dad did to you was shitty. They should've never done that. But it's not Olivia's fault. And it's not her fault that they learned from their mistakes instead of repeating them."

"Did they, though? Learn?"

"I think they did." She takes another sip of her coffee. Mine is forgotten in my hand because I don't think I can get anything past the lump that is lodged in my throat. "They're rooting for you, Luli. They tell everyone at the clinic that their kid will be a movie star."

"They never said that to me."

"Yeah." She lowers her eyes. "They still have a lot more to learn. But," she continues, locking her eyes on mine again, "would you really prefer that Mom and Dad did the same things to Olivia that they did to you? Aren't you happy she was spared that?"

"Of course," I answer quickly because it's true. I'd never want her to suffer the way I did. "It's just..."

"You wish you hadn't gone through that either," she offers.

“Yeah.” I take a deep breath. “I resent her because I always felt that they gave her all the support they never gave me.”

“I’m sorry you went through all of that.” Julia reaches for my hand, and I quickly grab it. “It wasn’t fair. But it’s not fair to resent Olivia for that either.”

“I know,” I agree.

A weight is lifted off my chest. I can practically hear the sigh of relief from my heart, as it can now grow, filling out the gaps left by this feeling of resentment I was holding on to.



Julia doesn’t tell me what happened to Olivia last night. She says it’s Olivia’s story to tell, but I have rehearsal at noon, and I know I won’t rest until I know what’s going on.

I open the door to their room and leave it slightly ajar, letting the morning light filter in. Her bed is positioned on the wall opposite the door, so the light hits it harder than it does Julia’s.

Olivia squints and shifts position but doesn’t wake up.

Sitting at the foot of her bed, I gently shake her leg. “Liv,” I call her by the nickname I haven’t used in years. It simply rolls out. I didn’t even think of doing it.

“Uhm?”

“Liv, wake up.”

She turns to face me, eyes half open. “Luli?”

“Hey, sorry to wake you.” She looked so peaceful sleeping I really didn’t want to wake her up. But I had to if I wanted to talk to her before leaving for work.

All at once, she seems to wake up. Like her body suddenly flipped the switch, and she’s now on full alert.

“Luli, I’m so sorry,” she says wrapping her arms around me.

“Whoa, hey.” I hug her back. “What are you sorry about? I’m the one who should be apologizing to you. I was a dick.”

“I didn’t mean to make you feel like you couldn’t be upset about the poster. I’m sorry I did. I’m sorry I said you were making a big deal out of it. It is a big deal.”

“No, you were right,” I comfort her. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Liv. I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry for the way I’ve treated you since you got here. Hell, I think even before that. I resented you for the things our parents did to me, and that wasn’t fair.”

“I didn’t know what they’d done to you. You don’t need to apologize.”

“I do. Because what they did to me was not your fault, and you shouldn’t have paid for it.”

“I forgive you,” she says.

“Good.” We share a smile, and I squeeze her in a bear hug. “Now, please tell me what happened last night.”

We move to the couch in the living room. She tells me everything, and I feel my blood quickly starting to boil.

“I’m going to kill him,” I grumble. I try not to focus on the fact that I could’ve warned her. *What happened to Olivia is not my fault*, I repeat mentally until I half believe it. Which is enough for now.

“I appreciate the intent, but I’d rather you not get arrested or deported,” Olivia jokes.

“I don’t care,” I blurt out, but both Julia and Olivia give me the most loaded side-eye. “He got you expelled.”

Why are they not angry too? Why are they so calm about this?

“Not yet,” Julia reminds me.

“Eh.” Olivia cocks her head. “I’ve basically got one foot out the door anyway.”

As much as I try to convince myself none of this is my fault, I can’t fully believe it. It dawns on me that if I hadn’t resented my little sister for so long, I could’ve paid more attention to her.

I had no idea she was still in touch with Graham.

Graham, who did to her the same thing he did to Winter all those years ago. If only I had been closer to my sister. If only I had told her that he wasn’t someone she could trust. Then maybe she wouldn’t be in this situation.

When Graham stole Winter’s script, it took a long time for Winter to get everything straight. Olivia doesn’t have all this time. Being caught plagiarizing is punishable by expulsion. If she gets expelled from school, her visa is suspended, and she has to go back to Brazil.

Seeing my little sister so heartbroken breaks *my* heart. *I could’ve warned her.* Maybe if I had, this could’ve been the great moment in her academic career it should’ve been instead of the stressful situation it became.

Having a renowned producer giving students feedback on their material is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, even at such a prestigious school like the Elysian Fine Arts Institute. No

one expects the producer to call you and the professor aside to say they've read that script before.

"It's okay," Olivia says, but her voice is coated in defeat. Her face contorted in a sulk. "I shouldn't have given him the script. At least, not before I turned it in anyways."

"Wait." I raise my index finger in the air. "How did you send it to him?"

"WhatsApp," she answers, giving me a confused look.

"Okay, so we take your phone to the dean. We show him you sent it before he registered the script in his name."

This will work. I know it will. There's no way Graham can say this script is his if Olivia can prove she sent it to him first. Unless...

"Did you talk to him about the script before sending it over?"

Olivia's eyes fall to her hands, fidgeting on her lap. "I asked his opinion once or twice."

Julia meets us on the couch with a new cup of coffee in hand. "Why?" she asks, offering me a sip, which I refuse vehemently.

It's time to tell them Winter's story, but if I want to do that, there's a lot more I need to come clean about.



"Oh my God. I knew it!" By Olivia's level of excitement about me and Winter being together, you'd never guess her stay in the US is being threatened right now. As soon as I started to

recount my last months, my sisters seem to have completely forgotten what's at stake here.

I feel like a teacher trying to get the students back on track when I attempt to return the conversation back to the pressing matter.

“So, this isn't the first time Graham's done this. And he was relentless with Winter. I'm afraid he'll try the same thing now. He'll use the help he gave you and spin it to make it look like this is his script.”

“Can we ask Winter to tell his story? If he comes to my defense, maybe the dean will actually listen to me.”

I sigh, knowing it's not that simple. “When he reached a settlement with Graham, they both signed an NDA that prevents them from talking about it. I don't know if he can come forward, Liv.”

The way her face falls immediately has my heart shrinking in my chest. I'd do anything to see my little sister happy.

“We'll figure it out,” I promise her. Olivia's sitting on the floor, her back to the coffee table, her legs folded in front of her. Her arms are wrapped around her knee, and I pull one of her hands to give it a gentle squeeze. “You're not alone.”

“Bento sisters are never alone.” Julia smiles, pulling the two of us in for a hug.

“Tell that to Maria,” Olivia says, squeezed between two of her older sisters. We all laugh, knowing full well our oldest sister would be with us in a heartbeat if we asked her for it. And that if she ever need us, we'd go to her, no matter the distance.

“I love you guys,” Olivia whispers. We're not a very verbally affectionate family. We don't go around distributing

“I love yous” left and right like some families do. So it feels extra meaningful when Olivia says it now.

“I love you too.”

“I love both of you,” Julia repeats. “But Luli, if you don’t wanna be late for your rehearsal, you have to leave,” she warns me.

“Shit,” I cuss. Grabbing my phone, I realize I need to call an Uber right now to make it on time.

“Go,” Olivia shoos me away. “We don’t need another one of us in trouble.”

I shoot her a quick glance before I bolt out the door, my fingers already tapping on the screen of my phone.

As I make my way to Movieland, I try my best not to panic, knowing that Olivia’s fate is not the only one at someone else’s hand. My visa is expiring in just a couple of months, and if Movieland doesn’t offer me sponsorship, there’s a chance the three Bento sisters will be returning to Brazil at the end of the year.



Chapter 24

Turns out, finding a solution for Olivia's problem is not as easy as I hoped. Our first attempt goes exactly as I expected.

Olivia talked to her professor, showing her that she'd sent Graham the script before he ever registered it on his name. The professor promised to take that into consideration, but as expected, when she contacted Graham, he claimed she had only helped him with a few things on the script.

There is nothing in their text thread that proves otherwise. She simply sent out the file, without contextualizing, so it's hard to prove that he is lying about that.

But as they decide Olivia's fate, at least they let her go back to attending her classes so she won't be behind in case she can prove her innocence. And I'm glad she has her classes to busy her mind with. I don't know how she'd handle being home all day thinking about what could happen to her.

Meanwhile, tech rehearsals get more and more complex. Some adjustments are still being made, especially with the lighting, but I can already see how amazing the show will look. Knowing I'm a part of this lights up a sense of pride inside I hadn't felt in a long time.

We're having our friends-and-family dress rehearsal just four days from now, and at this point, it all feels very real. Terrifyingly real.

"You," Winter says, pulling me closer to him. We're alone in the dressing room, the rest of the cast already gone for the day. "Can't stop impressing me." He plants a kiss on my

lips, and I revel in the familiar taste of cinnamon that accompanies the warmth of his mouth of mine. I smile against his lips.

“It’s easy when I have you on stage with me,” I say, realizing how true those words are. “Everything is easier when you’re with me, Winter.”

“I love you,” he blurts out. The way he says those three words, so casually and nonchalantly, as if they didn’t hold the power to upend my entire world, is like a key locking into place. “I love that I can make life easier for you because you don’t just make things easier for me. You make them better. Brighter. I can’t tell you the exact moment it happened. I can’t place where I was or what was happening. I was at your feet before I even realized I was falling.” The hand that is cupping my face starts to lazily stroke my cheeks as he touches his forehead to mine, breathing me in. “I don’t know what kind of spell you’ve put on me, but I don’t ever want to break free. With you, I’m not afraid of letting go of control. You ground me. You made me love acting again. You brought a kind of joy back to my life when I didn’t know that was possible anymore. You’re the sunshine I’ll always want in my winter.”

He calls me sunshine, but right now I feel like he is the sun. His words, the warmth of its touch, their power blossoming something inside of my chest, an overwhelming sense of love, of being loved.

I tip my head slightly, closing the distance between our mouths. Our lips connect in a bolt of electricity. This kiss feels different, urgent, promising. Slipping my tongue over the crease of his lips, I can feel the vibrations of his groan as he responds, opening his lips and eagerly claiming my mouth.

The sudden rush of emotions that flood me at realizing I’m the only one who can unravel him, undo him like this has me wanting to shout from the rooftops. His wandering hands

continue exploring my body, leaving goosebumps in their wake. As his hands trace down, he palms my ass before sliding his hands to the back of my thighs.

“Up,” he urges. In a quick move, he sweeps me off my feet, hands firmly gripping under my ass to keep me in place as I wrap my legs around his hips, feeling the evidence of what I do to him right between my thighs .

The kiss deepens as he presses me against the wall. He grinds his hips against mine, the bulge in his jeans causing a deliciously sweet friction that sends a jolt of lust through my bloodstream.

But as much as I want to, and as much as I know it to be true, I can't bring myself to say those three words back to him. I know how strongly I feel for Winter, but there's a part of my brain, the small part that can still manage rational thoughts, that knows this... us... it can't last.

My future is too uncertain to make promises. Declaring my love for him right now only to have to say goodbye in January terrifies me.

It doesn't make sense, but I convince myself that if I don't tell him out loud, I can pretend what I feel for him isn't so intense. That these feelings don't hold the power to trigger an earthquake in the foundation of my very existence. So, instead of using words to answer him, I just kiss him. I kiss him with the hope that he can taste everything I'm feeling for him in the clash of our tongues, in the touch of our lips.

When we finally break apart, when the sweet cinnamon taste of his lips isn't flooding my senses anymore, I feel the weight of reality threatening to bury me alive.

“Sunshine,” he says, his right hand on my cheek, pushing my hair away. “What's wrong? Where did you just go?”

I shake my head. If I try to speak, I might start crying, and I don't want to taint this moment. I don't want this memory to be anything but perfect when it becomes all I have from him. A memory I can replay over and over in my mind.

I try to slip down, but he tightens his hold on me.

"No," he grunts, searching my eyes frantically. "Don't do that. I don't care if you can't say it back." His voice has taken a soothing, soft quality. "I can wait. I'll wait however long you need. I'm not going anywhere. Just please." His voice wavers when he pleads. "Don't walk away."

"Winter," I whimper. I want to leave before my heart shatters to the point I can't put it back together. But just the mere thought of walking away from him is enough to crack my chest wide open. There's no easy choice. If I stay with him, leaving him in January will rip my heart apart. If I leave him now, my heart will bleed every time I have to see him again for the next couple of months.

I move in his arms, and this time he doesn't try to stop me. I slide down, my legs feeling like they're filled with lead.

"I..." I feel a sob coming up my throat, so I try to swallow it back down. "I can't do this anymore. We can't... I can't. I need to go."

His eyes plead with me, begging me to stay, but he doesn't say anything. He doesn't hold my arm. He doesn't reach for my hand. As I turn on my heels to leave the dressing room, all Winter does is watch me go. And I hate myself for putting that pained look on his face and breaking my own heart while I do it.



Chapter 25

IT'S BEEN TWO DAYS. TWO DAYS SINCE THAT LAST moment in the dressing room.

Our dress rehearsal is tomorrow, and at this point I'm not sure what it is going to happen. I'm scared of breaking down as soon as I see him. And I'd have an audience of family, friends, and park employees to witness it.

My mind hasn't stopped replaying that last conversation we had in a relentless loop. I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a precipice.

I can't handle all of it at once. My heartbreak and my worry for Olivia are threatening to bury me alive. It's just all too much.

Julia's the only one whose head is just above the water, and she's trying her best to keep us all floating. She's even attempted to cook for us, but one meal was enough for her to resort to takeout.

The day woke up on the wrong side of chilly, a cold gust of wind coming through the open door of our balcony as I make my way to the kitchen, following the aroma of freshly brewed coffee.

"There's milk in the microwave," Julia tells me from her spot on the couch. The fact that she's still home and hasn't left for class yet tells me that I, again, woke up way earlier than I needed to. With my coffee in hand, I join her on the couch.

"Couldn't sleep?" she asks me with concern.

I shake my head.

“Have you talked to him yet?”

I shake my head again.

“Will you—”

Whatever Julia’s about to ask me is interrupted by the unexpected opening of a door. We both look at each other, surprised by the noise and even more surprised by the sight of Olivia rushing out of the bedroom.

“What happened?” we ask in unison.

Olivia’s never up before she needs to be. Sometimes not even when she needs to.

“I woke up out of the blue,” she says out of breath. “Like, I don’t know. Something woke me up. Then I went to check my phone because I thought I’d missed the alarm, but it was just seven in the morning, so I was gonna go back to sleep because I only have class in the afternoon today, but then...” She walks further into the living room now. “Then an email pinged. The dean wants to talk to me. Today. Now.”

“Now?” I yell.

“Well, at eight. But yeah.”

We jump out of the couch and sprint to action. In less than twenty minutes, we’re on the sidewalk waiting for an Uber to take us to the Elysian Fine Arts Institute in North Hollywood. It’s just a twenty-minute drive, thankfully not through any highways since traffic is already insane at this time. It’s another ten minutes of rushing through campus to get to building where the dean’s office is located.

We get there just in time, the clock turning to eight a.m. right as we knock on his door.

“Come in,” a gravelly voice calls from inside.

“Do you want us to come with you?” I ask Olivia, gently squeezing her hand that is wrapped tightly around mine.

She eyes both me and Julia before shaking her head. “No, I think I need to do this on my own.”

“We’ll be just outside,” Julia tells her reassuringly.

Olivia goes to open the door, but before she can reach the doorknob, it opens from inside, and my heart somersaults inside my chest.

The sight of Winter standing on the other side of the door sends a mix of surprise and elation through my body.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, and he dimples at me. But I can see that his smile doesn’t reach his eyes. Eyes that I immediately notice are brimming with exhaustion and reflecting the sorrow I’m sure he can see in mine.

“I’ll leave you guys to talk,” Julia says without hesitation.

“No, you stay. We’ll go over there.” I nod to the lounge area in front of the stairs that we took to get the third floor.

“So,” I encourage him to start.

“I miss you,” he says as if he can’t help himself, just like the sun can’t help rising every day.

“You’re here because you missed me?” I try to make sense of his words through the dense fog of remorse they cause in my brain.

“Sorry, no. I came to talk to the dean.”

“Why?”

He eyes me with that look that asks, *Do you really not know why?* “Cam told me yesterday. I came here because I needed to do for Olivia what no one was able to do for me years ago.”

The fact that he still showed up. That he still had the urge to help my sister despite what happened between us, despite the fact that I broke his heart two days ago by leaving him.

This is the moment I know, with unshakable certainty that I could never not love him.

That trying to stop myself from loving him is as fruitless as expecting winter not follow after autumn.

I can't bring myself to say anything.

"You have to know," he says, resting his elbows on his knees, leaning forward to grasp my hand between his. "Surely you have to know that I would always, always do anything for you. Anything for the people you love."

"What about the NDA?" I ask softly.

"It forbids me to publicly discuss it outside the circle of people who were involved in the process." I blink at his answer, still confused. "This is my school. Elysian is my alma mater. It all happened here. The dean already knew about what happened to me, but it was under a different professor."

"I didn't know." I turn my hand to hold his. To intertwine my finger with his. I don't ever want to let go. "Thank you," I whisper.

"You don't have to thank me."

"I do. I have to."

His breath becomes quicker, as his eyes find mine, looking right into them, trying to find the meaning behind my words. But I want to make it easy for him. I don't want him to have to search for it. I don't want him to ever doubt it again.

"I do have to thank you," I say in a breathy voice. "Not only for what you did for Olivia, but also for finding me. For seeing me and choosing to love me. For choosing to keep loving me even when I didn't know if I could be loved."

"It was never a choice," his low, deep voice says adoringly. "From the moment I saw you, I never stood a chance. But if I did..." He brings his hand to cup my face. "I'd

choose to love you over any other option. I'll always choose to love you."

"I don't think I ever stood a chance either," I confess. "I've just been too afraid to let myself admit that I love you, but..." I mirror his gesture, cupping his face in my hands too. "Loving you has been inevitable for a long time."

He closes the distance between us, pressing his mouth to mine in a soft kiss.

I breathe him in, relishing in the familiarity of the cinnamon taste of his lips.

"In January, I might..." I start, but he brings a finger to my lips, interrupting my words.

"We'll worry about that later." With one last long exhale against my skin, he retreats and looks me in the eyes. "We do this for however long we have. I'm yours, Sunshine. I don't want to be anybody else's."

"I'm yours too." It's all I can answer.



It feels like forever before Olivia comes out of the dean's office. Winter tries to reassure me, saying he's positive the dean will side with her. Rationally, I know this is the most likely outcome, but I can't stop worrying.

The moment the door opens, Julia and I all but lunge at our sister.

Her bright smile comes out before any words.

“I’m officially innocent. My academic record has been cleared, and I’m fully reinstated at Elysian’s student body,” she proclaims the words as if reciting them back from what the dean told her.

We hug her in celebration, relief washing over us.

She turns to Winter after we let her go. “Thank you for coming to my defense,” she says weakly.

“Of course.” He gives her smile and a quick nod.

“And I’m sorry,” she utters under her breath.

Winter frowns at her. “What for?”

“Well...” She stretches the word, cocking her head in shame. “I might have said a few not-so-nice things about you to a few people around Movieland.”

He laughs, those dimples I love so much making an appearance.

“I bet you weren’t the only one.” He shrugs. “As long as you don’t still have those opinions about me...” His voice trails off.

“No, of course not.”

He chuckles. “Then we’re good.”

We make our way downstairs, and Winter offers to drive us home, so we all follow him to the parking lot. When we’re almost to his black Jeep, Olivia stops and tips her head to the sky, breathing out a sigh of relief. Her eyes roam around, taking in the campus around her. The campus where now she will be able to stay for the next three and a half years.

The she stops and looks at us. A mischievous smile on her face.

“Well, okay. Now that *that* is out of the way,” she says so matter-of-factly, I turn to her with a suspecting frown. “I guess

I can tell you I've been officially nominated for the Golden Quill Awards." She chuckles, but there's a hint of nervousness there. "It would've been a bit awkward if this hadn't gone my way," she finishes pointing with her thumb over her shoulder in the direction of the dean's office.

"Olivia," I yelp her name. Then, I repeat it more softly, my voice laced with admiration. "Olivia."

Julia and I hug her at the same time as we congratulate her, and Winter waits by the sides, letting us have our sisterly moment.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Julia asks.

"I..." she hesitates. "I was afraid they'd withdraw the nomination if I couldn't prove my innocence."

We don't question her reasoning. The fear of having something so huge be taken from you is something I'm well familiar with. It dawns on me how much she had riding on this talk with the dean. And how Winter's help might've changed the course of her life.

Fighting the sudden wave of emotions that threaten to cascade down on me, I shake her lovingly.

"Holy shit, you're a Golden Quill Award nominee!"

Julia smiles at my sudden outburst. "When is the ceremony?"

"January twenty-seventh," Olivia answers.

My heart plummets inside me. My visa expires in the middle of January. Her awards ceremony has just joined the ever-growing list of invaluable things I'll miss once I return to Brazil if I fail to secure a visa sponsorship.

I don't mention it, though. I don't think she's realized that the date falls after I'm due to leave the country. So I keep it to

myself and let my sister celebrate her moment the way she deserves it.

In fact, I realize there's something else I can do to make her celebration even better.

We drop Julia and Olivia at our apartment, and I ask Winter if I can go to his house. He doesn't even ask me why, he just drives.

As soon as we arrive, I take a deep breath and find my mom's contact on my cellphone, pressing the videocall button.

If Winter can come to Olivia's defense, the least I can do is the same. So, I wait for my mother to answer, ask her to get my father too, and tell them that their youngest daughter is a talented screenwriter who could use their support instead of judgment.

I tell them all the things I never had the guts to say before. But just like Winter showed up for Olivia because he wishes someone had been able to help him when it happened to him, I do the same. I show up for my sister in a way I was never able to do for myself.



Chapter 26

“I THINK SHE’S BROKEN,” OLIVIA SAYS.

“She’s spiraling,” Julia agrees.

I can hear them talking about me, but I can’t bring myself to react. I’m paralyzed in the middle of the living room, an empty cup of coffee I don’t remember picking up in my hand. My head is spinning with everything that can go wrong today crossing my mind as flashes of a horror movie I don’t want to watch but can’t look away from.

“Drink this,” Olivia demands, lifting my hand toward my mouth.

“It’s black coffee, Olivia,” Julia argues. “She hates it.”

“That sweet crap she drinks won’t do the trick now.” Her free hand waves in front of me before she snaps her fingers. “Luiza, drink this. One big gulp, come on.”

I can’t act on my own, but I don’t fight her when she brings the cup to my mouth. The hot liquid tastes like tar, the bitterness going down my throat like sandpaper. I cough as I try to keep that terrible flavor away from me.

It’s enough to bring me back to life. I push Olivia’s hand away from me. “This is horrible,” I complain.

“There she is.” Olivia smiles.

“Okay, come on, Luli. Let’s go.” Julia beckons me to the door.

I’m on autopilot as we make our way to the park. Our Uber pulls over at the drop-off area, and that’s where my sisters and I have to split ways. They’re walking into the park

as guests through the front gate, while I have to go through the Sheriff's Gate on Film Strip.

"You got this," Julia says, squeezing me in a hug.

Olivia wraps her arms around me too. "Break a leg."

I swipe my employee ID, greet the security guard, walk through the tunnel, all while a single sentence plays on an endless loop in my mind.

Don't freak out. Don't freak out. Don't freak out.

My phone starts buzzing as soon as I climb the stairs back to ground level. Cece's face fills up the screen as I accept the videocall.

"Hey, booboo," she greets me, using the nickname she only uses when she's drunk and her affectionate side comes out. But it's the middle of the morning, and I'm fairly sure she's at work.

"Are you drunk?"

"No," she says bitterly. "I'm trying to be supportive." She pouts, then whines, "I wish I could be there."

"I know, C. But you'll come on the weekend."

"Yeah, after everyone else has watched it," she laments. "What kind of best friend privilege is that?"

I laugh. She's been mad about missing my first performance ever since I told her it'd be on a Friday afternoon. Cece's boss wouldn't let her miss work for "such a frivolous reason."

"So, how are you feeling?" she asks after I assure her she's not losing her best friend card for missing today's show. "Nervous? Excited?"

"Like I might puke at any moment?" I offer. "I don't know. I feel like my body is buzzing. Like my brain won't stop

picturing everything that can go wrong. I dreamed that I forgot all my lines last night and I woke up crying. Literally crying. Like, tears soaking my pillow.”

“Wow,” she says. “You’re spiraling.”

“I know!” I pinch the bridge of my nose and try to regulate my breathing. “Distract me.”

“Okaaaay,” she elongates the word, thinking of something. “Right, uhhh... That guy you told me that offered to marry you for the green card. Tell me about him.”

That does the trick. Her request snaps me right out of my spiral.

“What? Colin? Why? What do you mean? Why? Why do you ask?”

“Well, you might pass on his offer, but God knows I’ll do anything not to go back to Brazil.”

“Except marry Colin to get a green card,” I say, hoping she starts laughing. When she doesn’t, I plead. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“Okay, you and Kat are so quick to tell me not to marry this guy, but neither of you have presented me with a better option yet.”

“Who’s Kat? And have you actually thought about that?”

“My friend at work. You met her at my birthday. But anyway, unimportant. Yes, I thought about that. My time’s almost up, Luli. I’m running out of ideas.”

“Look, if two of your friends are telling you not to do it, then maybe this isn’t a good idea?”

“You can judge me for considering marriage all you want, but while you don’t come up with a better solution, this is all I got.”

“I’m not judging you because you want a marriage of convenience! We all know that’s unfortunately how a lot of people get to stay. I am, however, judging you”—I bring my free hand in front of the camera, pinching my index and thumb close together—“just a little bit for being willing to marry *Colin* of all people.”

“Well, again,” she stresses the second word more than necessary, “I don’t see an alternative.”

“Can’t you at least find someone who isn’t so...” I try to find a word to describe Colin. “Repulsive?”

“It’s not like I have a pool of people to choose from.” She shakes her head. “Anyway, you have a play to get ready for. Shit for you.”

I laugh at her literal translation.

“What? Isn’t that what you should tell an actor before they go on stage?”

“In Portuguese, yes,” I explain. “We say ‘merda,’ but in English the expression is ‘break a leg.’ It’s not a literal translation.”

“Whatever. Neither of them makes sense anyway. Te amo, amiga. Arrasa.”

“Eu também te amo.”



The dressing room is so busy, I don’t get a moment alone with Winter. But as soon as I step into Melina’s wedding gown, it’s like my anxiety is wiped away. A sense of calmness, of

rightness dwells in me. A certainty that this is what I'm meant to be doing. That I got this.

When Mia, the stage manager, gives us the five-minute warning, I know for a fact that there's no one else that could be Melina in this play. She and I have fused together. I'm her, and she's me.

Even when I'm told there's press attending the show, that conviction doesn't waver.

This strong sense of self-assurance walks on stage with me as I bring Melina in front of an audience for the first time. Throughout the whole play, my confidence never falters. And it's different than what I was used to feel. This strong belief in myself isn't a costume I'm putting on. It's coming from within, like a seed finally blossoming after receiving proper care.

The whole play lasts about forty minutes, but today, it's all done in the blink of an eye, and before I realize it, it's time for Melina and Arthur's kiss.

Slowly, Winter lowers his face to mine. His eyes closing, as he touches his lips to mine, the sweetness of his cinnamon taste floating straight to my chest. I feel like I've been breathing at half capacity since I woke up this morning, and now I can finally fill my lungs with air.

I don't know how I've survived all my life without his mouth on mine.

The kiss is brief. Chaste. Tender. But it's a strong enough reminder that I love him. I love Winter. I love him with every cell in my body.

The audience breaks out in applause, breaking the spell between us, and slowly the applause turns into a roaring standing ovation. Winter finds my hand and squeezes it, and then we're joined by the entire cast on stage as we take our

bows. Everyone's beaming, exhilaration permeating the air. We did it. We performed in front of an audience for the first time, and it was perfect.

The energy follows us to the dressing room as we walk off the stage. The buzz of excitement is so loud, I can't hear my own thoughts.

A knock on the door is followed by Emily walking in. Everyone starts clapping for our director, congratulating her on the great job she's done. She waves us off, returning the praise back to us.

When her eyes meet mine, she nods to the door, and I quickly follow her outside.

My body temperature plummets. My blood has turned into ice. I try to swallow the lump that has lodged itself in my throat, but my mouth has gone dry.

"Luiza, Anne Marie wants to talk to you." My eyes widen, but there's nothing in Emily's expression giving away what this conversation is about. "Do you have a minute now? I'll walk with you."

The walk through the tunnel takes ten times longer than normal. The silence sits heavy between us, and I have to keep myself from asking Emily what's going on. If she could tell me, she would've.

Emily's the one who knocks on Anne Marie's door when we get to the sixth floor of the 441 building. She doesn't wait for an answer before she opens it, waiting for me to walk in before her.

The theater manager watches us approach her desk, her lips flat, her eyes giving nothing away.

"Take a seat, please, Luiza."

In the seconds it takes me to pull the chair and sit down, I go over every single thing that's happened in the last few months. I try to think of what I could've done that would land me here. Or maybe it was something I said? I want to crawl out of my skin with how nervous I am right now.

"Luiza," Anne Marie begins, "we knew from the beginning what your status was, with your visa."

I want to interrupt her. To assure her that I never tried to hide my situation, that I'm not doing anything wrong. But she raises a hand, stopping me before I say anything.

"We took a chance on you." She turns to look at Emily. "Emily did. She saw something in you, and she asked me to give you this opportunity. She fought for you."

I look at my director sitting next to me. She gives me a proud smile.

"It would've been easier to hire another actress. Someone who's not on a temporary visa. I told her that when she said she wanted you. But she said it wouldn't be the right decision. I know now that she was right. I watched the dress rehearsal today," she tells me, and I gawk at her in surprise. I didn't know she was in the audience. "And I'm more certain than ever that no one else could've played Melina like you. Emily had to fight to get you hired, but after watching you today, I could finally see what she saw in you."

My bottom lip is quivering as I try to hold my emotions in.

She looks at me intently and takes a deep breath before continuing, "Movieland wants to sponsor your P-1B visa if you want to stay in our cast for more productions. Do you want to become a full-time member of Movieland's cast?"

I blink at her. My ears have captured her words, but my brain seems to have trouble processing them.

“What?” My eyes go from Anne Marie to Emily, then back to the theater manager.

She smiles at me. “We want to hire you. We can’t give you a permanent status, but this is a start. The P-1B visa is specifically for the entertainment industry, and we can ask for an extension after your one-year period is over.”

“I can stay?” I still can’t make sense of what she’s saying.

“You can stay.” It’s Emily who confirms, placing her hand on top of mine on the arm of the chair. I hadn’t realized I was gripping it so strongly.

“Oh my God,” I squeal.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Anne Marie says. She and Emily share a satisfied smile.

“Yes, of course.” My heart has expanded like a balloon in my chest, and I feel like I will float right out of here if I let go of this chair.

“Good. Welcome to the cast of Movieland, Luiza. We’ll start the paperwork on Monday.” Anne Marie stands up from her chair and reaches a hand across the table. I take it in the most satisfying handshake I’ve ever shared.

“Thank you,” I tell her. Then, I turn to Emily. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” she answers. “You earned this. Your talent got you this.”

Not one for sappy moments, Anne Marie waves, dismissing us. “Now, go. You two still have a show to put on tomorrow and every weekend for the next three months.”



Chapter 27

THE SHOW RUNS FOR THREE MONTHS, BUT WHEN THE end of January comes, it feels like the first weekend was just yesterday. It's the second-to-last day of shows, and I already miss Melina.

Since the beginning of November, I've been playing her three times a day every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday without fail.

Rehearsals for the summer production will start soon after, and I'm excited about it, but I'm still sad to be saying goodbye to my first character.

To the play that change it all.

When we take the last bow, Winter's hand in mine, we share a look that says everything we can't tell each other right now. But then, without being able to hold it in, he mouths, *I love you*.

We basically have to run off the stage to get out of our costumes and into our formal wear to attend the Golden Quill Awards ceremony.

The one thing I forgot to take in consideration when Olivia told us the date of the event was that even if I were still in the US, I would still have three shows to perform that day. Thankfully, the last show ends just before five, and it gives me all of thirty minutes to get changed before we drive to the ceremony venue.

"I'll miss the rush that I get every time I leave the stage," I comment when we're in the car and Winter's following the GPS directions to get us there via the fastest route.

“You’ll get to do it again soon,” he reminds me.

“I know,” I whine. “But I don’t wanna stop. I wish there wasn’t a break between the plays.”

“Trust me, if there wasn’t one, you’d wish there was.”

He places his hand on my thigh, the flimsy fabric of my dress doing nothing to filter the heat that spreads over my skin. He glances at that spot then up to me before returning his attention to the road.

“Are you sure we don’t have time to—”

“No,” I cut him off before he can even suggest it.

“But you look so”—he grabs my hand, bringing it to his lips to drop a kiss on my knuckles—“so fucking hot right now.”

I still blush when he says things like this. And he says it all the time, so for the past three months, I’ve been in a constant state of blushing.

“Don’t,” I warn him, seeing the mischievous grin that’s teasing his lips. “You know how important today is.”

“Yeah,” he concedes. “If I didn’t know it, I would’ve ruined this perfect dress of yours the moment you walked out that dressing room.”

“Are you really not going to miss the play?” I ask, bringing the conversation back to safe territory because we were on the verge of crossing the point of no return.

“I’ll miss working with you,” he says, caressing the back of my hand. “But theater was never my thing. And…” He pauses, and I turn my full attention to him. “I’m thinking about trying to get my script produced again.”

“You are?” I beam with pride when he nods to confirm.



The Golden Quill Awards aren't nearly as big as the Oscars or the Emmys, but for screenwriters, it's the biggest accolade after them.

When we get there, the venue is already swarming with people. Now that we made it in time and I'm not worried we'll be late anymore, I finally take a good look at Winter, and thank God I only did it now.

I wouldn't have been so quick to refuse his suggestion if I had realized earlier how handsome he looks in this suit.

The luxurious fabric hugs his broad shoulders, the rich hues of blue making him look elegant and fashionable.

Ever since the show started, he's been getting more and more attention from the press, and it didn't take me long to understand why he's always in worn-out jeans and a white T-shirt. Paparazzi shots end up looking like they're from the same day when the outfit doesn't change, which is his simple way of trying to get rid of photographers following his every move.

But that means I'm used to seeing him in his casual clothes, so when he does wear something different, my heart trips in my chest like I'm seeing him for the first time.

"Stop looking at me like that," he warns close to my ear.

"Like what?"

"Like you want me to whisk you away from here right now."

He's right. That's exactly what I want.

But I know we can't. We have to look for Olivia's table. As one of the five nominees for the Rising Star Award, she was given a full table and nine invitations for her guests. And we find them, my heart beaming at the sight.

Olivia is standing, wearing a gorgeous deep grey dress that hugs her round curves in all the right places. Her hair is up on a slick ponytail, leaving all the attention to the sweetheart neckline of her dress. Around her, everyone chats enthusiastically, a palpable feeling of pride permeating the air.

Cam has his arm wrapped around Julia's middle as they chat with Cece and Kat.

But my eyes are immediately drawn to the people chatting with Olivia.

My parents and our oldest sister Maria arrived earlier today, and even though I wasn't there to witness the surprise, Julia sent me a video so I could watch the shock on Olivia's face when she opened the door and found them on the other side.

I don't remember the last time Mom and Dad took a vacation, so the fact that they did just so they could be here for this, for Olivia, gives me hope that they truly understood everything I told them in that phone call months ago.

Arranging for them to be at the ceremony was a challenge. Olivia didn't want to give those three tickets away, so we had to resort to Winter telling her they were for Alice Soo, when in reality it was for our parents and Maria.

"I think she won't be that sad that her favorite actress isn't coming tonight, right?" I ask Winter as we watch her embrace our parents after they tell her something that make her eyes water.

"She is, though."

"What? How?"

“If Alice Soo wants to go somewhere, invitations abound,” he jokes.

As if conjured by the mention of her stage name, Ali Hoang appears right next to us. She hugs me before hugging Winter.

“Already lost the best friend post,” he complains.

“Not yet, but if you don’t step up your game, this one right here will sweep it right off of you.” She wraps an arm around my shoulder, squeezing me to her side.

“Come on, let me introduce you to Olivia.”

My youngest sister notices us before we get to her, her jaw dropping to the floor at the sight of the woman next to me. Ali laughs and promptly gives Olivia a hug, skipping any formal introductions. They start talking as if they’ve been friends forever.

I turn to my parents next, an unexpected surge of warmth blanketing my chest.

“Mãe,” I say as I hug her. “Que bom que vocês vieram.”

When I try to leave her embrace to also tell my father that I’m glad they made it, she holds me tighter, not letting me go.

“Obrigada, filha.”

She doesn’t have to say more. Her strong embrace enough for me to understand what she’s thanking me for.

My father hugs me after playfully pushing my mom aside, saying he too missed me a lot.

Then, after I’m sure I won’t turn into a puddle of tears because of the overwhelming sense of happiness and love that I’m feeling, I finally turn to Winter to introduce him to my parents.

“Mãe, pai, esse é o Winter.” I point to the man by my side, then I say the words that still make butterflies take flight in my stomach, “Meu namorado.”

Winter Brian Davis, my boyfriend.

“É um prazer conhecer vocês,” Winter says in Portuguese, but it takes me a second to realize that.

“What the fuck?” I blurt out, but he just laughs. He offers his hand for my mom to shake, but she pulls him into a hug, and my dad does the same.

Only when the ceremony starts and we’re sitting at the table do I have the chance to ask, “Since when do you speak Portuguese?”

“I don’t.” He shrugs. “But I’m learning.”

“Why?”

He gives me that look that I always get when I ask him a dumb question. The *‘you really don’t know?’* look.

“You told me your parents didn’t speak English.”

“You learned Portuguese so you could talk to my parents? You’re learning a new language for me?”

“Sunshine, for you I’d learn a thousand languages.”

I don’t think there’s any space left for more happiness in my heart, but when Olivia’s name is called to receive the Golden Quill Rising Star Award, I know that I’m wrong because my heart doubles in size, and a new, profound feeling of happiness and pride takes all the space inside.

As she walks to the stage after looking at us for confirmation that she didn’t mishear, that it really was her name that was called out, a beaming smile spreads across my face. I relish in the blissful wave of elation that sweeps through me, as I realize that I’ve never been this happy before.

Winter leans toward me, his lips a breath away from my ears. “Happy?” he asks before kissing my temple.

I nod, unable to speak without opening the floodgate to my tears of joy.

“Good,” he says. Then he says, “Eu te amo,” and I’m powerless to stop the emotions from spilling out of me.

“Eu te amo mais,” I whisper.

“Impossible.”



Epilogue

Two years later

“WINTER, OVER HERE.”

“Luiza, on your left.”

“Give us a kiss.”

The photographers shout orders relentlessly as Winter and I walk down the red carpet at the premiere of his movie. His directorial debut.

Burden was finally produced a year ago, after Winter rewrote the script, laying his soul bare on the pages. If the script was good before, it became a masterpiece after he realized he couldn't keep holding back if he wanted it to succeed, and that he needed to be the one to direct it.

The story is filled with the complexities of feeling used by someone who was supposed to love you. Of hating a person you also love. Of grieving someone after they're dead, even if you spent a long time wishing they were gone. It's raw and beautiful.

I might be biased, but I'm not the only who thinks so. The movie has been nominated for three Academy Awards, including Best Original Screenplay, Best Director, and Best Actress in a Supporting Role.

And Winter already won the Golden Quill Awards for Best Screenplay last week.

After we make our way down the red carpet, stopping every few inches for pictures, we arrive at the reporters, who

quickly start shoving microphones in front of us.

“Winter, *BuzzFeed* here.”

“Sarah Moore for *ET*.”

“I’ll get to everyone,” Winter assures them. “Let’s just do one at a time. You can go first.” He points to the BuzzFeed reporter.

We make our way down the line of reporters, answering most of their questions, dodging a few others. When we finally get to the last one, I recognize the logo of the young woman’s mic from a Brazilian portal.

“Winter, Luiza, thank you for talking to us. So, you are one of Hollywood’s hottest young couples right now. And when you announced you were directing your first feature film, we all thought Luiza would be in the cast for sure. Was that ever considered? Why was she not cast?”

Winter looks at me, silently asking if I want to take this question.

“We did think about it,” I say. “But this movie means so much to him, and he did such a beautiful job with the script, that we just wanted everything to be all about the story. We didn’t want to take attention from it and make it about a “couple’s project” when this is such an important movie for him.”

“But can we expect any collaboration in the future?”

“Definitely,” Winter answers before I can.

“And Luiza, now that you’ve been confirmed in *Movieland*’s first direct-to-streaming series, can we expect to see more of you on the screen than the stage?”

“I still love doing theater,” I say truthfully. “But I do want to do more TV and film now that I’ve left the park. I’m not

saying I'd never do theater again, but for now my plans are taking me in a different direction."

"Any projects we can expect to see you in the future?"

"Yeah, for sure. My sister and I are making a movie together, and I can't wait to tell you all more about that soon."

"Amazing! You two look incredible tonight. Thank you so much for talking to us."

With the last of the interviews done, we finally go look for our friends. Inside the safety of the theater and away from the cameras, I unlatch the clasp of my clutch and fish out my ring from inside.

Winter stops me and grabs the ring from my hand, sliding the oval diamond on my ring finger, his eyes intent on me, beaming with love.

"It was almost worth it," he says, his voice husky and low.

"What?"

"Agreeing with you that hiding this tonight was the best choice."

It had been a whole thing. Winter hated the idea of me taking off the engagement ring he'd given me in our most recent trip to Brazil. But I argued that it wouldn't make sense for me to wear it when the whole point of tonight was making sure the whole focus of the press was on the movie and not the two of us.

"And why was it worth it?" I tease.

"Almost worth it," he corrects me. "Because I got to put it on your finger again."

"I can take it off more oft—"

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he growls and kisses my lips, his hand still holding mine, thumb stroking over my ring finger.



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About Gabriela



Romance enthusiast and HEA advocate, besides reading and writing stories that transport us to different realities, Gabi also teaches English and uses literature to help her students gain fluency.

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Contents

[Cover](#)
[Title Page](#)
[Credits](#)
[Map](#)
[Dedication](#)
[Chapter 01](#)
[Chapter 02](#)
[Chapter 03](#)
[Chapter 04](#)
[Chapter 05](#)
[Chapter 06](#)
[Chapter 07](#)
[Chapter 08](#)
[Chapter 09](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)
[About Gabriela](#)

