

office

Affairs

ZELENE HEATH

OFFICE AFFAIRS

(Burning Bossy Desires Book 2)

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

OFFICE AFFAIRS

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Written by Zelene Heath.

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Office Affairs \(Burning Bossy Desires, #2\)](#)

[Copyright 2023 by ZELENE HEATH - All rights reserved.](#)

[Zelene's Introduction](#)

[TikTok | Facebook](#)

[Chapter One | Matheo](#)

[Chapter Two | Amber](#)

[Chapter Three | Amber](#)

[Chapter Four | Matheo](#)

[Chapter Five | Veronica](#)

[Chapter Six | Amber](#)

[Chapter Seven | Matheo](#)

[Chapter Eight | Amber](#)

[Chapter Nine | George](#)

[Chapter Ten | Matheo](#)

[Chapter Eleven | Amber](#)

[Chapter Twelve | Matheo](#)

[Chapter Thirteen | Matheo](#)

[Chapter Fourteen | Amber](#)

[Chapter Fifteen | Veronica](#)

[Chapter Sixteen | George](#)

[Chapter Seventeen | Linda](#)

[Chapter Eighteen | Matheo](#)

[Chapter Nineteen | Amber](#)

[Chapter Twenty | Matheo](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One | Ava](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two | Matheo](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three | Amber](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four | Matheo](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five | George](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six | Amber](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven | Matheo](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight | Amber](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine | Matheo](#)

[Chapter Thirty | Linda](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One | Matheo](#)

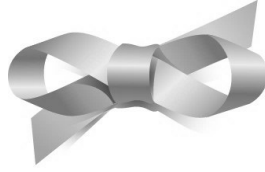
[Chapter Thirty-Two | Amber](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three | Matheo](#)

[BOOK 3 SERIES](#)

[Follow my SOCIAL MEDIA](#)

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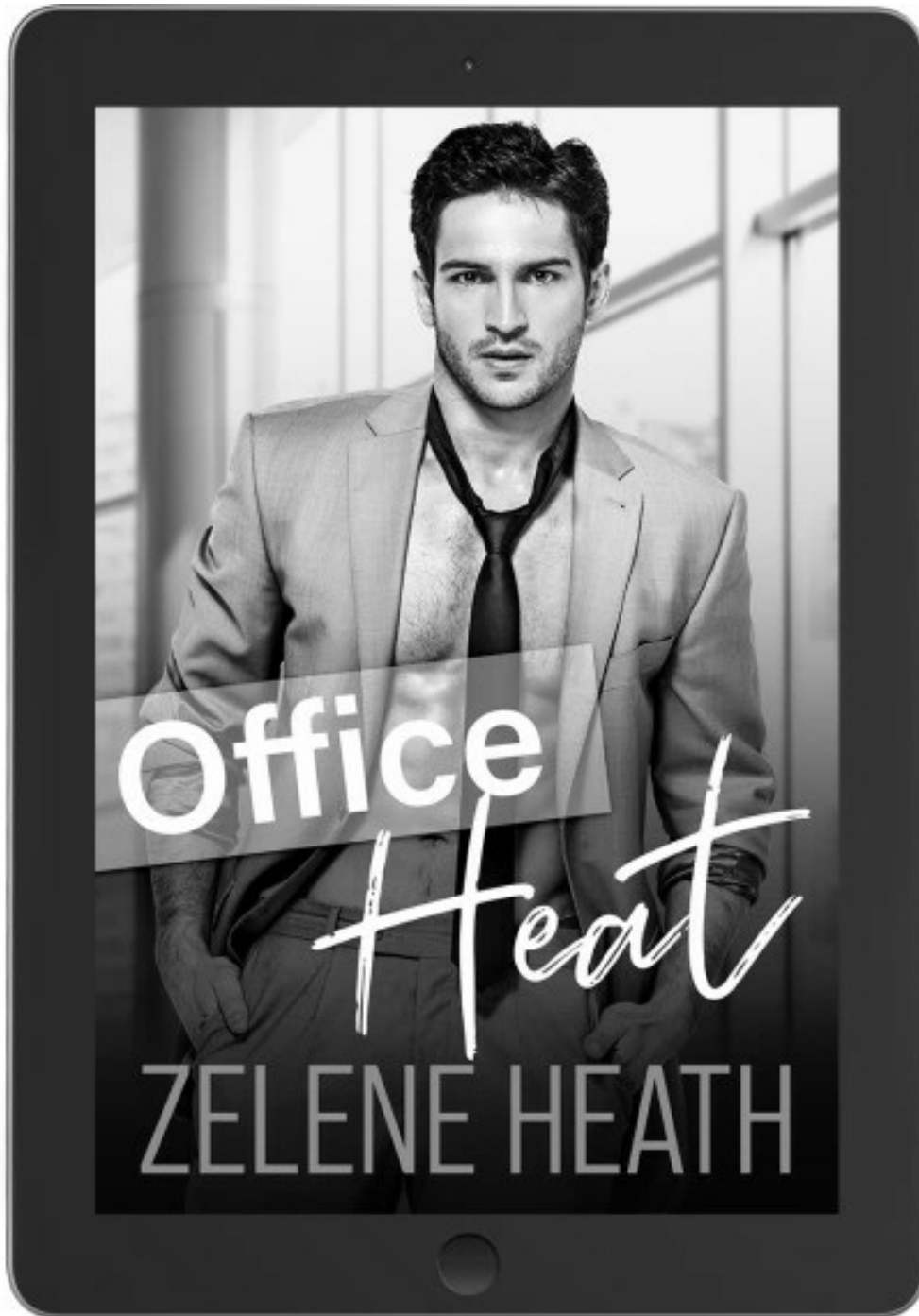
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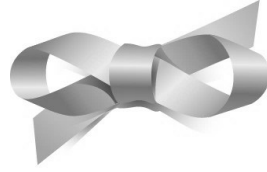
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Zelene's Introduction

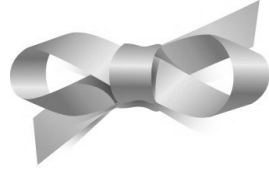
Thank you so much for grabbing one of my books. I sure hope you
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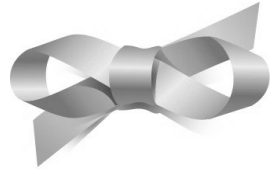
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Chapter One

Matheo

Did you ever find yourself crushing on your co-worker? No doubt, it was thrilling and fun. The stealing kisses, secret eye contact, caresses here and there, and love signals to the heart-jarring sex after work that gives you immense excitement you can't explain.

The adrenaline rush that I felt in my body was just unimaginable. Our relationship benefited both of us as we continued to inspire each other. The only difference is that I'm her boss, not her colleague.

We fell for each other over a short time without knowing it. The chemistry is embarrassingly unreal. Then, one night while still at work, we felt the urge to kiss, and our feelings exploded.

Isn't it funny how one woman can occupy such an ample space in a man's world and ignite his every desire?

I couldn't put a finger on why no one else was as disturbed by her presence in the room as I was. I thought it was just me, but then.

"Amber, come! Sit there." The accounting manager, Mrs. Percy, pointed to a chair beside an unfamiliar man. Amber, of course, was as obliging as ever.

I watched as she walked to the chair with her head bent, and when she raised those beautiful eyes, a jolt reverberated through my body. She only gave me a brief smile of acknowledgment before she looked away.

This is her second year being an intern.

Damn! If only she knew the effect, her presence had on me.

"Go on, Mr. Martinez," Mrs. Percy said.

It was hard to find where I had previously stopped, and just when I was about to get a hold of something to say, Amber raised her head and smiled at me again. Once more, I lost my place.

Who the hell was the guy sitting beside her? He was drooling over Amber and almost undressing her with his lustful eyes.

He bent sideways and whispered something, and Amber smiled more widely, her eyes crinkling. I had to say something to put a stop to his behavior.

"First, thank you all for coming to this meeting and your continued hard

work.” The room fell silent.

“Please be prepared for a third-party audit that will take place over the next few weeks. We need to ensure that we are maintaining our high standard quality management system. I expect you all to be cooperative and helpful.” As I spoke, my eyes scanned the faces of my employees. I made direct eye contact with the man sitting next to Amber.

“Excuse me, Mr...?” That was sudden, but it served its purpose, as the guy who looked like he was just recently got hired immediately sprang up from his chair so fast that he startled Amber as well.

“My name is Brad,” he replied.

He was rather timid, which was probably good, but I needed to get my girl away from him anyway. If only he knew we were in a relationship.

“How long have you been working here?” I asked as I moved closer, not to be obvious about my intention to intimidate the guy. It worked.

“N...no, Mr. Martinez...I’m a new intern.”

“He’s quite a looker.” I heard women whispering near me.

“Oh, I see. Is anyone assisting you?” I was already beside him.

“It’s Amber.” Mrs. Percy said, nodding with a wide smile.

That woman had a habit of smiling, even when it was unnecessary, but you can’t hold that tendency against someone, can you?

“Miss Stone, thank you for helping Brad. Don’t hesitate to come to my office if you have questions.”

“Mr. Martinez, Brad is doing great. He’s a fast learner,” Amber smiled confidently.

I loved the way she said my name. It was impossible not to love her at first sight.

“I have printed out some materials to help us prepare for the audit. Miss Stone, would you mind distributing these materials out to everyone?” I said and cleared my throat lightly.

“Sure, my pleasure.” Amber nodded.

Amber stood up immediately and walked over to collect the materials I had prepared.

I didn’t know if that was helpful, but I sat down beside Brad and personally showed him the documents that needed to be prepared by the accounting department.

Amber was forced to find another chair to sit down in.

“What preparations have you made concerning the third-party company

we hired to conduct the audit?”

Mrs. Percy signaled Amber, and even when she stood up to give her report, she kept a confident posture.

“They will arrive next week, and we already have two weeks planned out for them. So I, along with the other interns, will help,” she said and sat back down.

“Including Brad?” I asked with a raised brow.

Amber raised her head but turned away immediately before her eyes met mine.

“Yes. We thought it would be good for Brad if he could experience the audit first-hand. I was involved in the audit preparation myself last year, so I’m confident that involving the interns this year won’t be an issue,” Amber explained.

“Great! It looks like Mrs. Percy has arranged everything, and we’re good to go.” I exclaimed.

Mrs. Percy nodded in agreement.

“Alright then. This meeting is done. You can all go back to work... Miss Stone, please see me in my office. I want to discuss the audit preparation in more detail.” I said while walking. “Everyone else, enjoy the rest of your day. Please don’t forget to coordinate with Mrs. Percy about the audit.”



The waiting felt like a thousand years as I paced back and forth in my office, but it was probably only a minute. Amber did not appear excited when she came in after a light knock on the door.

It was written all over her face that she would rather not be in the same space with me.

“You asked to see me?” She acted too professional, but that was fine.

I took a few slow steps toward her, watching as she battled with the desire to look at my face.

“You seem to be busy, Miss Stone?”

“Yes, indeed—”

I grabbed her before she could complete her words, and even though she resisted, she couldn’t escape. She was delicate, and her small lips were always easy to possess and consume. Finally, she pushed me back with all her effort, and I let her have her way.

“We’re in the office,” she said and stared at the door.

“I know.” I reached for her lips again, but she pushed me back.

“You know?”

“Of course I do. Isn’t it obvious?”

“Are you pretending not to understand my meaning, or are you just ignorant?”

“Are you calling me ignorant, Miss Stone?”

“No... no, not—” I interrupted her attempt at justification with a laugh, and she recoiled in surprise.

“Miss Stone, don’t you think you should make it up to me after what you put me through at the meeting?”

She smiled now, staring keenly into my eyes. I removed her glasses and threw them into a corner, and she retorted immediately, “Hey, those are mine.”

“You look better without those glasses.”

“I only wear eyeglasses when I’m in front of the computer.”

I put a finger to her mouth to shush her, and she froze immediately. I could feel her body stiffening as I moved toward her. Then, when I slipped a hand around her waist to her back and drew her closer, she snaked her arms around my neck and brought our lips to meet.

She parted hers gently and gave me a way in. I picked her up with one arm, and she wrapped her legs around my waist. Then I took her to the desk and cleared space, pushing everything to the floor. I sat her down as delicately as she deserved.

Her lips were swollen when I relinquished them, and she was panting hard. Her pulse racing was so apparent that it pleased me to watch her.

I could see the desire in her eyes. But, as innocent as she looked, she also had her dark side.

Amber was the submissive type. She could initially resist a few of my touches, but once we started, she’d be the one asking for more.

I removed my lips from hers after a moment, moving my head back a bit to look at her.

“Why?”

I smiled, tucked her hair behind her right ear, then drew in and whispered, “I thought we were in the office?”

She smiled when I looked at her face again, but she wasn’t shy. “You started this,” she said.

“So, should I stop?”

“Will I get fired if I say yes?”

I chuckled. “Well, too bad I have the final say on this matter.”

I parted her legs slowly, got in between them, then moved my head in to kiss her but retreated immediately as she approached. I loved teasing her. We exchanged a knowing smile before I permitted her the kiss.

Amber arched her back when she felt my hand on her lap. I moved it slowly to her inner thighs, and she stiffened her body immediately before arching more into the space my arms offered.

I moved slowly, and she trembled with anticipation. Then, when my fingers touched the surface of her skirt, she clasped my hand between her thighs and fell weakly into my arms, panting and gasping for breath.

“You’re wet,” I whispered in her ear before biting the lobe.

Amber inhaled several times deeply before she got a hold of herself. Then she whispered back, “You made me this way....”

“We’re just beginning this meeting, you know.”

She shifted a bit and moaned softly. “I want you....”

The request was unexpected, and although I had looked forward to this for a long time, I had always wanted it to be her own choice. But here, in the office?

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

With Amber, it was hard to say ‘no’ and not regret it afterward. I grabbed the edge of her underwear and pulled it over her hips. However, it seemed to stick a bit.

“That teased my clit,” she said.

I had just claimed her lips again and moved my hand to touch her clit further when there was a hard knock on the door. I moved away from Amber immediately and quickly stuffed her underwear into my pocket. She got down from the desk. How were we supposed to explain the clutter on the floor?

“Mr. Martinez?”

Fuck, Stephanie. She’d always had terrible timing.

“Should I just fire her?”

Amber smiled, leaned in for a quick kiss, then whispered, “I’ll need my underwear back.”

“Oh.” I handed them over.

She put them on before helping me to return a few things from the floor

to the desk.

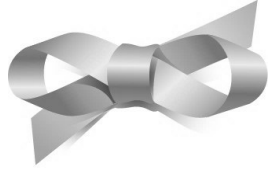
By the time I was summoning Stephanie in, Amber was already at the door, so she walked out just as Stephanie came in, and the nosy secretary stared after her retreating back.

“Mr. Martinez, did you give Miss Stone a hard time?”

“Why do you think that?” I asked.

Stephanie chuckled. “I wonder since the audit is a big deal. We both know this will show how well you manage the company.”

She was nosy, but that was okay. I’m in too good a mood to be affected by what she said. Finally, she dropped the documents she wanted me to sign and left. After that, there was enough time to reminisce about what had happened between me & Amber.



Chapter Two

Amber

Dating a hot guy must be the most stressful experience a girl could ever have, especially when you can't put an owner's tag on him.

Many girls want to have a taste of your man, and there's nothing you can do about that. And even if he's not paying attention to them, you still get annoyed seeing how they throw themselves at him. So be glad that you're the one he truly loves.

When you kiss, you can feel the warmth in your heart. You can taste the sweetness of his lips. You can experience the intimacy of your minds and bodies.

I had my first romantic kiss with Matheo, and we have been dating for over six months. But I hadn't dared to say a word about it to anyone except Michelle.

This is the last year of my internship, and the knowledge and experience I gained while working here have made me confident in doing my job, while most female staff at the office probably fantasize about him.

Having a sexy and competent boss you see every day is wonderful.

He kissed me on my neck and my shoulder. His fingers had worked magic on my clit. If only Stephanie hadn't intruded...

I loved him enough to want him to myself for as long as it would make him admit his feelings to my face. And with a man like Matheo Martinez, you might not get a verbal declaration; you need him to kiss you several times to prove he loves you.

Aren't kisses supposed to be words lovers don't say?

I was utterly overwhelmed by this man. He had such power. His touch made me shake so much that I sometimes forgot to breathe. Just realizing that I am dating Matheo Martinez, one of the most eligible bachelors in Dallas, Texas, was enough of a turn-on. But looking at myself in the restroom mirror right then, it occurred to me that Matheo could have gone out with someone better. I wondered if it was my vulnerability that appealed to him.

"I'm going to try my luck this week," Emily said while looking into the

mirror and preening.

“Not if I try mine first,” Bethany said.

They were best friends who always became enemies at moments like this.

“Mr. Martinez would never go out with a girl like you,” Emily retorted while Bethany laughed.

I was just a few steps away from them, but they loved to act like the whole world revolved around them.

“And you think Mr. Martinez would go out with you? You’re probably not his type.”

Emily scoffed. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” she said as she painted her lips pink. She looked beautiful.

“Do you think he has a girlfriend?” Bethany asked. She looked worried, so it was hard to know if this girl loved Matheo or just wanted a piece of him inside her.

Well, who wouldn’t want a piece of Matheo Martinez? Mrs. Percy undoubtedly regretted that she was married already. However, she still tried to invite Matheo to dinner at her house every weekend.

I’d always wondered why she was insistent with this, even though Matheo had consistently turned her down. Maybe she wanted to show her husband what she expected of him. I probably would never understand her state of mind, the same way I wouldn’t understand what Emily and Bethany wanted with my man.

Wait, did I say, ‘my man?’ As lovely as that sounded, it was ridiculous.

“I’m sure he’s single. Don’t you see how he walks?”

Bethany chuckled. “Do single men walk differently?”

“Of course, they do. I’m sure he’s single.” She drew in and whispered, “And even if he has a girlfriend, I won’t mind just having a one-night stand with him....”

Bethany’s face lit up, and I watched her swallow deeply.

Would he turn these girls down if they were to make a move on him? They were beautiful and irresistible, so a man would probably have to be insane to turn them down.

With a man like Matheo, most girls would try everything to get his attention. But I couldn’t help being jealous, and there was this spasm of fear as I realized that I might be afraid of losing something that wasn’t wholly mine.

I washed my hand in the basin, leaving the two girls, who still hadn’t

acknowledged my presence, and walked into the hallway. As I walked out, I bumped into a body, and a hand immediately grabbed me firmly.

“Careful, Miss Stone.”

The voice rang a bell, and my body reacted immediately. I looked up, and there he was, as if I had summoned him. His beautiful eyes and sensuous lips conjured up every dark desire I didn’t even know existed in me.

The moment in his office replayed in my head, and I smiled in the fantasy of what could have happened, but my imagination was short-lived as he cleared his throat lightly.

Matheo helped me stand straight, and I still couldn’t say a word.

“Are you okay?” he asked, smiling widely.

I breathed deeply and tried to regain proper composure, although it was hard to recover the weakness in my knees even as he walked away.

Emily and Bethany rushed over to me immediately with curious eyes.

“What was that?” Emily asked, looking annoyed and jealous.

“How did it feel to be held by him?” Bethany wanted to know. “Did your knees weaken?”

My knees had weakened, but that wasn’t the first time. And I was afraid it wouldn’t be the last. With Matheo, every touch made me weak.

“I guess?” I said with a shrug as I turned and walked away.

“Lucky bitch,” Bethany said.

I went back to my desk and started typing. A few minutes later, Matheo came by our department.

“Mr. Martinez, there you are.” Mrs. Percy said.

He smiled widely and approached her.

“How’s the preparation so far?” Matheo asked.

“Please, sit,” Mrs. Percy invited, but Matheo preferred to stand.

“Everything is going well. Our guests should arrive as scheduled, and everything has been set to make their stay comfortable.”

Matheo nodded incessantly. “That’s perfect.”

“You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Oh, I’m not worried. I’m just checking in. Do you have everything you’ll need?”

Mrs. Percy seemed lost in thought for a moment but nodded anyway. “Yes, we do. But I’ll let you know if anything comes up.”

“That’s good!” Matheo looked so happy that everyone was doing their best.

“Before I forget, Amber.” Mrs. Percy suddenly called my name.

I rushed over to Mrs. Percy’s desk. When I met Matheo, he gave his usual seductive, broad smile. It was impossible to look away from him.

It was painful looking at his face and being unable to touch it. It was torture being ridiculously close to him like that and not being able to have him hold me. And it was devastating to have his lips in such proximity and not be able to kiss them.

Why did he have to wink when he knew it would torture?

“There you are.” Mrs. Percy turned to me.

“Yes?” I stuttered. My heart wouldn’t stop racing, and my breath wouldn’t steady, so I felt as if I was suffocating where I stood.

“Have you talked to Mr. Carlos, our electrical contractor?” Mrs. Percy asked.

“Yes, I called him after our meeting and told him to resend all his invoices with the correct purchase order. So, we can pay him all at once before the end of this month.” I explained.

“That was fast. Thank you, Amber.” After Mrs. Percy praised me, I immediately went back to my desk.

“Miss Stone is quite reliable, isn’t she?” Matheo asked, directing the question at Mrs. Percy. I shot him a surprised look.

Mrs. Percy smiled. “Matheo, she’s quite the team player. I’m lucky to have her on my team.”

“You’ve said that several times. You trained her well. It’s nice to know they have a good leader in the accounting department.” Matheo winked.

Matheo glanced at me. Seeing Matheo look proud of me was a momentary assurance, but I couldn’t even enjoy his praise.

“On the topic of training... Once the audit is over, I’ll need a training and development program created to ensure our interns have a consistent training experience. Everyone must have the same knowledge and resources to do their job. Okay?” Matheo gave the order with authority.

Mrs. Percy nodded.

“Miss Stone will help me with the documents I need to sign.”

“Okay, Mr. Martinez.” I agreed.

He walked away immediately. Mrs. Percy began to gather the documents.



He pulled me into his arms immediately after I entered his office, but I pushed him away just as promptly. He was somewhat surprised, but I had to play hard to get sometimes since that was one way to get my feelings across to him.

“I must say I’m impressed, Miss Stone!” he said as he approached, watching me like a predator watching its prey. When he got close again, although my body ached with just a touch from him, I pulled away.

“Your manager praised you so well.” He turned to me with a surprised look.

I loved how he could flatter me without needing too many words. Moments like that always make me feel like an achiever, although it was always short-lived. He only had to touch me for me to fall into a submissive headspace.

“Do you always have to ask how I do my job?”

“Are you saying I’m being nosy?” Matheo asked.

“Well, are you satisfied with what you heard? I’m not being lazy, that’s for sure. I’m quite adaptable if I must say.” I laughed.

He breathed deeply. “Mrs. Percy stresses you too much.”

“She’s not. You’re only looking for an excuse to see me,” I said and walked away to drop the documents on his desk.

I was about to turn around when I felt his presence behind me. I felt his chest grazing my back. His breath was warm on my shoulder, and I shivered when he kissed me there.

“I just want to make sure that you’re not spending time at your desk daydreaming about me.” He looked at me and smirked.

I breathed in deeply before he kissed the back of my neck again. I sent a hand back and grabbed his head so that he kissed me more: my back, my earlobe, my shoulder, and the nape of my neck.

Desire simmered in my blood, and I could feel myself tingling already. I gasped.

A touch from this man could make a woman combust. He turned me to himself and kissed my lips. Then, he broke away and moved in slowly, whispering, “Where were we?”

Matheo hoisted me onto the desk. I felt lightheaded, and my heart raced as I looked at him. How far would he go this time?

“I don’t have a condom in my office,” he gave me a seductive look.

“Why?” I asked, only to realize that it was a ridiculous question. We both

laughed, dissipating some of the tension in the room.

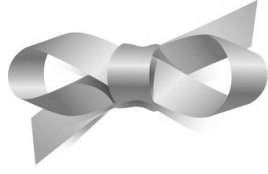
“I want you, Mr. Martinez,” I said with abrupt boldness.

“And I need you, Miss Stone,” he replied.

His hand stroked my neck and claimed my lips again, but I pushed him back.

He let go immediately, and I sighed with exasperation.

“I have to excuse myself now, Mr. Martinez. I have to get back to work to prepare the financial statements for the audit.” I waved my hand at him as I ran to the door.



Chapter Three

Amber



The day passed quickly, and I decided to spend time with Michelle after work.

“So, how are you? And how’s your love life, by the way? Is it getting hotter?” Michelle, my best friend, asked.

I checked my phone to see if it was silent and turned back to Michelle, who was giggling. I gave her a wicked look, but she still didn’t stop.

“Ha ha, very funny,” I sarcastically said as I sat beside Michelle.

There’s always a difference between loving someone and dating someone. Although I loved Matheo enough to be sure of my feelings, it’s impossible to know the other person’s feelings toward you.

I was convinced Matheo loved me, but I felt I loved him more.

“Yes.” That was short, and it sufficed

“Don’t forget to hang out with me more often. You should know who’s your priority between Matheo and me.” Michelle paused and drew closer.

I smiled. “I know, right.” I agreed with a serious look on my face.

She smiled widely and tapped my shoulder. “Seeing you with so much spark in your eyes makes me happy with about relationship with Matheo. ”

He’s lucky that a girl like you is in love with him. And he’s a fool If he doesn’t realize that yet.” Michelle was always a shoulder to lean on. We had known each other longer than anyone else, and our bond had always been strong.

She was an elegant sight to look at as well. Her delicate, tall, and slender body looked refined in striped jeans and a blue top while she crossed one leg over the other. We sat on a yellow bench in open-air seating and sipped refreshing cocktails. The weather was soothing as well. I probably wouldn’t have known about the place if Matheo hadn’t brought me there two weeks ago, but the atmosphere didn’t seem new to Michelle.

“You’ve been here before?” I asked, and my best friend recoiled and stared at me like an alien.

“Of course. Haven’t you?”

“Just once.”

“Oh. I guess Matheo brought you here.”

I smiled. “Why do you think that?”

Michelle sighed deeply. “Amber, you need to enjoy life. You’re investing too much in this job, and you’re only an intern.”

I sighed exasperatedly. Being an intern didn’t mean I had to slack off; I appreciated the job because it gave me a chance to help my man achieve his goals.

I knew Matheo loved the company. Being able to contribute something to it made me feel I was a part of his life and dreams.

“I hope you don’t miss Matheo while hanging out with me.” Michelle paused.

“What?” I asked. Michelle adjusted herself, sitting more upright before focusing back on me. “What?” I insisted.

She looked at me, and that alone ignited my curiosity. I knew she had a habit of saying ‘never mind,’ and I hoped such wouldn’t be the case at that moment.

“I know you’re not ready to go public with your relationship with him due to complicated matters, but how do you handle it?”

“Complicated matters?”

“Your relationship with Matheo, of course, being the intern and him as the CEO. It may seem okay now because you can see each other in the office and maybe have a moment....” She searched my face and saw me smiling. Michelle laughed. “I see.”

I wavered, trying to think of something to say, in my defense. My chest tightened as I laughed. “Um, sure. It happened.”

Office romance is such a turn-on, especially when it’s secretive, although I had always known it could be the end of me if the secret were to break out.

“You love him, don’t you?”

I could feel my face burning, so I took a quick sip of my cocktail for courage.

“I do love him, Michelle. A lot.”

I could understand why Michelle looked more worried than I was about my relationship with Matheo. But we always tended to look out for each other. So maybe I was just a bit too calm about the situation because the present reality seemed to be what mattered to me most.

“Sometimes, I ask myself what I did to deserve Matheo Martinez, and—”

Michelle interrupted me immediately before I could finish that thought.

“Who told you that? My dear, you are wonderful. Falling in love is a magical moment that often defies all logic, reason, and practicality. It’s just that when it comes to being with someone from a different social status, the harsh truth may be hard to hear.” Michelle grabbed the newspaper and showed the headline about TotaBuyzz.

“Eventually, both of you will have to understand what the other sees as an opportunity, a challenge, a possibility, or an impossibility because of your difference in expectations and values.” She continued.

I took a moment to think about Michelle’s points. I hadn’t considered what would become of Matheo and me when the semester began, and I had to leave the company for a while. With hungry hawks like Bethany and Emily around, I could only guess that I might not be able to concentrate on my studies while thinking about what could be happening back in the office.

“That’s not a problem,” I said, hoping to convince myself and Michelle.

“We’ll meet during weekends.”

Michelle nodded. “That sounds like a plan. But he’s Matheo Martinez, and you must keep this relationship a secret, right? Well, you have to, for your safety. So many people will crucify you if they know you’re dating Matheo Martinez.”

Michelle’s words hurt, but that was because everything she said was the truth. How the hell had I slipped into such a complicated situation? But, really, why do we always choose to fall in love when we can walk right into it? Is it because love is meant to hurt, or is it primarily accidental?

Being part of TotaBuyzz, a global multinational technology company specializing in e-commerce, cloud computing, digital streaming, and artificial intelligence, is a dream come true for me.

It has been referred to as one of the world’s most influential economic and cultural forces and is one of the most valuable brands of our day, so everyone working here feels proud to be employed.

Just how I feel proud to be loved by Matheo Martinez. If only I could shout out loud. But I can’t be selfish. I also have to protect his reputation as the CEO. So I can’t be greedy.

Should I have continued to hate Matheo because he was all the things I hated a man to be: cocky, arrogant, and inconsiderate?

And if I hadn’t gone to the office that evening, would things be easier for me now?

It had all started with an impulsive kiss in the weirdest situation, and

somehow it had become impossible to stop loving the man.

“Michelle...”

She looked at me with concerned eyes.

“I love him. I do love Matheo Martinez.” I looked at Michelle with a solid affirmation of my feelings, and Michelle drew me into her embrace and caressed my hair.

My heart ached. I didn’t want to lose him. Even the thought that we might have to end our relationship at some point hurt so much that I felt genuine fear. If a day like that was written in our future, I was already praying I wouldn’t live to see it pass.

“It’s going to be fine, okay?” Michelle said.

But the tears wouldn’t stop. It was as if I had held too much in and, at that moment, had finally lost control.

“I’m sure he loves you too.”

I gasped several times when Michelle brought me out of her embrace and looked at my face. Then she smiled widely.

“See...? He’s the one who doesn’t deserve you.”

I couldn’t hold back the urge to laugh, so I let it out, and Michelle drew me back into her embrace and began to pat my back.

“It’s alright, baby girl. You’ll be fine.”

“Do you think people would approve of me if I were good at my job?”

“What?”

“I want to be good at my job, Michelle. So if I can show others that I deserve him, they wouldn’t attack me with such negativity when they find out about our relationship, right?”

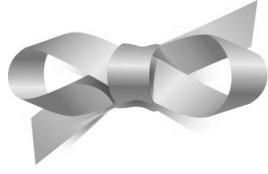
Michelle sighed exasperatedly. “You don’t have to prove yourself to anyone, my dear. And even if you devote all your energy to this cause, it won’t save you from negative opinions. There will inevitably be a set of people who don’t think you’re a match for Matheo. What matters most is what he thinks of you and if he’s ready to fight for you.”

Would Matheo ever be ready to fight for me? He’s tall and has broad shoulders—if only that’s enough to defend our relationship.

He was a man who had everything, while I was just an ordinary college girl living at the mercy of her adoptive parents. What did a girl like me have to offer a man like him for him to be ready to protect me once criticism arose? I would instead let him go than damage his image or drag him into a scandal.

Such is love, and such was my life.

Michelle was a great comfort, and it felt good to know someone would always root for me.



Chapter Four

Matheo



I knew everyone thought of me as cocky and arrogant, probably because I had a wealthy father and was now the CEO of the company he'd made. And sometimes, it hurts how people can conclusively judge the other person without a real peek into the person's life.

But we all have our fair share of hurt, although no one would care to know it. You only have to be rich and smile for people to conclude that you have the best life, just like you only have to see what you want and not go for anything less. But in the end, some people will still assume you're cocky and arrogant. I wouldn't deny that I was a bit of both, however.

Love is a phenomenon that no one truly understands, and each person tends to reduce it to their level of understanding and define it in their way.

Amber and I were never friends, to begin with. Ours was a relationship made by chance. Before meeting her, I didn't realize you could discover that you genuinely love someone just by kissing them.

Well, that's a story you'll probably get to know. However, I feel Amber has been avoiding me. We hardly interacted like we used to, and she seldom came to my office. Maybe it was simply because of the preparation in progress for the audit.

Amber was what I needed to make my life complete.

I checked my wristwatch. There was a minute before the meeting would commence, and although Mrs. Percy was already seated, Amber was nowhere in the room.

There were a few other executives seated opposite one another at the long desk, waiting for me to say whatever I had called them for, although most of them already knew what it was. But I couldn't start.

My eyes were fixed on the door. I wanted to register the moment Amber walked in. I wanted her for inspiration and to announce the company's progress in my woman's presence. However, she remained absent. I managed to clear my throat and stand up anyway. After that, the room became relatively quiet.

"Good morning, and thank you all for being here...." I got a few nods and

smiling faces in response, but they weren't the ones I wanted to see.

"TotaBuyzz has been doing well, and this is because of your hard work and dedication. Are you excited to hear the good news?" I asked everyone in the board room.

A few people chorused 'yes,' while others only smiled.

"Well, that's only one part of the reason..." A few chortles occupied the space during the momentary pause. "The real reason we've been doing well is that we've been working as a team. Because of our success, TotaBuyzz is proud to announce the launch of a new project."

Curious eyes looked up at me from both sides of the table. I felt an enormous amount of pride to be working with these people. A company is not defined by its CEO but by its employees.

"We'll be opening a grab & go convenience store and grocery stores across the US. Of course—"

I hadn't expected them to applaud with so much passion that the room remained rowdy for almost a minute. When they calmed down and shook hands, I knew I had to move ahead.

"Of course, the headquarters will be here in Dallas, Texas. And all the employees of TotaBuyzz will get a discount on every purchase.

"Also, to appreciate you all for your hard work so far, the good news is that there's a dinner reservation at Viviera Restaurant tonight for everyone, at seven." I blurted it out with a happy face.

They applauded again, more joyfully, and I walked out feeling better than when I'd walked in. But when I saw Amber in the hallway, my heart skipped a beat.

I had just taken a step when I realized we were not supposed to act like we knew each other. But then, I saw the other intern, Brad. He insisted on taking the files out of Amber's arms, and she handed them to him with a bright smile.

"Mr. Martinez?"

I looked back immediately. It was Mrs. Percy.

"Congratulations on the new project."

Amber and the new intern joined us, but she only smiled briefly at me.

"Well, I have people like you to thank for it, don't I?"

Mrs. Percy laughed. "You flatter me, Mr. Martinez."

I glanced at Amber. "Is the preparation for the audit going well?"

"Yes, Mr. Martinez. It's going pretty well. Brad has been helpful as

well.”

The guy gave a bright smile, and I saw him blush.

“Oh, I’m just doing my job,” he said.

“You’ve done well,” Amber insisted.

“Oh, no. Amber...” Brad looked so shy.

I had no recollection of pouring fuel on my head, but I could feel it ignite just because the other intern called my woman “Amber.” She didn’t seem to have a problem with it, however.

“Are you both going to stand there and argue about who’s been helpful and doing this job?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Martinez. Amber has been a good trainer.” Brad said.

“I’m happy to hear that everything is working out.” I gazed at Amber.

Amber looked into my eyes and smiled forcefully.

“Will you come to the company dinner?” I asked abruptly. Amber and Brad halted.

The question was directed at Amber, but I immediately turned to Mrs. Percy.

“Your department has been doing well, so you’ll agree that you must be there.” I turned to Amber and saw her smile widely. That seemed enough to calm me—that she got my message.

“Of course, I’ll be there,” Mrs. Percy said.

“And Miss Stone?”

She and Brad stared inquisitively at their manager, and Mrs. Percy gave her consent.

“See you all there, then. By seven.”

I turned back to watch Amber walking away. She looked back, too, and smiled at me. There are moments when your lover doesn’t have to say a word. They have to make the smallest gestures, and you’ll feel they have said thousands of what you want to hear. Somehow, I just knew I had achieved my goal for the day.



I hadn’t been to a steakhouse for a while. The circular driveway’s central fountain and valet service were excellent. The buzzing bar drew me into a strange and familiar atmosphere.

The dark wood and soft lighting made the room seem comfortable and welcoming. I had Stephanie reserve an extra dining room area for an intimate

dinner. I felt myself relax a little as I entered. The atmosphere was friendly and celebratory.

The staff talked and laughed with one another as they ate. It was my first time having dinner with my employees, and although I enjoyed it more than I thought I would, I couldn't help but feel a little strange.

However, everything seemed to be progressing well. Amber seemed as if she was enjoying her meal.

She raised her head and looked in my direction when our eyes met. She smiled and looked around guiltily to see if anyone had observed the exchange. I noticed the new intern looking between Amber and me as if he suspected something. She also saw this and dropped her fork. I watched her stand up.

"Excuse me..." she said. She glanced at my face quickly and then looked away.

"Be quick with it, will you?" Mrs. Percy said.

She walked away, and I couldn't watch her fully because of the new intern who wouldn't stop staring at me. Finally, getting tired of it, I glared back at him, and he greeted me, but I didn't feel the need to reply.

A minute later, it seemed like Amber was already taking too long. So, I stood up. I also provided the excuse of needing to use the washroom since Mrs. Percy wanted to know, although everyone else didn't seem like they cared.

I walked into a larger room filled with just as many people as the one I walked out from, although the setting was different. I knew it was impossible to walk in a space like this and not get admired, so it had become my tradition to give a few nods and smirks.

The female staff member I asked for directions to the restrooms seemed pleased that I had chosen her to talk to.

I stopped outside the women's restroom. I knew I shouldn't barge in without knowing if Amber was the only one inside, so I waited another minute before she came out.

She froze when she saw me leaning against the entrance.

"Mr. Martinez?"

I smiled. "Miss Stone?"

"What are you doing here?" She closed the door and quickly looked around the corridor, checking if we were alone.

"Since you've been avoiding me, I thought I'd come to you."

Amber giggled and stepped closer to me. She stood on her toes and placed a kiss on my forehead. Then she smoothed my hair with her thumb.

“You know I’ve been busy. Congratulations, if it’s not too late.”

I drew her closer into a tight embrace. Somehow it felt like I could breathe more efficiently when she was near.

“I missed you,” I said and pulled her in further. I could feel her smile and breathe deeply as well.

“I missed you too, okay?”

We heard footsteps and inaudible voices and immediately stepped apart. But how was I supposed to explain why I was hanging around the ladies’ room?

Amber pushed me into the restroom and closed the door behind her without further ado. She locked the door and breathed deeply. There was a knock on the door, but Amber held the doorknob tightly so it couldn’t be opened.

I smiled to myself. Another knock landed on the door again before someone walked away to try elsewhere. That was when Amber could breathe with ease. I watched her shoulders rise when she took a deep breath; she looked beautiful in her red dress.

My gaze followed her long hair down her back, and then it meandered across the curve of her hips and down her long legs.

I no longer needed to fight the desire to walk toward her, so I had nothing to hold back as I did. I slipped my hands around her waist. She jerked in surprise, then turned towards me with an almost stiffened body.

She stared intently into my eyes, holding her breath. She looked too delicate to be loved at that moment.

“Are you scared of me, Miss Stone?”

She managed to draw a weak breath.

“N...no, I...”

She fell silent when my right hand moved to her neck, and I moved it up her chin, then to her cheeks. I cupped her cheek. She leaned into my embrace and closed her eyes. When I angled her face up for a deep kiss, she moaned gently as if whatever I was doing to her was painful.

I could feel desire beating in my blood as well. My heart was racing. I turned Amber around and thrust against her ass. She wiggled against me.

She sent a hand back and caressed my erection. I reached forward to touch her as well. But instead, I held her by the neck, registering how fast she

was breathing.

I reached down, lifting her skirt. Her thighs trembled beneath my touch. I moved further, skimming my fingers over her underwear. She arched her back in response. It became hard to stop myself from reaching down to relieve the pressure on my zipper, but we both knew we couldn't have sex in a public washroom.

So, I turned her around and kissed her deeply. When our lips parted, we were both breathing heavily.

"That was intense," I said, and we both laughed.

"Mr. Martinez, will you forever keep me hanging without completing what you start?"

I smiled widely. "I won't give you what you want unless you beg me for it, Miss Stone."

She gave me a teasing kiss, moving away before I could grab her.

"Let's see how long you can hold on, then."

Amber's eyes looked at my zipper.

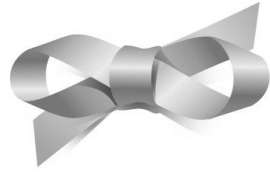
"He looks hungry...."

I looked down and laughed. She gently patted my crotch before she opened the door.

"I think you should wait till the young man calms down."

She walked out, closing the door behind her.

I gave her a two-minute head start before following. And, by then, the young man had calmed.



Chapter Five

Veronica



I never expected that I would get a compassionate release from prison. It's a good thing that I made a friend before I got out who told me to call his family when I got out. She said all I had to do was make my bed, not be late for dinner, and go to church. If I did these things, I could stay, but there's one thing I have to do first.

George Martinez is my son's father, but do I have the right to call Matheo Martinez my son? I had tried to get rid of Matheo. Seeing my son grow into a handsome man was beautiful, although I couldn't approach him.

Linda didn't know I was at George's retirement party. I know I wasn't supposed to be there, but I planned to confront her about why she set me up.

George must have seen me, so he hurriedly went down the stage and caused his accident.

They were sipping their wine and were pleased with the number of people who turned up. The pool in the backyard was surrounded by greenery, while its interior was beautifully decorated. Matheo was sitting, but he stood up immediately when he saw a girl approaching his direction.

Narrowing my eyes at the girl, I saw that she was quite the beauty. She was delicate and desirable in her attire. She walked a little unsteadily; I surmised her heels were giving her trouble. Regardless, she appeared to be quite the catch.

They looked cute together. I could see the way Matheo looked at her like a treasure he'd want to keep for the rest of his life, and she was smiling sheepishly throughout their conversation.

Although they looked like they were making a normal conversation, like co-workers, after a more scrutinizing look at the two of them, I knew they were in love. But I wondered why they seemed like they had to keep it a secret. She wouldn't stop glancing around, afraid of being caught with Matheo. But, on the other hand, he didn't seem like he cared as much.

After a few moments, she walked away. Two younger girls ran towards Matheo, with the younger one asking Matheo to hoist her up on his arm while the other took Matheo's cup and gulped the contents before he could retort.

I guessed they were Linda's children. Based on how close they seemed to be to Matheo, it was obvious that they were probably nothing like their mother. Linda and I had our story.

I began to look for the girl I had seen talking to Matheo previously, but she seemed to have disappeared from the gathering. I didn't want to walk around too much and risk getting caught by either George or Linda. So, I had to give up the search for her.

It was fulfilling enough watching my son, Matheo Martinez. Knowing that something beautiful to look at had come out of me provided a joy that you'd have to be a parent to understand. I hadn't been the best parent, and I didn't know if I would ever be forgiven for all my past mistakes. I couldn't even rationalize precisely why I had to come to the party to see my son. Perhaps it was because I didn't have much time left. I had a cliché desire to make peace with him before it was too late.

I wonder if Linda treated Matheo well, but I had seen him happy and comfortable with his siblings, although they came from Linda.

I had to leave anyway. The gathering was not a place for me, and I was satisfied with what I had seen. Too late, the security team in the mansion was approaching me. Now, Linda and George know that I am back. I regretted showing up at the party impulsively.

I must find a way to talk to Matheo. He needs to know what happened and how I regret what I did in the past.

When I was thrown out at George's party, Linda probably had asked their security team to review the video footage and saw me when George looked in my direction.

I went to a Reentry Resource Center, which provides a support network for ex-convicts, and found a job as a janitor.

I needed a job so I could get my own place to stay.

The subway train was jam-packed. I almost fell when someone exited the door.

"Are you ok?" The woman asked. She looked familiar, but I couldn't figure out where I had seen her before.

"I'm ok. Thank you." I replied.

We both walked in the same direction and took the same bus.

"It's you again! My name is Veron." I introduced myself while looking at her.

"My name is Amber. What a coincidence! You live in this area too?" She

looks surprised.

“Yes!” I replied.

“It was nice to meet you, but I’m sorry, this is my stop.” *She’s generous with her smile, and she seems like she’s always happy. Her aura was full of warmth and kindness.*

I realized that she was the girl that Matheo talked to at George’s retirement party.

She looked approachable and friendly. Was it my fate to meet Amber?



It was around 6:45 am the following day, and I was fidgeting as if I’d lost something. Even though I felt awkward, no one seemed to pay me attention.

About 25 minutes later, a bus stopped on the pavement in front of the enormous building that was TotaBuyzz. I got out immediately and looked for something in my handbag.

There were thousands of thoughts circling in my head as I paced. Getting a job as a janitor in a coffee shop close to TotaBuyzz makes me feel closer to my son, Matheo.

When the bus began to drive away, I turned swiftly and collided with someone. I fell over, and the woman squatted down beside me.

“Are you okay?” she asked, looking concerned and sorry.

“I’m fine,” I said but strained as I tried to get up.

“I’m sorry. Oh! It’s you again.” There was a sound of surprise in her voice.

I raised my eyes and looked into hers. It was Amber. She looked stunning in her black skirt and white long-sleeve that morning.

“Hi! I’m okay. I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“No, don’t say that. It’s my fault.”

“It’s okay,” I insisted.

She insisted as well. “No, it’s not. I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know why Matheo had fallen in love with this woman, but now it’s clear. She wasn’t just beautiful; she projected an aura of warmth, kindness, and friendliness when she smiled.

“Can you stand?” she asked as she held me by my right arm, and I nodded lightly.

“I think so,” I replied.

She helped me up and apologized again.

“Can I buy you coffee?”

“Yes!” My response sounded rather desperate. I only realized this afterward, but she didn’t let me take it back even when I tried to.

“I mean—”

“Thank you for saying yes. Shall we go get some now?”

“Don’t you have to get to work?”

“It’s right here.”

I stared at the enormous building and pretended to be impressed. “You work here?”

She smiled sheepishly. “Yes, I do. It’s still early, anyway, so I have time to buy you coffee.”

I shrugged. “If you say so. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Here...”

She led the way toward the coffee shop across the road, and we entered. I took one of the seats by the window while she went to the counter to get the order. The coffee shop was empty that morning and peaceful as well. Slow music played in the background, and the soft lighting made the atmosphere warm and comfy.

Where I sat, I could see TotaBuyzz standing gracefully in its place, commanding respect from the other businesses surrounding it.

“Here you go.” The girl placed my coffee on the table, and I thanked her with a smile. “What are you doing here, by the way?” She asked.

“Oh, I got a job at this coffee shop as a janitor. My shift will start at 8 am. I need to hand over some paperwork, so I came early.”

“Sounds funny. We keep bumping into each other. I’m beginning to think that I’m clumsy.” Amber raised the coffee to her mouth and stared briefly at me over the rim.

“Thanks for this,” I said.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I owe you this much, at least.”

I drank from the coffee and took a napkin out of the dispenser. There was a moment of awkward silence between us. I knew I needed to say something but didn’t know where to start.

“So, you work at TotaBuyzz?”

She almost choked on her coffee.

“Yes.”

“That must be great.”

She smiled widely. She was proud to be working at the company.

“I’m just an intern. After completing all my classes and requirements, I’ll graduate in December this year.”

“Oh, really?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’m a student at Northwestern University of Texas, studying accounting.”

I reclined and took a deep breath. The best way to form a camaraderie with a person is first to find what you two have in common, and I’d just found what I had in common with Amber.

“Wow, that’s great. I was once a student there as well.”

She looked elated. “Really? Are you an alumna? Which department?”

“Accounting.”

“Accounting?” She was smiling widely now.

“Yes. But I dropped out during my first year.”

“Oh...” she said. She seemed to deflate like a punctured balloon.

“I’m sorry about that.”

I shrugged, wondering if she’d be interested to know my story.

“Can I ask why?” She observed me for a moment and added, “It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it; I just—”

“No, Amber. I want to talk about it with you.”

She looked surprised. “With me?”

“Yes, of course. Aren’t we friends already?”

The girl was an opportunity to connect with Matheo, but I needed to win her over and convince her to help me.

She put down the coffee immediately and shook her head.

“Yes, of course. I often drop by here to buy coffee. We will be seeing each other from time to time. She stared at me, obviously worried I was offended, but I found her cute.

I felt her sigh deeply; then, she drank from her cup.

“I’d be glad if you would be my friend, Amber.”

Amber stared at me.

“Are you ok, Amber? You’re mind seems to be miles away.”

She shook her head. “No, not that. I remember bumping into someone else, we became friends as well and...” she said. I could see the emotions in her eyes and that she was pleased with just the thought of that person.

“Lovers?” I asked, and she blushed. “Why are you surprised? You think I wouldn’t guess?” I teased her.

She smiled. “How did you know?”

“Well, I’m old and more experienced, right?”

“Right.”

“So, it’s a man, then?”

She nodded and smiled sheepishly again. It must be great being young.

I didn’t have the best of my heydays, and I was probably not having the best of my adulthood, but I would be satisfied as long as I could be bold enough to make amends with my past.

“Tell me about him next time. I have to report for work for now.”

She almost dropped the cup of coffee in her hands and bolted upright. But then, with how bright her face suddenly lit up, I knew she could only have good things to say.

“Alright, see you next time!” Amber waved her hand and walked away.

After a week, I heard someone call my name while waiting for my shift to start. It was Friday at 7:20 am.

“Veron,” Amber repeated when she reached me with a cup of coffee in her hand.

“I woke up early today, so I decided to drop by here to say hi,” Amber mumbled as she joined me at the table.

“Where’s your boyfriend?” I asked

Amber stared at me for a brief moment and checked her phone messages.

“I texted him that I’ll be here. But, unfortunately, I’m not sure if his schedule will allow him to meet me here.” She looked at her phone again and pulled a sulking face.

I chuckled. “So where were we the last time? You were going to tell me every good thing about him, weren’t you?”

She leaned back and stared keenly at me.

“No, please. I’m not a mind reader.”

“But how did you know I was thinking that—you must have read my mind.”

“Do you think I’ve never been in love?”

She shook her head.

“We all have love stories, although they start differently and end differently. But tell me about yours.”

She didn’t say much—just that she loved him and wanted to do everything she could to make their love grow stronger. Hearing her say she loved my son, with such passion in her eyes, eased my mind.

“But we have to keep it a secret,” she said and suddenly became sad. I watched her face. The light previously in her eyes had been overshadowed by a cloud. I could see she felt worried.

I felt that I could understand Amber’s feelings quite well. However, it’s easy to say we know the other person when we’re not going through the pain or predicament they’re going through, and even if we are, isn’t pain felt and handled differently?

“Why? Why must you keep your relationship a secret?”

She chortled. “He’s every woman’s dream, and many people who have a son on the board are also probably envious of him because he’s such an achiever at his age. I don’t want people to use our relationship against him just because I’m still an intern.” Amber explained.

“And so...?”

She looked at me incredulously. “I need to protect him and our relationship. That’s it.”

I sighed exasperatedly. “You don’t think that you deserve him?”

She hid her face and nodded lightly. So, I took away her cup of coffee, put it aside, and held her hands. She looked straight into my eyes.

“What if he’s the one who doesn’t deserve you?”

She stared at my face, and I shrugged. “That could be so, don’t you think?”

Amber didn’t appear convinced at all. Instead, she was looking at me somewhat incredulously.

“You think you don’t deserve him because he’s handsome, wealthy, and successful? We sometimes tend to misunderstand the other person when loving them. It’s the same way a man could see a beautiful woman and think she’s way out of his league, but what if she just wanted to be loved?”

“Just because he’s handsome and resilient doesn’t mean he doesn’t have his fears. He might be a good catch because he draws attention from every woman, but it doesn’t mean they truly love him...” I paused and took a deep breath. By then, Amber looked more convinced than she previously was.

“...so, maybe you’re just overthinking this. And don’t you ever try to prove to yourself that you deserve him. You don’t have to prove yourself to anyone, not even to your lover. You have to be yourself, love him sincerely, and if he doesn’t see that, then he’s a fool.”

Amber looked somewhat offended by my last statement, so I quickly apologized for insinuating that her man could be a fool. She smiled.

“Oh, no. Thank you very much, Veron.”

“You’re welcome,” I said and breathed deeply before I released her hands. “Don’t worry about anything, okay? I’m sure he loves you just as much as you love him. Thinking that you don’t deserve him might draw you back from expressing yourself fully toward him. That’s why such thoughts aren’t healthy. You shouldn’t hold back anything in love.”

Amber smiled thoughtfully and took a sip of coffee.

“So, tell me, does he ever talk about his family? That also tells a lot about your man.”

Amber looked at me with surprise. I knew it was abrupt to jump in that direction, but I was becoming desperate, although I was trying not to show it.

“Not really,” Amber replied.

I nodded. “I see...”

“He doesn’t talk about his birth mother, but I sensed that he wants his father to be proud of him.”

My chest suddenly tightened so much that I could feel it suffocating my heart, and it became hard to breathe freely. Tears welled up in my eyes, and when Amber looked at me, I raised my head immediately to keep the tears back.

But I couldn’t hold my emotions, and my body slumped over in my chair. I couldn’t understand my sudden weakness, but I could understand why it hurt so much.

“Are you okay?” Amber asked.

I smiled awkwardly and tried to hold myself together. However, as I opened my mouth to offer assurance, the feelings came crashing in, and I was already powerless to hold back the tears. I still tried to control it; I put a hand to my mouth so I wouldn’t make a sound.

Amber stood up and came over to console me; strangely, I felt I could relax in her arms.

“I didn’t mean to leave him....” I tried to say between my tears, but she didn’t seem to get the message.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but it will be fine.”

“I didn’t mean to leave him,” I repeated and gasped for air as I got out of her arms. She stared keenly into my eyes.

“What?”

I drew up my nose. “I didn’t mean to leave him behind....”

Amber stared at me more with incredulous eyes. Suddenly something

seemed to click. “What?” she asked again.

I couldn’t say anything more. She had already got the message.

“How’s this possible?”

The tears came streaming down my cheeks again.

“My real name is Veronica. You must believe me, Amber. Everything he’d heard about me was lies. I never meant to leave him behind.”

“But you’re here, in the same city he is—why haven’t you reached out?”

Amber looked even more worried and concerned.

“I was young back then and a fool. I was easily manipulated. I couldn’t see him because....”

“Why?” Amber’s question was somewhat aggressive, but she appeared to make an effort to calm down and breathe deeply. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to shout.”

I wasn’t offended anyway. “I didn’t know how. I wasn’t sure he would want to see me, and I didn’t want to make him sad or angry with my sudden appearance.”

Amber sighed deeply. “What if that’s not the case? What if he misses you and wants to see you get closure? It’s obvious that you want to see him as well, isn’t it?”

“Then do so,” Amber exclaimed.

“I can’t... I just can’t. I’m afraid I’ll hurt him.”

Amber moved closer but stopped immediately as another customer entered the café. It was Matheo. He was able to come after all.

He smiled brightly at Amber. I moved away from her as quickly as I could and turned around to hide my face.

“I knew you’d be here,” Matheo said as he joined us. They were being casual with each other so as not to draw attention to other people who might be employees of TotaBuyzz.

While Matheo was facing the wall and Amber was facing me, I mouthed and gestured, signaling at her not to reveal my identity.

“You came early, Mr. Martinez?” Amber looked at Matheo.

Amber stared at me again, and I quickly mouthed to her. We almost got caught by Matheo. He turned to look at me; I turned my face sideways.

“I decided to get something for the staff and have it delivered. What’s going on?” Matheo asked.

Amber smiled awkwardly. “Nothing. I was grabbing coffee with a friend.”

Matheo looked somewhat surprised that Amber regarded me as a friend.

“A friend?” He looked keenly at me.

I summoned every ounce of strength in me to look at his face.

I watched his lips, and I couldn't help but smile. It was the first resemblance I noticed between us, and it felt enough that a part of me had made him. My eyes suddenly became teary again, so I moved my face away immediately and took a quick breath as I tried to ease the tightness in my chest.

“Ver—” Amber cut off my name, presumably realizing it was not yet the best place to reveal my identity to Matheo. “Veron, meet Matheo. And Matheo, meet Veron, my new friend.”

He smiled. He was beautiful. Again, I felt a sense of pride that he was my son.

“Hi, Veron,” he said, stretching his right hand for a handshake.

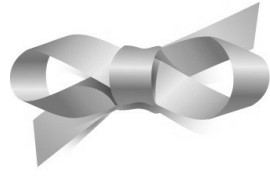
I watched his hand with a broken heart, unable to take it. Then, finally, I raised my face to look at him again, and he was staring at me with confused eyes.

How could I not have been part of my son's life all these years?

The thought crushed my heart once again, and the tears started again.

Matheo looked worriedly at Amber before turning to me as he withdrew his hand. He probably thought I was incredibly weird.

But that was okay, so long as he didn't know my real identity.



Chapter Six

Amber



“How about dinner at my house? 8 pm tonight.”

I had fantasized about those words coming out of his mouth all day.

He invited me to show off the new painting he had just acquired, but I could sense that it was not just a piece of art.

So, I wore a simple but elegant dress. It took tireless efforts to keep my heart steady throughout the ride in the cab, and I took constant deep breaths to maintain composure.

As I took the first step up to Matheo’s place, I felt lightheaded, consumed with the fantasy of every dark secret waiting to be uncovered behind those dark wooden doors.

Matheo’s place had a modern style with corner windows.

It had a pool with a tropical-designed outdoor veranda, home furniture, and the house’s façade. It was a breath of fresh air in the city, combining comfort and elegance. Lush greenery adorned the place with touches of green in indoor and outdoor areas, like a tiny palm beside the pool and hints of potted plants in the living foyer.

I took the features in and gathered the confidence necessary to open the door. But once I touched the doorknob, it was as if a shock traveled through my heart.

Damn it. All my senses were heightened, and I could barely think of anything that wasn’t Matheo on me or me on him, whichever position would be necessary.

“Hi...”

I stood back a bit when his head popped out of the door. Then he opened the door widely and stood within its space, clad in a white apron and smiling brightly.

I watched his eyes with interest and then traced my eyes down to his sensuous lips. He swallowed.

“Hi?”

I was startled out of my thought again and became embarrassed by my reactions. His eyes were smiling at me when I looked at him again, and I

knew he was mocking me, which made me shyer.

“You okay?” Matheo asked.

He knew I wasn’t okay, and I couldn’t even give him a response. So, I barged through his body and made him stagger back as I entered.

His place has an impressive living space. It was enormous and insanely grand, with large closets.

It was built with expansive windows throughout to take full advantage of the panoramic view of the city.

The place was as exquisite as I had always imagined, with high ceilings in the living room. With overstuffed couches surrounding a brick-encased fireplace, this room was made for relaxing and kicking back.

And on his walls were different collections of paintings and art deco.

“I got that at an auction last week,” he said while pointing to one of the paintings on the wall.

I couldn’t have told you what the painting was depicting. But I had always wondered why rich people loved to buy scrubs of colors at a high price. Was it to show they have the money and can afford it or to prove their worth at an auction?

“It’s beautiful,” I said, then smiled at him to make him believe I liked it.

“Here, come...”

Matheo took my hand and led me to the dining table, where a feast was laid out, waiting for my arrival. It was as if a 5-star chef had been in the house to prepare the dinner, but Matheo insisted that he’d made the preparations himself and that everything was home-cooked.

I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Can we even finish this?”

He shrugged and smiled widely.

My mouth watered as I inhaled the delicious aromas.

I turned to him sharply.

“Are you sure you prepared this?”

“Why don’t you believe me?”

I shrugged lightly. “Well, I mean...”

He leaned in and whispered, “There are many things I can do with these hands, you know?” He placed his right hand on my left shoulder, then squeezed it gently. My body stiffened. He brought his eyes to look into mine and smiled. “You don’t believe me?”

I drew a deep breath and turned away from him, but he held me still and

moved closer. I could feel the heat radiating from him, burning my body and the hardness between his legs.

My knees weakened, and my gaze wavered, but suddenly I could see what was depicted by the splashes of paint in Matheo's piece of art. It was a portrait of a woman kneeling at a man's feet and pulling his trousers down.

"Do you like the painting?" he asked and bit my ear lightly before kissing my shoulder. I nodded.

"Do you love it?"

"I love it," I agreed.

"You do?"

I nodded and sighed deeply.

"Then how about we make our painting? We could also be colors on a canvas."

My heart pounded hard in my chest, and I drew a long, slow breath.

"Are you sure about that?" I ground my butt against his erection, and he struggled with a moan. His breath on my neck sent shivers down my spine.

"I've never been more sure about anything in my life."

Slowly, he turned me towards him and drew me further into his spacious, broad arms. His hand made me weak when he trailed it over my shoulder, then to my neck, before moving it to the nape.

The lips he offered were soft and warm. I could taste the lingering sweetness of the wine he'd drank.

His taste became addictive as we kissed. The kiss began lightly, but it gained an urgency that made his desires and needs more apparent. Matheo picked me up. I wrapped my legs around him and arched further into his arms as he carried me to the counter in the kitchen and sat me down.

His eyes were filled with lust when he brought them to stare into mine, and the dark desires in them also awoke my desires. I dragged his head towards mine and reclaimed his lips.

"I'm not wearing anything underneath this dress," I said under my breath.

Matheo smiled. "I know."

I had begun to struggle between the need to grab his zipper and pull him out and the resolve to leave him to continue what he was doing with my body. I couldn't understand why he was moving so slowly. I ached for him between my thighs.

"I want you...." I said softly.

"Not yet, Miss Stone."

I arched my back when it began to hurt. He removed his lips from mine, leaving them swollen and still wanting. Then he pressed his face to the curve of my neck.

His eyes were dark and intense when he brought them to look into mine. I could see the dark secrets he was trying to hide from me, but they were understandable without a word from him. He was filled with power and passion, and I was just as overcome with weakness and submission. I wanted him inside me as soon as possible, but he didn't seem ready to satisfy me just yet.

“We should—”

I grabbed him by the nape and dragged his head closer for another kiss. How dare he even start to suggest we stop at that moment?

I grabbed his zipper and pulled it down, grabbing his dick before he could stop me. He tilted his head back with a groan of pleasure.

He stared deeply into my eyes, and we exchanged a knowing smile. His desire was so apparent that I was assured he wouldn't try to stop me again.

He parted my legs and drew me further forward so that I was seated at the edge of the counter; then, he made me recline a bit as he grabbed firmly onto my waist and lowered his head between my legs. He kissed my thighs.

I could feel myself getting wetter, and I knew that he would be able to see that for himself. As soon as his mouth touched my damp folds, my thighs began to shake. I raked my hands through his hair to steady myself.

Matheo began to tease my wet lips with his tongue, and I held his head firmly in place, arching my back and struggling to be patient.

But just when I thought I would combust, he removed his mouth.

I breathed heavily.

“Why did you stop?”

He smiled wickedly. “We're just starting, Miss Stone.”

I watched as he removed the white apron and drew his trousers down, keeping his eyes on mine.

Matheo moved closer slowly and claimed my lips again. I felt his hand pushing between my thighs, then the tip of his penis penetrated me slightly. I inhaled shakily.

He put a hand around my neck, holding me gently and staring into my eyes as he pushed inside me. His penetration stretched to the point of pain, and it felt as if he wouldn't fit, but it also felt good in an inexplicable way.

I felt a tear roll down my cheek. He kissed it away.

“I love you, Miss Stone.”

“I love you too,” I said.

It hurt a bit when I tried to shift beneath him. Finally, Matheo took a moment to kiss me again.

When he began to move slowly inside me, my arms encircled him, and I closed my eyes to receive him further.

The pleasure and pain were undoubtedly memorable.

I watched his face, registering the enjoyment he was taking from my body.

My back arched with need. I felt swollen and overwhelmed, but delicious ecstasy continued to build within me. Finally, I closed my eyes, surrendering to the waves of heady sensation.

Matheo began to move faster, gathering me closer into his arms so that he was holding me firmly. My body shuddered, almost surprising me with a final staggering release, and he clutched me tighter, moaning my name as he found his completion.

He placed his forehead on mine, shuddering. Then he kissed me passionately on my lips. I still couldn't see clearly. It was as if I'd seen a flash of a shooting star or a meteor shower through the night sky.

“That was...” He kissed me deeply again to shut me up. “That was a blast, Amber.”

I chuckled weakly.

“Mr. Martinez...”

He peered into my eyes. “Are you okay, Miss Stone?”

I shook my head dramatically and let out a quick laugh. “I feel sore.”

“I'm sorry, Miss Stone.”

“No, Mr. Martinez. That was good.”

He smiled widely, obviously pleased with himself.

“I wish we could do this again.”

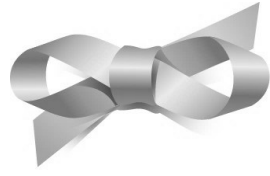
He rather chuckled. “Easy, Miss Stone.”

We both stared into each other's eyes and exchanged a knowing smile. Then he picked me off the counter in bridal style and took me to the bathroom.

The bath was refreshing, and the meal after it was delicious. He ate in his boxer shorts while I wore one of his white shirts, which was long enough to cover me up to my thighs.

Staring at his bare body opposite me while we ate, I knew we would go

another round before morning.



Chapter Seven

Matheo



There was no logical reason why I thought my father should know about Amber, but I still wanted to tell him. Perhaps, I just wanted him to see that I had made a good choice.

Linda had a nice lunch waiting for me when I got to the house—a delicious salmon salad, which she was setting on the table in the breakfast room.

Father was waiting to greet me. He was nearly fifty years old but could still have passed for a forty-year-old. Perhaps the money and a very sophisticated wife were responsible for him retaining his youthful vigor.

If there was anything to thank Linda for, it was her continuous efforts to ensure that my father retained his health.

“Hi, son,” he said, smiling in a way that crinkled his eyes.

I looked around quickly for Ava and Mabel but saw no trace of them. They’d probably gone shopping or were hanging out with friends.

The house was large and graceful, with memories lingering at every corner. Linda had put much effort into getting me to move out of the house, and when I’d finally left, she’d begun to complain about how infrequently I visited.

I still wondered how she had felt when my father relinquished the company’s management to me. My father refused to say.

I knew that he loved Linda. But I’d never felt as certain about our relationship. I’d always wonder if he thought of me as his successor more than as his son.

“You’re here,” Linda said, sitting beside my father.

“Hi, Linda,” I replied as I sat opposite her.

“I made your favorite. It’s been a while since you last dropped by.”

“Thank you.”

Father looked elated, probably because of the somewhat relaxed conversation between Linda and me.

I didn’t intend to say much anyway. It was only courtesy to appreciate her for the effort she’d made to get the food ready.

As expected, lunch was excellent. However, I tried to hold back the desire to eat more. Perhaps Linda noticed my struggle.

“Are you okay, Matheo? Do you want more?”

I smiled awkwardly. Although my desire for more was shouting ‘yes,’ I couldn’t admit it. I was too embarrassed to ask her for more, and not because I was shy. I wanted to maintain that we were not close, and I wasn’t hoping to change that.

After lunch, we sat together in father’s garden. It was surrounded by an expanse of grass that looked out to a neighbor’s house across the street.

Linda had served iced tea in addition to lunch. It was enjoyable, but I was getting tired of having her around.

I wanted the perfect timing to tell father about Amber. I didn’t need Linda to be present for that. Firstly, I don’t trust that she will leave Amber alone. I was sure she would make every effort to do a background check on her, which would be stressful for Amber and me.

Secondly, I didn’t want to talk about Amber in her presence because it would seem like I was telling my parents about the girl I love, as she never really treated me like her son. Finally, I didn’t think Linda deserved that much from me. I didn’t want her to be more involved in my life than she already was.

“So, son. What brought you by today?”

I almost choked on the tea. But I recollected myself immediately and shrugged.

“I just dropped by to say hi.”

Father and Linda looked at each other and exchanged a knowing smile.

“Matheo, we both know you don’t just drop by. So, what is it?”

I looked in Linda’s direction, and she smiled.

“Is everything okay with the company?” she asked as she sipped, fixing her eyes on me over the cup’s rim.

Linda’s question could have come across as a concerned gesture if she had been someone else, but I could tell her question was designed to keep me in check. She might even be hoping that everything wouldn’t be okay so she could have reasons to bring up another issue with my managerial position.

I shrugged anyway. “Fine, thank you. Where are Ava and Mabel?”

Linda smiled. “They’re probably out with friends.”

“That’s good. It’s always nice to hang out with friends.”

“Says someone who doesn’t have real friends.”

I peered at Linda immediately. The atmosphere suddenly became tense. Father looked back and forth between us, hoping the situation wouldn't escalate until Linda smiled awkwardly.

"I mean—"

I cut her off. "That's okay," I said and placed my empty cup on the table. "I'll go now."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay for dinner?" Linda asked.

"You should stay, son. That would be nice."

"No, I just remembered that I have important things to attend to. Thanks, Linda."

It was apparent that Linda wasn't going to permit the privacy I needed with my father, but I could always come back to discuss it with him when she wasn't around—so leaving seemed like the best option at that moment.

You could never put Linda and me together in a room and expect peace, even if we didn't say a word. I was afraid that, while talking about Amber, Linda might say something that might make me lose control over my temper. Then I wouldn't be able to see Ava and Mabel for a few days.

My little sisters were the most precious to me in the family, but I couldn't be rude to their mother while loving them. So, I always had to keep a balance. Perhaps Linda knew this. She certainly abused the advantage it gave her—she never held back as I did.

I was already out of the garden before I remembered that I hadn't even bid Father and Linda farewell. Nevertheless, several memories of similar occasions passed through my mind.

So much of my past had involved Linda interfering with one thing or the other: the school I attended, the clothes I wore, how I spent my vacations, and several other decisions.

"Do you know the woman thrown out at the party?"

"No, do you?"

I halted promptly as I overheard the conversation between two maids in the house. They whispered to each other so intently that they didn't even notice that I was close by.

"I heard she pretended to be one of the housemaids. That's why she got in. She looks younger than the other maid.

"Well, it wasn't the first time someone tried to do that."

"But it's weird that Mrs. Martinez looked furious after they saw her in the video footage at the party."

“Well, I heard she once worked here. It was a long story...” the older maid sighed deeply as she raised her chin, then startled away when she noticed me.

“Oh, my...!”

I smiled widely and approached with my hands held together behind me. The maids had bowed their heads and stiffened, but I could see their feet shaking as if they’d prefer the ground open up and swallow them.

When I touched the younger maid’s shoulder, she shook as if she had been electrocuted.

“What’s your name?”

“Brenda!”

The older maid was very familiar. It was Lola. She’d been in the mansion since I was a boy, and her age meant I shouldn’t talk to her the way I could speak to the younger maid— although she was a maid herself. So, I addressed my question to her companion.

“Who’s the woman you were talking about?”

They looked at each other and looked away immediately.

“It’s no one, Matheo.” Lola seemed nervous when she spoke.

I smiled widely. It felt nice being able to tease them, and that was helping me feel a bit better than when I’d left my father and Linda.

“Really?”

“Yes,” Brenda said. She glanced at my face and looked away immediately.

“You’re still here...”

I turned and saw Linda walking over with my father, with their cups of tea still in their hands. The housemaids seemed to freeze after Linda caught them interacting with me, but they raised their heads in unison to stare at me, and I immediately understood what they meant.

“Yes, just chatting to these ladies.”

Linda looked them over with a frown on her face. Then she sent them away.

“Why don’t you just wait for dinner?” Father suggested. I could see he wanted me around, but I couldn’t risk being suffocated around Linda. It would have been better if Ava and Mabel had been present.

“No... I should go now.” I had just moved a step when I felt a strange curiosity about the woman thrown out of the party. So, I halted immediately.

“Who was the woman thrown out at the party?”

Father and Linda stared at each other, looking back at me.

“What woman?” Linda asked, obviously directing the question to her husband.

“I heard a woman was thrown out of the house because she wasn’t invited.”

Linda turned to Father for a while. “Matheo, housemaids gossip a lot. You know that, right?”

Father was trying to hide his face like a boy who’d done something wrong and probably had no way to escape the situation.

“Matheo!” Even I was startled when Linda shouted like that.

I only needed to say a few words when suddenly Linda started acting weird, raising my suspicion even more.

My father was also strange enough for me to think something was off. But his eyes... the way they were staring at me...

Something happened, and they’re hiding it from me. I asked them, but they aren’t sharing it.

I could see remorse in his eyes. I could feel that he was going to apologize for something, but I didn’t know why.

“I’m sorry, son, but I’m quite tired. I need to rest.”

I chuckled. “Can’t you even spare a little time for me?” I asked my father.

Linda was inquisitive as well. “Matheo, you know your father is getting old, and he has to meet the board early tomorrow.”

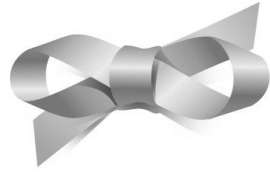
Father sighed deeply. “Veronica was at the party.”

Linda coughed. She seemed unable to speak.

“But...? Who’s Veronica?”

For a moment, I honestly didn’t know what he was talking about. I had disregarded my birthmother, just as she had disregarded me. It took me a while to realize whom my father was referring to.

However, when I realized she had been thrown out of the party, Father had seen her but kept it from me. So, for the second time, I bet he lied again for the wrong reason of protecting me.



Chapter Eight

Amber

He raised the glass to his mouth again, and although only half of the bottle of whisky was left, I immediately grabbed it away from him.

“That’s enough,” I said. Well, what was left wouldn’t even be enough to intoxicate a child, but enough means enough, and I meant it.

“Amber,” he said with a hand swirling around, probably looking for me. His eyes had become red, and his lids were swollen. I wouldn’t have recognized this man if I hadn’t known him for so long.

“Matheo...? Are you okay?”

“Are you hiding something from me as well?”

I felt a strike in my chest immediately.

“What’s wrong? What happened?”

He’d informed me that morning about his intention to go to his father’s mansion to discuss something with him. But he didn’t go into details about what he wanted to discuss with his father, and now I was worried about what news he had returned with.

“Matheo, what’s wrong?”

He laughed, “Could you believe my father lied to me again?”

“Your father?”

“Of course, my father! Who else?”

“What happened?”

“As usual, he lied again....”

He kept repeating this. A tear escaped one of his eyes, and I struggled not to show how shocked I was to see him cry.

I had never seen Matheo shed a tear before. I had never even imagined a tear coming out of his beautiful eyes.

Probably not. It was startling as much as it broke my heart into pieces. I would have known how to console him better if he’d opened up to me about the problem, but he didn’t look like he would do that.

I began to shed tears. I could feel his pain, even though I couldn’t understand it. I knew he was hurting. But whatever the cause was, it also seemed to hurt me.

“I don’t know what’s wrong, Matheo. But I’m sure everything’s going to

be fine.”

He laughed briefly in an awkward way. “You think so?”

I nodded while staring intensely into his eyes.

“You’re going to be fine, Matheo.”

I drew him into an embrace and tried to make a hand reach his back so I could pat him.

He breathed deeply over my right shoulder once I began to pat him gently.

“Thank you for being here, Amber.”

I smiled. “You’re welcome, Matheo....”

I felt him belch. Then he jerked a bit to push my body back, and I had to hold him tightly.

“Matheo!” I exclaimed as I jerked away a bit from him immediately. But he was smiling, his eyes like those of a man losing consciousness.

“Are you angry?”

I scoffed. “Of course I am. You’re such a bad boy, Mr. Martinez.”

He smiled. “That’s great....”

“What? Mr. Martinez?”

“I love you, Amber... I love you so much.”

I couldn’t help but smile. Hearing him confess his feelings for me at that moment made him look cute and trustworthy. I could feel his sincerity and be overly assured and emotionally satisfied.

“I will be here to give you the strength you need,” I replied, full of love and compassion.

He smiled widely and began to search for my face with his right hand, so I helped him to it. His hand was warm when he cupped my cheek. I could barely see his eyes now.

“Amber Stone... no matter what happens, I hope you’ll never leave my side.”

My heart swelled as it felt pumped with the spasm of emotions that made my eyes tear up again.

I would almost be happy if Matheo got this drunk more often. He was a man who seldom showed his feelings. It was too bad that I couldn’t kiss him.

“I’ll never leave you... okay?” I said. “Now, get up.”

I tried to stand up with his body leaning entirely on me, but the first trial failed.

“Matheo...can you stand?”

He breathed deeply. He was half awake and half asleep, and thankfully enough, his wakefulness was enough to lend effort to his feet as I put his hand around my neck and helped him up. But that was only a step into a journey of a thousand years.

Well, it was enough to start anyway. And although it was a hassle getting Matheo up the stairs, we struggled to his bedroom. He immediately slumped onto the floor.

I felt sorry, but he was smiling, probably like a drunk person would even if you were to slap him.

Maybe alcohol numbs the pain in a man— I wouldn't know—but it certainly makes him look foolish.

I couldn't move him. I was already tired. So, I dragged him to the bathroom, then pulled his shirt off. Mine followed.

He smiled. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

I was the one feeling seduced. Staring at his broad chest and touching his bare body, being alone in the bathroom with him, the other night's events replayed in my head. I wanted to take advantage of this moment, but he was drunk. I didn't want to have him that way.

Once the water had washed away the smell of the alcohol, I drew his head in and kissed him deeply. I sighed when his lips separated from mine. The kiss did nothing to quell my desires.

I kissed him passionately once more. His chin raised; he seemed to be coming out of his intoxication. Matheo grabbed my head and took control of the kiss.

Matheo drew in close and whispered, "Thank you for being here for me."

I smiled. "I will always be here. No matter how big, small, or petty an obstacle may be. We will face it together." I held his face and stared into his eyes.

"I'm fine now." Matheo looked at me and hugged me.

Apparently, he was feeling better and must have sobered up a little bit. But that didn't take away whatever had been wrong.

I didn't want to pester him to talk. I knew he would eventually tell me about whatever was going on with him, so there didn't seem to be any merit in forcing him to talk when he wasn't ready for it.

"Will you promise to share everything with me at some point?" Matheo looked hesitant, so I added. "I'm not trying to force you to talk, but I want you to know I'm always here."

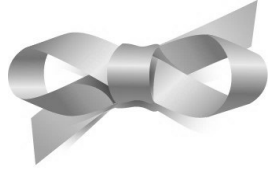
He smiled widely. “I know, Amber. I promise to tell you everything when I’m ready. But I need to confirm a few things first.”

That was reassuring, so I sighed deeply. “No more drinking. You were a mess.”

Matheo laughed and brought me into his arms.

I don’t think I would have loved anyone else who wasn’t Matheo Martinez this much.

Indeed, the power of love is magnificent and compelling, and I could hold nothing back.



Chapter Nine

George

Being a parent requires more effort than is needed to make a child. But your child will never know how much it takes, even when you're struggling to be someone he can rely on and be proud of.

So, how do you communicate your feelings toward your child? Well, there's no other answer than showing how much you care. It requires more than just buying your child what they need. Sometimes, all your child need is your presence and your undivided attention.

I had failed Matheo. I wasn't always around during his upbringing, although I never blamed Linda for struggling to bring up a child that wasn't hers.

It felt rather selfish of me to be proud that I had a son like Matheo. He'd been handling the company beyond my expectations.

And did Linda object when I decided to leave the company for Matheo to take charge? Well, what do you think? You can never blame a woman for caring for her children regarding who gets what.

But I loved my children equally, even though Matheo was from another woman.

Every man has a first love as well. Unfortunately, most never work out, no matter how genuine and sincere the feelings are. Having been born into a family like mine, I struggled to identify true love.

No matter how long Linda and I had been together, Veronica could never have been written out of our history.

I still remember that night we got together. Veronica was the prettiest. Her allure was in the beauty of her smile and how she always offered a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on. It was only natural for a guy like me to fall in love with someone like her.

If my mother was alive, I bet she would have liked Matheo.

He was a fine young man. I could sit at home and be proud of where he was. However, he was also a man who needed my explanation, and as his father, I thought he didn't need to question my way.

I can't blame him for misunderstanding my intention, but I just thought Veronica didn't deserve to see Matheo, even a glimpse of him.

Every story has different sides, and I hoped Matheo would listen to mine. But he wouldn't even give me a chance.

"Do you have to work this hard to get him to listen to you?" Linda asked.

I ignored her. It was the best thing to do in a situation like this. But she seemed rather annoyed that I didn't reply.

"Why didn't you tell me you saw Veronica at the party?"

I sighed exasperatedly. "It was brief, okay?"

"Brief enough for you not to tell me?"

"We both know you wouldn't have enjoyed the conversation."

She looked pissed. "Why? She's just your past mistake, anyway."

"In that case, I hope you stop getting worked up over this."

"I'm not worked up, okay? You're working this hard to explain yourself to Matheo, which is what's pissing me off."

"He's my son, and he deserves an explanation."

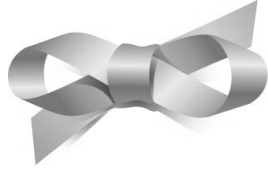
Linda chuckled. "Oh, does he? Why don't you go meet him at the office then?"

Well, she made a good suggestion. But she was surprised when I stood up.

"Are you going?"

I scoffed. "I thought you said I should?"

She turned the other way, and I couldn't care less about her feelings at that moment. So, I picked up my car keys and drove to the office.



Chapter Ten

Matheo



“Hi, Mr. Martinez. Your father is here asking to see you.”

“Let him in,” I replied to my secretary.

“Ok, boss!” Stephanie exclaimed.

I felt guilty for being so hard on my father. But he should have prepared for that much, anyway. Immediately, I knew I had to talk to him.

“Son, we need to talk.”

I stare at my father in awe.

“Are you going to let me in or...?” he says, glancing inside the room.

As I try to clip my thoughts together, I move for him to come inside.

“Your office is well organized,” he says as he takes a seat.

There are like a thousand things to talk about. Where do we start?

“I’m sorry. I never wanted to hurt you, but I thought I was protecting you,” my father looked restless.

“I will try not to hold a grudge against you. Please give me more time.” I paused.

“Thank you. That’s a good start.” My father said as he moved closer to me, stretching his arms for a hug.

Folding my hands across my chest, I say, “First, I don’t hate you. Second, I don’t understand why you keep lying to me. You have to let me decide how to handle things.” I started to say.

“I will not say anything bad against your mother if you decide to look for her. On the contrary, I will give my utmost understanding to get the closure you need all your life.” My father turned to me and stared at the picture on my desk.

“I thought I’d lost you.” He slowly lifted his head and looked at me.

I stared at him. His words were so unexpected to me.

“I didn’t mean to be disrespectful. I just didn’t understand your way of protecting me.” I told him straight up.

“I understand.” He exclaimed.

We stood there staring at each other for a while. Neither of us was going to break eye contact. Then, finally, I started to shift back and forth on my

feet, and he began to smile.

“Well! You better get back to work.” He said, giving me a pointed look.

“Last time I checked, you weren’t the boss of me,” I said to him. He smiled and grabbed my arms tight.

The rest of the day went by, and before I knew it, it was almost time to go home.

“Are you okay, Mr. Martinez?” Stephanie, my secretary, asked while staring at me as I continued the pile of work I had compelled myself to do throughout the day.

I glimpsed at her. “I’m fine.”

“Are your fingers not aching?”

I looked at my hand. I was already feeling a cramp, but it was bearable, knowing I had no choice but to continue.

“It’s fine, don’t worry about me.”

I sighed heavily as I reclined in the chair. She looked concerned, but there was no reason to tell her what was happening.

“Everything is fine. Now get out of my office and go do your work.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

I sighed exasperatedly. She was getting on my nerves, but I couldn’t be angry with her knowing she was only concerned.

“Should I fire you? I’ve been contemplating that recently.” I chuckled.

She smiled widely. “It’s funny of you to say that when you’ve never accepted my resignation letters.”

I smiled. I remember the first time she’d turned in her resignation letter. She was looking pissed off that day, and I had thought nothing could make her stay. However, she’d ultimately remain behind to complete her job for the day. Then she’d showed up the next morning, too.

She was nosy and all, but in a safe way. And I knew there was no way I’d ever get an assistant like her again.

“Don’t you have to contact the shipping company about the goods we expect?”

She smiled. She always has that smile whenever she surpasses my expectations.

“The goods have arrived?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yes. They’re already in the warehouse.”

“Well, you should be busy with something else then.”

She shrugged. “Nope. I’ve sorted everything out.”

I couldn't help but laugh. "Then go home. Please..."

"But Mr. Martinez..."

"Should I leave then? Fine, I'll go."

She turned her back and walked out immediately, but I heard her sitting behind her desk outside. It wasn't like Stephanie to leave when I was still in the office.

Amber wasn't in her seat when I had to leave the company. She had probably gone home.

When I got home, Amber's call came in.

"Hello, Matheo," she said.

The richness in her voice was soothing and reassuring. I felt refreshed immediately.

"Hey! You good?"

"Yes," she said. I heard her sigh.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Just tired."

"You should rest then."

"I'm doing that already."

"Really?" I lay back on the couch. The way she breathed before picking her words... I imagined the words maneuvering her tongue before escaping her lips, and I couldn't bear the intense desire to kiss and cuddle her at that moment.

"What are you wearing?"

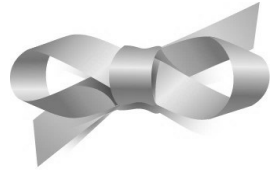
She laughed. "Not tonight, Mr. Martinez."

"Why?"

Amber laughed again, and I enjoyed the sound, but it wasn't acceptable for her to cut the call and leave my desires unattended.

It only fueled my need for her whenever Amber did something like that. So, I began to hatch several plans for the next time we were alone together.

Meanwhile, I picked up a canvas and began to scrub away at it with some paint, curious about what my restless mind would come up with.



Chapter Eleven

Amber



I invited Veronica out for a meal. The last time we saw each other with Matheo wasn't the right time and place since I was also shocked to learn the truth from her.

I didn't know if I was making the right decision as I didn't want to meddle, but I needed to help Veronica to end Matheo's pain about his mother. I needed to arrange for them to meet or ask for permission from Veronica to tell him the truth. I was sure it would hurt him if he should find out that I had known about his mother and kept it from him for so long.

The other night, when he was drunk, he'd asked me if I was hiding something, and since then, it'd been hard to clear my mind of the question.

Seeing Matheo hurt, hurt me just as much. I felt his pain as if it was my own.

I was scared to sit opposite Veronica in the restaurant. Still, the emotions were bearable while I kept justifying my actions by saying I was only doing the right thing. So, I tried to nurture a calm composure.

"What are we doing here?" Veronica asked. She looked bright and happy, but somehow, I felt she wanted more than what she had at the moment.

I stared at her and became scared again. Was she ready to meet her son, or did she still need more time to prepare her mind? I couldn't be sure of Matheo's willingness to meet the woman he hadn't seen for ages, but it's worth a try.

Although I didn't know the whole story, Matheo had always been hurt by his birthmother leaving him behind.

"I think it's time for you and Matheo to meet."

Veronica smiled. "Thank you!"

"The last time we spoke, I was still in shock, but now I can explain things better to Matheo."

I watched her smile, lowered her face, and her expression dulled. I couldn't lie to myself to think that I could understand how she must have felt when she saw Matheo but couldn't reveal her identity to him. I felt like I was about to make her re-live the hardships again, but I was determined to

introduce them to each other this time—properly.

I held Veronica's hands on the table and rubbed them gently. She raised her head and smiled at me with brimming eyes, and my heart swelled with emotions.

"Do you want to meet your son?"

She breathed deeply. "I'm not sure he would want to see me."

"Good. So, why don't you give it a chance? I'm sure he misses you as well."

Veronica chortled. "I'm sure he doesn't. What I did to him was unforgivable."

I sighed exasperatedly. She was being pessimistic, and I was not too fond of that. But I couldn't get angry with her. So instead, I inhaled deeply to calm my inner storm, then exhaled slowly to release it.

"Well, this is our opportunity to see if that is true. But, it's time to clear out what happened in the past."

Veronica stared at me for a moment, processing my words. Then she jumped out of her chair. I stood up immediately and quickly walked toward her, but she signaled me to stop.

"Did you...?"

I nodded. "I had to, okay? I'm sorry. I couldn't keep lying to someone I love."

I saw how Veronica was, and it didn't feel like I was doing the right thing anymore. I felt I had created a disaster, and before I could think of what to do to contain the effect, the door opened, and Matheo walked in with the brightest smile I had ever seen.

My heart skipped a beat. I know I must step into my pain, liberate myself, and even create a new life with Matheo. But how on earth could I reveal what was going on and not end up hurting him? I didn't want him to stop smiling, but it seemed inevitable.

When Matheo drew me into his embrace, Veronica turned to hide her face.

"Hi! You smell nice," he said.

Somehow, I was lost for words.

"Hi there," Matheo said to Veronica. "We meet again."

He approached Veronica to greet her properly, but the woman seemed to struggle not to look at him. It made her look strange than she had during their first meeting.

Matheo drew back and whispered to me: “Is she okay?”

I nodded. “Of course she is.”

I breathed deeply to conjure the courage I needed at that moment. I couldn’t even think about right or wrong anymore. I wanted Matheo to meet his mother and Veronica to stop hiding.

I looked into Matheo’s eyes.

“I’m sorry, Matheo. I need to tell you something.”

He smiled. “Oh?” He looked around quickly.

Veronica shook her head hard to discourage me from talking, but she turned away immediately once Matheo looked back at her. I took the opportunity to speak.

“Matheo, this is Veronica...”

Matheo chortled. “Of course, you introduced her the last time we met.”

I nodded. “Yes, I did. But not properly.”

“Not properly? What do you mean?”

Veronica coughed to disrupt the conversation. Matheo turned to her and asked if she was all right, and she nodded while her hand was still covering her mouth. She couldn’t even look at his face; it hurt me to see this.

For a moment, I considered them beside each other, and I could see the startling resemblance between them— not a complete facial resemblance, though—they just fit in a way that couldn’t be explained.

“She’s your mother,” I said abruptly.

“What?” Matheo asked.

I pointed to Veronica. “Veronica Wales...”

Matheo turned back slowly. He chuckled. He turned around to face me.

“You must be joking, right?”

I said nothing. I could see that he’d gotten the message but couldn’t wrap his head around what was happening.

Matheo turned back to look at Veronica again. By then, Veronica had begun to cry.

Matheo shook his head.

“Impossible! This can’t be... right?”

Veronica attempted to move toward him, and he retreated a step back to avoid her.

“I’m... sorry...” she said.

I watched Veronica cry out while the man I loved battled with his emotions. Had I done the right thing? Well, I wasn’t sure yet.

“I’m truly sorry,” Veronica said again. But Matheo didn’t look like he was concerned with the apology.

“Don’t you think it’s too late for that? What do you know about how I feel and what I’ve been through?”

Matheo immediately turned back to walk away, but Veronica fell on her knees. I instinctively squatted to attend to her, but I couldn’t. I felt I shouldn’t meddle between them for a while, so I let her be as she wept with her head bent. Then, finally, Matheo halted and turned back slowly.

“I’m sorry” seemed to be the only words Veronica could say at that moment.

It was heartbreaking watching Veronica cry on her knees. I had also begun to cry, although I kept drawing my nose up and raising my head to keep the tears from running down.

Matheo’s eyes became puffy with emotion, and I could see he was trying to maintain control. However, he stumbled and seemed like he was going to fall. I made towards him immediately, but he kept me away at arm’s length with a hand.

At that moment, I didn’t know what to do anymore. I couldn’t even think of what to do or if I was supposed to do something. So I just stood there, watching as Veronica wept and Matheo stared down at her.

“I’m sorry... I was young and naïve back then and trusted people easily that ruined my life... our life.” Veronica repeated.

I watched Matheo raise his mother’s face and wipe her tears with his handkerchief. At that moment, my heart was filled with joy. Matheo held his mother’s arms and helped her to her feet.

He was taller. Veronica raised her head to stare at his face, then she reached out for it and cupped his cheeks with both hands.

She drew her nose up and smiled, breaking into tears again. When Matheo pulled her into his embrace, I turned away and wept.

Matheo’s hatred seemed to vanish at that moment.



“I’m sorry....” Veronica said again once she and Matheo had settled and sat beside each other. Veronica was holding Matheo’s hands.

I was sitting opposite them, keenly observing every exchange.

Matheo looked better than he’d seemed in the last few days, and I was glad I’d made it happen somehow. He gave me no attention. Instead, he

concentrated on his mother and ensured that every teardrop wouldn't go beyond her cheeks before he swept it away.

"Thank you, Amber," Veronica said. She reached for my hand, and I held it out immediately. Matheo smiled at me as well.

"I'm still pissed at you, okay?" he said.

"I'm sorry...."

"Oh, Matheo. Don't be. Amber was angry with me for not telling you. I had to plead with her to keep it a secret."

Matheo stared at me. "You were angry at my mom?"

"No, I... I..." I stuttered.

Veronica laughed, and Matheo joined. Then I realized that he was teasing me.

It was lovely seeing them that way. Matheo was looking bright. He was smiling widely, which was enough for my emotional health.

"You're just like your father," Veronica said.

Matheo's countenance immediately clouded over. I could see that he was angry, and I remembered how messed up he'd been when he returned from his last visit to his father's.

What could have gone wrong between them?

"Can we not talk about him?"

Veronica seemed surprised. "Why?"

Matheo sighed deeply. The anger in his eyes had spread over his face, and you could tell he was taking it out on Veronica instead.

"He lied to me. You were at the party, weren't you? But he had you thrown out."

"No, Matheo. George didn't have me thrown out. And I only saw him briefly before he had an accident at his party. So I was finding my way out of the mansion without being seen when the security personnel found me. I think Linda asked to review the video footage."

"So, why were you there? Did you know how angry I was when I heard you were thrown out of the party, and I didn't know about it?"

"I came to see you, but it was hard to get closer to you at that time," Veronica said.

She had begun to weep again. "Looking at you from afar and how you turned out to be a good man was enough. I was just too afraid that...." She gasped as she cried. Matheo reached for her face and wiped her tears, pulling her closer and pecking her forehead.

“So, don’t be too harsh on your father, okay?”

“But—”

Veronica cut in. “He’s a good man, and I’m sure he loves you very much. You have to give him a chance to show it.”

Matheo chuckled. “How would you know? You haven’t been around.”

Veronica sighed with a drooping face. Her shoulders dropped, and she’d lowered her head so that it seemed she couldn’t even look into her son’s eyes.

“I’m sorry for not being around... I’m sorry, Matheo.”

“No, Mom. That’s not what I meant.”

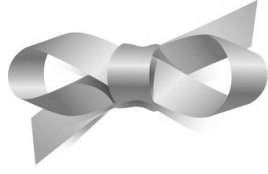
“I know, son. But I’m still sorry for that. I know I’ll have to do penance for my sins throughout my life, and I only hope you’ll allow me to do that beside you.”

Matheo didn’t say anything for the moment. But Veronica looked desperate.

She sighed deeply. “I know this is selfish of me, wanting to stay beside you when I haven’t been around all these years. And you might think, why I’m only doing this now, but Matheo, I’m dying....”

“What?” Matheo exclaimed.

I froze as well.



Chapter Twelve

Matheo



“Breast cancer, stage four.”

The world ceased to exist when my mom dropped the bomb in the numbness of those seconds. And once it faded and everything else became audible again, reality kicked me so hard that I felt a puncture through my heart.

What seemed to hurt most wasn't even my mom having cancer. Instead, it was the fact that I didn't know the exact reaction to give.

I was angry and devastatingly sad.

Why now? Why did she wait all these years before she reached out?

Linda had once said my mother tried to sell me off. She would always say this whenever she needed to reaffirm that I was an unwanted child in the family. I'd stopped listening to her at some point, although the number of times she had made this claim seemed to have built a doubt inside me.

I wanted nothing more than to clear the doubt now. I had always looked forward to listening to my mom assuring me that she hadn't tried to sell me. But it was hard to ask her anything when I was also trying to process the fact that she was dying.

I was angry. Couldn't it have been something more easily treated so that I could spend more time with her?

She'd only looked for me when she knew she would die. I suppose she'd thought that she had nothing to lose. So rather than being angry, Amber had said I should try as much as possible to spend quality time with my mom.

So, there I was, in her house.



It was a small house but comfy in its way. My mom welcomed me with a hug.

There was a sofa in the living room with an upholstered ottoman in front of an armchair.

“Welcome,” she said. She picked a pile of clothes from the sofa and ushered me towards the open seat.

“What can I offer you?”

“I’ll have water.”

She smiled and walked into the kitchen immediately. I looked around and saw some simple canvas paintings on the walls. Perhaps she was the reason why I was interested in art—maybe I’d gotten that side from her.

From where I sat, I could see through the glass opening to a garden she’d made at the back of the house. It looked somewhat like the one in Father’s mansion.

She brought the glass of water, and I drank immediately while she sat beside me. I was removing the cup from my mouth when I noticed her staring keenly at my face. So, I moved away from her a bit, but she moved closer.

“Wow... how can you be this handsome?”

I laughed and had to deal with a fit of coughing.

“What? Mom...”

She smiled widely. “You’re like your father when he was young. He was good-looking like you.”

I sighed exasperatedly. I still couldn’t figure out why my mom couldn’t have a conversation without mentioning my father, especially considering that I didn’t want to talk about him.

She noticed my countenance. So, she placed a hand on my shoulder and rubbed it gently.

“You still haven’t talked to your father?”

“Do I have to talk to him?”

“Matheo, he’s your father....”

I stood up from the sofa and breathed quickly to calm down. “Aren’t you angry with him? Does he even know you have cancer?”

She shrugged lightly. “I didn’t tell him.”

“Well, why should you anyway? He’s been living with Linda without even thinking about you.”

“Matheo!”

“Mom!”

I watched as she inhaled deeply. Then she stood up, took my hand, and sat back on the sofa.

“George never mistreated me, okay?”

“Mom, you don’t have to cover for him.”

“I’m not covering for him. Your father’s a good man.”

I didn’t know if I should believe my mom, but I was sure she had her

reasons for thinking that way. Then she began to tell her story.

“Your father was a rich kid who wasn’t proud. He was considerate of others, even to a housemaid like me. He wasn’t cocky. He had this beautiful smile that could make any lady’s heart jump out of her chest, and I wasn’t an exception.

“We’d always had a thing for each other,” she added, “but I knew it could never happen between us. George wouldn’t have cared about my lower social status, but his mother was strict.

“I wish you’d met your grandmother. She was sweet in her way, and she loved your father dearly. I guess that was the reason she was so adamant about not allowing me into the family when she discovered that your father liked me.”

Mom’s face dropped. She suddenly looked sad, and I wondered what she was thinking. Then, finally, she looked into my eyes and cupped my cheeks.

“But I have no regrets now. Looking at you now, Matheo... I’m proud of what almost everyone thought was a mistake.”

I recoiled. “A mistake?”

She nodded. “Your grandmother died from a heart attack right after seeing George and me together in his room. So, that was the misfortune. And the mistake was trying to avoid your father because of the difference in our social status, but I fell in love with him. It was an intense love that grew from the moment we kissed.”

I had heard the story. Linda had ensured she didn’t miss out on that part; if it was true, I couldn’t understand why mom didn’t seem unhappy about that.

It was apparent that giving birth to me had contributed to the hardship she had had to go through in her life. But she seemed to have made peace with her past.

“You should have seen George drunk that night,” she said with a bright smile. Her eyes suddenly lit up as if she remembered a happy memory.

“He was cute, and it was most pleasing watching him loosen up his feelings and talk freely with me. But unfortunately, he drank too much because he’d argued with his mother that evening, so he came back late, and I helped him up the stairs.”

“We fell into his bed, and he kissed me....” She paused and smiled widely again. Then she stood up and paced back and forth.

“I kissed him back... and do you know what I felt? I felt my heart beating

up to my throat and suffocating me. It was nice. One thing led to another, and... you can imagine the rest. I did love your father, Matheo. I loved him so much, but I couldn't have him. It became worse when his mother died.

"I was so naive back then. I tried to give you up because I feared that George would hate both of us and would always be reminded of the death of his mother whenever he saw you. I loved him so much that I only thought about his peace of mind. But I regret everything now. If I could return to the past, I would change every wrong decision I made."

She began to cry again, which was hard to watch. I drew her into an embrace.

"I hope you can forgive me, Matheo."

I brought her out of the embrace, wiped her tears, and kissed her forehead. She inhaled deeply.

"I forgive you, Mom. I forgive you. By the way, here's my number. I want you to remember my number just in case you want me to go with you to the hospital for your check-up."

She smiled widely. She embraced me again. I could feel her smile, and I loved what we both were to each other at that moment.

"I have something to show you," Mom said and stood up immediately. She hurried up the oak staircase and opened the door to what I supposed was her bedroom.

I stood up and began to survey the house again. I wasn't really what you'd call a reader, although I also had a bookshelf in my living room. So, while looking at mom's bookshelf, I wondered if mom was a reader or just keeping a bookshelf for the sake of having one.

"What's this?" I asked once we were seated, and she held a photograph on her lap.

She smiled widely. "This was you."

"What?" I stared at the photograph. I could barely make out a body, but my mom said the ultrasound was taken of her belly when she was five months pregnant.

I couldn't help but laugh. "This is me?"

She nodded. "Yes, Matheo. I was so happy during that time. I would wake up in the middle of the night and have whispered conversations with you while rubbing my belly. You pulled me through those hard days, Matheo."

I chortled. Something was happening in my life, and although I couldn't

place my finger on what it was, I could feel it was something good.



Later that day, we packed and set out for a picnic. Amber had come up with the idea.

It was a clear and beautiful day because I was with the two women I loved immensely. But unfortunately, the sun was still at its prime then, so we took refuge under the shade of a tree.

The scenery was beautiful as well—green and flowery. Spring was my favorite season.

“You look fully prepared for this,” I said once Amber and I set down the grill and other stuff she had packed for the picnic. Mom was already seated on the blanket spread under the tree, and she seemed to be already caught up by the beauty of a butterfly she was watching from a distance.

“I’m just so happy,” Amber said.

I drew her towards me for a kiss.

Amber looked back quickly and hit me playfully on my chest. Then she whispered, “Your mom is here—”

“So what?” Mom asked as she abruptly pushed her head through the space between Amber and me. We were both startled out of our positions.

“Mom,” I exclaimed. Then, I looked at Amber and saw that she was breathing heavily as well.

My mom laughed. “I like lovebirds, so don’t mind me being here, okay?” she said as she picked a cookie from the basket on the ground.

We ate and enjoyed ourselves. It made me scared in some ways. Knowing my mom had cancer wasn’t just a thought I could brush away, even though the present was good. An ominous shadow hung over us, so it took more effort to keep my mind positive.

I was still in thought when Amber stuffed a piece of meat into my mouth. Mom used the opportunity to take a picture of the three of us.

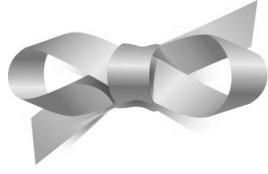
“What!” I exclaimed. “Did you just take a picture of me?”

My mom laughed as she stared at her phone. Amber joined her as well.

“You look...” Amber looked back at me and burst into laughter again.

“Let me see.” I attempted to grab the phone, but the duo stood up immediately and ran into the field.

By the time it was sunset, I had wished that the day didn’t have to end.



Chapter Thirteen

Matheo



I couldn't remember when I had last had such a great time as I did with Mom and Amber at the picnic. Spending time with both of them had been so exciting that it began to seem like they were the only ones in the world.

On Sunday afternoon, without the pair of them to distract me, I began to think about my father and realized that he had also suffered at some point.

I'd tried to paint something on a canvas, but nothing, in particular had come to mind. I wanted more than the scrubs of colors I came out with.

I knew Amber would probably be spending the day with her parents, and I didn't want to pester her to come over. Mom had also taken a trip, although she had refused to say where she was going.

Just then, the doorbell rang. Ava and Mabel stood on my doorstep.

"Hey!" I said, somewhat surprised.

I hadn't seen them for quite a while. I had been trying to avoid them.

Ava stared at me, her eyes peering as if she was trying to see whatever I could be hiding within. I lowered my face immediately. I had forgotten every excuse I had put in place to explain why I hadn't been around to spend time with them.

"Hey," Ava said as she strode into the house.

Mabel jumped on me, and I grabbed her to myself immediately. Then she buried her face over my shoulder and whined.

"I've missed you," Mabel said.

I smiled and patted her on her back. "I've missed you too, cupcake."

I closed the door and carried her in. Ava was already seated on the couch and fiddling with my TV remote. She dropped the remote and rushed to stand in front of a painting on the wall.

"When did you get this?"

I stood Mabel on her feet, and she ran towards the painting as well.

"Wow, it's beautiful."

I walked to stand beside Ava. "Do you like it?"

She raised her head to look at me, and once we stared into each other's eyes, she turned her face away and walked back to sit on the couch. So, I bent

down towards Mabel and whispered, "Is Ava okay?"

Mabel shrugged dramatically. "I don't know."

I looked back at Ava but immediately looked away from her as promptly as she looked back.

"Why don't you ask her?" Mabel said.

Something was up with her, but I felt somewhat reluctant to ask. Unlike Mabel, I had always had to walk on eggshells around Ava anyway.

Mabel was the baby of the family. Ava acted as if she was my older sister. She had a well-developed vocabulary and tended to speak to me as if I were her friend rather than her older brother. But we were pretty close as well.

Ava had been my sister and my friend as well. She had even begun to act like my mother, but she was strange that afternoon.

"Are you okay?" I asked. Ava gave me a brief look and turned away.

"I'm fine. You?"

I nodded. "I'm fine as well." Then I became lost for words again. My hands were sweating, and I kept running them on my knees.

Ava was looking everywhere in the living room but my face. Then she folded her arms and began to hum.

I searched for her face. "Are you angry with me?"

"Well, are you feeling guilty?"

I chuckled. "Of course, I am. That's why I'm apologizing."

She turned to face me. "So, what is wrong? We've never kept away from each other for this long."

I sighed deeply. "Work has been hectic, okay?"

"Really?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Of course, you know I'm not lying to you."

Ava turned away. "I'm not sure about that anymore."

"Please? How can I make it up to you?"

She smiled, grabbed her phone, tapped it, scrolled through quickly, and showed me a picture of a red dress.

"This..."

She shrugged. "You want to make it up to me? Then buy me this. Mom won't give me money for it, and Dad supports her. But I have a lovely brother who will get it for me, right?"

Ava made a puppy face. She was cute. Mabel came running as well, then she threw herself onto my body, and I grabbed her. She hoisted herself up

immediately and sat on my lap.

“I want a Cinderella dress,” Mabel said.

Ava pushed the phone past Mabel and got it to my face. “Are you buying me this or not?”

I sighed deeply. “Fine! I’m buying you both whatever you need.”

“Yes!” Ava said as she punched the air.

“Me as well?” Mabel asked. I nodded. She kissed my cheeks, got down from my lap, and began running around the room.

Ava sat back. “I told my friends I would get this dress by next week, but they didn’t believe me.”

“I’m sure they will now.”

She smiled widely. “Yes. I can’t wait to see the reaction on Alethia’s face when she sees me in the dress.”

“I love you, okay?” Ava said.

I nodded. “I know, beautiful.”

“Aww...” she smiled widely. “You see why I missed you? Mother always calls me ugly while Mabel is the beautiful one.”

I shrugged. “Well, you’re always the most beautiful one to me.”

Mabel intruded immediately. “What about me?”

I smiled and teased her on her chin. “You’re beautiful as well.”

“Really?” Ava exclaimed. She stood beside Mabel. Both girls stared at me.

“So, who’s the prettiest between the two of us?”

I looked at them consecutively. They were staring at me as if they were ready to shoot me dead with their eyes if I was to take the other person’s side, so I avoided their eyes immediately.

“Well, I...” I paused and raised my head to look at their faces. They had pushed onward with their expectations apparent on their faces.

“...both of you are pretty!” I said sharply.

“Such a betrayal,” Ava said. Then she slumped into the sofa.

“So, I’m pretty?” Mabel asked, with her usual bright smile on her face.

Mabel was always cheerful, and I guessed that was mostly because she was young and had nothing to worry about. But my childhood hadn’t been like hers, which made me jealous of her happiness.

Ava stood up and went to get herself a cup of juice. She got one for Mabel, who gulped it immediately and started touring the house again as if it was her first time being there.

I was gathering my thought about the day when Ava asked an abrupt question:

“So, are you seeing someone?”

I choked.

“What?”

“What?” She turned to stare at me. “Why are you surprised?”

“Well, why do you ask?”

“Are you?”

“I... I...” I stuttered.

“I guess you’re not,” Ava said. She dropped her juice on the center table and turned to face me.

“So, do you like someone?”

I smiled. “Easy...”

“Do you like anyone? Answer me, yes, or no?” She was somewhat aggressive.

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. Ava sighed deeply.

“Matheo. You need to start dating someone.”

I laughed. Ava acted as if she had more years of life experience than me.

“Why exactly do I have to date someone?”

“Well, because most people think you’re a rich playboy.”

“What?”

She loosened up and sought to explain herself immediately. “My friend said her older sister, who worked in your company, thinks you’re a playboy.”

“And who’s that?”

Ava smirked. Then she turned away. “Oh, I’m not telling you that?”

“Really? I need to fire the person.”

“That’s why I’m not telling you.” Then, she stood up and began to walk toward the dining room. I stood up immediately to go after her. Then she ran to the other side.

“I’m not telling you, okay?”

“You have to.”

She dodged when I reached for her. The glass cup she was holding dropped and shattered on the floor, and we both froze.

“Stay there, please,” I said. She nodded. I got down immediately, picked up the broken pieces, and then threw them into the small wastebasket in the corner. Then I tiptoed over the space where the glass had dropped, reached for Ava, carried her back to the couch, and then squatted in front of her.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded. “Yes, I’m fine.”

Ava was staring into my face. And although she wasn’t saying anything, I knew something was bothering her.

“What is it?”

She shook her head and hugged me instead. But I slowly pushed her out of the embrace and stared at her face.

“Tell me. What’s wrong?”

“I heard you quarreled with Mom and Dad the last time you were in the house. What happened?”

I loosened my hold on her and cleared my throat. I felt awkward.

“Nothing,” I said. Then I added, “Everything is okay.”

“Are you sure? You haven’t been to the house since then. So, I suspect something is going on with you. That’s why I had to come with Mabel. We’ve missed you.”

At times like these, I wondered how Linda could produce such children. They were nothing like their mother.

I cupped Ava’s right cheek and drew her head in for a kiss.

“I’ve missed you too, cupcake....”

“I’m a cupcake!” Mabel exclaimed as she joined us.

“Deal with it!” Ava said.

Mabel began to whine, so I had to attend to her immediately. I hoisted her in my arms and sat her down in the chair, but she wasn’t satisfied yet.

“I’m sorry, okay?” I said.

Mabel strapped her arms around her body and turned right and left dramatically.

“I’m your cupcake....”

I nodded. “Yes, you are.”

She smiled. “Really?”

“What am I then? You called me cupcake just now!” Ava retorted.

I sighed exasperatedly. I had been complaining about spending Sunday afternoon alone, but having those two around seemed somewhat overwhelming, but I liked it.

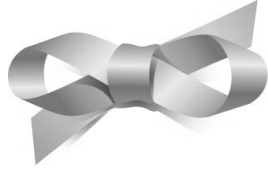
“Let’s play a game. The winner gets to be called a cupcake.”

Mabel slid down from the couch immediately. As small as she was, she was very competitive.

“Fine! I’m sure I’ll win.”

Ava stood up as well. “Do I look like I’ll lose?”

They both headed for the game room adjacent to the gym room. And although I could breathe for a moment, I knew it was only a matter of time before one of them came running to complain about something.



Chapter Fourteen

Amber



I arrived at Matheo's house at around ten minutes after six. When he opened the door, I smiled at him. Although he smiled back, I could feel something was going on.

He turned and traipsed back to the couch. I surveyed the room. The throw pillows were on the floor.

"Are you okay?" I asked once I was seated beside him.

He looked at me with tired eyes and shook his head. "I'm not fine."

I dropped my bag immediately and drew closer to attend to him. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Ava and Mabel happened. They just left."

I smiled widely and felt the tension in me dissipate.

I still wondered how Matheo could be that close with his sisters when he and Linda didn't get along. But, of course, that was one of the reasons why I respected this man.

"You had fun with your sisters without me?"

Matheo sat up and leaned towards me to put his head on my shoulder.

"You call spending time with Ava and Mabel fun?"

I jerked my shoulder a bit to nudge his head away. But he brought it back to its place again.

"What do you call it then?"

He sighed deeply. "They're trouble. You wouldn't want to experience it."

"Are you sure?"

Matheo sat up straight and smiled at me.

"Do you know that Ava asked me if I was dating?"

Even I was surprised. "How old is she again?"

"She's fifteen."

I smiled widely. "Well, it's the twenty-first century. Teenagers know about dating."

Matheo shook his head.

I hadn't met Ava and Mabel before, but I had seen them from afar on a

few occasions. They seemed fun, based on how Matheo smiled brightly while talking about them.

“So, what did you tell Ava?” I asked.

Matheo shrugged. “What do you expect?”

I became strangely elated. “You told her about me, right?”

He scoffed. “Of course not.”

I felt disappointed. So, I turned away from him. “What a betrayal.”

Matheo laughed. He reached for my chin and turned my face to look at him. Then he kissed my lips.

My senses immediately heightened, and I was ready for him to take things further, but apparently, his mind was elsewhere. So I was disappointed when he moved his lips away.

“Don’t be so dramatic, okay?” he said.

I faked annoyance. “Dramatic? You couldn’t even tell your sister about us.”

Matheo chuckled. “It seems you want approval from Ava or something, but I suggest you hold your horses. Ava would suck you dry of energy if she discovered we were in a relationship.”

I stood up from the couch and attempted to walk away, but Matheo got up immediately and pulled me back into an embrace.

“You’re being dramatic, Miss Stone.”

I was exaggerating my annoyance to tease Matheo but keeping our relationship a secret did take a toll on me. I wanted to show off that I was in love with Matheo Martinez and that he shared my feelings, especially now that his mother knew about it already.

I should have been grateful to escape scrutiny. With Matheo Martinez, even those who didn’t like him would think they knew what was best for him — which wasn’t me. They’d probably pictured Matheo with someone more beautiful. A girl who could walk as if she’d stepped out of a fashion magazine. I could barely walk comfortably in heels and didn’t have many fashionable clothes.

Matheo kissed me briefly and cupped my face on both sides. His palms were warm and comforting, so I rubbed my cheeks against them.

“What’re you thinking about so deeply?” he asked, staring into my eyes.

I pulled my shoulders up to shrug, then smiled. “Nothing.”

“Are you sure?” He looked concerned.

I nodded. “Yes...”

He kissed my forehead again and held me tightly in his embrace.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said.

“I’m glad I’m here too. How’s your Mom?”

Matheo sighed deeply. “She’s fine, I guess?”

I pulled out of the embrace and looked at his face inquisitively. “You guess?”

He smiled widely. “She’s fine.”

I nodded and sighed. “So, have you spoken with your father?” Matheo attempted to pull away, but I held him still. “Have you?”

“Well, he hasn’t been calling or texting for days now.”

I sighed exasperatedly. “You should try to know the right time to cease your anger.”

“What did you expect? He lied to me.”

“Well, I lied to you as well. I didn’t tell you about Veronica when I first found out.”

“That was different!”

I chuckled. “Was it?”

Matheo finally pulled away and sat back on the couch. He was looking everywhere in the room but at my face, so I went to sit beside him. He turned to the other side. So, I climbed over his lap and put his hands around my waist.

“Do you have to be like this when you miss talking to your father?”

He recoiled a bit. “What? You are a mind reader now?”

I smiled. “Of course, I am.”

“Really?” he said, moving his head in to kiss my neck. “Do you know what I’m thinking right now?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Don’t change the topic, okay?”

He chortled. “I’m not.” He kissed my neck again and moved his lips to my right cheek. I strained to move my face out of his reach.

“Are you going to call him?”

“What?” His hold loosened immediately, so I held him still.

“You should call your father, Matheo. It’s what you need to do. You can’t expect him to be the only one making an effort.”

“He’s an—”

I kissed him deeply to halt his words, then moved away. He moved forward, but I held him back with my middle finger on his lips.

“Pick your words carefully, Mr. Martinez.”

He smiled. “No, I want to be rude.” He pushed his head further, and I continued to avoid the kiss he intended to give me.

I got down from his lap, and he looked disappointed. But, on the other hand, I found him cute and desirable as I tried to hold back from every dark desire nudging me toward him.

A painting was leaning at the foot of a wall in the living room. Well, I wouldn't call it a painting, exactly. It looked like the outcome of colors badly scrubbed on a canvas.

“What's this?” I asked once I was standing in front of the painting.

Matheo stood up and came over to stand beside me. “A work of art,” he said.

I chuckled.

“What?”

“Well, that's one hell of a work of art.”

“I painted it.”

I took a closer look at him. Matheo Martinez was indeed a painter. He continued to amaze me, learning how talented he was.

He shrugged while I was staring at him. “I was bored and disturbed, okay?”

I nodded lightly. Painting provided a good outlet for his emotions.

“That's good,” I said. I squatted in front of the painting to observe it more closely.

“Painting can help you clear your mind at times.”

“Really?” he asked once he was squatting beside me.

I turned to look at him and nodded. “Yes, honey. You should paint whenever you're troubled.”

Matheo laughed and stood on his feet. “Thanks for the advice.”

“Do you want to go to the club?”

He halted as he was just about to sit on the couch. Then he turned to look at me.

“The club?”

I nodded as I walked towards him. “Yes. It'll be fun. Come with me, please....”

Matheo was reluctant. I didn't even know why I suggested going to the club. Of course, I wanted to liven his mood, but I could have done that elsewhere.



I'd suggested the outing, but I became timid and reluctant once Matheo parked his car in an open car park in front of the building. There were several other cars to make it evident that there were several other people in the building, so it suddenly felt like I didn't belong there.

I looked at Matheo beside me while he turned off the engine. He looked dashing in his denim jacket and jean trousers. His glasses added more elegance to his beautiful face. It was rare to see him dressed so casually, but it wasn't the first time I'd realized that he would probably look dashing in anything.

He turned his head sideways to look at me. "Are you okay?"

I nodded. Then I breathed nervously. I wasn't okay. I was feeling unnecessarily tense.

Matheo loosened his seat belt and turned towards me completely.

"Are you ready to show me you're dance moves?"

I inhaled deeply and moved into his arms.

"Yes, but are you ready to drool when I dance at you?" I gave Matheo a seductive look.

He laughed.

"Don't laugh..."

"I'm sorry." he apologized while still trying to hold back the laughter.

"I already fell into your trap, okay?" He continued to laugh, but his eyes were caring, urging me to kiss him.

"Let's go now and have some fun." He grabbed my hand, and we both got off his car.

I followed his direction.

"Just remember you're here with me to have fun."

I nodded, feeling reassured by Matheo's obvious concern.

The bouncers at the entrance were heavy and hard-faced. But they didn't look too harsh when Matheo offered them some cash. Instead, they slipped it into their pockets with the brightest smiles you wouldn't know they had in them.

Matheo held my hand and walked me into the club. It was bustling and deafening. I could barely distinguish the song the DJ was playing on his mixers. It seemed everyone was dancing to the beat, but it was a lively beat anyway, and what had I been expecting?

I felt Matheo say something, but I couldn't pick out his words. So, he leaned in to repeat.

“Do you want to sit?” he said loudly.

I nodded. We made our way across the floor, meandering around girls better dressed than I was. Being almost naked seemed to be the prerequisite, so I had to walk as if I didn't exist.

By the time we found somewhere to sit, I was already tired. The loud beat was deafening me, and the changing light made me dizzy. Well, I felt better when I sat down.

“I'll be back in a second.” He was already on his feet and walking away when I thought to ask him where he was going. But I watched him go to the bar, so I figured he was getting us something to drink.

There was a space like a balcony in the room. It was right above the area I was sitting in, and some other people were there. Others danced to the loud beat or lined up around the counter.

A girl approached Matheo at the bar, and I felt tense immediately. She was wearing a crocheted top. From where I sat, I could see the side of her breasts protruding.

The girl smiled sheepishly, and Matheo returned the favor. My chest became stuffy. I couldn't breathe freely anymore, and my head was hurting because, no matter how hard I strained my ears, I could not hear what they were saying to each other.

It was obvious that they were enjoying the conversation. Then Matheo brought out his phone. I instinctively stood up, but he put the phone to his ear, turning away from the girl.

I approached him when he started towards me. His steps looked urgent, and worry swept over me just as promptly.

“What's wrong?” I asked once he'd reached me.

“Mom is in the hospital,” he said and took my hand. We both hurried out of the club.

“What happened?” I asked once we were seated in the car. Matheo appeared troubled. He couldn't even find the proper position to hook his seat belt.

“Fuck!” he exclaimed as he slammed his fist on the steering wheel. He startled me. I watched as he tried to get himself out of the panic he was experiencing.

“Calm down. She's going to be fine.”

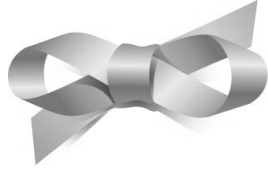
I placed my hand on his fist and made him loosen it. He looked into my eyes. Then I gave him directives to breathe slowly.

“She’s going to be all right.” I tried to assure him.

He nodded gently. “Okay... okay.”

I talked to the club valet parking attendant to get Matheo’s car.

Once he revved the engine to life, he breathed deeply before reversing out of the parking space.



Chapter Fifteen

Veronica



I could barely open my eyes when Matheo rushed into the room. After coming to such a sudden stop, he almost slipped, and his shoes made a terrible squeaking sound.

I couldn't even react to the amusing image he presented. My forehead was on fire, and the heat radiated through my whole body.

Matheo darted his eyes around the room before he found the corner where I was lying on the hospital bed. He made his way over. From what I could make out, Amber followed behind him.

"Mom! Are you okay?" he asked. He made to touch me but held back once he did, and I strained and moaned sharply.

"I'm sorry," he said. I could see the fright in his eyes, and it was comforting that he cared for me. But I was most thankful for the fact that I was still breathing.

I'd known I would be in this position once my breast cancer finally began to take a toll on me. However, I hadn't expected to land in the hospital after a hit-and-run incident.

A failed hit-and-run.

I was sure it was 'failed.' The car appeared to approach me intentionally without stepping on the brakes. Although the driver was unfamiliar, I suspected someone else was behind the incident. I knew she would have heard the news of my presence, but I hadn't expected her to go about eradicating me so quickly.

"I'll get the doctor," Matheo said and dashed out immediately.

Amber moved closer. She gaped for a moment before asking me if I was okay.

I tried to nod, but I couldn't. I made a failed attempt at smiling as well. My face felt sore, and my cheeks seemed to bear the brunt.

I strained to adjust on the bed, but Amber quickly placed her hands on my right arm to keep me down.

"Keep still, okay?"

I breathed deeply and tried to let my body relax. I felt hot underneath the

blanket. I distracted myself by taking stock of all the equipment surrounding me. A drip was attached to my right hand, which lay on my belly. A pulse-monitoring clip was attached to the index finger of my left hand.

Breathing was taking a toll on me. I couldn't draw oxygen as usual, but at least what I was being given was enough to keep me awake and aware.

There was a saline water stand by the right-hand side of the bed. Once I turned my head to look in the direction of the beeping ringing deeply into my eardrum, I saw the monitor keeping track of my heartbeat. I couldn't figure out if the movements of the string of zigzag lines were regular.

I couldn't feel my right leg, but I could feel the soreness in my left leg. So I moved my left leg sideways until I could feel the fullness of my right leg. I sighed with relief; all four limbs were still attached.

The doctor joined Matheo. I was examined immediately with his stethoscope. I saw optimism in his eyes. He looked keenly into both of my eyes with the help of bright light.

The doctor sighed with relief. "She's awake, and she'll be fine," he told Matheo and Amber.

"Thank you for calling me right away," Matheo said, "but what happened?"

I managed to make a slight sound of protest and tried to use my eyes to plead with the doctor not to answer the question. But I was caught by Matheo once he traced the doctor's eyes looking in my direction.

"Mom, what happened?" Matheo appeared somewhat annoyed.

I blinked my eyes gently toward him, hoping he'd get the gist. But, of course, he should hear the whole story from me, and there were several pieces of other information I wanted to add as well.

"Do not stress her too much, okay? We searched for any identification card in her wallet, and that's where we saw your business card in it." the doctor said.

Then he added, "She needs as much rest as possible to recover fast. So, I plead with you to keep her calm."

Matheo nodded immediately. The doctor turned and walked away. Matheo found two chairs for Amber and him to sit in.

"Mom, what happened?"

"Come on, dear. Let her rest first." Amber said.

Matheo scoffed. I could feel a battle going on in his head, and I wanted to tell him everything, but I was sleepy.

I tried to keep my eyes open, but they kept lusting for the oblivion of sleep. So, I succumbed.



“A hit and run?” Matheo said once I told him what happened. He’d bolted out of the chair and had begun to pace forth and back. Amber was trying to calm him.

I strained a bit. I could feel my whole body now, which meant I was also feeling the pain. But at least it meant I was still alive.

My right leg was in a cast. I had undergone surgery to repair some of the damage done to it.

“Who would do such a thing?” Matheo inquired, clearly without an answer from me. But he needed answers anyway. And at that moment, I was rethinking the decision to tell him everything about Linda.

I was sure Matheo wouldn’t keep calm and quiet once he heard everything.

After waiting so many years to reconnect with my son again, I wasn’t sure if I should give him a reason for worry and resentment. I didn’t want Matheo to inherit my resentment toward Linda, and I was afraid that the relationship between him and his stepsisters would suffer—he seemed to love and care for them.

However, I still needed to warn him about Linda. My time had passed, but Matheo still had his life to live, and I hoped it’d be long and happy. That was the main reason Matheo had to know what Linda was capable of.

Linda fooled me because I was naïve, but although Matheo is different from me, he still needs to get a heads-up about what Linda might do to harm him in the future.

“I think it’s Linda.” I managed to say, but Matheo didn’t hear me. He came towards me immediately after registering that I was trying to speak.

“Mom, are you okay?”

I nodded lightly. “I’m fine, son.”

“Do you need anything?”

“I could get you something to drink,” Amber offered.

I smiled. My cheeks hurt less now. “No, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” Matheo asked.

I nodded lightly again. “Yes. Please, sit.”

Matheo stared back at the seat, wondering why his sitting down was

essential to me. Despite his apparent restlessness, he drew up the chair and resumed his seat. Amber sat as well.

“I think it’s Linda,” I repeated my previous assertion.

“What?”

“Linda could have orchestrated the hit and run.”

Matheo scoffed. He stared at Amber, who seemed surprised.

“How, why?”

I sighed deeply. “Linda’s the only one who’d do this.”

Matheo didn’t seem convinced. “I know she’s mean. But I don’t think Linda would be so heartless as to hurt someone else physically.”

“Well, she would if the person was me. And I’m afraid she’s just waiting for the right time to hurt you, too.”

I couldn’t decipher Amber’s expression, but I could guess she didn’t believe me either. I only hoped she wouldn’t disregard my warning and assume my thoughts were added because of a concussion.

“Mom, are you sure about this? We can’t accuse Linda of something we’re not sure of.”

I was sure, even without any evidence. I barely mattered to anyone except Linda. No one else had reason to hold a grudge against me.

I wouldn’t know how my death would appease Linda, but I knew she felt threatened by my existence. Perhaps it was jealousy that caused her hatred of me.

“I’m sure it’s Linda,” I said. I adjusted myself on the bed and made to sit up. Matheo quickly helped me with the pillow, and I felt much more comfortable once he placed it behind my back.

“Remember what I told you about the death of your father’s mom after she caught us in the room?”

Matheo nodded. He looked at Amber and quickly explained how and when the incident had taken place.

“Linda used it to manipulate me.”

“How?” Amber was quick to ask.

“Well, I was naive at that age. I know your father loved me, and I tried to avoid him because it was best for him, even if it wasn’t good for me, and Linda hated me for that. Linda was behind the idea of getting rid of Matheo through a baby-selling syndicate.

“Initially, Linda told me to find a family for Matheo who will take care of him as George might resent me for what happened to his mom, and I don’t

want Matheo to suffer. I knew I wasn't ready to take care of my son because I was young and poor. But unfortunately, Linda manipulated me, and it was my fault to be so gullible."

"What?" Amber exclaimed.

"Mom, what are you talking about?" Matheo asked.

I sighed deeply and prepared to go into more explanation.

"Linda was friendly towards me at first. She was always around in the last few days of my pregnancy. I didn't know she was engaged to George.

"When I gave birth, she instilled doubt in me about what was best for George. She told me George would be reminded of his mom's death whenever he saw my son and me. She told me that he would never love Matheo and me.

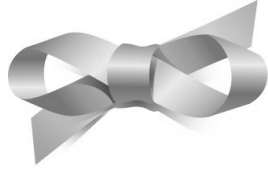
"I was young and emotional. It was already too late when I realized I had fallen into her trap. She'd made an arrangement with a baby-selling syndicate and made it look like I was trying to sell my child. I managed to keep you out of their clutches, but I was deemed to be an unfit mother by the authorities."

I took a moment to breathe, struggling with the pain of the recollections and my physical ailments.

"I was sure that Linda wouldn't be able to hurt you if I stayed quiet rather than trying to argue my innocence. No one would believe a woman who has a poor background anyway. I wanted you to grow up with a complete and well-functioning family. A *functioning family* filled with mutual love, respect, humor, and boundaries, even if I wasn't sure how Linda would treat you.

"I have no regrets, now, seeing the man you've become. Although, I know it couldn't have been easy growing up around Linda. But I know that your father truly loves you. And I have no grudge against him. He showed me that he loved me, and I saw that he was sincere towards me."

By the time I was done narrating, Matheo was staring into space and looking deep in thought.



Chapter Sixteen

George

It had been too long since I'd last had the opportunity to see Veronica. Age had taken a toll on her, but some things hadn't changed. Perhaps I would always see her primarily as the mother of my child, the woman I'd hoped to end up with.

For the first time in my life, I was proud of the momentary slip that night Veronica and I got together and made Matheo. After that, however, I knew I needed an explanation from her for the emotional trauma and everything that happened afterward.

She was asleep when I got to her bed. So I decided to wait for her to wake up, irrespective of how long it could take.

I knew Linda had treated Veronica kindly when she was pregnant. Knowing that they became friends, even for a short time, for Matheo's sake, made me proud of Linda.

Further scrutiny revealed the extent of Veronica's injuries. Her head was bandaged, and her face was swollen.

When the doctor joined me, we shook hands. There was something familiar about his face, although I could not put my finger on where I had seen him before.

"Is she going to be fine?" I asked.

The doctor looked at Veronica on the bed and sighed worriedly. I became worried as well. Since he wouldn't say anything directly, the tension I felt kept building.

"Is it bad? Can I get a bigger room for her?"

The doctor seemed taken aback at this point. He wondered who I was to Veronica, but I did not offer details.

"If you would like to, Mr. Martinez. We need a miracle for her right now."

"I want her to be comfortable, okay?"

The doctor smiled. "I know. We should wait for the next 24 hours and see how her body will respond to treatment."

"Were there any surgical complications?" I asked.

"No, not really. But..." he paused and looked keenly at me. "I'm sorry,

but what's your relationship with the patient?"

I breathed deeply. For a moment, I considered the fact that a scandal might surface if it was to be known that Veronica was Matheo's mother. I couldn't trust the doctor, even though he'd been polite. So, I hesitated, and it was then that Matheo joined.

"She's the mother of my son," I replied.

I looked at him sharply and swallowed a lump in my throat. I was ashamed that I had held back from divulging the truth immediately, and I couldn't even enjoy the justification that I had done it for Matheo's sake. We weren't on good terms at that moment.

The doctor seemed surprised and confused.

Well, it was probably because Linda Martinez had been featured in several magazines and was well known as George Martinez's wife and mother of Matheo.

"Your..." He turned to Matheo. "Your mom has stage 4 breast cancer. It's already severe."

"What?" I exclaimed. Matheo didn't look surprised. He only sighed worriedly.

"You knew about this?" I inquired.

"Yes, I didn't know how to tell you." I cut him short.

At that moment, I realized that I didn't even know when and how Matheo had met Veronica.

Matheo turned to face the doctor. "She woke up yesterday. So, she's going to be fine, right?"

"We're monitoring her. Hopefully, she'll recover from the injuries she sustained in the accident."

An inkling about what she must have gone through gave me great pain. Perhaps I still hadn't gotten over what Veronica had meant to me. If Linda ever found out, she would also hate me.

"You could have told me that you met your mother," I told Matheo after the doctor had left. I could feel his resentment towards me in his eyes, but it didn't matter if I deserved it. For some reason, I felt things wouldn't have turned out the way they did if I had known about the two of them meeting each other.

"Thanks for letting me know that your mom is in the hospital, Matheo."

"Does Linda know you're here?"

"No, but don't worry about her. I will try to explain everything to her at

the right time.”

“I’m sorry that this might cause a problem between you and Linda, but I thought we were the only family she has in this very critical moment,” Matheo explained.

My head hurt. I had expected things to be hard with getting Matheo to fully forgive me for not telling him about how I’d seen Veronica at the party, but they had finally met anyway. And our dissension seemed really out of place, considering that we were standing next to Veronica’s hospital bed.

I sighed deeply and turned away from him, facing the direction of the bed. I saw Veronica trying to open her eyes.

She mumbled my name.

“Veronica. Are you awake?” I asked as I knelt beside her

Matheo walked across the bed to the other side and smiled at her. She returned the smile before Matheo put a kiss on her forehead.

“Hi, Mom,” he said.

I loved the way Matheo called Veronica ‘Mom.’ It felt like things that had been displaced were finally being put right.

“George,” Veronica said as she touched my hand with hers. The contact was warm and soothing. It seemed to comfort me, and even that little connection brought back memories.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She nodded lightly with her eyes closed. Once she opened her eyes again, she was smiling brightly.

“You’re here,” she said.

“Yes, I am.”

“You look... strange.”

I burst into laughter, and she joined in, although she struggled and ended up coughing.

“What was that?” I asked and laughed again.

“That’s how you look,” she said.

I watched her turn to look at our son.

“Matheo, you should be respectful to your father, okay?”

“Mom...”

“That’s okay,” I said. Then I added, “I deserve that much, didn’t I?”

“Definitely!” he said.

I giggled just as Veronica did.

“How’s Amber?”

The question was directed at Matheo, but I reacted to it. “Amber?”

Matheo looked at me from the side of his eyes and ignored my question. “She’s fine, Mom. She sent her regards.”

“You know Amber?” I repeated.

I watched as Veronica stared at Matheo and gestured her head sideways to urge Matheo to tell me what I wanted to know, but Matheo stood up instead.

“Father, do you want coffee?” Matheo asked.

“Of course, I want coffee,” I replied.

He nodded and strode out of the room.

Veronica laughed. “He’s just like you,” she said.

I turned to look at her and found myself smiling as well. Veronica still had something about her that made me feel comfortable in her presence. Nothing had changed.

Would we be happy now if we had met at different times and places?



Of all Veronica’s qualities, the most amazing seemed to be her ability to forgive. She held no grudge about what had happened in the past.

“Why didn’t you take care of your health?” I asked. A wave of emotions flowed through my heart, and I caressed a tiny piece of skin exposed between the bandages on her forehead.

“I was completely focused on becoming a good person when I was in prison. It was how I repented for my sins.”

“How can you spend more time with your son now that you have been given a terminal diagnosis?”

She smiled. “It’s okay, George. I’m going to be fine.” Veronica closed her eyes and sighed deeply as she strained over something.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded gently.

“Are you sure you’re fine?”

Veronica assured me she was okay. But I wasn’t at ease even with her assurance. I might not know how she was truly feeling, but I knew I didn’t like to see her in a hospital bed.

I regretted all the years we’d been apart. I should have done better, and things would have turned out differently now.

I held her hands tightly. We looked into each other’s eyes.

“I loved you, Veronica. I always will,” I said without any expectations. The fact that she smiled was enough.

“I loved you too, George Martinez. Thank you for showing me how to be loved by a man like you. Although we were worlds apart, loving you was every woman’s dream. It made me feel fortunate that George Martinez could fall head over heels for a woman like me.”

My heart stumbled in my chest.

I felt young again at that moment. I recalled the young me flirting with the young Veronica, although we hadn’t teased each other much. The feelings we had for each other back then had been deeply buried. They hadn’t come to light before we made love. That action had seemed to strip our emotions bare—as our bodies coalesced, it had become evident that we belonged together. After that, we finally realized how we’d always felt about each other.

“What are you thinking about?” Veronica asked.

I turned to her. Breathing deeply, I shook my head. “Nothing much. I thought it was better for Matheo not to see you. I didn’t expect us to be in this inevitable situation, and I hope to clear things with you when you get better, to get a closure of our past and for the sake of our son. After that, he will be happy to see us with no grudges at each other.”

Veronica closed her eyes gently as she nodded. “You think I’ll get better?”

“That’s for sure. Matheo and I will help you. He needs you.”

“So, how are your wife and the children?” Veronica asked.

I was reluctant to discuss my other family. But I said they were fine. Veronica smiled. She seemed pleased with that. Then she looked at me worriedly.

“What’s wrong? Do you need anything?” I inquired quickly.

“I know Matheo is old enough to look out for himself, but you’re still his father, and you should look out for him as well. No matter how much he’s grown, he’ll always be your son.”

I nodded. That was sensible enough. “I understand what you mean, and I won’t fail at my responsibilities towards him or you— not anymore.”

“I’m fine, okay? But you have to look out for Matheo. And please, George. Keep him safe even... from Linda.”

I widened my eyes at her and raised a brow. Veronica asking me to protect Matheo from Linda seemed odd. I knew Matheo and Linda had their differences, but Linda had accepted him at some point. And there hadn’t been

too much to raise an alarm about her.

“Promise me?” she demanded. I could see that she wanted me to reassure her. But, by then, her eyes seemed to be closing, as if she was falling asleep but trying to keep herself awake with all her strength.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“George, promise me!” she said. Then she coughed hard.

I noticed blood on her lips.

I got up immediately, and my head went blank just as promptly as I did. I didn’t know what to do. In the spur of that moment, I thought about going to get the doctor, but Veronica grabbed my hands before I could even take a step.

“George, promise me?”

I cupped her cheeks. “Yes, Veronica. I promise. Don’t close your eyes, please.”

She smiled but did what I told her not to. “That’s good then.”

“Veronica?” I said as I tapped on her left cheek incessantly.

“Doctor!” I called. Turning back, I saw Matheo standing motionlessly behind me with two cups of coffee.

“Mom!” he exclaimed, dropping the cups.

“What happened?” Matheo demanded, but I had no answer for him.

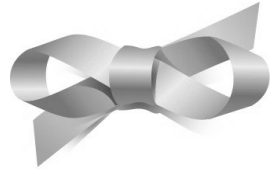
“What happened?”

Veronica wasn’t moving anymore. I couldn’t react. My head went blank, and I could only watch as Matheo crashed to his knees while he continued shaking Veronica to wake her up.

My world seemed to be crashing down before my eyes, and I kept losing my grip on what was around me.

The doctor and a nurse rushed in, and the last thing I heard was, “I’m sorry, Mr. Martinez.”

Then I collapsed.



Chapter Seventeen

Linda



It's ironic that one person's demise can provide peace of mind to another person. But humans tend to do everything possible to survive and hoard what they have.

No matter how generous a woman is, she could never be happy to share her husband. A woman could sometimes allow her husband's body to be shared, but she would always do anything to keep his heart only for herself.

So, was I happy with Veronica's death?

Well, it was a perfect night for a cup of elderberry wine. The sky was dark with few stars, although the moon shone brightly. But I couldn't bring myself to pour a cup or smell the richness of the drink.

George had been brooding over Veronica's death, and he'd been staring at the moon the moment it came out as if his thoughts were far away. I sighed heavily as I watched him before approaching him on the balcony.

"George, are you going to come inside soon?" I asked.

He turned his head and stared at me over his right shoulder. I couldn't discern his expression, but I reasoned he was sad, and maybe it was only natural for him to feel that way.

It wasn't natural for me to try to understand why he was moody over another woman's death. I had always known he loved Veronica, even after he agreed to marry me...

Everything was George's fault, to begin with.

His clinginess over an insignificant housemaid started my hatred for Veronica. He always smiled brightly whenever he saw her, which made me wish for her to vanish. But it was bearable because I had him when she couldn't.

At least, it was bearable until George impregnated Veronica. A stupid mistake that pushed me to end Veronica's connection with George.

I knew George liked Veronica when I saw him look at her, but Veronica suppressed her feelings. I couldn't be deceived to believe so, not when I had an inkling about their feelings for each other.

Well, marrying George was what I got for keeping the family's secret and

making sure that a scandal didn't surface.

Finally, I thought I had George after all, but it turned out that I could never have him. Matheo had always been a reminder of Veronica to him.

It was too bad for Veronica that she believed everything I told her. She was so gullible to think that I would befriend her. And then Veronica resurfaced again...

Every woman would do anything to keep her husband to herself at that point. I met him first, and I'm the woman who supported him in building his empire using my family's influence, so no one deserved him more than I did.

I walked over and sat in the chair opposite George while Ava and Mabel were busy talking to each other.

He smiled. "The moon looks bright tonight," he said.

I turned back to have a look at the moon myself. It did look bright, but what was that supposed to mean?"

"Veronica loved looking at the moon," he said. But then, his countenance changed, and I saw his eyes tear up.

I burned with anger. I couldn't show my anger or resentment for a person who was already dead; neither could I be angry with George for being so clingy to someone already dead.

I sighed deeply. "I'm sure she's in a good place," I said. Well, it wasn't exactly a lie. I wasn't hoping that Veronica would go to hell. No. I was only relieved that she wasn't around anymore.

George turned to look at me, and there was something suspicious in his stare that I recoiled from. I could feel he was thinking deeply about something and that it related to me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He shook his head and moved his eyes to look at the moon again.

"Mom, is everything all right?" Ava asked.

We'd been trying to keep the situation away from the girls' notice. Finally, I forced a smile onto my face. "Yes, honey. I'm okay."

She turned to her father and asked the same question. I spoke up when George did not. "Of course, he's fine."

Ava turned sharply to look at me. "Mom, I wasn't asking you."

"Hey, young lady. Watch your manners."

She wasn't fazed. "Can you tell us what's been going on? Things are getting very tense, and I don't think we're too young to notice." She glanced at Mabel, who nodded as well. So, they'd planned this ambush.

I didn't know what to say.

"Everything is good, okay?" George assured them. But even though he kissed Mabel's forehead, the young girl didn't seem like she could be cajoled into believing things the way her father intended.

"Matheo doesn't come over anymore," Mabel said.

George looked straight into my eyes. By the time I was looking at Ava again, she'd noticed the look that had passed between George and me.

"Did Dad fight with my brother again? Even Matheo wouldn't say."

I raised a brow. "What? You asked him?"

"We visited him!" Mabel said, looking elated.

My head spun, and I found myself on my feet. Ava and Mabel have a good relationship with Matheo, which had never been to my liking. If I could have it my way, I'd rather they detest him as much as I did. But they had their minds. During moments like this, I almost wondered if they were my children.

"Did you get permission before you went to his house?"

Ava chuckled. "Since when do we need permission to go visit our brother?"

George had stood up with Mabel in his arms when I turned back to look at her. What had these kids talked about between themselves before approaching us?

I had an answer for Mabel, but I couldn't say a word in response to her question. But, of course, she was just a kid, so she didn't even need to understand why I decided to say nothing.

Ava was different. She was older, and she had always been upright and outspoken. I'd always felt that Matheo must have infected her with such an attitude.

Ava was staring at me still, obviously demanding an answer to Mabel's question.

"It's dangerous to go to Matheo's house on your own," I said. I wasn't surprised Ava wasn't convinced.

"Matheo had a game room made for us. I love it." Mabel said, seeming unconcerned about the present situation.

"That's enough, okay?" George said.

"Dad...?" Ava drawled as she stared at him.

George shook his head, obviously warning her to drop the subject. However, I could tell she wasn't pleased.

George was talking to Mabel when my phone suddenly gave a buzz.

“I’ll get—”

I cut Ava short. “No! I’ll get it.”

George gave me a sharp, suspicious look.

“Excuse me,” I said.

The phone had stopped ringing when I got to it, but it began again as I picked it off the table. It was an unknown number. At least, it appeared that way on the phone’s screen, but the number was familiar to me. I would not say I liked the voice at the other end of the line.

He’d done a lousy job. The arrangement was for Veronica to die on the spot, but the idiot had made it so that she could get to the hospital and still have a few moments with Matheo and George.

“Hello!” His voice was hoarse as usual.

I took a moment to say, “I can hear you.”

“Oh, you can? Why have you been ignoring my calls?”

The guy on the other line was shouting as if he could see me standing in front of him. I looked over my shoulder instinctively and saw George staring at me. I smiled awkwardly and gestured that I’d be with him soon. Then I walked quickly to the bedroom and slammed the door behind me.

Pressing the phone to my ear, I said, “You idiot! Didn’t I tell you not to call my line again?”

“You haven’t paid me the balance. So why should I do anything you say?”

I laughed. “You did a bad job! Why should I pay you?”

“She’s dead, isn’t she?”

“But you didn’t kill her!”

“I hit her with my car just as you wanted. And now she’s dead! What more could you ask for?”

I scoffed. “She died in the hospital when she should have died on the spot. So that means you didn’t do a good job.”

“You should have hit her yourself, then.”

I sighed exasperatedly. “I *should* have just done it myself. My only regret is that I hired a fool like you.”

I hadn’t gotten this man’s name because it hadn’t mattered. His job was to kill whomever he was told to kill, which brought us together.

He might think I owed him, but I didn’t think I owed him a dime. I’d given him a hefty amount of money already as the down payment, and, given

the outcome of the job he was supposed to do, I would only be generous to give him even more.

“It seems you don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

I laughed, although the sound was somewhat forced. He was a hitman, so I shouldn’t underestimate what he would do.

“Are you threatening me?”

“Does this sound like a threat to you? I’m warning you.”

“I make the call here because I’m the boss, not you. Do you even know whom *you’re* talking to?”

He laughed. “Of course I do. I did my research. Linda Martinez, right?”

I froze immediately. “W-what?”

“Now you’re surprised.”

“You fool!” I removed the phone from the position where the mouthpiece could give away my heavy breathing. He asked if I was still there.

“You fool. Do you think you can get away with this?”

He chuckled. “Worry about yourself and your two girls. You don’t want them to know that their mother hired me to kill someone. Or should I tell your husband instead?”

“I can hire someone to kill you in a blink of an eye!” I said this sharply and immediately regretted it. I needed to control my temper before it got me into trouble. “I’ll pay you your balance, okay!”

He seemed to consider the matter for a moment, then said, “No, the price just changed. I want two million dollars.”

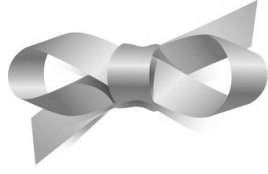
“What?”

“Mrs. Martinez, I have a recording of you instructing me to commit a hit-and-run. And I’ve been recording this—”

I hung up immediately.

Nothing about Veronica would ever be erased. Not that she was Matheo’s mother, nor that George had always loved her. And even the miscreant I had hired to hit her with a car reminded me of how painful her existence was.

I felt fragile and tired, so I fell back into bed.



Chapter Eighteen

Matheo



I wondered if my father was becoming too absentminded in his old age to notice what his wife was up to.

There was also a possibility that he might, to some extent, have an idea of what Linda had done but decided to turn a blind eye toward everything.

Although my biological mother hadn't wished for me to inherit every one of her grudges against Linda, there was no possible way I could forgive her.

Not that I cared, but Linda should have at least pretended to feel some sympathy.

Linda had frozen when she saw me at the house. It was the day after burying mom, but I was still in a black suit. I planned to mourn for as long as it would take to forget how she'd died.

The burial had been very brief. Mom only had a few friends she used to stay with after she got out of prison. So, only me, Amber, my father, the priest, and a few others attended.

That Sunday afternoon, I primarily visited because I wanted to see Ava and Mabel. So, I texted Ava to give her a heads-up.

However, I was also curious to see how Linda would react to me.

"Hey, Matheo," Father said.

"Good day, Dad."

Linda and Father were in the garden, enjoying the day's warmth. I couldn't fathom how the man seemed to have moved on so fast.

Something about the garden captivated me. I had spent time in it before, but I had never really had a thing for sitting around and admiring plants. However, that afternoon, I found myself developing a new interest.

The peonies were thriving pink and bright. The flowers of the snapdragon were already blooming with variegated foliage.

I was admiring a Yaupon Holly tree for the first time. Then, suddenly, I realized what had changed. I was reminded of the garden I'd seen behind mom's house the first and last time I visited.

Was it the lavender's beautiful hues or the black-eyed Susan's blooming

golden flowers? Something made this garden look very much like my mom's.

Indeed, the space spoke of her in a way that I thought only I could understand until father said, "Veronica loved peonies."

I looked at him in surprise—so did Linda. But the man had his eyes closed already as he inhaled the air deeply. He'd absentmindedly made his comment. Then, realizing that he'd shocked us when he reopened his eyes, he cleared his throat and sat upright.

Linda looked in my direction. She couldn't bring herself to say a word to me. In her darting eyes, I could see she was nervous about something.

"So, Matheo. You're here."

I chuckled. "Of course, I am."

He widened his eyes at me. He was using me to escape a possible reproach from Linda.

"Yes, you're here," he said again.

"Where are Ava and Mabel?"

Linda shot a cold glare at me, and my body instinctively recoiled a bit.

"Why?" Linda asked.

I looked at my father before looking at Linda.

When I looked at Linda again, it seemed like she was struggling to stay calm. She'd gotten to her feet and stared at us with barely concealed disgust.

"I've missed you," Ava said in a muffled voice as she buried her face into the curve of my neck.

"I've missed you too, cupcake."

She lifted her head and looked at my face with her usual smile. "Mabel would kill you if she heard you call me cupcake again."

I smiled. "You're right. And where is she?"

"Ava, why don't you check the dress I bought for you and your sister?" Linda said.

"Mom, Mabel is sleeping."

Linda glanced at me and then back at her daughter. "Really? Don't you have other things to do then?"

Ava was looking mentally stressed out already. Even she could have felt that her mother was trying to separate us. She stared into my eyes, and I gave her a quick, reassuring smile.

Linda took Ava's hand from mine and smiled awkwardly.

"I'm sure Matheo has something urgent to discuss with your dad, Ava. You should go and check the shopping bags."

“Matheo, are you busy?” Ava asked, looking at me with eyes that were pleading for me to say *no*.

“No, I’m not—”

“I’ll go with you,” Linda said as she got Ava’s hand and dragged her away.

My father and I stared at each other for a moment before he got up and began pacing back and forth, looking worried.

I sighed exasperatedly. “Was that necessary?” I asked my father.

He stopped pacing and turned to face me. “Matheo...”

He couldn’t say anything more. So instead, he stared at me with a conflicted expression.

“What if Linda had something to do with Mom’s death?”

“Matheo, stop jumping to conclusions without evidence,” he said sharply, looking around as if he worried my statement could have been overheard. His lack of surprise at my suggestion made me think that the same suspicion might have occurred to him, too, even if he would never admit it.

“I hope I’m wrong, Father.”

After that, neither of us knew what to say. Finally, I turned away from him and walked out of the garden.



A little internet research was all it took to find myself in one of the rooms on the second floor of a building downtown. It was the office of a private investigator.

They were highly recommended with a good number of reviews. It didn’t matter to me to pay a considerable amount of money, especially regarding ensuring the case's confidentiality.

The office was crammed. A bookshelf was filled with worn-out books and white folders. A sofa impeded my movement immediately after I came in, so I had to squeeze past it through the space between the couch and another sofa.

A bearded man sat behind a metal desk, ushering me into one of the chairs in front of it.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi!” I replied and looked around quickly.

Had I made the right choice to come to this private investigator? I knew I wouldn’t get far if I went to the police without evidence.

“You’re the private investigator?” I asked.

He smiled. “I may not have the look, but I have the prowess for the job. So, you can be assured that I’ll do well.”

I sighed deeply.

“Please, call me Ivan.”

“Ivan,” I said as I nodded lightly.

“So, Mr. Martinez...” He looked straight and long at me as he drawled the name. “Are you *the* Matheo Martinez?”

“Can we keep this on the down-low?”

“Oh, sorry. I’m just excited. TotaBuyzz has quite a reputation.”

“Thank you. But I’m not here as the CEO of TotaBuyzz. I’m here as myself.”

“It’s an honor to meet you.”

He seemed amused, but I sighed exasperatedly.

“Can you do this job discreetly?”

He widened his eyes at me for a moment before adjusting to his chair.

“Of course, I can. What do you need me to do?”

I sighed and leaned forward as if we were about to share a secret that no one should know about afterward.

“I need you to investigate a hit and run.”

“Oh,” he said. He fetched his pen and a small notepad before raising his eyes to mine.

I gave him the details and sent him Linda’s picture, tagging her as the most probable culprit, although I doubted she had been the one who had been driving the car.

“I’ll get you evidence, Mr. Martinez. Now, tell me about the victim of this crime.”

I felt a sudden strike of emotions in my chest, and it became too much for me to contain myself. I wiped my eyes.

“Are you okay, Mr. Martinez?”

I nodded lightly.

“Sorry about that,” I said.

“Oh, that’s okay.” The private investigator reclined in his chair.

The only pictures I had of my biological mother were the ones we’d taken during the picnic. So I sent them to the investigator and pointed her out.

“That’s her.”

The investigator looked keenly at the screen of his phone before he raised

his eyes to look at me again.

“She’s...”

“She’s dead.”

The private investigator looked into my eyes. He appeared sympathetic, not that I needed him to be. I just wanted him to do his job.

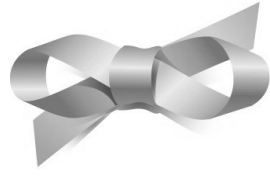
“I’m sorry about that,” he said.

I shrugged lightly. “That’s fine, thank you. Can you start with the investigation as quickly as possible?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll get to it right away.”

We stared into each other’s eyes.

“I promise to do a good job, Mr. Martinez. You have nothing to worry about.”



Chapter Nineteen

Amber

It was just chicken marsala, and it wasn't even supposed to be challenging, but it took so long that I was sweating over the frying pan.

I began to get lost in my thoughts. It had been happening a lot. The time I spent with Veronica had been brief but memorable. She was the first person to accept me as Matheo's girlfriend. I'd felt a connection with her.

Besides my sadness, consoling Matheo was quite a predicament. I wasn't sure how to comfort him. There was no point in making a grand speech about it. How could I counsel the person I loved to live with the pain of having lost a mother he'd just been reunited with? Nothing could ever reverse what had happened. I felt as if I was useless to him.

"Amber!"

I was startled out of my thoughts and immediately jerked away from the stove. My father yanked the frying pan away from the fire and turned the gas off immediately.

I'd left the white wine sauce unattended on the stove for a moment, and it had burnt.

"Are you okay?" he asked again, glancing at me as he tended to the frying pan.

The chicken had become charcoal. It only confirmed that I was a failure. I couldn't even cook.

I fetched a towel and joined my father in blowing away the smoke that had already filled the kitchen. Once we were done, he asked, "So, what's for dinner?" He chuckled.

"We'll just have to figure something out." I tried to make it sarcastic, but I was somewhat embarrassed. Finally, he walked over and stood beside me.

"Did you accidentally burn your hands while cooking?" My Dad asked.

I looked at his face and saw concern in his eyes.

My adoptive parents didn't know about Matheo. I hadn't felt the need to tell them yet, although I had thought about it several times.

I was waiting for the right time. I knew they'd be happy for me. After all, they only cared about my happiness.

"I'm fine," I replied.

He chuckled. “No, you’re not.”

I glanced at him again and shrugged. “I guess I just have too much on my mind.”

My dad breathed deeply. “I thought as much. Chicken marsala is one of the best meals you make. Usually.”

I chuckled. “Right? Now I feel bad for the chicken.”

“As do I,” he said and giggled. Then he drew closer and put his arm around my shoulder.

“So, what’s going on in your head?”

I stared at him for a moment without saying a word. Then he turned me to face him and peered into my eyes.

“Is it your heart, then?”

I smiled widely. “Both, I guess.”

“Now, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

I sighed deeply and felt my chest loosen a bit. “There’s someone—”

“It’s a man, right?” he asked with excitement.

“Dad...?” I said as I recoiled back a bit from him, letting his hands fall off my shoulders.

He smiled widely.

“I’m sorry, okay. Now I’m listening.”

“How do I console the person I’m in love with?”

My dad looked curiously at me. His lips began to form a smile, but he drew them together immediately and assumed a serious face.

“Well, what happened?”

“Someone died. Someone very close to him.”

He sighed and reclined as he backed the counter, folding his arms across his chest.

“Well, my dear. There’s no good advice for how to console someone. And do you know why?”

I looked at his face. “Why?”

“Pain comes differently to each of us. We all feel and handle it differently. So, what works for a person like you might not work for him.

“Some want to feel the presence of their loved ones when they’re going through hardships, while some might demand to be alone.

“Pain can make us feel so alive that we might want to die at a certain point in our lives, and it is at that moment that most of us realize that we’re human after all. We’re fragile; we can’t handle the situation alone. So,

ultimately, we need to know that someone will be there for us....” He paused and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder.

“My dear, you don’t need to give anything or know a perfect way to console this person. You have to assure him that you’ll always be around and be there for him whenever he needs someone to share his thoughts with. I don’t think you can ever be enough to cure his wounds. No, you can’t. You have to help him as he seeks to heal.”

By the time my dad was done talking, my head had cleared.

“Thanks, Dad,” I said and inhaled deeply. He was smiling, like an open book with such an expression. I knew what he was thinking about from a glimpse.

“So, who’s this person?”

I chuckled. “You can’t let it go, can you?”

“Of course, I can’t. He’s your man, isn’t he?”

I smiled widely. “Is it healthy for us to talk about this?”

He stared at me dramatically, with a furrowed brow as well. “Oh, come on... I should know these things about you.”

I laughed. I had the best relationship with my adoptive parents.

Maybe I was lucky that Matheo was just as loving as my dad—although Matheo had been a jerk at first toward me.

My dad was staring at me with searching eyes. His fifty-five-year-old eyes were sunken a bit, and he was already gathering wrinkles on his forehead, but his cheerfulness always made him look younger than his age.

“Well, it’s someone I’m in love with—”

“Yes!” he said, punching the air.

“Dad?”

“You’re dating, finally!”

I chuckled. “What’s exciting about that?”

He stopped fidgeting around and stared at my face. “Do you know what it means to see you starting to date? You get to experience life and become an adult.”

“Will you still be so happy about this development when I get my heart broken?”

“Seeing that you care about this person, I’m convinced he’s not someone who’ll break your heart so easily. But, who is he?”

I laughed awkwardly. “Of course, he won’t break my heart. There’s nothing to worry about.”

I prayed silently that my dad would just let the conversation rest, but he never let go once he bit. And he was somewhat determined to drain every information I had about the man I was seeing.

“Is he a ghost?”

“No! Of course not.”

“Then why can’t you tell me who he is?”

“Dad, you see....” I paused and looked out right into his eyes. With his raised brow, it was evident that he was expecting answers, but I wasn’t sure if telling him about Matheo was right for that moment.

“Amber?”

“It’s Matheo!” I said sharply.

My dad stared at me for a while before he chuckled. “Matheo... who?”

My face had fallen so that I couldn’t look at his face. It had become routine for me that everyone who’d found out about my relationship with Matheo had first doubted its genuine nature—except Veronica.

“Matheo Martinez?” he asked.

I managed to raise my head a bit. I nodded gently before lowering my eyes again.

“He was the reason I was able to get surgery, right,” he asked. Then he added, “The person who helped us when I got sick?”

“Maureen!” he exclaimed to my mom.

I tugged at his arm. “Dad, what are you doing?”

He turned his head and looked at my demanding face underneath his. “You’re dating Matheo Martinez... Maureen should hear about this.”

“No, Dad. Not yet, please?”

“Why?”

“You know, he’s Matheo Martinez.”

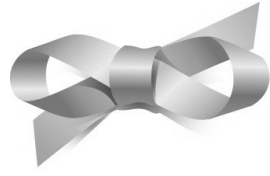
“He shrugged. “And so? He’s dating you, right?”

I nodded.

“Then that’s it!”

“Dad!”

He got his arm away from my hold and hurried out of the kitchen as he kept shouting for my mom while I followed suit to stop him from divulging the situation to her.



Chapter Twenty

Matheo



Lying to Ava and Mabel had become a habit. I had an uncomfortable feeling that Ava had gotten an inkling about whatever was going on.

It wasn't difficult to see that there was an ongoing feud. I hardly visited the mansion anymore, and when I did, you could feel the tension between Linda and me. We could barely bear to greet one another anymore. And although Ava had made it mandatory that I joined them for dinner, I wouldn't have if Linda was supposed to be around. Luckily for me, she was out.

It was a few minutes past eight. The housemaids had begun to set the table, and I was settling Mabel on the chair beside me because she'd insisted on sitting beside me while she ate.

"I especially made this dinner for you," Ava said, smiling at me as if she'd gone all out to impress me.

It was only a bowl of fried rice, although it was loaded with plenty of veggies and eggs. I looked at Ava while the maid dished me a portion; she was instead staring expectantly, even as I raised the first spoon.

The combination of scrambled eggs, sautéed veggies, and garlic with the stir-fried rice gave the meal a hearty, savory flavor. When I looked at Ava again, she'd widened her eyes more.

"So... how is it?"

I swallowed a portion of the food in my mouth and cleared my throat lightly as I reclined in the chair. Then, breathing deeply, I could see in Ava's eyes that my response mattered to her a lot, especially if it was a positive one.

I nodded. "It's well done, and it has a rich taste," I said, then added, "I love it."

She smiled. "I helped in making it."

That was a surprise. "Really?"

"Of course."

"That's great," I said. I raised another spoon to my mouth immediately to assure her that her efforts were being appreciated. Father was already eating away enthusiastically, and Mabel seemed to enjoy her meal.

“We should save some for your mother. She’ll be glad to know that you had a hand in making the meal,” Father said as he munched away on the food in his mouth, probably without much thought about his words.

Ava and I stared at each other, and even though I smiled awkwardly anyway, she still had to turn to drop her cutlery, and she sighed with exasperation.

“I didn’t make dinner for Mom, okay?”

I glanced at my father. He enjoyed his meal and didn’t even hear what Ava said.

“We’re keeping a portion, right?” he said with a muffled voice.

I gestured toward Ava immediately to drop the issue. But, instead, she sighed again and rolled her eyes. Then she stood up.

“I’m full, okay?”

“Ava?” I called. But she only walked away and headed for her room. When I stood up to go after her, Mabel demanded to come along.

“Dad?”

He glanced at me over a spoon before shrugging.

“What?”

I scoffed. “You’re enjoying dinner, aren’t you?”

He smiled widely. “Of course I am. I think Ava is going to be a great cook.”

I chuckled. “Good for the family, then.”

He’d begun to eat again by the time I was taking Mabel’s hand. So we headed to Ava’s room.

I knocked lightly on the door, but there was no response from inside. I opened it, and Ava immediately turned her back to me, where she was sitting on her bed.

“Hi?” I said as I approached. Mabel had jumped on her bed and was doing her own thing.

“Ava?”

She still wouldn’t say anything or turn to face me, so I walked over and stood in front of her. Then I squatted down to her level.

“You shouldn’t have said that to Dad.”

She snorted. “He didn’t even hear me, did he?”

“Regardless—”

She cut in. “I’m angry with you as well!”

I recoiled a bit. “Me?”

“Do you people think you can deceive me?”

I sat down beside her on the bed. “What are you going on about?”

She turned. “Something is going on, but even you won’t say it.”

Ava probably had many questions that she wanted answers to; it was unfortunate that I had to let her down.

There was no way I could tell her of my suspicion about her mother, Linda. She didn’t even know that we had different mothers.

“Nothing is going on, okay?” I said dryly. “I think we’re all just exhausted right now. But you know the deal with work.”

Ava didn’t look convinced.

“I know Mom doesn’t see eye to eye with you, but she’s still our mom.”

We stared into each other’s eyes just as she said this.

“Do you like Mom then?”

Even though I had lied to Ava, I couldn’t tell her I liked her mother.

The more she didn’t know about the ugly situation, the better for her. But she was staring at me with eyes that were demanding my answer.

Thankfully, my phone buzzed inside my pocket. I extracted it, but it stopped ringing just as I was about to accept the call.

It was Eric Rodriguez.

It’d already been quite a while since we last saw each other, and it had been that long since we last spoke on the phone, and he’d just saved me.

I tried calling him back, but his line suddenly became busy. Well, that served as an excuse to leave.

“Hey, girls. I think I have to go.” I employed a bit of urgency in my tone to make my situation seem inescapable, but Ava was as suspicious as ever.

“I thought the line wasn’t connecting?”

I smiled awkwardly. “Yes, but I want to try him again when I get home.”

“Can I come along?” Mabel asked. She was in front of me, blinking her eyes like a doll. It was almost impossible to turn her away, but I had to. Ava would also want to come along.

“Oh, not now, Mabel. Maybe next time?”

“When is next time?” Ava asked. She got down from the bed and got in my face as well.

I gathered the two of them in an embrace.

“You know I love you, girls, right?” They nodded over my shoulders.

“And you know I’ll always love you?” They nodded again. I brought them out of the embrace and stared into Ava’s eyes.

“Nothing is ever going to change between us, okay? I’ll always love you girls, and that’s all that counts.”

Ava sighed heavily. Then she fell against me again. “I love you too, Matheo.”

I smiled as Mabel kissed my cheeks.

I didn’t bid Father goodnight. It was enough that the girls saw me to the poolside before they turned and walked back.

As I drove away, I couldn’t stop wondering why Eric Rodriguez had tried to call me.



I was trying Eric’s line again as I parked my car. Then, I spotted Amber sitting on the porch with a book raised to her face.

She looked up, and our eyes met. She put down her book and began to run towards me. As we collided, I felt like a missing piece of myself had slotted back into place.

I breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of the shampoo she’d used to wash her hair. She smelled of vanilla. She even tasted like it as we kissed.

“I’ve missed you,” Amber said as our lips parted.

“And I missed you, too.”

She smiled up at me and rubbed my back with her palm.

Amber’s smile seemed different. Her eyes seemed to have lost some of their sparkle.

She could barely look into my eyes, and I felt she was holding back in a way that already worried me.

“Have you been here for long?”

She shook her head. “No, not really. Barely ten minutes ago.”

“Oh, you could have called.”

She giggled. “You’re here now, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sure. But I could have given you the pin for the door. I’m sorry.”

She dragged me towards the door and told me not to worry about that. Nonetheless, I gave her the code she would need if she wanted to come by unexpectedly.

Once we were in the living room, she halted. I couldn’t discern the emotion behind her expression even as she was staring at me. Then she smiled and pulled me into her embrace.

She squeezed me tighter and tighter.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I found myself smiling.

“I’m okay.”

Amber breathed deeply into my chest. With my height and hers, it was tough to conclude if she was trying to console me or if I was trying to comfort her. She nuzzled her face against me. I could feel her close her eyes as she sighed again.

I kissed her head and inhaled the scent of her hair again.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” Amber said as she looked up at me. I lowered my head and kissed her deeply.

“Thank you,” I said once our lips had retreated again.

“I’m sorry you couldn’t come to the burial.”

She smiled. “I understand, okay?”

“Thank you once again.”

Amber snuggled against me once more.

We didn’t say anything after that. Then, a few minutes later, she asked where I had been.

“Ava made me have dinner in the mansion. Linda wasn’t around. She had to attend a charity meeting with her friends.”

Amber nodded. “How was the dinner?”

“It was nice,” I said as we both moved to sit on the sofa. Amber dropped her handbag behind her and took my hands.

“I guess it was since you seem pleased about it.”

“Well, yes. I was pleased. Do you know Ava helped out with the meal? She was engaged in eighty percent of the preparations to have me come to dinner.”

Amber looked surprised. “Really?”

I nodded. I stood up and began loosening my tie as I headed for the wine shelf.

“She’s such a sweet girl.” I halted, turned back to face her, and added, “You should meet soon.”

Amber looked unsure, but the excitement in her eyes couldn’t be missed.

“Really?”

“Why? You don’t want to meet Ava?”

“Of course I do.” She said. She was on her feet already. Once she was standing in of me, she wrapped her arms around my waist. She got a quick kiss before she continued to speak.

“I told my dad about you.”

I raised a brow. Meeting Amber’s parents hadn’t been in my immediate plans. However, when I thought about our relationship, it felt like we were already at that point, and I couldn’t hide my nervousness.

“It’s nothing serious, okay?” Amber said quickly. I knew she was only trying to calm me.

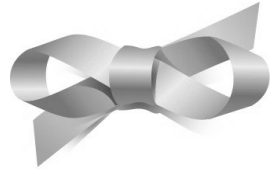
“What did he say?” I asked Amber impatiently.

Amber chortled. “Don’t worry. My dad will surely like you.” Amber assured me.

I sighed deeply. “We both know that’s not true.”

Amber shrugged. “Well, my dad doesn’t have a problem with me dating as long as the man is sincere enough towards me. But you’ll have to try harder to convince my mom.”

Amber’s eyes seemed to dance as she said this. Her eyes did this whenever she was teasing, so I sighed with relief—for the moment. I was nervous about meeting her parents when I hadn’t even officially introduced her to my father yet as my girlfriend.



Chapter Twenty-One

Ava



Something was going on. Something big. I feared that if whatever Matheo was keeping from Mabel and I ever got to see the light of day, it would disturb our peace at night and separate us from each other.

Dad seemed neutral, as if he knew what was going on, and only pretended everything was fine. Or maybe he was just as oblivious as Mabel.

I couldn't blame Mabel. Being the youngest in the family, her only daily goal was to be fed and remain as happy as possible. She was fast asleep in bed already. Her relaxed state made me wonder why I had to be troubled.

Still, I realized I would graduate in two years, and Dad wanted me to help my brother, Matheo, in our business.

As per my dad, we should share the burden as a family. That's what family is supposed to do, considering that I'm Mabel's second eldest sibling whom she should look up to. So we have to show her how a family should help each other through thick and thin.

Even after Matheo had assured me that nothing would ever change between us. I worried that he was lying to himself as well as me. However, maybe I was the one changing after all. I had too much going on in my head, which was normal for a teenager.

As I took a deep breath, trying to let go of some of my tension, I heard Mom's footsteps headed to the kitchen. I listened to a door slam behind her.

I walked towards the kitchen as quietly as I could. I hesitated a bit when I reached the kitchen, but I pressed my right ear against the door. I needed to know what was going on.

"You don't have the right to threaten me, okay?"

The animosity in Mom's voice made me raise a brow.

I listened again.

"You did a bad job! What if she mentioned something to Matheo before she died? But I'm still willing to meet your demands... the best thing you can do is wait!"

There was a pause.

"You idiot! Leave my kids out of this!"

That sounded serious.

I opened the door, wanting to confront my mom about what was happening before I realized I had no excuse for overhearing the conversation. Mom was startled and almost jumped out of her skin when she saw me coming in. She ended the call immediately and tried to smile at me as I approached her.

“Hey, Ava. Why aren’t you sleeping?” she asked.

Even though Mom tried every trick to hide whatever situation I had just seen her in, the fact that she was trying so hard to make me think everything was fine meant everything wasn’t okay.

“Mom, who were you on the phone with?”

She giggled. “Oh, that? That was one of my business partners.”

I was not at all convinced. “What does that have to do with us, then?”

Mom walked towards me. “Honey, you shouldn’t eavesdrop on people’s conversations,” she admonished as she brushed my hair away from my face. Then she added, “That’s a bad habit, okay?”

I could feel Mom’s nervousness.

“Mom, are you planning to do something to Matheo?”

She sprung up immediately. “Ava! Why would you say that?”

“You don’t like him, right?”

Mom sighed deeply, not saying a word.

“You don’t, right?” I asked again.

“It’s not as if he likes me either.”

“Why?”

Mom glanced at me. It seemed as if she was on the verge of being honest for a moment, but then she changed the topic.

“Honey, why don’t you go and join Mabel in bed? It’s late.”

She took my hand, but I jerked it away as promptly as she attempted to move me.

“Mom, what’s going on?”

“Ava, go to bed now!”

“If anything happens to Matheo, I won’t—”

Mom cut me short. “Will you shut your mouth!”

“Mom...?”

Tears streamed down my face. Suddenly I felt like it was my responsibility to make sure that she didn’t do anything that would jeopardize the love Mabel and I had for her.

She drew me into her embrace and apologized for having to shout at me. After that, I thought it might be a good time to try again to get some honesty out of her.

“Mom, will you tell me what is going on?”

Well, I was wrong. However, she was still unwilling to say.

“Please don’t hurt Matheo,” I pleaded.

Mom sighed exasperatedly. “Listen, you did not hear anything from me!”

“No, Mom. Matheo is my brother, and he loves us.”

She laughed. “He doesn’t care about you. He’s only trying to get closer to you girls to use you against me. See...? He’s already turning you against me.”

“Is Matheo the one you were talking to on the phone? Why is everyone trying to use us against you?”

“Because...”

That was where she stopped. She swallowed.

It pained me to be doubting whether my mom was a good person. However, her unwillingness to speak honestly made it hard to trust her.

“Mom, if you won’t tell me what’s going on, I’ll take Mabel, and we’ll go and live with Matheo.”

That was supposed to be my threat and, maybe, my final and most strategic move, but once Mom heard that, I realized she’d reached her patience’s end.

“You and Mabel are not going anywhere!”

“Mom...?”

“Do you want me to repeat it?”

She paced forth and back and came to hold me by my shoulders.

“From now on, you’re grounded from leaving the house.”

“Mom! I have to hang out with my friends.”

“Well, not anymore. I can’t have you running off to Matheo’s house.”

“We’ve gone there before, and it’s never been a problem.”

“Not anymore. And you’d better not try anything funny.” She began to storm out of the kitchen but halted to look over her shoulder.

“Don’t you ever mention Matheo’s name again in this house, okay?”

With all she had been hiding from me and how harsh she’d suddenly become, it was my turn to withhold a response. I ran past her and out of the house.

I was already out by the poolside before I realized that it was already very dark outside, and although I desired to leave the house, there was nowhere I

could go from there.

“Ava!” Mom exclaimed once she was out of the house. By the time I turned back to face her, Dad was also coming out of the house with a sleepy expression. He yawned immediately after he got to Mom’s side.

“Is everything okay?” he asked. “Ava? What are you doing outside?”

I looked straight at Dad as he walked towards me. There was so much I wanted to ask and say to him, but nothing seemed like a good option.

I wriggled my body out of his hold and dashed back into the house.

“Ava!” Mom said.

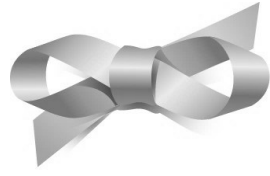
But I didn’t respond or stop. Instead, I went into my room and slammed the door behind me. I listened to my parents’ muffled voices outside.

“Is she okay?” Dad asked.

“She’s just being a kid,” Mom replied.

I was disheartened that he didn’t press Mom further for answers. Instead, he obliged when Mom suggested that they go to bed when he should have instead made sure he found out why I had acted out.

I expected to lie awake for hours, worrying about what was going on with my mom. But the emotional turmoil had exhausted me, and I quickly fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.



Chapter Twenty-Two

Matheo



Friday had moved too fast, and the clock in my office was ticking so loud that it resonated with the devastating pounding in my chest. I hadn't been able to concentrate on work throughout the day, and Amber had avoided me the best she could, or so I thought, because we didn't even get to see each other before she left for home.

Well, she'd gone to prepare for my visit to her house that night, but I would have been doing better that evening if I'd talked to her before she left.

Maybe I needed a clue on what to wear, what to bring—if need be—and how to behave or address her parents to make a good impression.

I was in a pinstriped, navy blue, double-breasted suit with corozo nut buttons and a felt-lined collar. The suit's figure-wrapping shape did pin my shoulders back and helped with a perfect posture. So I noted as I stood staring into the mirror. I would have been full of confidence on a typical day, but that evening, the suit felt somewhat suffocating.

But it was the third suit I'd tried on, so I made do with it anyway.

It was about twenty-five minutes to eight when I drove out. It had begun to drizzle by then, but I knew it wouldn't rain hard that night. It'd been hot lately, so it made sense that the sky was also trying to release its sweat.

I tried as much as possible to be calm through the drive. Everything was going to be okay. I would not give Amber's parents any reason to dislike me; I knew how to behave.

The steering wheel was slippery as I drove. And although I tried to accelerate slowly, it still felt like I was going too fast.

The road was relatively clear as well. I was pretty nervous about meeting Amber's parents as I had never done this before to show my intention and sincerity toward her. I couldn't place my finger on why I was excited but nervous about what kind of parents raised a woman like her, but I knew there was no way I could accept them not liking me. At that point, there was nothing I could do without Amber anymore.

By the time I emerged from my thoughts, I was already driving past Amber's house, so I stepped on the brakes abruptly, causing myself to jerk

forward.

I took a deep breath, reversed, and parked properly on the pavement in front of the house. Amber was already on the front porch, standing on her toes as she stared at me.

I glanced at her quickly and smiled. Then, I firmed my hold on the steering wheel and prepared to get out of the car.

A hark knock landed on the window and startled me out of the thought. Amber was at the window, gesturing for me to wind down the glass. So, I did.

“Hey,” she said, obviously happy to see me.

She opened the door and sat in the passenger seat.

“Are you ready?”

I darted my eyes around quickly, trying to recover my composure. I cleared my throat.

“Hey,” I said nervously.

I put on a fake smile, but she knew it and burst into laughter at the sight of my expression.

“Why are you nervous? It’s not like this is your first time meeting your girlfriend’s parents.” Amber looked at me, waiting for my answer.

I peered into her eyes, inhaled deeply, and then turned sharply away.

“I never had a serious relationship. Most of the women I met were just a fling or one-night stand because I knew they were just after the benefits of being part of our family.”

She giggled. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, I am!”

“You are...”

We stared at each other for a moment before she burst into laughter again, and I joined her this time, hoping to discharge most of the fear.

Amber was placing a kiss on my cheek by the time I realized that she’d moved closer. I smiled widely and turned to face her.

“There’s nothing to be nervous about, okay? My parents will love you.”

“Do you think so?”

Amber sat back in her seat. “Of course, I know so. I love you, so they’ll probably love you too.”

“Probably?”

She chuckled. “They’ll love you, okay?”

I couldn’t help but sigh deeply, and my heart couldn’t help but thump.

But there was nothing much I could do, save to put a kiss on her lips.

Amber smiled against my mouth.

“Careful, Mr. Martinez. You can’t do this in front of my parents.”

I made to retreat immediately, but Amber held me in place.

“Just a moment,” she said. We kissed for a few seconds before she pushed me away with a hand to my chest.

“We should go in now.”

I looked around immediately. “Now? Can’t we take a little more time?”

Amber chortled. “And I thought you weren’t nervous....” She pushed the door open and got out.

I drew a deep breath and tried to maintain a calm composure. I took a moment to adjust my suit, then walked around the car to meet her where she stood.

Her silver-colored gown stopped just above her knees and fit her like a glove.

She held my hand and led me along toward the house. Each step made my heart pound, and although I dragged my feet, we still got to the porch anyway.

Amber took the last step to the porch when I got my hand away from hers. She turned back and stared at me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just a moment,” I said as I fiddled with my suit to adjust it properly. I took my time and even had to bend down in an attempt to tie my shoelace.

Amber grabbed my hand as we walked.

I was practically trembling, and there was no possible way to hide that. My legs were quivering, my hands were shaking, and I could barely look Amber in the eyes.

“I didn’t know Matheo Martinez could be this nervous,” Amber said. A little smile was on her face when I looked at her.

“What?”

She moved closer, took my other hand, and slipped my hands to hold her by the waist. Then she put her hands around my neck. Finally, she stood on her toes and kissed me again.

Her scent and taste doused whatever worries I was having, and although I still felt a little nervous, it felt like I would do fine with her parents, so long as I had her by my side.

“How do you feel now?” Amber said once she’d retreated and was

settling down on her feet.

I sighed deeply. I did feel relieved in some way.



The house felt warm from the moment I stepped into the living room. Everything was casual, from the walls to the furniture. There were two couches facing each other, with an armchair beside a coffee table. There was a small fireplace under the TV set, and beside the fireplace was a large picture of the trio of family members.

I looked up and around immediately. Pictures were hung on the walls, along with some self-portraits and paintings.

Mr. Stone came across as cheerful and friendly. He advertised this with a smile that crinkled his eyes and his casual shirt and baggy jeans.

Mrs. Stone had the kind of face that looked like it'd take more effort to put a smile on. If she ever did smile, you'd wonder if she was pleased or just being sage with you.

“Hi, Matheo! It's finally nice to meet you.”

Mr. Stone's greeting pulled me out of my thoughts immediately. When I looked at him, his hand was already approaching for a handshake.

I took his hand immediately, and he shook mine hard, smiling as he stared at me. My confidence immediately rose when Amber's dad joked about never having thought he would shake a billionaire's hand. I laughed and replied, “I'm glad you recovered quite well after Amber applied for the employee loan program.”

I looked and smiled at Mrs. Stone immediately after seeing her.

“Don't mind him, okay?” Amber said, referring to her dad. “He's just being funny.”

“Oh, I'm serious,” Mr. Stone corrected.

“Welcome to our humble abode, Matheo,” Her dad added.

We all laughed, except for Amber's mom.

“Mom?” Amber said.

I bowed my head a bit to Mrs. Stone once she turned to look at me upon Amber's call. She didn't appear impressed.

“Good evening, Mrs. Stone.”

The woman peered at me over her glasses before she approached.

I couldn't breathe while Mrs. Stone was staring at my face. Even her breathing was a threat, and although it wasn't hot in the room, it felt sizzling

within my suit.

“Your pictures didn’t do you justice,” Mrs. Stone said.

Mr. Stone started laughing, and Amber smiled. Unfortunately, I was unable to make a genuine expression yet.

“We’ll talk after dinner,” she said and turned back sharply. She was gone before I could say anything.

“Shall we?” Mr. Stone said before he followed his wife.

Amber slipped her hand into mine, getting me to look at her face. She smiled sweetly and moved her head in as she whispered, “So... what do you think?”

I shrugged. “I’m holding on right now.”

She smiled. “Don’t mind my mom, okay? She’s very sweet and jovial.”

“Do you think your mom likes me?”

Amber shrugged. Then she slipped her hand out of mine and walked away without answering my question.

I inhaled the delicious aroma of the sheet pan honey chili chicken with veggies and rice, which Mrs. Stone was putting in place on the table by the time I took my seat. Amber was also helping, while Mr. Stone was rubbing his palms together, obviously salivating already.

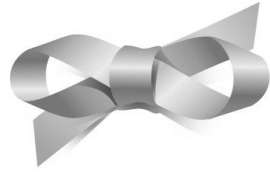
“Amber made this specifically for you,” Mr. Stone said.

Amber and I exchanged a knowing smile before she dished up my portion.

“So, how did you two meet?” Mrs. Stone asked as we were finishing up with dinner.

Everything halted immediately. I’d just put the last spoon into my mouth, so I was faced with the dilemma of whether to choke it down in a go or signal for a brief reprieve so I could chew it.

Amber and her father were also staring at Mrs. Stone, but Mr. Stone wasn’t batting an eye. Instead, she was staring still at me, demanding an answer.



Chapter Twenty-Three

Amber



I still can't figure out why it had become a tradition for parents to know how and when their child met the person they are in a relationship with as if that would determine how far the relationship was going to go or if it ever had the chance of lasting.

Matheo swallowed hard and immediately dropped his spoon. It clanged loudly on his empty plate. I was glad that he'd finished his food—I took it as a compliment to my cooking efforts.

“Ummm...” Matheo said, turning to look at me. I turned away, leaving him to face the moment alone. When I looked at him again, he was wiping his palms on his lap.

“Ummm...”

Mom chuckled. “Is that an abbreviation for something or what?”

Dad giggled.

“No, Mrs. Stone.”

“So, would you mind telling us how you've met?”

“Amber and I bumped into each other accidentally. Then I discovered she was one of our hired interns. But it turns out we had met before when we were just kids. Amber was there for me when I was younger... when I needed a friend,” Matheo said.

“Well, I hope my daughter didn't give you a headache?”

“No, of course not. She is hardworking and very resourceful,” Matheo responded.

Mom adjusted in her seat.

“So, why her?”

Matheo straightened his back immediately. As he inhaled, his chest popped out. He exhaled gently with a shaky breath, so I took his hand under the table. He turned to look at me, and I gave him an encouraging smile.

He held my hand firmly, saying, “I'm sorry I do not have grand words to express my feelings for your daughter right now, but all I know is she was different. She's full of positivity, and she always fights her battles head-on. She doesn't look at what I have but looks at who I am. She sees the real me.”

Dad smiled widely. You could see on his face that he was impressed with Matheo, but my mom was indifferent.

“Do your parents know about your relationship?”

Matheo and I looked at each other immediately, and our hands fell from each other’s just as promptly. I sighed.

“I guessed as much,” Mom said. “What are you planning to do with her when your parents find out? Do you think they’ll accept her?”

“Mom!” I exclaimed.

“Amber, you know we are always there for you, but as your parents, we also need to know what you will face in the future so we can be there and guide you,” Mom said.

“Don’t worry, we will face it together, but right now, I need to get your approval of Matheo and your blessings in our relationship,” I said.

Even Matheo looked at me with surprise.

“Matheo, we only want Amber to be happy. We don’t care about anything else as long as you can commit to loving Amber even when things are difficult.” Mom explained

“Forgive my wife, Matheo. All moms are overprotective, you know.” Dad said.

“I lost my mom recently.” Matheo blurted out.

Mom dropped her spoon. She appeared to be more surprised than sympathetic.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” my mom gave a sympathetic look to Matheo.

I stared at Matheo, hoping he wouldn’t have to go further. But he sighed deeply and kept his face straight, looking straight at my mom.

“Linda Martinez isn’t my biological mother. I only met my biological mother recently, but she died about three weeks ago after a hit-and-run incident.”

As the silence thickened, I slipped my hand into Matheo’s again to comfort him, and he turned to look at me. He gave me the ‘I’m okay’ look. But I knew he wasn’t okay. I knew the pain he was still trying to make peace with, and it must be difficult for him to talk about it again, even to my parents.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Mom said finally.

“My condolences,” Dad said as well.

Matheo smiled. “I’m okay. And I’m sorry for making you concerned about our relationship. I’m only looking for the right time to tell my father

about it. Linda always had her idea about whom I go out with. I never want her opinion to hurt Amber in any way. And Amber was friends with my biological mother before she died.”

Mom had loosened up a bit. “I’m sorry for making you talk about such a painful subject. I hope you know I’m only looking out for my daughter.”

Matheo smiled. “I know, Mrs. Stone. But you should know that I’m the lucky one here. You’ve raised Amber so well that a person like me doesn’t deserve her. So I can only do my best to appreciate what I’ve been given.”

“I can see just how much you love her,” Dad said.

Mom stared at him from behind her glasses. “Of course, you can.”

They laughed, and Matheo and I joined. When the atmosphere calmed again, Mom commented, “I hope you enjoyed your meal?”

Matheo nodded. “Yes, I did.” Then he turned to look at me before he added, “I guess I’m lucky it turned out so well.”

Mom smiled. “Don’t be deceived into thinking that she made the meal alone.”

“Mom...” I exclaimed.

“Of course, she did,” Dad said.

“Thanks, Dad...” We exchanged a fist bump.

“I guess I’m done here then,” Mom said as she rose. She began to gather the plates.

“Let me help,” I said while getting up, but she got my hand off the first plate I touched.

“Why don’t you sit with your man and your ever-supportive father?”

“Mom...?”

“Oh, I’m not angry that you two are always against me... it’s fine, okay?”

Dad was laughing already. He rose and got the plates from Mom, then began to walk away before Mom could retort. The duo then moved into the kitchen.

Matheo was smiling when I looked at his face again.



“You have a lovely family,” Matheo said once we were outside the house, approaching his car.

“Right?”

“I would be surprised if you’d turned out any different,” he added.

I laughed. “How did I turn out?”

He halted and turned to face me. “You’re loving—extremely loving and compassionate. And...” He peered into my eyes, making me curious about what lay behind the long pause.

“And...?”

He smiled widely. Then he cupped my face and kissed me passionately on my lips.

“And that.”

We laughed as we continued to walk toward his car. Once we were there, he leaned back on the car while I leaned on him.

“How are you doing?”

Matheo shrugged. “I guess I’m fine. I was so nervous about meeting your parents.”

I chuckled. “I know you were.”

He smiled. “I’m glad we’ve crossed this bridge. I think the ball is in my court now.”

Matheo’s face became clouded almost immediately after he spoke. I could feel that he was worried. He looked lost in thought.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Matheo turned his head sharply to look at my face. “I’m fine! Your family is lively.” He said sharply as well, so I understood it was because he wasn’t fine.

“Yes, we are. You still haven’t talked with your father, have you?”

“I did, and our relationship now is better. I just realized how lucky you are that your parents are there for you. They will help you stand on your feet again if you fail. If only my father and I had had a good relationship since the beginning. We wasted so much time arguing.”

“Well, forgot about the past. Always remember that our parents have their struggles in raising us, and we might not be able to understand or relate to them until we become parents in the future. Always remember that. That way, you can balance your differences and understand each other.”

Matheo smiled widely. He drew closer and pressed me tightly to his body, taking a deep breath.

“What?” I asked.

He sighed deeply again. “What would I have done without you?”

I smiled. “You feel lucky, right?”

He moved me out of his embrace and nodded hard. “Yes, I am. I’m fortunate.”

I drew him in and wrapped my hands around him. His broad shoulders made his embrace warm and comfy. We didn't say anything to each other, but I understood his feelings when he planted a kiss on my head.

When I pulled back to look at him, he looked beautiful under the moonlight, and his eyes were bright as the stars were blinking above him.

He didn't say he loved me and didn't have to. Instead, he kissed me in a way that made me wish we were not outside and that he didn't have to go. But we said farewell, and he drove away.



I didn't know what I was going to say, but I'd called George Martinez out anyway, and as I sat in the pub across from TotaBuyzz, I could only hope he would show up.

The pub was bustling, and the stools at the counter were fully occupied. Business was good that afternoon, and I could see the evidence in the bartender's face—he conversed brightly with every customer.

I shifted nervously in my seat. I should have gone to the house to see the man, but that had seemed too bold. Was this any better? I had to meet him in whatever way possible. Either I took the step or left him and Matheo to continue swaying away from each other. And Veronica wouldn't have wanted that for them.

I was sure she would have wished for them to make peace with each other.

Knowing Matheo and how stubborn and egoistical he was—I guessed that might run in the family—he would never approach his father first, and his father might have resolved to let him be.

I watched a deep blue BMW Alpina XB7 park in front of the pub. My heart began to pound. My fear was staring me in the face, so I took a deep breath and tried to gather my courage. My phone rang in my pocket.

I fiddled with the phone a bit before I could pick up the call.

“Hello...”

“Come outside,” George Martinez said.

I looked out the window and saw a car window wind down. I hung up. I couldn't think as I walked towards the door. When I got outside, one of the car's back doors opened to reveal the man I was waiting for.

I climbed in. George Martinez was already staring at me expectantly, and I knew I had to go ahead with whatever I had to say.

But he beats me to words, “Hi, Amber! How are you?”

“I’m good, Mr. Martinez.”

“You’re a sight to look at,” he commented.

I felt suffocated by what seemed like a compliment from the man, but I smiled nervously.

“I’m sorry for bothering you,” I said.

“Oh, don’t be. I’m sorry I couldn’t meet you somewhere else. I don’t like to be seen outside.”

I nodded. “I understand that.”

He tapped the back of the driver’s seat, and his driver looked back, then got out of the car to give us some privacy.

George turned to face me.

“I’m happy to see you again.”

He must have found out that I was with Matheo when his mom was brought to the hospital. There was no way Matheo had told him about our relationship—I knew he hadn’t. So, did he somehow find a way to figure out that Matheo has a relationship with me? I only hoped he hadn’t found out somehow and had done a background check on me.

I’d heard rich people did that to ensure their child’s compatibility with people they date.

“I’m sorry?”

He smiled. “Veronica once talked about you. But Matheo didn’t allow her to say much. I guess he wanted to keep you hidden from me,” he said with a smile. I could see how much he was fond of Matheo, and I felt he also loved Veronica. He wouldn’t have mentioned her name with such brightness if he hadn’t loved her.

“So, why did you want to have a conversation with me?”

I drew a long and deep breath. The man was still staring at me, and I almost forgot my planned lines.

“Matheo is fine!” I said sharply.

The man almost giggled. “You don’t have to be nervous around me. I’m just like any other old man you’ve met before.”

I smiled. “You’re Matheo’s father,” I said. I didn’t know why I had to say that, and I was embarrassed immediately because the man seemed to have caught the message in my words.

“Of course, I am. But you should know I don’t have a say in how he lives his life. For what it’s worth, I think he has good taste.”

We looked into each other's eyes, the man laughed, and I joined him lightly.

Well, perhaps George Martinez wasn't as intimidating as his reputation suggested.

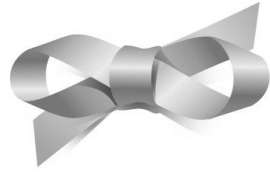
"I know I'm not in the position to meddle in your relationship with your son, but I hope you'll give him time to heal. He might not show you he loves you, but he needs your fatherly love right now."

He nodded. "Of course, you're in the position to meddle. I'm glad you've been there for him, and I can see the changes in him as well. I wouldn't be smiling with you now if I didn't think you'd made him a better man."

I smiled widely and breathed deeply as well. George's opinion of me mattered a lot, and since he had kind words for me, I couldn't help but think Matheo's father liked me after all. It felt like I'd accomplished my most significant achievement. I couldn't wait for Matheo to know that there was nothing to worry about when it came to his father learning about our relationship.

George Martinez waved at me as he drove away.

I looked at the sky. The sun was blistering, but it was nice and warm. And it was a bright day, after all.



Chapter Twenty-Four

Matheo



Meeting Amber's parents had kept me smiling throughout the weekend, and I'd carried over the smile to the new week.

But right from the moment I got to the company and walked into the hallway, I knew something terrible would happen.

There were side comments, but the usual admirations did not engender the comments. The atmosphere was ominous. Well, I shrugged it away, and since Stephanie didn't seem any different from the usual, I didn't think there was anything to worry about.

She was my assistant and secretary, and she would have informed me immediately if anything was wrong— I could trust Stephanie with that. She was always willing to tell me something I didn't want to hear.

“Hey, Stephanie. You okay?”

She nodded as she smiled. “Yes, Mr. Martinez. Good morning.”

“How was your weekend?”

She shrugged. “Fine as yours, I guess?”

I smiled. “How would you know if my weekend was fine or not?”

“You're smiling, and that's rare.”

“Go away...” I said, and we both giggled. Then I opened the door to my office, and there he was...

Eric Rodriguez.

I halted immediately and turned back to look at Stephanie. She smiled, then she shrugged and continued with whatever she was doing while clacking away on the keyboard of her computer.

Eric stood up with his usual smile. I had not seen him for three months. He'd lost some weight. Nevertheless, he looked fit in his white long-sleeve tucked into milk-colored chino trousers, which were so well-ironed that they looked as if they could cut you if you brushed past them.

“Eric?” I said as I closed the door behind me.

“Who else?”

Eric giggled. “Come on, man...” he said. “Are you just going to stand there and repeat my name?”

We embraced each other, tapping on each other's back as we did so. Eric drew me into the embrace again and held me more tightly.

"I missed you, man," he said.

"Same here, brother."

We disengaged from the embrace. And while I walked around the desk to sit, he sat in one of the chairs in front of it.

"How are you?"

Eric was smiling still. "I'm fine, very fine. I called you recently."

"Oh, yeah! You did. But your line wasn't connecting after that."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I was busy managing the set-up of our two new warehouses in Canada, but I'm here now, right?"

"Of course you are. Thank you for taking care of our newly built fulfillment centers. "

Eric chuckled. "I'm happy to help."

I smiled. "I'm glad you're back. What are you doing tonight?"

"Tonight!" he said as he adjusted. "I must visit Michelle first."

I smiled widely. Eric was a trusted friend and a very reliable employee. He flew to Canada three months ago to inspect the two giant buildings with state-of-the-art robotic upgrades that TotaBuyzz built as the newest and most technologically advanced fulfillment centers. He'd always been professional at work despite our friendship. He loved his job as I did mine, and that was all that mattered.

"So, you have to report to Michelle after seeing me?" I asked.

Eric reclined. "Yes, of course. I need to be a responsible boyfriend."

"Well, just go ahead and check her out at her desk but make sure that there is no PDA in the office," I laughed.

There was a pile of folders already waiting for me on the desk. It was a clear sign that it would be a stressful day.

I drew in a deep breath and adjusted to commence the daily activities. Thinking about Amber would only distract me from my work. Why distract myself with the thought of Amber when she was just a few steps away? I could summon her whenever I wanted to see her...

"Stephanie?"

She'd barged in without knocking.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Martinez. You need to see this," she said as she approached with an iPad. She placed it on the desk before me.

"Stephanie, what's wrong?"

“This...” She scrolled down to show me the article displayed on the screen.

The headline read in capital letters, “THE MARTINEZ’S SAGA.” I stared up at Stephanie immediately with demanding eyes.

“This came in online news and had written that Matheo’s mom is an ex-convict. So somehow, they are questioning if he is a legitimate son?”

“What’s this about?” I said as I scrolled down to read.

Just then, Amber ran in, hyperventilating.

“Amber?” I got to my feet immediately and moved to get to her.

“Reporters are in front of the building. You need to leave now.”

“What? Leave? Where do you want me to go?”

“I don’t know, but you have to go.”

She took my right hand and was already towing me out when Stephanie asked her to wait.

“How will you get out?” Stephanie asked.

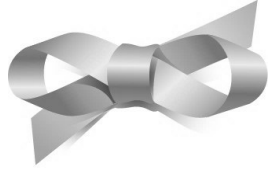
I stared at Amber. My mind was literally blank, and I was devastatingly befuddled. Whoever it was that had dragged me into this didn’t mean to hurt me alone. They were also tarnishing my mother’s reputation, with no consideration that she was dead already and should be left out of any scandal.

“Matheo, I will use your car to distract the press. I will make them think that you were driving your vehicle. Then leave when everyone is gone, and don’t go home yet, as the press might be waiting for you there.” Eric suggested.

“It’s a good idea. We can take the elevator down to the parking lot. We should be able to escape through there,” Amber said.

“My car is parked there. You can use it.” Eric managed to say.

Everything was rushed, and I didn’t feel I had time to process what was happening. So, for the moment, I went along with Amber’s escape plan as she drove out of the parking lot. But, because of my shock, I couldn’t grasp the full implications of what was happening, even as we went through the stream of reporters camping outside the company.



Chapter Twenty-Five

George

The day was bright and fair. I sat munching on pancakes on a wooden chaise lounge chair beside the pool, with an umbrella providing a lovely shade.

At my age, I wanted to relax and enjoy myself with nothing to worry about. Matheo was handling the company so well—perhaps better than I had.

I still had my daughters to worry about. However, you can't blame young girls for wanting unceasing attention from their parents, can you?

When I saw Ava running over with her iPad, I took a deep breath to prepare for whatever discovery she might have encountered while browsing the internet.

“Dad, have you seen this?” she asked as she reached me. Her expression was worried.

I sat up immediately, took the iPad from her, and read “THE MARTINEZ’S SAGA.”

“What’s this?” I demanded.

“This was up on the company’s page. It’s about Matheo.”

“What?” I looked at the screen and read more into the article.

“Who are they to think that Matheo is not my legitimate son? His mother attained the best route to reaching a high status by marrying a rich man. What is this”

I wondered who’d given out the news about Matheo being the son of a housemaid. Who had captured the footage of him tending to Veronica in the hospital?

“What’s this all about?” Ava asked.

I didn’t know how to answer her. Just then, my phone began to ring incessantly.

“Dad...?”

“This is...” I looked into Ava’s face and realized there was no way she could digest whatever I told her at that moment. So, I got up, wrapped a white towel around my waist, and hurried towards the exit.

Linda met me at the door and gave way immediately.

“What’s happening?”

I halted my steps toward the stairs. “There’s a ridiculous article about Matheo.”

Linda was indifferent. “Oh, you mean THE MARTINEZ’S SAGA? It was quite a good read, though.”

“Linda?”

She shrugged. “You can’t fault someone for writing about the truth, can you?”

I laughed. “Of course, I will. And I’m only sorry for whatever I’m going to do to whoever wrote this.” I turned away from her and walked up the stairs into the bedroom.

Linda’s behavior wasn’t a surprise. But, of course, you can’t be surprised when a pot on fire steams, so it was only typical of her to react that way.

But I had hoped she would be humane enough to let go of whatever grudges she had. She had her daughters already, and they loved Matheo more than they seemed to love their parents.

And Veronica was dead, anyway. So Linda couldn’t be jealous of her anymore, could she?

As the day went on, I was bombarded with calls from investors, shareholders, stakeholders, and friends.

Eventually, I turned off my phone.



“Say something, George....”

Everyone in the boardroom wanted me to speak. I owned the highest share in the company, and there was no way I would let them get what they wanted—for Matheo to be booted out.

“Matheo’s birth mother was an ex-convict. They think his mother was a gold digger as she used to be your housemaid. We can’t risk the reputation of the company being associated with this,” one of the shareholders was showing his disapproval of Matheo managing TotaBuyzz. He was the third highest shareholder in the company, but that didn’t mean he had a say in whatever was happening with my family.

“Don’t forget that his mother used to be my wife as well,” I said, apparently with calm composure.

The board members all looked at each other while murmuring. When it died down, another board member asked:

“What are we going to do about this?”

“We’ll need to elect a new CEO,” another board member suggested.

I looked at the second-highest shareholder of the company. He wasn’t saying anything. He’d been a quiet person, and I’d say we were friends. But, sitting with men who wanted more than what they should have, I couldn’t trust anyone to be on my side.

I sat upright and sighed deeply. “Can anyone here say Matheo hasn’t been doing well?”

They all turned to look at each other’s faces, this time without murmuring.

“That’s not what we’re trying to—”

I interrupted the board member who was talking. “I don’t care what you were trying to say, Kevin. Answer the question.”

“He’s the son of an ex-convict, for heaven’s sake!”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

“We should take a vote,” someone shouted. Others cheered.

I chuckled. “Take a vote, you say? No, we’re not taking a vote.”

The third highest shareholder bolted out of his chair. “This board will not take this attitude from you, George. We need our voices heard.”

I laughed. “It’s obvious that your voices are ridiculously unreasonable. But, since Matheo has been in charge of this company, we’ve been doing more than fine. Our employee’s morale has never been this good, and everyone wants to be part of this company now because of Matheo’s employee program, which allowed us to hire the best talent we could get. Or does any one of you have anything else to say to fault his achievements so far?”

There was a moment of silence.

“I thought as much,” I said. But then, I met everyone’s eyes when I turned to look at each of them, and they turned their face away immediately.

“If you people can’t admit how competent Matheo is and will only go about how he’s the son of an ex-convict, we’ll have to rethink our businesses together. Don’t forget that I’m the chairman. I managed to grow TotaBuyzz as the leading e-commerce business globally, and Matheo was able to reinforce the loyalty and dedication of our employees, so all of you can enjoy the profits of your investment. Because of Matheo’s employee program, our profits tripled. Everyone worked harder than they used to. So, if you threaten to force my son out of the company again, you’ll have to pull out your shares. There’s a line-up of investors waiting to be in your seat. I promise you that!

We only needed your money to grow this company, but Matheo and I did all the hard work.”

“George!” everyone exclaimed.

“You all know I mean this. I never knew I was working with a bunch of...” I paused—being verbally abusive wasn’t necessary.

“So...” I glanced at the third highest shareholder, and everyone stared peevishly back at me.

“Whose son would you make the new CEO after kicking Matheo out?”

“What? What the hell are you insinuating, George?” he asked.

I smiled. “You must have done a lot to cajole the other board members,” I said and looked at everyone in the face, although they avoided eye contact with me while clearing their throats. He looked guilty immediately.

“George, I...”

“Don’t be surprised that your son will soon be arrested for being a habitual drug user.”

He stared at me incredulously, as did the other board members.

“And you should find out how many years you’d spend in prison for embezzling the company’s funds. Perhaps you’ll have more sympathy for people who’ve served time after that.”

The third highest shareholder stood up immediately.

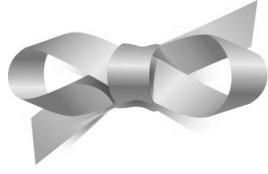
“I didn’t embezzle the company’s funds!”

I chuckled and reclined in the chair. “That’s to tell you how far I’ll go to get back at everyone who seeks to play dirty tricks on my family or me to get the company I worked hard for. There’s no way Matheo’s dropping his position. I’m still the highest shareholder anyway, so I’ll take charge until your shenanigans die down.”

I was already on my feet as the murmuring went on. I had moved on when someone tried to say something I wasn’t interested in listening to.

“We’re done here, everyone. Have a nice day.”

I couldn’t care less if they had a bad or good day. But I was sure they’d gotten a very clear message.



Chapter Twenty-Six

Amber

Matheo Martinez. Given how blessed he was in some areas of his life, you might think he would have it easy. But unfortunately, that was not the case, as I was quickly discovering.

He leaned towards me in the backseat of his friend's car, and I cradled his head against my chest. He hadn't said a word since we'd left the company, and I didn't know how best to console him.

Matheo was at a point when he needed me to stand by his side, and I was ready for that. My only worry was that I didn't feel equipped to advise him on how to deal with the mess he was in. Essentially, there was nothing I could do for someone like him anyway. He had everything— he'd always had everything, so how was I supposed to help him to live with the possibility of losing it all?

I kissed his forehead, and he rubbed the side of his head against my chest as he took a deep breath.

I was glad Eric, Matheo's friend, was there when we needed him. And he seemed concerned and loyal to Matheo.

We had just parked the car on the pavement in front of my house when my phone buzzed in my bag. It was Matheo's father.

"Is Matheo alright?"

That was the man's first words when I picked up the call. I could hear the shuddering in his voice, and I knew it wasn't from old age; it was because he was worried about his son.

"He's fine."

"Are you with him now?"

"Yes, I am. I brought him home."

"Home? He shouldn't go home for now. Some reporters are already here, and it's only a matter of time before they go to his house."

"You don't have to worry, Mr. Martinez. I brought him to my house."

He sighed deeply. "That's so thoughtful of you. Thank you."

"Matheo will be fine, so you don't have to worry too much about him."

I felt the man sigh deeply. A little voice in the background asked how

Matheo was doing, and I surmised it was one of Matheo's sisters.

"Thank you, Amber. I couldn't reach Matheo on his mobile."

I glanced at Matheo. He seemed deep in thought, whirling away without being aware of anything around him.

"He must have forgotten it in the office. We left in a rush."

"Okay then. Tell Matheo that I will handle the rest in the office. I'll contact you later if that's okay with you?"

"Definitely, Mr. Martinez. You can call any time."

Matheo was opening the door when his father hung up the call. I put the phone away immediately and received him as he came over for a hug.

I could feel that he was mentally stressed, and since the only thing I was good for, at that moment, was by hugging him, I held him tightly in my embrace and patted him lightly on his back.

"You're going to be okay, and your father called to tell you not to worry about everything else in the office," I turned to Mateo and touched his face.

Eric met us after he helped us to get away from the reporters. He cleared his throat to draw our attention, so Matheo and I disengaged from the embrace immediately.

"I'm sorry to disturb you two," he said. "Can you tell me what's going on here?" Eric asked.

I looked at Matheo's face. He appeared reluctant, and I thought he might not want to share the situation with Eric, but perhaps that wasn't how he felt.

"We should go inside," I suggested.

I slipped my hand into Matheo's as we walked to the house while Eric followed. I guessed that my dad would probably be at work by that time of day, and Mom should be out with her friends. So, thankfully, we had the house to ourselves.



"Linda isn't your birth mother?" Eric asked once Matheo had told him his story.

Matheo nodded. "Everything is complicated right now."

Eric chuckled. "Complicated, you say? It's pretty messed up, and that's the beauty of it."

Eric seemed to have a unique way of looking at things.

"I believe this article was written to put you in a difficult situation, but that doesn't mean you aren't the son of your father, right?"

Matheo and I looked at each with raised eyebrows, wondering what Eric was getting at.

“Eric, I don’t think you understand everything that’s going on,” Matheo said.

“What’s there not to understand?” Eric said. “This article is surely a device meant to get you out of the company, but it only gives reasons for you to stay. Whoever did this has made a big mistake.”

Matheo didn’t seem convinced by Eric’s words, but I was relieved. Eric talked persuasively that you only had to follow his line of thought to see the possibility of whatever his assertion was.

“I’m sorry about your mom, though,” Eric said.

Matheo stared long at Eric without uttering a word. Then he abruptly rose to his feet and began to pace forth and back.

I rose to meet him.

He turned sharply to look at me. “Do you think Linda is behind this?”

I recoiled immediately. His suspicion was reasonable. But what was Linda’s motive?

“I’m sure she wants me out of the company,” Matheo said.

“We can’t be sure if she’s behind this,” I said while trying to be unbiased. But as Matheo stared into my eyes, I felt guilty for not agreeing with what he thought of his stepmother.

I should take his side.

“I’m sure of this,” he said with clear conviction.

I squeezed his hand, trying to signal my support.

“Can I use your phone?” Matheo requested.

I gave him the phone, which he practically grabbed. Then he turned his back while punching a number in.

“Hello...any news? What?”

I watched as Matheo conversed with the other person on the line. Whatever they were talking about, Matheo was getting even more worried.

“You said two weeks... it’s been more than two weeks already...when?... How sure are you?”

I felt I should make him stop the call, so I approached. But it was then that he got to the height of the conversation.

“She’s the culprit! You have to find the evidence... How hard is that?... One more week... that’s all!”

Matheo was breathing deeply when he cut the call. He’d already raised

his hand as if to smash the phone when he realized the phone in his hand wasn't his. He lowered his arm slowly to his side.

I hadn't seen Matheo angry before. He looked like a different person, and I didn't know what to make of that. But I knew he had every reason to be angry. He'd been bottling up his emotions recently, and there was certainly sufficient cause for emotional reactions—his mom had died, and his stepmother was his prime suspect.

It made sense that Matheo would think of Linda first and not consider the possibility of someone else being the culprit.

“Who was that?” Eric asked. I was glad he did. I'd wanted to ask Matheo but could not bring myself to do so.

“That's the private investigator I hired to investigate my mom's case,” Matheo said.

Eric rose to his feet. “Was there any suspicion about the cause of her death?”

Matheo looked into my eyes, and I gestured for him to be calm. I didn't know about the private investigator, but there was no reason to go into too many details.

He looked away just then. “Perhaps,” he said in response to his friend's question.

He collapsed on the couch, and I sat beside him. “You need to take it easy, love.”

Matheo looked at me and sighed.

I could only imagine the pain and frustration he was going through at that moment.



Eric left. It was 1:00 pm already. Matheo certainly hadn't had breakfast, and it was probably past his lunchtime already, so I was in the kitchen making a sandwich for him.

My phone began to ring.

“Hello, Mr. Martinez.”

“Your voice reassures me that Matheo is fine.”

I smiled widely, although he couldn't see me. “Yes, he is. Do you want to talk to him?”

“No!” he said sharply. I moved my ear away from the phone to avoid being deafened.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized immediately, then added, “I’m not sure he’ll want to talk to me right now.”

“I understand, Mr. Martinez. But you won’t know unless you try.”

“I’m sure about this. I’m not the person he needs right now, Amber. But we all have our roles in his life, and I’m sure this situation requires only you with him. Although I’m sorry for the inconvenience.”

“Oh, no, sir. There’s no inconvenience here. Matheo is doing just fine.”

“I won’t bet on that. Thank you once again. I guess I owe you one?”

I giggled. “Not necessarily, Mr. Martinez. Matheo is my responsibility as well. He would have done the same and more for me.”

“Alright then,” he said somewhat dismissively, so I hung up.

I returned to the kitchen to pick up the small tray on which I had set the sandwiches. Then I walked out and up the parallel oak stair.

Matheo was curled up in bed when I entered my room. I placed the tray on the bedside cabinet and joined him in bed, sitting close to his head.

He raised his head and placed it on my lap, and I rubbed his temples gently.

I wished the situation allowed me to express my desires, but I had to hold them in. I shouldn’t hope to console him with sex—that would be so unhealthy, I thought.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the private investigator.”

“I’m sure you had your reasons,” I said.

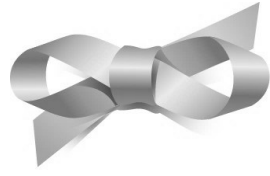
He raised his head and stared up into my eyes. “Whatever the reason was, I should have told you about it.”

I smiled and gave him a ‘that’s fine’ look. Then he lowered his head back to my lap, following a kiss on his head.

“I made your sandwich,” I said and made to get down from the bed immediately, but Matheo held me still.

“Let’s just stay like this for a moment,” he said.

Whatever he needed, I was ready to give it to him.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

Matheo



I had loved *the atmosphere* and the simplicity of it by the time I woke up after the best sleep I'd had in a long while.

Amber's room was small but spacious. The walls were white with pops of pink here and there, obviously to announce her femininity, and the door was eggshell with a brass handle.

There was a window above the headboard with white blinds. Amber had no wardrobe. Instead, she had a couple of rails the length of the walls to hang her clothes, with her shoes lined up below.

The bed was queen-sized with a white blanket and pink pillows. Her white nightstand had double compartments, and on it was a lamp.

Amber's room was comfy and restful. The air was also relatively clear, and I could breathe while momentarily forgetting the situation at hand.

I imagined her sitting at the small white desk before the bed.

I got out of bed, walked out of the room, and then paddled down the oak stairs.

Mrs. Stone came out of the kitchen with a silver dish molded like a dome. We halted in unison, and she turned her head slowly to look at me.

"Matheo," she said with a small smile on her face. Then she headed for the dinner table to put down the dish.

Mr. Stone came out of the room just then. The man was already drawing me into his embrace before I could react. So, I held stiff, looking over his shoulder at Mrs. Stone behind him.

"How are you, Matheo?" he asked as he patted me on my back.

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing in particular. Then, Amber came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands with a dish towel.

Amber had told her parents about my situation, and I couldn't be more thankful.

"It's okay if you stay here," Mrs. Stone said.

"You can stay for as long as you want," Mr. Stone said. Then he tapped me on both sides of my shoulders.

I chuckled lightly, exchanging a bright smile with Amber.

Amber was putting on a white apron with a double pocket, making her look somewhat older than she was.

Mrs. Stone snapped her fingers in front of my face. “You’re not sleeping in Amber’s bed. Just so you know.” She was smiling when she turned back to walk away, and Mr. Stone was smiling. Even Amber was smiling as she turned back to follow her mom into the kitchen, and I couldn’t put my finger on whatever had caused the hilarity.

“I’m sure you won’t mind, right?” Mr. Stone said. He walked towards the dinner table and sat in one of the chairs.

I joined him a couple of seconds later. The aroma of whatever Amber and her mom were making in the kitchen had already permeated the room.

The smokiness coming out of the kitchen was rich, and I could almost taste the flavor of baked salmon.

Once Amber and her mom joined us at the dinner table with the last dish for their dinner settings, you could see in their faces that dinner would be great.

It was baked salmon with grapefruit salad.

Mrs. Stone said a little prayer before we picked up our utensils. The salmon was moist and flaky and melted in my mouth immediately.



Mrs. Stone had given up her space for me on the bed. She was already with Amber in her room while Mr. Stone volunteered to sleep on a futon sofa bed in the living room.

I loved sleeping with the light on— at least the bedside lamp.

I knew I’d have to adjust to many more things through a couple of days I would be in the house. I couldn’t complain.

The main bedroom was spacious compared to Amber’s. The walls were made of dark wooden ware, and the wind whispered eerily through the cracks.

The moonlight filtered through the blinds and painted a few stripes of grey light on the wall. It made me miss home, where I could stand out on my balcony under the moon.

“Can’t sleep, Matheo?” Mr. Stone asked.

Mr. Stone silently entered the room to get a pillow but noticed I was still awake.

I adjusted immediately and drew the blanket up. “I’m sorry, I had so

much on my mind. I apologize for dragging your family into this mess.”

The man drew a long breath. Then he sat up and leaned back against the headboard.

“You have nothing to worry about. You’re always welcome here,” Mr. Stone smiled afterward.

“Life is going to be easy if you have someone you can turn to during difficult times,” Mr. Stone continued.

“Who said life was going to be a smooth ride? Your job is to navigate through them as best as you can.”

I assumed the same seating position while facing him.

He shrugged. “There are lots of questions we don’t have answers to,” he said. “Life is complex at times.”

I raised a brow immediately. “I know I love Amber.”

Mr. Stone snorted. “I know you do. I can see how much you love her by looking into your eyes. But just because you love her doesn’t mean it’s enough. Love constantly evolves as it shows how deeply connected and committed we are to the person we love. Love takes a lot of work, passion, determination, and trust.

I wondered why my father and I had never had conversations like this. But then, I realized that I had missed out on many things, and maybe I had been too hard on the man.

Maybe he deserved the way I had treated him, or he didn’t. But the fact remained that, by being angry with him and constantly pushing him away, I had woken up one day to become an adult, then realized that I had never experienced things I should have experienced while growing up.

I hoped it wasn’t too late.

I sighed deeply. When I looked at him again, Mr. Stone had decided to go back into the living room to doze off, so I laid down and called it a night.



I woke up at 5 am and began to wander around the kitchen—a delicious scent wafting from the bunch of basil in a vase of water on the counter. The aroma helped me to focus as I did some thinking.

Although I had escaped to Amber’s house to avoid the situation, I’d realized that avoiding it wouldn’t clear the air. So instead, facing the problem head-on might be what I needed to do.

However, there was something else that I needed to do first.

The kitchen and the freezer had almost everything I needed to make breakfast, so I began to collect everything together, excited that Amber would love me more when she found out I had prepared the breakfast that morning.

I'd just selected a more sizeable bowl for the combination of pork, bacon, maple syrup, and sage mixture when I felt two hands slipping into my waist and holding me by the torso.

I cringed a bit before I realized that it was Amber.

"Good morning," she said. Then she planted a kiss on my back.

"Good morning," I said.

She bent sideways to peep at what I was doing. "What are you up to?"

I smiled. "Making breakfast."

Amber removed her hands immediately and walked to stand beside me.

"You're making breakfast?"

Her eyes were inquisitive.

"Yes, as a gratitude to your parents for making me stay here."

She shrugged. "Mr. Martinez, I think you just want to show off that you're a perfect boyfriend for their daughter."

I chuckled. "This is my game plan, so they won't let me get away from you."

"For sure!"

I smiled and turned away from her. Amber watched with interest and wonder as I began to shape the patties. I scooped out 2 ounces of pork mixture and flattened them to create 3-inch-wide patties. Afterward, I was able to form about 13 patties.

"Wow," Amber said with widened eyes.

I kissed her head quickly and moved over to turn on the stove. Amber slipped her hands around my waist as I heated canola oil in a large cast iron skillet over medium heat.

"Anything I can help with?" She asked.

I shook my head lightly. "It's my treat, okay?"

She nodded. "That's fine then."

I added the sausage patties and began to cook until browned, about 2-3 minutes per side. Soon enough, my homemade sausage for breakfast was done and served on four plates.

Amber inhaled deeply.

"This smells good," she complimented.

"Really? Wait until you have a taste."

She touched the meal, and I slapped the back of her hand, making her jerk back. Then, we exchanged a smile as she sucked her fingers.

“Wow, this is nice.”

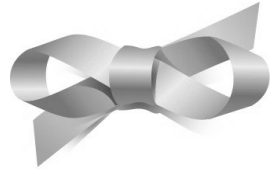
She touched the sausage again quickly, and before I could retort, she slid her finger into my mouth. My heart leaped.

Amber was seductively beautiful that morning; I had been too focused on the cooking to realize it had first. Her nightgown was rather skimpy, and once I'd noticed, it was hard to look away from the curves it exposed.

It felt like Amber and I was alone in the house for a moment. Then, it felt like we were a married couple about to have good morning sex.

With a hand on her back, I drew her in, and she crashed into my body. She had stiffened and was staring intensely into my eyes. We breathed shakily together when I pressed my lips against hers, and my desires were stimulated.

I was already hard where it mattered, and I was sure Amber felt my reaction. She raised one of her legs, and I caught it as she snaked it around me.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

Amber



Matheo had immense power over my desire. He tasted so good that it felt impossible for me to relinquish his lips.

I arched towards him, enjoying the way his hands explored my body. First, his fingers trailed down my back, then he grabbed onto one of my buttocks and squeezed it in his large palm.

I was wearing underwear, but it was a pair so insubstantial that he'd be able to flick it aside with a finger. Instead, excitement began to build as I felt his hand sliding further up between my inner thighs. I could feel his hard-on nudging against me as well.

But then he pulled his head away abruptly and held back, fighting to calm his breathing.

The sound of approaching footsteps made us disengage from the entanglement. My dad scuffled into the kitchen and sent a little smile towards Matheo and me as we stood side by side, backs against the counter, looking awkward. The man looked as if he had a good idea of what we'd been up to before he came in.

I suddenly realized I was home, and my parents were with us.

"Good morning..."

"Good morning, Mr. Stone," Matheo said.

"Good morning, Dad." I looked at him and blushed.

"You're up early," Dad said to Matheo.

Matheo was probably about to answer him when Mom joined us. But, instead, she halted abruptly on entering the kitchen. She sniffed as he moved closer to Matheo and me.

"What's that?"

Dad was about to drink from a bottle of water he'd gotten from the fridge, but he looked around for whatever Mom was referring to.

"What?" he asked.

Mom turned back sharply to look at him. "Can't you smell something?"

Dad sniffed as well, but then he shrugged. "The kitchen smells nice?"

I smiled and moved away a bit to reveal what Matheo had prepared.

“Matheo made breakfast,” I said.

Matheo smiled sheepishly while Mom and Dad stared at him with disbelief.

“He cooks?” Dad asked.

“Of course, he cooks,” Mom said.

“It’s nothing compared to what you have done for me. I just wanted to thank you for having me.”

“Matheo, don’t worry about it, and we’re sorry that we couldn’t be more helpful,” Dad said.

“Mr. Stone, what you’ve done is more than enough. You gave me a place that I can run to so I can gather my strength,” Matheo looked to my dad with an assurance that he was pleased.

“Why don’t you go to the table, and we’ll bring everything out,” I suggested. But Mom was already getting her plate, and Dad had done the same.

We joined them at the table a few seconds later. By then, Mom was already emptying her plate.

“Mom, will you go slowly?” I asked while settling into the chair beside Matheo.

“This is so delicious,” she said with a muffled voice. “How did you learn to cook so well?”

I turned to look at Matheo. I wanted to know his story as well.

He glanced at me before looking at my mom with his usual bright smile.

“I also studied culinary arts short courses on the side while I was at the business school in college,” he said.

Mom looked at me immediately. “Did you know about this?”

I nodded my head lightly. “Yup, he cooks well.”

“That’s why you’re doing such a sloppy job of making him propose to you!”

“Mom!”

Matheo was laughing, and so was Dad, but Mom didn’t mind. She continued with the food immediately.

“She’s obsessed with men who can cook,” Dad said as he pushed his head forward over his plate, almost whispering to Matheo.

“I wonder how I ended up with you,” Mom said.

Dad sat back in the chair and sighed deeply. “Wasn’t it because you were head over heels for me?”

Mom sniggered. “You never bought me a single heel then, did you?”

Matheo laughed. “That was funny.”

Mom and Dad had always been like a cat and mouse, but teasing appeared to be their love language.

Watching Matheo smiling and laughing with my parents gave me a sense of fulfilled responsibility. I felt reassured that he was protected from the outside world and appeared to be in good spirits.

He’d also revealed himself as a total package—a man who could cook is more attractive to a woman like me.

When I absentmindedly attempted to pick up my remaining sausage with a fork, I found my plate empty.

Someone had stolen my food.

“Dad...?”

He recoiled immediately, pointing his fork at mom. “Ask her.”

“Mom...?”

She was already swallowing. She looked smug and unrepentant as she met my eyes. “Oh, I thought you were done.”

I sighed exasperatedly. “I hadn’t even started yet.”

“But you’ve had some, right?”

“Of course, but I wanted the rest too.”

“You left it on your plate, didn’t you? I was only trying to avoid wasting food.”

Matheo put the remaining food on his plate onto mine, giving me a sweet smile.

“So, you’re staying for a month, right?” Mom asked.

Dad burst into laughter and could only stop after a few seconds. By then, Mom was glaring at him.

When he’d caught his breath, he asked, “Why don’t you ask him to stay a year?”

Mom shrugged. “That’ll be okay with me,” she said and turned to Matheo. Then she added, “If that’s okay with you.”

“Mom, I can’t allow my man to become your chef,” I said.

Mom sighed. “Aren’t you lucky, my dear?” She stood up and stared down at dad. “What good is a man who can’t even cook?”

Dad snorted. “A man has much other use apart from being able to cook, don’t you know?” He rose and followed her into the kitchen.

“Aren’t they a delight to deal with?”

Matheo laughed. "You're lucky."

I looked at his face. Although he was smiling, I could feel that he was thinking about something deeply; it was indeed something about the past or what he had wished could have been possible for his family.

I placed my hand into his hand, and he turned his head towards me. We exchanged a smile, and he gave my fingers a light squeeze.

"Thank you for this," he said.

"Thank you for breakfast," I said.

He chortled. "Anytime, dear."



Matheo and Dad looked like two boys on a school holiday lying on the couch, doing nothing in particular.

The weather was nice that afternoon, and it was quiet. But unfortunately, I had just realized that I'd skipped work without notifying Mrs. Percy about my absence, and I couldn't get through to her phone line.

Dad was already dozing off on the couch, and although Matheo had his eyes closed, I knew he was wide awake. Since Mom was probably in their bedroom, I could squat before Matheo to kiss his forehead.

He smiled without opening his eyes.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey, are you okay?"

He nodded. "I'm just fine."

Just then, we heard a car coming to a stop in front of the house.

"Is that...?" I paused with a finger pointing toward the direction.

Matheo rose to look out the window. "That should be Eric," he confirmed.

We both walked to the door. Eric was already at the front porch, with Stephanie standing beside him.

"Hi, boss," Stephanie said.

Matheo smiled at her. "Hey, Stephanie... Eric?"

"Hey, man. You good?"

Matheo and Eric embraced each other. Stephanie drew me into her embrace and whispered,

"Thank you for this."

She took Matheo's phone from her bag and handed it to him.

"Your father has been calling," she said.

Matheo took the phone from her without enthusiasm but thanked her anyway.

“Shall we go inside?” I suggested.

Stephanie excused herself. She had to oversee some things since Matheo wouldn't be around for some time.

“Your father has a new task for me, so I must head back immediately.”

Matheo moved forward. “Are you working for my father now?”

Stephanie scoffed. “I wish! He's nicer to me than you are.”

Matheo chuckled. “What do you mean?”

Stephanie shook her head lightly. Then she brought out her phone and began to scroll through it.

“What are you doing?” Matheo asked.

“Booking a cab. I don't think Eric here will take me back, right?” She looked at Eric, and he smiled awkwardly at her.

Eric pushed his way into the house. My phone was ringing, but it was an unknown number. Matheo was staring at me as I picked up the call.

“Is that my father?” he asked.

The voice on the other end of the line was hoarse, and the first thing the person said was, “Mr. Matheo...?”

I handed the phone over to Matheo, who strolled away and began an animated conversation.

“Really...? Right away...good... thank you.”

He looked excited when he returned with the phone.

“Who was that?” I asked.

“It's the private investigator. He has something for me.”

“What's that?”

He shrugged. “I guess I'll have to go there and find out.”

Eric drew closer. “We should go, too, right?” he asked, looking at Matheo eagerly. “I'll drive.”

“Who's this?” Mom said as she came out of the bedroom, staring at Eric. Dad was up by then, so I made a quick introduction.

“What's going on?” Mom asked.

“I'm sorry, Mrs. Stone. I have to go now... Can I take Amber with me?”

“Of course you can!” Dad said.

“Is everything okay?” Mom asked.

Matheo gave her the necessary reassurances.

Mom nodded. “Take care.”

“I will.”

With that, Matheo took my hand, and we headed for the car along with Eric.



About 45 minutes later, Eric parked the car in front of a building downtown.

I followed Matheo into the private investigator’s office. A bald man popped up behind a metal desk, looking rather excited.

“Mr. Martinez,” he said.

“You got something for me?” Matheo asked as he attempted to approach him, walking around stacks of files, but the man said he could stay right in his position.

The bald man shifted through some papers on his desk. Then he ushered us onto the sofa and took a seat opposite us.

“I found the driver who hit your mom,” he announced.

Matheo accepted the file the man held out to him.

“It was a stolen vehicle. He paid someone to get the CCTV footage, but we could track the employee who disappeared after the accident. As soon as we find him, we will coordinate with the police so they can release a composite sketch of the suspect.” the man explained.

Matheo glimpsed at him before looking back at the info in the file. “Where is he now?”

“I don’t think that’s the right question....”

“What do you mean?” Eric said.

The man looked at Eric and chuckled. “I’m sorry, you are...?”

Eric snorted. Matheo sighed exasperatedly and told the man to answer the question.

“Well, he already scrapped the car, and he’s a contract killer specializing in hit-and-runs. So, the question is, where would he be?”

“Where?” Matheo asked.

The man sighed deeply and handed another file to Matheo. “Unfortunately, he knows where to hide. We can’t get a lead of his whereabouts for now.” He said and sniggered. “He’s a junkie.”

Matheo breathed deeply and put the files away. “So...?”

“It’ll be impossible to catch someone like him so easily. He’s probably a professional in this job, so he knows how to cover his tracks. But he’s bound

to come out soon, and we must prepare for possible situations where he could leave some loose ends.” Eric turned to Matheo.

Matheo sighed deeply. He picked up the files again and looked at them consecutively. Then he turned to look at me.

“What do you think?”

I wasn’t sure if my opinion mattered or not, and although I wished he would drop everything and focus on being happy, I didn’t think I was supposed to tell him to let go of everything when he was just a step away from finding the person who killed his mother.

The private investigator was probably waiting for my response just as Matheo - probably Eric as well, as they all were staring at me.

“I think Eric is right,” I agreed.

The private investigator sighed heavily and turned to look at Matheo. Matheo nodded gently and took the files from me, and while handling them back to the man, he said:

“Let’s do that then.”

The man stood up from the chair. “I’ll get on with it right away,” he said and walked back to his desk.

“How soon will that be?” Eric asked.

“It depends... let’s just hope he makes a mistake as soon as possible.”

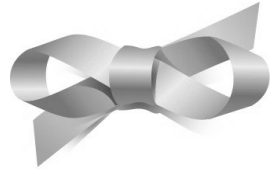
Matheo shrugged. “And Linda? Did you find anything on her?”

The investigator turned back. His face suddenly turned sluggish, and his eyes couldn’t look outright at Matheo.

“No, nothing.”

I looked at Matheo. There was disappointment in his eyes, even though he was trying not to show it. I didn’t know why I was glad that the investigator had found nothing on the suspicion over Linda. It wasn’t even because I hoped she would be innocent. It was obvious that Matheo would have difficulty coping with his stepsisters after such a fallout with Linda, and I didn’t want him to go through that.

We were back on the road to my house a few minutes later. Matheo was quiet throughout the drive.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

Matheo



Two days later

“The hit-and-run driver took the bait!” the private investigator said. He’d expected this to happen. He already had a plan and liaised with the police for backup.

If I could have it my way, I’d love to shoot the man in the head, but it wouldn’t solve anything, and a man must consider his priorities when seeking vengeance. Besides, throwing my life away for this man made no sense. He’d undoubtedly get whatever was coming for him in the end. What I truly sought from him was a name—possibly Linda. I needed to know who’d arranged a hit on my mom.

It was time Linda got punished for her crimes. I couldn’t let the matter go, even to protect Ava and Mabel’s image of their mother. What kind of mother could she be if she was a killer, anyway? They were my siblings, and I was ready to make them my responsibility.

The alley appeared to be deserted when we arrived. However, there were police officers stationed covertly around the corner. In addition, the investigator had a brown envelope stuffed with paper instead of money.

The man who entered the alley appeared to be at most thirty years old. He fidgeted in the pockets of his hood as he walked towards the investigator with a slinky gait.

The investigator seemed almost too calm for the situation. I was trying not to worry that the man might discover a crack in the pretense and escape before we even started. I’d hidden with a couple of police officers behind some garbage bins at the end of the alley to hear what was being said. However, it was also being recorded and had a hidden microphone from the investigator.

The man removed his hands from his pockets.

“I’m supposed to meet you here, eh?” the man asked. He wouldn’t stop looking around, and with one look at him, you’d know he was a drug addict as well. His fingers wouldn’t stop fiddling his nose, and he wouldn’t stop sniffing hard.

“Yes,” the private investigator said. Then he added, “I guess you’re the driver?”

“Of course, that’s obvious.”

“That’s good.”

“So, you said you have a job for me?”

“Oh, yeah. I’d heard you might be the right guy to care of something for me.”

The man chuckled, sounding pleased. “That’s my job, okay? First, you need to tell me who and the place for the job. Then, I’ll handle the rest.”

I closed my eyes and sighed deeply to calm myself. The man talked about his job as if he had done it with pride. He’d probably felt that way when he’d hit my mom.

“I need a down payment.”

“How am I to be sure that you’re going to do a good job? I don’t want any loose ends,” The private investigator said. “How do I know you’ll do a clean and thorough job?”

I couldn’t breathe as I waited for the hitman to answer. The purpose of recording him was to make him confess to his crime, and so far, there had been no conclusive evidence to tie him to my mom’s hit-and-run incident.

The man laughed. “You want a reference? Didn’t you go through someone to get hold of me?”

The private investigator sighed deeply. “I did, but you know things like this could be lied about.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that. I completed a rather high-profile job, and the client was very pleased with my work.”

I breathed deeply. The police officers beside me tapped my arm, reminding me to keep quiet.

“Who was your client?” the investigator asked.

There was hesitation from the driver, but finally, he said, “I do a squeaky clean job. That’s the only thing that I guarantee you.”

The investigator pretended to be ignorant of the name. “How would I know that?”

“Why did you come here to see me, then?”

“Hmm...”

“Now, the advance payment, please? I need to be out of here.”

The investigator scratched his bald head with the other hand while stretching out the envelope in his right hand to the man. Scratching his head

was a signal. The police officers got ready to intervene.

The tension between the man and the investigator suddenly heightened. The driver had already dropped the envelope and had a knife out, ready to attack the investigator.

“What’s the fuck is this?” he asked.

The investigator looked around in panic, expecting the police officers to come out by then. But the driver had noticed his movements, and he became more suspicious.

“Did you set me up?” he exclaimed, glancing around the alley.

The investigator had his hands in front of him, trying to protect his face.

“Fuck! You set me up?” the hitman shouted and made to attempt for the investigator with his knife. Fortunately, the police moved out of their hiding places and pointed their gun at him.

“Drop the knife,” one of the police said. Then he added, “Put your hands where I can see them.”

The man sniggered and began to retreat slowly. Then, in a whirl of movement, he grabbed the investigator and placed his knife to his throat.

“Stay back,” he threatened.

I looked around to see what I could do, but there were no reasonable options.

“You set me up! Who are you?” the hitman shouted in the investigator’s ear as he dug the tip of the knife into the man’s neck. A small line of blood had already begun to snake down the investigator’s neck, but the man seemed determined to cut his throat if the police refused to back off.

“You idiot,” I said, stepping out to where the hitman could see me.

The man narrowed his eyes at me and smirked. “And who the fuck are you?” he inquired.

“You hit my mom with your car, you murderer.”

He chuckled. “Who the hell is your mom? I have no business with you.” Then he paused. “Did you set me up?”

“This is just the beginning, you fool. There’s no way out of this.”

“Oh, there is.” He looked carefully at the police officers as he spoke.

“You’ll allow me to leave, or I’ll cut this man’s throat. Make your choice.”

I noticed the investigator moving his hand as he stared intently at the police officers. He seemed to signal to them, while the hitman was more focused on me.

“Calm down, okay?” the investigator said.

“Shut up!” the man commanded.

One of the police officers dropped his cuffs abruptly, and they clattered on the ground, creating a momentary distraction. The driver looked in the direction of the sound, loosening his hold slightly, which gave the investigator the opportunity he needed.

The investigator elbowed his assailant’s stomach, causing the man to stumble backward. He picked himself up immediately, and with the knife in his hand, he made for the investigator again.

Then the sound of a gunshot echoed through the narrow space. I saw the culprit who killed my mother was shot in the shoulder while trying to escape.



The man still hadn’t talked after several minutes of interrogation. He wanted a lawyer and wouldn’t talk until one was brought for him.

There was concrete evidence showing his involvement in the hit-and-run. The junkyard where he’d scrapped his vehicle had the CCTV footage of his visit, and the manager of the junkyard had the record for that transaction—as presented through the investigation of the private investigator.

The man had defended that he could scrap his car if he wanted to without answering why he’d done so. But when the recording of his previous conversation with the private investigator was played, he clearly stated who’d hired him for the job; once he’d recollected the memory of his blabbering, he seemed like he had been dragged into a corner where he couldn’t get away from.

“Call her,” the interrogator said.

With his hands cuffed, the hit-and-run driver obviously had no choice anymore.

He took the phone from the police officer but looked like he didn’t know what to do with it.

“Who hired you?”

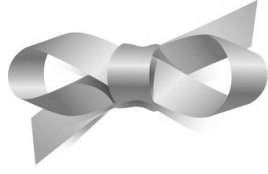
The man didn’t move nor talk as if his not eager yet to shift some of the blame.

“Call her and ask for the money she owes you for the job,” the police officer said.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” the man said.

“If you cooperate with us, we will shorten your sentence—whoever hired you will not be able to help you now.”

Apparently, the warrant for Linda’s arrest was still pending.



Chapter Thirty

Linda

George seldom talked to me like he used to, and I sensed he had something against me. But he didn't bring it up, and I'd resolved it was better to let him be with his thoughts.

I could only imagine what was going on in his head, and it was scary to consider whatever he'd been able to find out. But he didn't look like he had any hard evidence to hold me at fault.

I wouldn't apologize for messing with Matheo by revealing Veronica as his ex-convict mother. The fact was, I'd never considered Matheo to be part of the family. I'd had no reason to like him.

Matheo had always seemed like he got along with my daughters. And I was sure that he would try everything to take away their rights, leaving them with none of George's properties. I will surely not let that happen.

I was seated on the balcony, munching on a stack of pancakes made by one of the housemaids. It did have a nice taste, but I could have made do with something better. I'd just dropped a pancake and cleaned my hand on the white handkerchief beside the tray when my phone buzzed on the coffee table.

"Unknown caller ID?" I said once I saw the screen. One of the housemaids approaching that moment suddenly halted as she stared at me, but she lowered her gaze immediately after our eyes met.

"Can I help you?"

She approached, picked up the tray I'd finished, and handed me a glass of water.

"You asked for this," she said quickly.

"So, what are you still waiting for?"

She hurried out of my sight immediately. But my anger wasn't directed at her. By then, the phone had stopped ringing.

A few minutes later, the phone began to ring again.

"You promised not to call again!" I shouted into the phone.

The voice at the other end of the line seemed weak and strained, not that I was concerned about the man's wellbeing. On the contrary, even his call was a headache, and my only wish was to get rid of him for good.

“You have to help me out here,” he said.

I giggled, sitting back in the armchair. “I’ve paid you what you asked for. I’m not giving you a dime more.”

“It’s not that....”

“Get the fuck off my line, okay? And don’t call me anymore.”

“I have been caught.”

“What?” I jumped up from the chair as if I had been shocked. My knees suddenly became weak, and my heart began an endless race.

“What do you mean by you’ve been caught?”

“I got arrested. If you don’t help me get out of here, I might slip that you hired me. So I need you to get a lawyer for me.”

I breathed deeply, trying to remain calm.

“Have you told them anything? Do they know of my involvement?”

“No. That’s why you have to help me out of here.”

I picked up the glass the maid had just brought and gulped it down.

“Okay, but you have to keep your mouth shut. It’ll be the end for both of us if you say anything to the police.”

“You have to get me out of here,” he said.

I scoffed. “You want me to come and get you out? Do you want me to announce to the police that I’m in cahoots with you?”

The man groaned. He sounded hurt somehow, and I surmised he’d been tortured or gone through some ordeal. I was glad that he’d been dealt with already. But I knew I would have to get him out as soon as possible if I were to be safe.

“Just get me a good lawyer, and I promise to keep my mouth shut.”

I paced back and forth. With someone like him, I would always be in a pickle. I had already shackled us together by hiring him for the hit-and-run job, so it was apparent that whatever was going to happen to him would eventually happen to me as well.

But I didn’t like that he was calling the shots. I had become his servant, and with what he had on me, he would always feel he could order me around as if I were his maid.

“Are you still there?” he asked.

I cleared my throat, trying to devise a better plan than getting him out. But it was always going to end with his death anyway, and I couldn’t take the risk of George finding out about my involvement in Veronica’s death. Also, there were my girls to consider. Ava would be very heartbroken, and so

would Mabel—I couldn't be the one to hurt them.

“Hiring a lawyer will only complicate things when they ask more questions. So I'll try to find another solution to get you out.”

There was a long pause in which I wondered what he was thinking. He was supposed to be glad about this, but he sounded incredulous when he spoke next.

“Really? When? Make it quick, okay?”

I drew in a deeply frustrated breath. “You don't get to order me around, okay?”

He snorted. “It seems you forget that we're in this together. One word from me to the police, and you're down here with me.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Call it whatever you want. But if I'm not out of here tonight, I will tell the police everything you made me do. It'll be nice to have you in prison to keep me company.”

He shouldn't have threatened me, but I knew that he held my reputation in his hands.

“Fine,” I said.

“I will need some cash as well.”

I sighed exasperatedly. I imagined myself stabbing him. If only thoughts could kill, or if only there were anything I could press on my mobile phone to have him dead immediately, I wouldn't have hesitated to do so.

“I've paid you enough. I don't have any money to give you again.”

He insisted. “I'll need about a thousand dollars to make a getaway.”

“Whatever did you do with the extra money you requested from me the last time?”

He chuckled. “A man has many needs, right? But, of course, I'll be expecting the money once I'm out.”

I sighed but assented.

I had a headache after the call with the man I hired to kill Veronica.

I was fiddling with the phone when one of the housemaids, Odessa, joined me on the balcony. She was my most trusted maid in the house, and she had the habit of always picking up on my moods.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I should or could discuss the situation with her.

She moved closer. Odessa always seemed to know something about

everything. Perhaps she could have given me the advice I needed, but the issue at hand was a matter of trust. I couldn't risk her going to the authorities.

"Odessa, I heard your boyfriend is in prison for robbing a bank. If you're interested, I can get a lawyer to defend him because he wasn't aware he was hired as a getaway driver. That's if you're willing to help me as well." I said.

"Oh, Linda. I have known you since we were teenagers. We've been friends since your parents took me in and gave me a job when my parents died."

"Right..." I exclaimed.

"They helped me with my parent's funeral expenses, and since then, I promised I would be loyal to your family when they were still alive."

I adjusted in the chair and tapped the phone on my left palm. Once I looked at her face again, I decided I shouldn't talk about it.

"That's good to know you remember."

She sighed exasperatedly. "Tell me, what do you want me to do? Are you having a problem with Matheo again?"

I stared sharply at her face, and she smiled.

"Well, I know you never liked him, and that's very understandable."

I inhaled deeply and made a quick decision. "You must find someone to deliver a message to your boyfriend in prison. Someone that can't be connected to you when something bad happens."

Odessa didn't look surprised at all, which somewhat surprised *me*. However, without hesitation, she is more than willing to oblige.

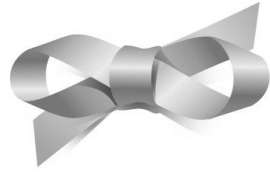
"Who might this person be?" She stared at me, waiting for details.

"Can I trust you to on this?" I asked Odessa.

She nodded slowly. "Of course. You don't have anything to worry about."

I sighed. I was already picturing the loose ends being tied, and although I wasn't relieved yet, I knew I soon would be.

"I'm so happy that you know how to repay my kindness," I looked to Odessa.



Chapter Thirty-One

Matheo



Police cars were parked in front of the mansion when we arrived. Once Amber and I got out of the car, Ava and Mabel came out, and Mabel ran toward me immediately.

“Some men came to take Mom away,” Mabel said.

“Matheo, what’s going on?” Ava asked.

Amber and I looked into each other’s eyes. Then, I quickly hugged Mabel to calm her down.

“Stay here, okay? Everything will be fine.” I assured Mabel.

She nodded obediently and moved towards Ava.

“Matheo!” Ava exclaimed.

“I’m here. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you.” I looked at Ava and hugged her.

“What is happening, Matheo?” Ava asked me.

“I don’t know yet.” I turned to her. Amber and I entered the house and were met with the sight of Linda in handcuffs.

“You did this!” Linda shouted as soon as she caught sight of me.

My father appeared completely befuddled—it was clear he didn’t understand what was happening.

“You did this to get rid of me, right?” Linda said again.

I turned towards the police officer leading the arrest, and he gave me a nod before turning to face Linda.

“Mrs. Linda Martinez, you’re under arrest for instigating the murder of Ms. Veronica”

“She wasn’t a Martinez!” Linda exclaimed. Then she added, “She was never married to him.”

My father looked down at the ground. “Linda, what have you done?” he asked sadly.

Linda sniggered. “She was nothing! She was an opportunistic woman. I am your only wife and no one else.”

“Did you not think of our daughters?”

Linda was lost for words. She only began to move again when she

noticed Ava and saw the disappointment in her eyes.

“No, honey. I didn’t kill anyone. So don’t believe them,” Linda said.

Ava walked closer to me and wrapped her arms around my waist. She was already shedding tears, so I had to hug her.

“Stay away from my daughter!” Linda exclaimed.

“Please stop this. Will you just take her away?” My father asked.

Even I stared at him in surprise, just like Linda. He seemed too rigid like he wasn’t his usual self anymore.

“George?” Linda called, but my father refused to look at her. “I’m your wife; you don’t get to let me go like this. You can use your money, our money, and connections!”

The police officer dragged Linda out of the house, although she struggled. The other police officer who headed the arrest had stayed back for more information.

The hit-and-run driver had *willingly* confessed to his crime.

“What?” I exclaimed, surprised. The police officer, who just gave us the news, seemed in a hurry, but he halted to attend to me anyway.

I looked at Amber and back at the police officer. “I’m happy my mom got the justice she deserved,”

“We still don’t know why the other prisoner attempted to kill the person who killed your mother.” The police officer looked at me.

The police officer smiled. “Well, it’s possible that Mrs. Linda Martinez hired someone to kill him in jail so no one can be a witness to her crime. So, the suspect divulged everything to us this morning.”

“That’s sheer wickedness,” Amber said, “how could Linda even do that?”

The police officer chortled. “She hired someone to kill another person, and you think she wouldn’t tie her loose ends?”

“We promised to lessen the number of years he would have to spend in prison, so he gave us more evidence for the case. He recounted the exact conversation he’d had when Linda Martinez when she hired him for the job.”

Mabel began crying profusely just as the police officer left the house.



It had only been a couple of hours since Linda was arrested and taken away by the police, but the house already felt as if it’d been deserted for ages.

It had taken intervention of Amber to get Mabel to stop crying. It seemed Ava was very cross with me. Thus far, she’d refused to talk to me, so

I sat silently in the girls' bedroom, waiting for her to open up. Eventually, she began to cry. I stood up and walked over to sit beside her.

"I'm sorry, Ava. Please talk to me."

She looked at me with teary eyes and sniffled. "Can you help Mom? You could have told me what was happening." I looked at Ava.

"I should have, and I'm sorry for keeping it from you."

"How could Mom have done all this?" Mabel said.

I was lost for words, so I only looked at her without saying anything.

Amber was quiet in a corner. I suddenly realized that I hadn't introduced her yet, but that wasn't necessary.

"Did you keep this away from us because we have a different mother?" Ava asked.

I raised a brow immediately. "What? Of course not! I didn't want you guys to get hurt."

Ava chortled. "So, do we look okay to you now?"

I sighed deeply. "I'm sorry, girls... this is my fault."

"I thought you loved us. Why did you not talk to me? Maybe I could have prevented Mom from making all these problems." Ava said. "I heard mom agitated while talking to someone over the phone. I told her to stop whatever she was doing, but she didn't listen to me." Then, Ava burst into tears.

I stared at her. Obviously, she had known. She was smart enough to figure it out.

"It's not your fault, Ava. The two of you will always be my sisters, who are very dear to me. Always remember that!" I gave Ava a tight embrace to make her feel that she still had a family.

"I'm sorry they had to take your mom away," I apologized. That seemed like the only word I needed to say, so I kept saying it until Ava and Mabel calmed down.



A few minutes later.

Father was dropping a call when I joined him in the living room. Instead, he was sitting on the couch and watching the news on the TV.

He handled Linda's arrest ahead of time, preventing the incident from leaking to the media.

He'd remained unflinchingly indifferent towards the situation, like a man ready to accept whatever came his way.

He glanced at me momentarily before refocusing on the screen.

“The board of directors wants you back at the office,” he said, still not looking at me.

I looked at the TV without an ounce of curiosity but realized that whatever it was that had caught his attention was worth it anyway. It was news about the recent innovative ideas in the business world, so it made sense that he was concentrating as if his life depended on it.

“I think it’s time people realize that new ideas can come from old ones. So, we don’t necessarily have to discard everything.”

I sat on the couch opposite him. Although I agreed with what he’d just said, I wasn’t sure if he was trying to get into a conversation with me or relaying his thoughts.

Father and I didn’t have a chatty relationship. We’d mostly kept our distance, so being in his presence seemed strange. But I’d known we’d have to work out our differences at some point, and with Linda gone, it is evident that he and I has a lot to talk about.

Once he’d noticed that I was relatively quiet, he cleared his throat and took his eyes off the TV—the news had ended anyway.

“I’m sorry, Matheo,” he said with his face lowered.

“I know I’ve said this many times, and you must hate me for everything. I only cared for myself and my happiness. Even now, I’m ashamed that the only thing I can do is apologize to you.”

I wasn’t sure what I wanted from him. I had never asked for more than he already gave me, but I had always wished we could have been closer during my early years. But we were both adults now, and I should be more understanding of his imperfections.

“I’m sorry about Linda, too,” I said. I’d realized that getting Linda arrested wasn’t to seek vengeance on her, although I had been angry. Instead, it had been the right thing to do for everyone.

My father sighed deeply as he adjusted himself on the couch. “She got what she deserved, okay? But I still can’t believe she instigated Veronica’s death.”

“She must have hated Mom so much to do that.”

“I wouldn’t try to understand her. There’s no justification for taking another person’s life or being the reason the person loses their life.”

Linda already had everything a woman could ever ask for. What else had she needed?

“I knew she even tried to sell you at birth. I learned about that recently, but I thought it was in the past and shouldn’t be brought to light to disrupt the present. Now I know I was wrong. I should have been more attuned to her activities. Instead, I made too many excuses for her behavior, and I now see the damage she has done.”

I’d never seen my father so worried and concerned about something. Or, maybe, we had never been close enough for me to notice.

“I don’t know the right words to say, Matheo. For everything.”

I was speechless. It would take more than this encounter to enable us to converse freely like two adults, but it was good to be reminded that he cared about me.

When he stood up and approached, I knew he meant to have a hug. So, I stood up, and we met between both couches. He held me tight and patted my back.

The last time I remembered sharing a hug with him, he wasn’t as plump and old as he’d become. I couldn’t even recall how long ago it had occurred.

Amber cleared her throat to draw attention to her arrival. We immediately moved out of the embrace, and both turned to look in her direction.

“Hi,” she said.

I smiled and gestured for her to come closer, which she did immediately, standing beside me. Father was smiling as if he already knew what I was going to say. Well, it was obvious anyway.

“Amber, meet my father,”

“Mr. Martinez...” Amber said.

“Hey, Amber.”

Both were smiling at each other after the little exchange of pleasantries. It seemed I was the only one who thought the situation was weird, probably because it wasn’t going the way I had thought it would.

“Amber is my...” I paused on observation of my father’s face. He looked like he was holding back a burst of laughter, but he only giggled.

“I’m sorry, he apologized. Then he added, “I’ve already met Amber.”

I looked at Amber.

“It took you so long to tell me about her.”

“I was going to tell you when the time is right,” I said in my defense.

He chuckled. “I guess it’s perfect timing then.”

Amber smiled as she slipped her hand into mine. I peered into her eyes and almost forgot that we were in front of my father, but since Amber

immediately understood my desires, she removed her eyes from mine and kissed me.

My father smiled widely. "I guess I should excuse you both," he said.

Amber and I chorused a response, but while I said, "Okay, that will be great," she said, "No, Mr. Martinez."

My father opened his arms and asked Amber for a hug, which she gave him.

"Thank you for everything," he said.

"You're welcome, Mr. Martinez," Amber responded. She got out of the embrace to stand beside me again.

Then Father moved closer and patted my shoulder, and, as if I hadn't realized it yet, he told me that I'd chosen a good woman.

Anyway, Amber was pleased with the acknowledgment.



Amber left to make dinner for her family while I stayed behind to have dinner with mine.

"I'm going to propose to Amber," I said abruptly, and Ava almost dropped her spoon.

"She's gorgeous and nice," Mabel said immediately.

"Do you think she'll want to marry you?" Ava said. She looked so serious that it made me cringe in fear.

"What do you mean by that?"

She dropped her spoon and cleared her throat. "I mean, she's too nice to be your woman, to begin with, but now you want her to marry you? Aren't you being selfish?"

I smiled widely. "I'd rather say I'm lucky, don't you think?"

"You can't have everything you want, you know," Ava joked, "eventually something's going to get in your way."

I picked a piece of the salad and flicked it toward her. She ducked immediately.

"Marrying Amber will be perfect, son," my father said.

I smiled. His approval mattered a lot. "Thank you for accepting, Amber."

"So, you're finally leaving us?" Ava asked. There was a note of sadness in her voice.

"Leaving? I'm getting married, not leaving."

"But you'll have to concentrate on Amber and love only her," Mabel said.

“Calm down, girls...” Father said. “You girls should be happy that Matheo will be getting married.”

Ava sighed deeply. “Only if you let me plan the proposal,” she said.

Mabel stood up, got out from the space between the dinner table and her chair, and walked toward me.

“I’ll pick the ring, okay?”

I smiled at them and chuckled. “If that’s what you girls want, so shall it be.”

“Fine!” Ava said. “We’d better go get the plans ready then.” Both girls headed for their room.

I laughed, and so did my father. “Those two are trouble.”

“Tell me about it,” he said.

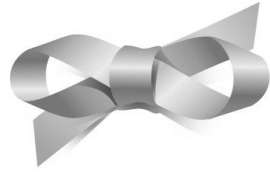
“I’m proud of you, son. Amber is a very nice woman and a good choice.”

I nodded gently. “She is. Thank you for understanding my feelings for Amber.”

“And she’s very kind. But, most of all, she’s not fussy,” he said as he leaned over the table.

We both joined Ava and Mabel in the living room after dinner. I want my siblings to feel that we’re still a family no matter what happens, and I’m always there for both of them.

It doesn’t matter if their mother is Linda. I love them.



Chapter Thirty-Two

Amber

I t's been two weeks since Linda was sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment. The hit-and-run driver was sentenced to 7 years, as promised by the police, because he cooperated with them on the case.

Matheo could face his life again and become closer to his father, while nothing had changed between him and his siblings.

Matheo informed me that he would spend the weekend at the mansion; I was happy to see him bond with his siblings. Mabel was the sweetest one who would always give Matheo no trouble, apart from always wanting to be pampered. But Ava was bossy. She always acted as if she was older than Matheo, and he often seemed to give in to her demands.

Michelle had come over to spend the weekend with me. Out of everything that had happened, she was most surprised that Linda wasn't Matheo's birth mother.

"Isn't that unbelievable?" she said as she sat beside me.

I shrugged. "I wouldn't have known if I hadn't been so close to Matheo."

Michelle smiled. "Tell me, how are you and Matheo progressing?"

"Progressing? What do you mean by that?"

She gave me a little bump on her shoulder. "Every relationship has stages, yeah? So, what stage are you in?"

I giggled. "What do you want to know?"

She looked at me searchingly. "Have you..." She peered into my eyes during the long pause, and although I understood where she was going to land, I faked ignorance.

"Have I what?" I inquired.

"Have you felt like you're ready to face anything with Matheo?"

I chortled to hide the shyness that would have otherwise been apparent.

"To be honest, it felt good to solve our struggles together."

"I know what you mean, and I'm happy for you." Michelle talked excitedly.

"Knowing that we have each other's backs makes me not worry in the days to come."

She giggled. "Oh, now it's your turn to hassle me, is it?"

I smiled. "I'm only being truthful."

She sighed deeply and lay on her back. "Well, for what it's worth, I'm glad we finally got you guys to realize what you truly feel for each other."

I chuckled. "You and who?"

She sat up. "Eric and I, of course."

I smiled. "Could you ever say a word without mentioning his name?"

Michelle laughed. "I'm in love with him, just as you love Matheo."

I laughed. "That's right."

I got up from the bed and headed to the door, but I halted to look back at her. "Shouldn't we prepare dinner?"

She widened her eyes. "It's only 5 pm."

"We eat dinner early here."

She sighed with exasperation. "Remind me what I'm doing here," she said.

Mom opened the door and entered the room, staring at Michelle.

"Why don't you join me to prepare our food?"

I smiled while hiding my face. Michelle couldn't utter a word. I could feel that she was looking at me, but it was her problem, and she had to face it alone.

She'd always been scared of my mom.

"Yes, Mrs. Stone. I will..."

"You meant you'd rather laze about in my house?"

"No, that's not what I meant."

"Then join me in the kitchen; don't dawdle," Mom instructed.

"This isn't funny," Michelle said when we were alone once more.

I giggled. "I wonder why you insisted on spending the weekend here when you can't stand up to my mom."

"Eric is busy reviewing the reports from a newly built warehouse in Canada before submitting them to Matheo, so I can't spend the weekend with him."

I raised a brow. "Wow, I didn't know you were such a very understanding girlfriend."

She smiled. "Yes, I am."

We'd just come down the stairs when my phone rang in my hand. It was Matheo.

"Is your lover boy calling you?" Michelle asked, smiling at me.

I headed for the kitchen as I picked up the call. "Matheo, is everything

okay?” I inquired. My parents and Michelle hurried over as they heard my concerned tone.

“Everything is fine. Can you come to my place for dinner tomorrow at 6 pm?” Matheo asked me.

“Since it’s Sunday tomorrow, I think it’s fine.” I agreed with him.

My heart jumped with joy, knowing that everything had been settled.

The next day, Michelle insisted on coming and offered to drive me there. So we headed for my parent’s car at once.

I received a text message from Matheo to head straight to the garden as I stepped into the mansion.

The lights turned on as I walked down the path sprinkled with rose petals and candle lanterns. A group of professional singers and musicians began singing All of me by John Legend with Matheo.

“You can sing too?” I asked while crying.

With a shaky voice, Ava answered that her brother wanted to propose.

My mind was already restless, and my heart was beating as if it could stop at any moment. Although my legs were shuddering, the desire to get to Matheo helped me find my strength.

Matheo stopped singing and walked toward me.

He showed me a heart-shaped diamond necklace.

I stared at Matheo and the necklace. I hadn’t noticed Eric until he walked out of one corner of the room and handed Mabel a bouquet of rose flowers. Then he walked over to stand beside George Martinez.

My parents showed up and joined them afterward.

It was obvious that they had planned for the occasion. Everyone looked dressed up.

Matheo had begun to say something as he held the necklace up and focused on me, but no words came out of my mouth as I was still in shock.

“When I first saw you, I felt like I knew you. You healed pieces of me. I fell in love with you, not knowing what love was. You had my heart at the first look and never really left possession of it. So, if you’re planning on keeping it forever, we might as well seal the deal.”

Then a big LED sign asking "Will You Marry Me" lit up.

The next thing I could hear was him asking if I would marry him; I struggled to speak, overcome with tears.

He stared at me, obviously wondering why I was hesitant to say something—if only he knew how overwhelming the joy inside me was.

“Of course, I will marry you,” I said.

Matheo jumped to his feet immediately and put the necklace around my neck. Then he drew me in and kissed me passionately. Tears continued to fall from my eyes.

Ava came closer, and we embraced each other. Then she whispered, “I planned the surprise.”

I smiled. “Thank you.”

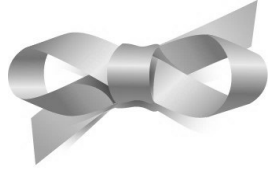
“You’ll take care of him, yeah?”

I nodded. “I will.”

Then there were rounds of embraces. By the time Michelle hugged me, Matheo and Eric were hugging each other as well.

“Did you know about this?” I asked Michelle.

“Of course, not.” She looked over at Eric, who winked at her.



Chapter Thirty-Three

Matheo



“I think we deserve a reward for this,” Eric said. So we’d organized a small picnic at the beach, and Ava and Mabel had run off to play on their own.

“I have just the gift you deserve,” Michelle said, kissing Eric on his lips.

I moved away from them and kissed Amber, causing Eric and Michelle to laugh.

“Someone is jealous, I guess,” Eric said.

I chuckled. “Fuck off, man....”

They laughed. Amber drew me into her embrace. “Thank you for this,” she whispered.

“I still demand we get compensated for helping you guys come this far,” Eric said.

“See, Matheo, you don’t deserve my friend,” Michelle said.

“Of course, he does,” Amber defended me.

Michelle sighed. “Can you just allow me to be bossy for a moment?”

Amber chortled. “Not a chance.”

“Okay, fine,” I said. “Would a ticket to Paris this Christmas be enough compensation?”

Michelle jumped out of her space to stand beside me. “Of course.”

Amber playfully pushed away and reclaimed her space at my side. Michelle walked over to Eric and hugged him tightly.

“Don’t forget my man is here as well,” Michelle said.

We all laughed.

“Paris it is then,” I said.

“Are we going to Paris?” Mabel asked as she and Ava joined.

“Of course, not,” I said.

Ava looked at me suspiciously. “You’re a liar, you know that, right?”

I smiled widely. “No one is going to Paris.”

Mabel whined. “I heard you mention Paris just now.”

“Matheo is booking a flight to Paris for everyone this Christmas,” Amber said.

Ava smiled brightly.

“You see, Matheo. I knew you made the right choice.” Ava said.

I had made a good choice. Amber was more than beautiful. She meant more to me than I could express.

Such a woman had said ‘yes’ to my proposal.

I’ve learned so much from Amber. She has taught me things about myself that I did not know about. Together, we struggled and learned how to cope with every challenge.

We faced challenges together as we strived to be a better version of ourselves. She is willing to ride the rollercoaster of my life and will stand by me in all situations.

“Settling down is a big commitment, and I don't want to do it with someone who's wrong for me or who ends up breaking my heart. It took a lot of hard work and self-reflection to find you, Amber. You’re my soulmate.”

Amber kissed me passionately without saying a word.

Meeting the other half of my soul is one of my life’s treasures. And something that I don’t want to miss.

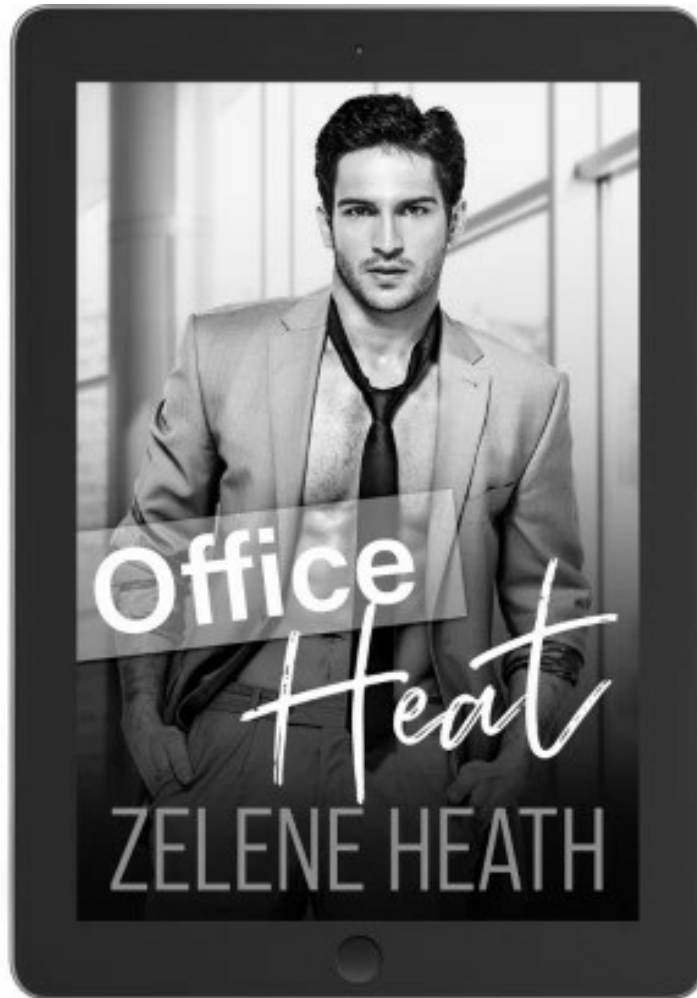
Amber is the person I have a soul connection with. My true love, ideal partner, and the person I want to be alongside for the rest of my life, and I can’t wait to announce publicly that I chose her to be mine.

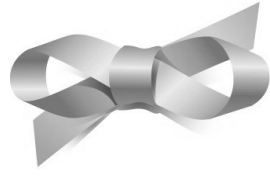
The End.

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Don't forget to read "*OFFICE HEAT*" (*Burning Bossy Desires Series BOOK 1*).

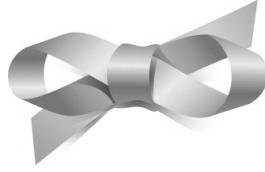
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