

Fast Lanes
series

Reclaiming
You

TORI ALVAREZ

Reclaiming — You

A Fast Lanes Novel

TORI ALVAREZ

RECLAIMING YOU

FAST LANES

BOOK 1

TORI ALVAREZ

ETERNAL DAYDREAMER PUBLISHING

Reclaiming You

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CONTENT WARNING

Reclaiming You is a contemporary romance between an alpha roll hero and a sassy, independent heroine. It is a slow burn, second chance, slightly forbidden, first love romance. This story may have content that may not be suitable for some readers which includes: cheating, overbearing father, and explicit language.

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For my daughter.

*“...a strong-willed, independent daughter is a parent’s dream,
it is also their nightmare.”*



PROLOGUE

8 YEARS AGO

NATALIA

ENJOYING SUN AND SAND SHOULD BE AT THE TOP OF EVERY teenager's summer list, but of course, I have to be the one complaining. What in the world am I going to do at the beach ALL SUMMER LONG? There will be a two-week break when my best friend will be joining me, but that's it. I'll be stuck with my mom at the beach house.

"Have you finished packing yet?" My mom yells from the other room.

"Not yet. Working on it!" I scream. I'm stretching the truth since I'm lying on my bed staring at the ceiling imagining all the parties I'm going to miss, but she doesn't need to know that. My suitcase is open next to me, half filled.

I look to my closet and all the cute clothes I bought thinking I would be home for the summer and enjoying all the parties. Sixteen. That's the magical year, right? I got my driver's license and a car—the freedom every teen dreams of. But instead, my dad surprises us with a beach house.

"Are you kidding me, Natalia?" My mom's voice startles me from my thoughts.

"I'm sorry." I sit up, crossing my legs. "Do I have to go? I could stay home, have Delia stay with me on the weekends since Dad will be here all week anyways. And the weeks he's staying at the beach, I'll go with him."

My mom takes a deep breath as she leans against my doorframe with her arms crossed. *Score*, she must be considering it because she didn't give me an immediate *no*.

"How about a compromise?" she states flatly, giving me no hint of her thinking.

I perk up, waiting to hear what she will say.

She takes another moment before saying, “How about you come down with me now and help me set up the new house. In two weeks, you can come back with your dad for the week. I’ll consider the weekends later. I’m not saying yes *or* no to the weekends at home yet.”

It’s not everything I want, but it’s a start and if I play my cards right, I’ll be home in two weeks!

“Deal!” I exclaim, jumping off my bed and going to my closet. “I’ll finish packing.” I smile at my mom. I’m going to be the model daughter so that she has no reason to tell me no later.



THE HOUSE my dad just purchased is amazing and sits right on the beach. Not exactly the white sand and clear blue water type of beach you think of since this is Texas, but it’s still beautiful in its own way. According to my dad, this part of the coast will be up-and-coming soon and he wanted in on the ground floor. But for me, being stuck in this small, hick town is not my idea of a good time.

Being away from friends for a whole summer before my junior year feels like social suicide.

“You want to go into town and explore? We can pick up some food on our way back home,” my mom offers as I’m sitting in the kitchen, messing with photo filters on the newest social media app.

I’m trying to not look as miserable as I feel. I need to be the perfect balance of helpful and miserable to pull at my mom’s heartstrings. That’s the only way I’ll be able to go home in a couple of weeks and stay there.

“Sure.” I give her a small smile, being the agreeable, perfect daughter.

AFTER A COUPLE of hours exploring shops, we're back home and I'm up in my room, sitting on my balcony. The sun is setting, and the sound of the waves is calming. Only a few cars have driven up and down this part of the beach since this area is new development and on the outskirts of town.

A truck stops and a few guys jump out. They open the tailgate and start throwing logs on the sand. I stand up by the railing, trying to get a better view. One of the guys begins to arrange the logs, while the others continue taking them out of the truck bed. I'm shamelessly staring at them—tan and lean, with the perfect sun kissed highlighted hair.

I watch as they work, wondering what will be happening later, when one of the guys looks up and catches me staring. He nods his head at me then turns around, saying something to one of the other guys. The next one looks up at me with a devilish smile which makes my stomach do a flip. He waves at me, and I'm frozen not knowing what to do after being caught red handed. He cocks his head to the side and waves again, so I timidly raise my hand in a small wave back.

He lifts both his hands with five fingers splayed on one hand and four on the other.

“Nine!” He cups his mouth and yells to me over the sounds of the waves, then points to the pile of logs, which I now figure will be the spot of a bonfire.

I can't help the smile that spreads across my face at being invited. *Wow*. The confidence of this guy inviting a random girl to show up to their party.

He lifts his hands to either side of him in question, bobbing his head then shaking it back and forth. He wants my answer. I take a deep breath and nod. He claps a couple of times before raising one fist in the air. I can't help but laugh at his dramatics. With that, I give him a small wave and head inside.



CHAPTER ONE

PRESENT DAY

MATEO

THE PAST CONTINUES TO HAUNT MY LIFE NO MATTER HOW FAR I try to move from it. The biggest decision of my life was forced upon me, and I still regret it. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if I could move on, but instead I'm still stuck thinking about what was taken from me. A simple breeze, the smell of jasmine, skittles, certain songs, will take me back to that time. A time when I thought I was invincible, and I would rule the world with the most beautiful girl by my side. It was always supposed to be her.

“Are we ever going to do something about that one?” C.J., the tattoo artist who's adding another tattoo to the back of my forearm, asks.

I shake my head, not wanting to get into it again with him. He's done most of my arm tattoos and the first time I came in, he asked about *Natalia*. The name that is splayed across the top of my forearm, but is now surrounded by other designs to distract from it.

“One of these days.”

He laughs knowing I may never be ready to pull that trigger.

It's been eight years and I still can't get myself to cover it. It has caused one too many arguments with women I've dated. Each of them want to know who she is and why I got it. At first, I was honest and told the truth—it was a girl I dated too many years ago. But now I avoid it, and Natalia has turned into my 'grandmother's name'. This way, I don't have to go through them asking me if I would get their name, which happened too often.

“I DOUBLE DOG DARE YOU!” Natalia exclaims, laughing.

“Cuete (firecracker), you should know better than to dare me to do anything. You know I will.” I stroke her cheek with the back of my hand. Her breath hitches.

I may have this girl’s heart in the palm of my hand, but she owns me. Every single fucking inch of me, she owns. I’m just better at not showing it. But she knows it. She knows all she has to do is ask and I’m going to figure out how to fulfill her every wish.

“I know.” She leans into my hand and steps closer to me. She licks her lips, pulling her bottom lip into her mouth, then releases it. “I want to be yours. Always.” She purrs and lifts up on her toes, bringing her lips close to mine, our breath intermingling. “And I want all those little bitches that think we won’t last to know we will.”

Our relationship has not been typical, especially for a couple of high school kids. We only had our summers. She’s a rich, private school girl from the city, and I’m a small, beach town guy. I’m about to give her a graduation gift. Not only the tattoo of her name on my arm, but I’m going to go to college next year in the same city as her. It may be community college, but it’s more than I wanted before meeting her. It seemed like a pipe dream, but since meeting her, I’ve focused on my grades and applied to as many scholarships as I could, determined to make our dream a possibility. She just doesn’t know it yet.

THE SOUND of the tattoo gun and the prickling on my skin brings me back to the present. There is no way to go back. I force myself to think about work and the couple of cars that came in. We finally get to do some restoration again. It’s been a couple of months since we had a classic restoration come into the shop. A classic eighties Jeep and a Bronco will be the projects on deck, in addition to the regular collision repair.

I focus on all of the things we need to order for the vehicles and getting in contact with Javie to work on the body

of the Bronco. It's in really bad shape and will need significant spots welded with reinforcement.

“Done,” C.J. announces as he wipes the excess ink off.

He finishes me up and I walk out focusing on the present. Each time I add a tattoo, I let myself drift to that time. Play out all the ‘what ifs’. Imagine life how I thought it would be instead of how it is. But as soon as the machine stops, so do the thoughts. It's back to the reality of what is.



“WHERE DID you run off to so quickly when you left the garage yesterday?” Damian startles me from behind. Fucker snuck up on me. I arrived at the garage early, not being able to sleep last night.

“Appointment to finish off my arm.” I extend my arm backward to show him my new ink. This tattoo location sucks because each time I place my arm on anything, it stings. But I guess I also get them for the pain.

“Nice.” He lets out a low whistle. “So now that you have no more room on that arm, where are you going next?”

I shrug. I'll never commit to an answer on my self-inflicted pleasure pain. I've started my chest and back, but not sure how far I want to take it. My other arm has one tattoo, but hesitant to do anything else on it.

“Have you heard from Javie about his availability to work on the Bronco?” he asks, coming to look under the hood at what I'm working on.

“I texted him this morning. He hasn't responded. But you know he'll jump at the chance to work on that Bronco and Jeep.”

He nods.

“And if you’re that desperate to start, why don’t you just ask Ritza to ask him?” I laugh, teasing him, knowing he won’t ask his sister to ask her boyfriend about it.

“Nah,” he huffs out.

The door to the waiting room opens and I look up to see Cici, Ritza’s best friend, walking toward us.

“Hey guys!” She smiles. I notice Damian tense beside me.

“Hey,” I respond as Damian continues to look at the engine, ignoring her. “What’s up?”

“Ritza’s birthday is next week. We need to do something special for her. She’s been through so much and she’s doing amazing!” Her tone is soft and caring as she speaks of Ritza.

“What do you have in mind?” I ask, since Damian has decided to ignore her, even if we are talking about his sister.

“Lola, Javie’s sister-in-law, is helping me organize a fun night out. Something Ritza can handle while also having a good time. She suggested going to At the Corner. Ritza has been there before. We can reserve our own area. Games, food, and drinks.” She lifts her shoulders, her eyes dancing.

“Sounds like a plan. Let us know when and we’ll be there.”

“Are you sure she’s ready?” Damian says gruffly from under the hood, not having the decency to look at Cici.

“Yes. Yes, she is.” She tenses and places her hands on her hips. “And don’t bother coming if all you want to do is rain on her parade. Javie will be there. And you know he protects her and can handle it!” she throws back, angrily.

Damian grunts disapprovingly.

Cici shakes her head. “I’ll text you Mateo. Damian doesn’t have to come if he’s going to act like an asshole.”

“Oh, I’ll be there.” Damian finally stands up and turns around to glare at Cici.

“Great.” She rolls her eyes. “Next Thursday at seven. At The Corner.”

“See you,” I say, as she turns around and walks back into the waiting room.

“What’s your deal with Cici?” I ask Damian, surprised by his response to her. Cici and Ritza have been friends since middle school. He’s known her for years.

“There’s no deal,” he answers, curtly.

“WHO’S IN FOR DRINKS TONIGHT?” Jaxson yells out as we’re closing up.

Damian and I co-own our auto shop, Fast Lanes, and hired our friends, Jaxson and Enrique, to start it with us. We’ve been open for about two years, but we’re growing. We started out just the four of us, but recently we’ve hired a few more full-time guys, in addition to the ones we contract, like Javie, Damian’s sister’s boyfriend. I wish we could have hired him full time, but he just opened up his own shop with his brother. Luckily, we aren’t competing. We’re restoration and collision, and they’re automotive repair.

“I’m in.” I need a distraction tonight. For some reason, I haven’t been able to shake the past after yesterday’s tattoo appointment. Usually, I’m able to let that shit go. I need to find someone to take the edge off.

JAX and I are sitting at the bar scoping out the scene. We are going to have to find a new place to go; it seems like it’s all the same faces here tonight. I take a sip of my whiskey—beer was not going to cut it.

“Hey,” Eliazar, a friend of mine, says, sitting in the stool next to Jaxson.

“I thought you weren’t coming,” I respond as Jax tips his head at him.

“Marisol wants to close again. She’s still getting used to her new managers. So now I got a couple of hours to burn,” he says as he raises his hand to get the bartender’s attention.

“Maybe we should scope Sol y Luna. There’s nothing for us here,” Jax says, wagging his brows.

That cabrón (*dumbass*) can never be serious.

“Next time.” I nod my head. Not a bad idea, but it will probably be better on the weekends.

Sol y Luna is Eliazar’s girlfriend’s coffee and wine bar. It’s located in an up-and-coming, trendy neighborhood.

“What’s wrong with this place?” Eliazar asks after he places his order.

“Nothing. Except no new faces lately. If you catch my drift,” Jax explains a bit too frankly.

Eliazar huffs out a laugh and shakes his head. “I don’t envy you guys at all.”

The bartender grabs a beer from the cooler, popping the cap before placing it in front of him.

“You should join us for Ritza’s birthday dinner!” I tell Eliazar.

Ritza has gotten to know Marisol since she’s taken pity on us and a couple days a week, she’ll stop by the coffee shop and bring us drinks after her class.

“When and where?” Eliazar asks.

“At the Corner, next Thursday,” I answer.

“Sure. We’ll be there. I’ll make sure Mari doesn’t close that night. She needs a night to relax and let go. She’ll probably want to drag her best friend along. Is it okay if she comes too?”

“I don’t see why not.” I shrug. “Is she hot?”

“I guess so. But she’s dating someone.” He takes a long swig from his beer.

“Then why is she your third wheel?” Jax asks.

“Not sure. It’s weird. I’ve never met him. The way she talks about him, seems like they’ve been together for a while, but he never joins us when Natalia comes along.”

My heart falls to my stomach at hearing that name. It is not a common name and...it's a fucking coincidence.

“What an asshole. Let's his girl go out all alone?” Jax breaks through the past I was about to fall into and voices my thoughts.

“I got a two for one.” Eliazar huffs out a laugh. “At least she likes me. Or else it would suck. You know you have to win over the best friend for things to go smoothly.”

NATALIA

I stare at myself in the mirror as I get ready for our date. I don't know why I'm still calling our nights out 'dates'. How long do people date for 'dates' to just turn into nights out or dinner? Aaron is a sweet guy and I've been dating him for almost a year. I can't believe I let my dad set me up with a friend's son, but what did I have to lose? I haven't been swept up off my feet or felt butterflies in my stomach in far too long. And the couple of times I have, they didn't last. Far too quickly, the excitement fades and each of them has turned boring.

Aaron is no different. He is handsome, from a wealthy family, and looks spectacular on paper, but in person he's just...a guy. A guy that treats me well and who my parents love. I respect and love him. But it's definitely not the all-consuming, burning, passionate love I want. Or once had. There's no spice. No heat. No passion. I want my body to hum with excitement when he's near. Instead, it's like pulling on those comfy, ratty old sweats that you refuse to throw out. You love them, but there's no thrill.

That's it. It's time to take matters into my own hands. I turn around and walk to my dresser and slide open my lingerie drawer. I pull out a black lace thong, one I purchased when we were first dating and haven't worn in too long. I slide my panties down under my dress, stepping out of them and stepping into the silky soft fabric of the thong.

I look at myself in the full-length mirror. *Do I really need a bra? Nah.* I unhook it over my dress and slide it out the armholes. Houdini has nothing on ladies when we need to get into or out of our undergarments. I take a deep breath, thinking about seducing Aaron. I lick my lips as my heart beats excitedly against my chest, thinking about a sexy, hot night. I squirm imagining it, now not really hungry at all.

The ring of the doorbell announces his arrival. I slip on heels and head for the door. I swing the door open, smirking with the thoughts in my head.

“Hello, gorgeous. Ready?” Aaron greets me, smiling politely.

“Aren’t you coming in?” I purr, now needy with want.

He glances at his watch. “Our reservations are in twenty minutes.”

“Oh. Okay.” I grab my purse and keys from the entrance table. “Where are we going?”

“Julius’s. The new steak house.” He waits for me to lock the door.

AARON PULLS into the valet line in front of the restaurant. He dominated the conversation on the drive with his excitement about working with my dad. That conversation has splashed cold water on the way I was feeling. Thinking of your dad is the best way to end the tingling sensations down under.

A valet opens my door and I step out and wait for Aaron to come around. I suck in a huge gulp of air, hoping I can get this ride back to where I was hoping it would end up. Aaron places his hand at the small of my back and guides me into the restaurant.

The hostess walks us to our table after he gives her his name. I look back at him and he’s looking around the room. He’s working...again. He’s checking to see if he knows anyone here. When he does this, he reminds me so much of my father. Always trying to climb the social ladder. Wherever they are is never high enough.

I’ll need to distract him. Get his attention, his *full* attention, on me. He pulls my chair out and I take a seat, and he takes his across from me.

“Your server will be with you in a moment,” the hostess says before she walks away.

He picks up the wine list and asks, “A red okay?”

“How about some champagne?” The bubbles always go to my head.

“What are we celebrating?” he asks, his eyes still on the wine list.

I tap the top of the menu with my index finger to get his attention. When he brings his eyes up to meet mine, I answer, “Nothing.” I scrunch my nose. “Do we have to celebrate something to have champagne?” I run my tongue across my lips seductively.

“Hmm. If that’s what you want.” He places the list down. “And what is going through that pretty little head of yours?” He smirks at me.

I lean forward and whisper, “The only thing I’m wearing under my dress is a lacy, black thong.”

My heart rate speeds up with my admission.

“Is that so?” His voice drops an octave.

I nod my head slightly, with a devilish smile.

The waiter greets us, and Aaron quickly orders a bottle and sends the waiter on his way.

“I wish I would have known that on the drive over. I would’ve loved to feel for myself.”

“You know now. What are you going to do with this knowledge?”

“What would you like for me to do?”

Is it wrong that I want him to take charge? To take my hand and walk right out and take me in the car. To find a dark, secluded corner and have his way with me. To want me so bad that he can’t wait to touch me. To even sneak his hand under the table and brush my leg, teasingly. Instead, I have to tell him what I want.

Stay in the game. I can guide him.

“Honestly? I want to leave. I want us to get lost in each other. Forget about dinner and when we are finally sated and spent, we can order food for delivery because we will be much

too tired to dress and be social,” I say without subtlety. Things that have been on my mind lately tumble out.

He clears his throat. “What have you been watching?”

The waiter comes back holding a bottle and two flutes, and another waiter places an ice bucket close to the table. I wait for him to fill our glasses as Aaron orders an appetizer.

Once the waiter walks away, I answer, “I haven’t been watching anything. I just thought...” I don’t know how to explain so I just say, “How about we finish our appetizer and champagne and get out of here?” I wink.

“Aaron,” a male voice says.

We turn to look at the person who just called his name.

“Michael.” Aaron greets the older man who stepped up to our table with a woman by his side.

“How is the purchase going?” the gentleman asks.

“Still negotiating. This is Natalia, John’s daughter,” Aaron introduces me.

“Nice to meet you.” He tips his head at me. “This is my wife, Hillary.” He moves his arm in her direction.

She politely smiles, looking bored.

“They’re holding out, huh?” Michael asks.

“Stubborn old bastards. But they don’t have the capital to sit on it and wait. Everyone knows that’s going to be the next part of town that’s revitalized. If he had the money to wait it out, he could be rolling in it. But he doesn’t. And he’s trying to up the price before selling.”

Another part of the city that will get a facelift and drive the lower income families out. It’s exactly what happened with the area I was able to secure for Marisol’s coffee and wine bar. My dad owns the majority of that development.

I take a large sip of champagne and zone out. I can’t believe he has let work dampen our evening *again*. First in the car. He never asked about my day, which I would have brought the conversation to something sexy, and now dragging on the

conversation with this old guy. I glance at his wife, and she is looking around, probably as zoned out as I am. Is that my future? Talk of business and money until my ears bleed?

My phone vibrates on the table, so I pick it up to check the message. I open a text from my best friend, Marisol.

MARISOL

Wanna join EA and I on Thur? One of his friend's sister is having a bday get together at the corner.

Uh... inviting me to a randos bday party?
Laughing emoji

Yeah. Pretty much. EA asked Mateo if we could bring you. *Tongue sticking out emoji*

Shivers run up and down my back and hit deep in my core. Mateo. That name. How can a name elicit such intense feelings? It's been eight years since he walked away from me. I should be angry. I should hate him for breaking my heart. But all I want is those damn summers back.

But who is this Mateo?

Mateo????

My breathing is shallow as I wait for her to respond.

EA's friend. The guy that restored his jeep and owns that garage I told you about. I've met Ritza, the bday girl. She comes by the shop to buy the guys coffee. She works at the garage her brother and Mateo own.

Oh...yeah okay. I'll go.

This is just a huge coincidence. I'm sure there are other guys named Mateo who like to work on cars. Besides, Mateo said he would never leave his stupid beach town. He was taking over his father's garage. That was his big dream.

“It was nice meeting you, Natalia. We should be heading to our table.”

I hear my name and come out of my stupor. I plaster on the public smile my dad likes and respond, “Nice to meet you. Hillary.” I nod my head at her as she does the same. They walk away to their table.

Aaron picks up his flute and gulps the entire glass. “I can’t believe how rude you were.”

Wait, what? I was rude? “How?” I follow his lead and down my champagne too.

“On your phone. You could have waited a couple of minutes until they walked away.”

“I wasn’t part of the conversation. That was your business, not mine. Why do I need to sit and listen? It doesn’t interest me. Not in the least.”

“I was networking. You can smile and seem interested. The way for me to get ahead is to know people.”

Frustration strums through my body at being scolded and talked down to like I am a child. I grab the bottle from the ice bucket and fill my glass so quickly that the bubbles run over. Aaron takes the napkin from his lap and dabs around my glass. A waiter notices and takes the wet napkin and hands him a new one. Gotta love these upscale steak houses. I’m sure these waiters have stories because they are trained to be flies on the wall, making sure the customers are happy.

I take a calming breath, not wanting to attract attention. “What do you want me to do? Did you see his wife? She was also bored out of her mind. A night out for just them... or us... turns into business.” I lower my voice so that only Aaron can hear. “I was just talking about sex. Wanting to leave and get lost in you. And you? Instead of polite introductions and a quick good-bye, you talked and talked about business.”

“Again, I was networking. Is it hard to sit and smile while I make deals?”

“No, it’s not hard to sit and smile. But I don’t want that to be my life. I wanted *you* a moment ago. Now, I just want to eat

and go home.” I don’t want to be my mom. While I loved that she was a stay-at-home mom and could be at my beck and call, that’s just not me. She perfected the smile and grace of looking interested. Or maybe she was actually interested. I’ve never asked.

“Awe, honey... no more pouting. Fine. It wasn’t a big deal that you were on your phone. I’m sorry.” He lays his hand on top of mine and strokes the back of it with his thumb. He leans into the table and says, “How about we go back to discussing what’s not under your dress?”

My lips spread on cue to dissipate the argument. I know we’ll eat, and he’ll more than likely just drop me off and head back to his place. He rarely spends the night unless it’s on a weekend because I live too far from his office, and he always wants to be the first one to arrive.



CHAPTER TWO

MATEO

THE BONFIRE HAS BEEN GOING ON FOR A WHILE AND STILL NO sight of the gorgeous girl from the balcony. I keep scanning the boardwalk up to the house she's staying in, not wanting to miss her or have one of these other jerks get to her first. Even from a distance, I was intrigued with her. She was alone which is strange for a teen at the beach.

It's the start of summer, and everyone is at the bonfire before work, summer school, and vacations split us up. This bonfire has been the town tradition since before I was born. My parents and older sister talked about their high school start of summer bonfires. The whole town knows there's underage drinking going on, but they all seem to turn a blind eye. Only in a small town.

"What?" Julian says as he grabs my full plastic cup from my hand, sloshing my beer. "Not drinking tonight?"

"Back the fuck up, dude." I grab my cup back taking a large swig of the room temperature beer.

"All you've done is stand there and look at that damn house." He shakes his head. "How long are you going to wait for that princess?" He tips his head in the direction of the house. "Because you know Ash will jump you if you give her the go."

"I don't want Ash." I shiver dramatically. "If you think so highly of her, you get with her."

Ashley has been after me all year, but I just don't find her all that appealing. She's way too fucking needy and thinks her popularity is her personality.

"I would, but she doesn't want me," he responds, defeated.

I pull out my phone to look at the time. Nine-twenty. I guess she really isn't coming

I turn around, crushed mystery girl stood me up, but still ready to party. There's still plenty of trouble to get into, with or without a girl. I pour out the warm beer and make my way to the keg for a refill. This one will definitely not be getting hot.

"Hey, new girl," I hear a guy say loudly behind me.

I turn to see my balcony girl walking around and looking lost. She gives some jackass senior a shy smile but walks past him. I rush to her before any other guy decides to try their luck.

"You came." I smile.

Her eyes dance with amusement, as her lips pull out.

"I did." She tilts her head a tad and licks her lips.

"I'm Mateo." I extend my hand.

She places her in mine. "Natalia."

A thrill shoots up my arm from this innocent contact.

I OPEN my eyes to light streaming in from the window. I pick up my phone to check the time. Shit! I overslept. I shoot up out of bed. Shit, shower, and shave as they say.

Every night since hearing Natalia's name spill from Eliazar's mouth, I've dreamt of her. I wish I could go back and change how it ended. I should have just let us take the fall. How bad could it have been?

I need to rush if I'm going to make it in time to meet Damian at Jack's, who does all our seat restoration work.

PULLING into Jack's I park next to Damian's mustang. Knowing I'm already ten minutes late I practically run to the door. I walk in and Jamie, who's working the front desk, just waves me back.

"Yeah. That color looks good," Damian says as I walk in.

"Mateo," Jack says to me.

“Hey,” I greet them with a small smile hiding the frustration with myself for being late.

“I started already. This is the leather I chose for the seats,” Damian informs me, lifting up a sample swatch.

“Looks good,” I respond.

We discuss a couple of other details for the Bronco before we walk out.

Standing by our cars, Damian asks, “Why were you late? You’ve never been late before.”

He’s right. I’m the guy that’s always on time, or usually early.

I shake my head. “First time for everything.” I’m not going to admit that I’ve been sleeping extremely soundly lately because I’m fantasizing about a girl I knew years ago. How fuckin’ lame does that sound?

“You’ll be at The Corner later? For Ritza?” Damian raises his brows in question.

“I’ll be there. And I invited Eliazar and his girlfriend the other night when Jax and I went out.”

“Sure. Cool. I don’t care. Cici’s in charge,” he responds flatly.

“What’s your deal? You seem annoyed with the whole idea of Ritza’s birthday.”

His shoulders tense slightly, but he shakes his head. “I don’t have a problem with it.”

I raise a brow. “Then what has caused your sunshine personality lately?” I smirk, knowing how annoyed he is right now at being questioned.

He huffs and shakes his head again. “It’s nothing. It’s me. I’m the one that’s fucked up. I’m scared for her. That place is huge and it hasn’t been that long since she had that last episode...” He drifts off.

I can understand his fear and hesitation. I don’t know how I would react if it was my sister that was raped and fell into a

pit of despair like Ritza did.

I grimace. “You’ve said it yourself, she has Javie now. He seems to be her safe space. She wants to do this. It’s not a surprise. Cici hasn’t done anything Ritza hasn’t approved of. It’s been just over a year since we moved her back home. She hit rock bottom this last time and now... now she’s stronger. Trust her.”

“I know. But it was worse the last time. If you thought it was bad when we first brought her home, this last time it,” he pauses and takes a breath, “it was a hundred times worse. If Javie wasn’t strong enough to bring her back out of the darkness, I don’t know if she would have made it. That’s what scares me.” Damian sounds pained. He’s probably one of the most strong, stubborn assholes I know, so it’s weird listening to him now.

“But she did. You can’t live in the *what ifs*,” I give my two cents. The same advice I have been giving myself for years and still, I drown in *ifs*. Maybe that bullshit line will work for someone else, because it sure as hell doesn’t work on me.



ELIAZAR and I are greeted at the entrance of The Corner by employees carding guests and informing them of the different locations. I give them Ritza and Cici’s names, not sure which it was under. They direct us to a room towards the back with its own pickleball court. We walk in and a small stage is set up on the right just as you walk in, with a guy singing country cover songs.

It’s my first time here and I’m surprised. I scan the area, now understanding Damian’s unease. This place is huge and there are people hanging out in groups by the several bars set up around the outdoor space. There are open spaces for people to congregate, patio tables strategically placed around, and a line of pickleball courts down one side. Oversized games like Jenga and Connect 4 are placed by each of the tables.

“Can you believe this place?” I say to Eliazar.

“It’s crazy.” He looks around. “I came here with Mari and Nat a few weeks back. They love this place. They tried their hand at Pickleball too!” He says holding in a laugh. “Not sure if they are that uncoordinated or had one too many, but watch them if they decide to play again.” He shakes his head and busts out laughing.

We reach the area the hostess directed us to. It’s a large building with different rooms and garage doors on one side that open to pickleball courts. I glance inside each of the rooms to find ours when I see a guy who resembles Javie, but with a hardened edge, standing next to a cute, petite blond. I’m guessing this is the older brother they’ve spoken about. I should have guessed Javie’s family would be here, as close as they are. Guess it’s the merging of the families, and I wonder how Damian is going to handle another alpha asshole around. Damian is on the opposite side of the room talking with Ritza, Cici, and Jaxson. A few other people are scattered about with drinks in hand.

Eliazar pulls out his phone and begins typing.

“Just letting Marisol know where to find us,” he says, not looking up.

I walk into the room. The cute blond looks at us and walks in our direction. The guy she was standing by notices her walking away and follows.

“Hi! I’m Lola, Javie’s sister-in-law.” Her smile lights up the room.

“Hey. I’m Mateo. I co-own the garage with Damian. I’m guessing you’re Javie’s brother.” I extend my hand to the guy who’s now standing behind Lola.

He takes my hand, shaking firmly. “Alex.”

I nod my head. He seems to be a guy with very few words. “This is a friend of mine, Eliazar.” I wave my hand in his direction where he’s still texting.

“Hey. Sorry. Just texting my girlfriend so she knows where to find us.” He nods his head and smiles.

“As you can tell, my fiancé doesn’t really say much.” Lola giggles, then waves a small roll of tickets and adds, “Here are a couple of drink tickets. Cici put me in charge of these since I’ll probably be the only sober one here.” She rubs her stomach and that’s when I notice the small bump she’s hiding under the flowy dress she has on. She hands us each a couple of tickets.

“Thanks.” I smile at Lola then give Alex a curt nod.

Like Damian, I won’t back down just because you act like you’re a fuckin’ big dog. Most big dogs are all bark and no bite. I’m a lover, not a fighter, but I won’t be pushed around either. I think that’s why Damian and I work so well together. I ignore his asshole behavior, not intimidated but won’t engage either.

I walk over to Damian and clap him on the back as I tip my head at Jaxson. I just left these fools a couple of hours ago.

“Happy birthday, Ritza.” I open my arms and she walks into them. I kiss the top of her head.

“Thank you,” she mumbles.

“Hello, Cici.” I smile at her over Ritza’s head.

She flicks her hand up in a small wave.

“Hey, Mateo,” Javie says and Ritza pulls away. She steps back, tucking herself in his chest. He places his hand gently on her hip.

“Hey.” I nod at him.

Javie is alert, scanning the room.

“Eliazar and I are going to get a drink.” I wave my ticket in front of him.

“I’m coming with,” Cici says, stepping away from the group.

We get to the bar right outside the open garage door and place our order. The bartender places three beers on the bar and pops the caps off.

Cici grabs one and takes a large swig. She places the bottle back down on the counter and says, “Does Damian always have to act like he has a stick up his ass?”

I had just placed the bottle to my lips and taken a drink. Her statement catches me off guard with the seriousness of it that I spit out my beer and laugh harder than necessary. There are few who push Damian’s button, and Cici is one of them. Those two are like oil and water.

Eliazar claps my back as I continue to laugh and choke on the beer that went down the wrong pipe.

NATALIA

I'm listening to Marisol talk about Sol y Luna her coffee and wine bar as we walk through The Corner, trying to find the room Eliazar told us about. I have never seen my friend this excited about work since I met her. She was floating through life and guys, but now she hit the jackpot with Eliazar and her new business venture.

"Are you going to hire more baristas? Maybe train another manager?" Marisol has been closing up too many nights. She needs to be able to delegate and slow down.

"You sound like E.A.!" She rolls her eyes, shaking her head.

"Smart guy! You're going to burn yourself out if you try to keep up the pace you've been going. And I can't get used to that nickname you have for him. It's killing me!"

She fakes a frown and bumps my shoulder. "That's the name I knew him as and I can't get used to ya'll using his full name." She shakes her head. "And yes, I know. I just—I want this so—"

All of a sudden, I hear a laugh, and stop dead in my tracks. My feet feel like they are trapped in cement and a shiver inches its way down from my head to my toes. My breathing becomes shallow. It can't be... not *him*... not *now*.

Fingers snapping in front of my face shakes me from that feeling. "Hey! Where'd you go?" Marisol asks, her brows pulled together.

I take a breath. "Nowhere. Sorry." I plaster a smile on my face. I won't repeat his name. I can't. I still don't trust myself with his name on my lips.

I follow Marisol into the room and instantly scan the area. I suck in a big breath, relaxing, not seeing a ghost from my past. A ghost I'm not prepared to see. May never be prepared

to see again. Even if he's always on my mind. Even if my heart still calls for him. I couldn't handle him walking away again.

"Hi! I'm Lola." A blond girl welcomes us. "You're here for Ritza's birthday, correct?"

"Hi. Yes. I'm Marisol and this is Natalia. I'm Eliazar's girlfriend," Marisol chimes in, smiling.

"Perfect. He said he was expecting you. Here are a couple of drink tickets, and make yourself at home. They are just finishing setting up the food." She tears off a few tickets and hands them to Marisol. "He just went that way to the bar." She points to a bar right outside the garage door and I see Eliazar.

We start in his direction when the guy standing next to him turns slightly and I see his profile; my mouth goes dry and my tongue becomes too large for my mouth. He slides his arm around a beautiful girl and pulls her to him. He leans down and says something in her ear and her eyes dance with amusement. It's him. He can make you smile on the shittiest of days.

Marisol turns back and says, "Natalia?" Her eyes narrow since I've stopped walking again.

Hearing Marisol, both Eliazar and Mateo look at her. His eyes move from her to me, and his eyes widen just a tad as his Adam's apple bobs up and down.

"I'm so glad you made it," Eliazar says, taking a few steps to Marisol, capturing her in his arms and kissing her.

I still haven't moved, and I can't take my eyes off Mateo. His gaze doesn't leave me either.

"Natalia, come on over." I turn towards Eliazar, and he waves me over.

I fill my lungs with air and concentrate on moving my legs that feel like I'm sludging through mud.

"Hey, Marisol," Mateo's smooth voice says as she approaches. He leans down and kisses her cheek.

I'm instantly jealous of his lips on her. On my friend. Who has a boyfriend. Who is not interested in him.

"And this is Natalia," Eliazar says waving his hand at me. "Natalia, this is Mateo and Cici."

Razors are slicing my throat, and I can't speak, so I just raise my hand in a small wave. The cute girl stays tucked in his side and the only thing I can think of is wanting to claw her eyes out. I have not felt this level of jealousy since high school and those stupid little beach whores who couldn't stop throwing themselves at my boyfriend.

But he's not my boyfriend. Not anymore. Hasn't been in years. My stomach clenches and my mouth waters. I swallow it down. I'm not the young, bright-eyed girl that will believe his bullshit anymore. I have a boyfriend and there is no reason for me to get my fuckin' panties in a wad.

His eyes narrow as he tilts his head slightly. He licks those kissable, full lips and stays silent.

I push my shoulders back slightly, cock a hip, getting comfortable, and paste on my million-dollar smile. The one Aaron loves me to wear when out with his colleagues. No one will know this asshole tore my heart out and never gave it back.

"Hello! Nice to meet y'all."

"Here you go." Eliazar extends his arm out, handing me a beer.

"Thanks." I grab the beer, taking a large gulp. I'll need to sneak to a bar for a shot of something stronger to take the edge off.

Lola comes over to us and says, "Cici, the food is set up and ready. How do you want to organize?" She cocks a brow.

"Uh... excuse me," she says, grabbing Lola's hand and walking away.

It's just the four of us left standing. He's close enough for me to touch. My senses are going haywire because I swear, I can smell the salty, ocean air. The scent that I craved

September through May. I lived for summers with Mateo. He made me feel alive. A beach house I swore I hated when my dad bought it turned into my favorite home. I pleaded for my mom to let us move there year-round. My dad could commute all year like he did in the summer, but the answer was always no.

“I love this place!” Marisol squeals happily. “After dinner, let’s play Jenga!”

Not realizing I had gotten lost in my thoughts and fixated on the floor, I look up at Marisol. “Sure,” I respond, knowing I need to keep my head on straight.

My past with Mateo is just that. The past. I’m just happy he pretended not to know me. I don’t want to disclose our story. I take a breath, filling my lungs, trying to figure out something to say.

“Are you in? Or are you going to go sweep some unsuspecting lady off her feet?” Marisol says to Mateo.

What the actual eff? Ugh... I wish I could leave because I know that’s what he can do.

“Are you kidding? I’m ready to play. You’re stuck with me,” Mateo says, his voice light and teasing. He grabs her hand and twirls her effortlessly.

How he makes everything look so easy and natural, I have no idea. He oozes ease and charm.

“Great! Flirting with my girl again? I’m standing right here,” Eliazar huffs out, laughing.

“It’s your fault for having such a suave friend,” Marisol laughs, sticking her tongue out at Eliazar playfully.

I’m currently feeling like a third wheel, when I’m actually the fourth. An outsider looking in. It’s fanning the flames of anger that have been dormant.

“You’re too cute and charming for your own good. Too bad it’s being wasted on me and Natalia,” Marisol says, patting Mateo’s cheek with a wink.

His face is no longer the clean-shaven teen boy face, but now sports a five o'clock shadow beard. But his smile is the same. Warm, inviting. His light brown eyes are the same, dancing with mischief.

“And why would it be wasted on this beautiful Firecracker? I don't see a boyfriend around.” Mateo smirks at me and looks around exaggeratedly.

My heart skips a beat at my old nickname. The one he bestowed on me because of my temper. I loved to hear it fall from his lips. But not now. I will play his game. This time I will not be left broken and crying.

I take a small step closer to him, licking my lips. His eyes fall to them. I'm going to take charge of this exchange. Especially if he'll be around—being best friends with my best friend's boyfriend.

“Because I'm not interested. Flings and charm with empty words are not my jam. Besides, I have a boyfriend. He's just working late.” I cock a brow. “Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to the ladies room.”

Marisol busts out laughing and says to my back, “That's my girl. You're such a badass, Nat!”

“I was right. Your friend is a firecracker,” I hear Mateo say.

I steady my steps, not wanting him to know I had to get away after that exchange. That was us. Has always been us. If he said pull, I pushed. If I said push, he pulled. Each of us wanting to dominate, but eventually surrendering to each other. Our fights were explosive, but our make-ups were nuclear. How we survived that as sixteen and seventeen year old's, I'll never know.

I TAKE the golf cart into town, looking for Mateo. It's still early enough that I'm hoping I'll find him at his father's garage. We texted throughout the school year, but they dwindled to almost nothing the past couple of months. Probably my fault. I was so wrapped up in Marco that... I don't know. It was stupid and he

was stupid. Now I'm back in the beach house for another summer and I'm desperate to find Mateo. I didn't even bother helping my mom unpack. I just threw my stuff in my room and took off.

Nervous knots fill my stomach. What if the perfection of last summer was a fluke? What if I came down hoping for something that had an expiration date? And the worst thought, what if he's dating someone? Someone other than me. My throat closes with that thought.

Tomorrow is the town's yearly summer kick off bonfire. I had to be here before then to see him. To talk to him. There is no way I'm going if we... I won't think about it yet. The pedal of the golf cart is to the floor and it's still not going fast enough.

The garage comes into view and I feel like I'm going to throw up. I pull in, parking, and slowly make the walk into the office area to ask for him.

A guy I recognize from last summer sees me through the glass door and as I open it, he yells through the window, "Hey, Mateo! I think you'll want to check this out in the office." He tips his head and smirks, as he opens the door leading out to the garage.

Mateo walks through and the guy claps him on the shoulder as he steps out. Mateo's eyes meet mine and the smallest of smiles graces me as he cocks a brow.

"You're back." He stays in his spot.

"I am," I squeak out, not knowing what he's thinking.

"What do you want?" He crosses his arms across his chest. A chest that seems wider and stronger than last year.

What do I want? To be honest, I want what we had last summer. I want him and all that came with him.

I clasp my hands in front of me. "You," I mumble out, unsure.

He narrows his eyes for a second before his lips pull out into the widest of smiles. "Good."

He strides over to me, taking me in his arms and bringing me into his chest. I breathe in his scent and relax. I never thought that a gritty garage smell mixed with the salty ocean air would become my favorite scent.

I WALK OUT of the bathroom and to one of the many bars, picking one away from our party room. I order a tequila shot and another beer, since I chugged the remainder of the one Eliazar gave me while hiding and taking a breather in the bathroom. Will anyone wonder why he called me Firecracker?

My body is tingling, wanting to get close to Mateo. To taste him again. It feels like I have tendrils pulling me back towards him. I shake my head, trying to clear it.

THE BONFIRE LOOKS LARGER than last year or maybe I was so taken aback by Mateo's larger than life persona, nothing could compare to it. Since we've arrived, he's kept me close, always touching me in some small way.

"Mateo! When did you get here?" A female's voice yells out.

He turns around to a girl I remember from last year but forgot her name. Her face may look the same, but she developed a whole bunch over the school year. Shit! And she's wearing a small triangle bikini top—barely holding the girls in—with shorts. I'm seeing red...or green...I don't know. Whatever. I just need this effing bitch to go away.

"Hey, Jackie," Mateo responds, not removing his hand from my lower back.

"Wanna hook up later?" She bites her lip.

It feels like flames just shot out of my ears. Hell no! Nope. Nuh-uh. I'm out of here. I turn and storm away. Tears automatically begin to fall.

"Natalia!"

Hands on my shoulders stop me, but I refuse to turn around. His arms come around me pulling me into his chest, so I step away and face him.

“What was that about?” I yell out, waving my hand in Jackie’s direction.

“It was nothing,” he says, reaching out to me.

“Liar!” I continue to make a scene. I look around and some people have stopped their conversations and started to watch us.

“I promise. It’s nothing,” he says softly. “It’s me and you, remember.”

When I left last summer, we said no matter what happened over the school year, when summer came again, it would be us. A childish thought.

“What did you do with her?” I ask harshly. I look in her direction and she smirks.

I have never wanted to fight someone so bad in my life. I take a couple of steps in her direction and Mateo grabs me around the waist and pulls me back.

When I struggle to pull away, he says, “Time for us to go.”

He bends down and wraps his arms around my thighs and throws me over his shoulder. He walks us up towards the dunes to the boardwalk, heading toward my house.

He puts me down and grabs my face in his hands, wiping the fallen tears with the pads of his thumbs, looking at me and placing a gentle kiss on my nose.

“I’m not going to say sorry. Not when that’s what we agreed to. But now... now, we’re back together.” He watches for my reaction.

“Then I don’t want this anymore!” I grab his wrists, pushing his hands away from my face and taking a step back crossing my arms. “You can leave now.”

“Watch what you say, Nat. Do you really want me to walk away?” He’s too calm when I’m feeling out of control.

No! I don't want him to walk away. But I want to beat that girl to a bloody pulp and I want to hit him for being with someone other than me! I JUST WANT TO BE MAD! So instead, I choose silence.

"Admit it. You don't want me to go." He takes a baby step closer to me. "Did you date or kiss anyone this year?" His eyes narrow.

That's why I stopped texting often. Marco caught my eye and I stupidly thought he could fill the void Mateo left. Turns out, the cutest and most popular guy in my school could not. He was more work than I care to admit. But having someone helped the school year go by and upped my popularity. There was that.

Silence, because I don't want to admit that I did the same thing I'm pissed over.

"I'm going to take that as a yes." He takes another step, bringing us almost to touch. He leans down and says close to my ear, "Should I be mad at you for whoever touched your lips?" His nose skims my ear, and his breath is warm on my neck. "Where else did he touch you? Someplace I haven't been allowed to go?" His fingers skim down my arm, interlacing our fingers. A trail of goose bumps left in its wake.

Last summer, we were both virgins, but now I'm starting to doubt he still is. He's too smooth. My heart is being strangled with the thought of his lips on Jackie. Him seeing all of her. It was supposed to be us. Us together, figuring that all out.

"Did you have sex with Jackie?" New tears fill my eyes.

He looks directly into my eyes. "No, I did not. But you still haven't answered my questions." He cocks his head.

"No one has touched the places you have. Or any others," I whisper, still unsure about sex.

His lips come to mine for a slow, gentle kiss. "All I want is you. I have my hands full con mi cuete pequeño (with my little firecracker)."

THE BURN from the shot of the tequila I just took has calmed the nervous jitters that were taking control. I try to hold my own with Mateo, but he has a way of disarming me with his suave coolness. I glance around the room; some people are in line for the buffet and others are already sitting. Mateo, Eliazar, and Marisol are at a bar top four-seater and the open chair is next to Mateo. They have plates already, so I get in the line to serve myself. At least this gives me more time to gather my wits.

As I walk back to the table, I begin wondering if Mateo has shared our past with our friends. *Our* friends. That's the weirdest part of this situation. How in the world did I get tangled in his web again? What are the chances?

Mateo's eyes meet mine and he pulls out the stool for me as I reach the table.

"And there's a hook on the side for your purse." He points then taps the corner of the wooden table on his side to show me. The sleeve on the long Henley he's wearing pulls up a bit and I see a tattoo peeking out. Does he still have...

"Thank you."

I pick up a cheese covered chip and shove it in my mouth to stop the question that's looming in my mind now. Is my name still on his body?

MATEO

Natalia is here. All I can think of is how I want to taste her again. Hold her. It's taking everything in me not to reach out and touch her. But she's acting like she doesn't know me. Like I'm just some stranger off the street. Not the guy she professed her love to for two years. She's mad. I know she is. I can feel it. And she has every right to be. I walked away and she only knows the story her father fed her. She probably doesn't know the real story. What really went down that day. I just need her to acknowledge me. And the best way is to fuel that spicy temper.

"Jaxson had the bright idea of making Sol y Luna our new hang out spot after work. Or do you not want a few grease monkeys dirtying up your classy joint?" I tease Marisol, and in the process, Natalia too. I'm going to guess Natalia is there more often than not. And if she's there, maybe, just maybe, I'll be able to explain.

I never wanted to leave her. It was forced. The party got out of control. Damage was done. And I was the one left holding the bag. Having years to think about it, I have wondered if it was done intentionally. A way to break us up. My only consolation was that in a small town, if someone did do it on purpose, everyone would eventually know the truth. And that little nugget of information has never been revealed.

"Yes! Absolutely make Sol y Luna your new spot!" Marisol responds, a little too excitedly.

"And why do you seem just a tad too excited about the guys hanging at your place?" Eliazar holds a smile, knowingly.

"Can you imagine when news spreads among all the women who come in? Hot guys hanging at the wine bar, actively trying to hook up!" She laughs loudly and claps her hand on her thigh. "I'll have it made!" She shimmies in her chair, still giggling.

I feel Natalia tense beside me, so I glance over and notice her straight back and fist on her lap. I can't believe, after all this time, I can still sense her. That was the strange thing about us—we knew what each other was feeling before we even spoke a word. Young and dumb, we often exploited it. I may not be young anymore, but her dad said I was dumb. So here I go... operation to get mi cuete to pop.

“Trying to whore me out, Mari?” I frown dramatically.

“Absolutely!” she answers, then adds, “While you're at it, bring Damian and Ricky too. I mean, come on. I'm amazed y'all don't have more girls crashing their cars on purpose to go hang at your garage.” She laughs.

Natalia squirms in her chair uncomfortably. She picks up a potato skin from her plate and takes a large, un-lady-like bite.

“You do realize your boyfriend is sitting right next to you?” Eliazar feigns hurt.

“Oh, babe, I know. But you don't attract customers since they've all seen you kissing me. You're spoken for. You're a deterrent.” She shrugs her shoulders. “You are hot and taken, but them... they are hot, single and ready to mingle.” She scrunches her nose and rolls her eyes.

“Well, then... if I'm working on your marketing, how much am I getting paid?” I joke.

“I'm her marketer and you won't be paid,” Natalia huffs out with a mouth full of food.

“That's right. Thank you, Nat. You'll be paid in dates with random women.”

“I don't think he's opposed to that idea.” Eliazar laughs. “Hey, Jax! Mari said your new job is hanging out at Sol at night and attracting the women.”

I bust out laughing, knowing this conversation is getting a rise out of Natalia.

“Hell yeah!” Jax says, just as Enrique pipes in, “I want in on that deal too.”

They are both at the next table over with Damian.

“What do you think, Damian?” I continue pushing, noticing Natalia fist and relax her hand over and over. She’s close to cracking. I can feel it. I want her to acknowledge me as more than a random stranger. With her this close, I’m craving the idea of her in my arms.

He shrugs with a smirk, “It can’t hurt.”

“Oh em gee! Y’all are dogs! When are you going to grow up?” Ritza decides to join in the banter. “I really don’t feel like fielding anymore calls for y’all!” She laughs, shaking her head.

“When we find The One, we promise, we’ll stop.” I glance at Natalia, and I see her swallow hard.

“Speak for yourself!” Jax says.

“Okay, okay, okay... maybe I started mayhem.” Mari laughs. “Time out.” She picks up her hands and does the sign of the ‘T’, still laughing.

“You just love starting trouble.” Eliazar wraps an arm around her, bringing her close and kissing her temple.

He lets her go and continues to eat. It’s quiet and didn’t go on long enough for Nat to break. I forgot she’s not the young, uncontrollable girl she used to be. I’m sure she’s tamed her spicy, hot temper. Lucky for her, I still remember how to push buttons.

“You didn’t like Mari’s marketing idea, Natalia?” I use her full name.

I rarely used her full name after that first night we met. She was Nat the first summer, until the following summer when she became Mi Cuete. Her jealousy turned me on back then, and now I know it still does. I don’t want to adjust myself because she may notice. If I still have that bond and can feel her, I wonder if she can feel me too.

She turns to me, fire in her eyes. She finishes chewing then says, “Not really.” Her brows pull together. “Not the most sustainable way to build a business. Unless y’all are serial players, never going to settle down. But then women will just

figure that out too and stay away. No need to risk your heart or health on male sluts.”

Eliazar chokes on a laugh and almost spits out the beer he has in his mouth. “Wow! I think this is the first time your charm hasn’t worked on a lady. I need to note this day down. Maybe you lost your game.” He pretends to write on his hand.

“I’m not worried.” I wink at Natalia. “I’m sure she’s just teasing me.”

Her chest rises and falls, her breaths deep and controlled. “And what makes you think I’m teasing?”

“Because...” I pause, leaning toward her just a tad, invading her personal space. “You can be annoyed with me all you want, but I’ve been told that I’m too irresistible to stay mad at.” Just a little throwback to help her remember us. She said this to me many times over our summers.

“Or...” She tilts her head and one side of her mouth quirks up. “Maybe you did in fact lose it. When you get too cocky, it can happen.”

She is definitely a whole hell of a lot stronger than she was before. But her feistiness is still there in spades.

“Maybe... but I don’t think so.” I sit back in the stool, moving away from her. This helps me adjust myself and not bring too much attention to the strain in my jeans. “I would still bet on myself.” I wink at her.

“Seriously, who cares whether Mateo lost it or not? Let’s eat and get our drink on! I’m not wasting a night out with my girl.” Eliazar throws out laughing. “But I still think you’ve met your match.”

I tip my head to Eliazar in defeat. If he only knew why she’s so angry with me. She probably thinks I walked away from her on purpose. That I left her. Maybe that I never loved her. I wanted to explain what happened, why I had to stay away. And when I did decide to throw it all to the wind and call, her number was changed. I had no way to reach her. I was released and she disappeared. I was young and scared and took the money to stay away from her to save my friend. Looking

back, I should have just let us take the fall. At least then she wouldn't believe whatever false story her dad decided to tell her.

Mari and Natalia take over the conversation, talking about a trip to wine country to sample a few new wines for the shop. I listen, staying quiet and behaving myself. Now that I have found her, I have time. I can try and get her to listen to me. Tonight's not the night.

After dinner, everyone starts mingling and playing games. A few have made their way out to the Pickleball court. Some better than others, but Marisol and Natalia decide not to play when Eliazar teases them. I've stayed away from her, giving her space, not wanting to be a dick and push too hard.

"What's your deal with that one?" Cici comes up to my side where I'm leaning against the wall, watching Natalia play a game of Connect Four against Ritza.

Surprised by her question, I deflect, "Huh?"

"Don't play dumb. You have been circling her; staying far away, but watching," Cici states too bluntly. She's right, but how would she have noticed? Everyone is too busy with games and each other.

"No deal. She just intrigues me." Which is the truth. She doesn't need to know how long I've been intrigued by her. "Am I that obvious, or are you watching me?" I wonder out loud, not wanting others to pick up on this until I'm ready.

"I'm watching everyone. I've been nervous about Ritza and don't want to draw any more ire from Damian." She leans against the wall with me.

"Why's he mad at you?"

She shrugs. "I guess he's still mad that I encouraged her to go to a bar. Railed me for pushing her too fast. You know the usual. Don't know why, but I just seem to bring out the nicest parts of him." She rolls her eyes.

"Relax. Damian can be..." I'm at a loss for how to stay neutral, so I stop and wrap an arm around her shoulders. She leans into me, and I continue, "She's safe here in this area."

Javie is by her side, and it looks like his family have her in their sights too. Damian will lighten up...eventually.”

I’ve noticed how at least one of Javie’s family members is always by Ritza and Javie. What are the chances that she found a family that was just as tight knit as ours?

With my immediate focus on Cici, I didn’t notice Natalia walking in our direction. Our eyes meet for the briefest second before she averts her gaze straight forward. Her shoulders are pushed back, chest out and she’s striding with purpose.

When she passes us, Cici says, “Well, looks like she’s noticed you, too. Talk about an Ice Queen. I think I’ll be staying away from you until y’all figure your shit out.” She laughs, standing straight and walking toward Ritza.

It will either be the best idea or maybe I’ll crash and burn, but I turn to follow Natalia. I follow her and watch her walk into the ladies’ room. I find an open stool at the bar closest to her and raise my hand to get the bartender’s attention. As I wait for my drink, I watch the door like a creeper, not wanting to miss her. I want to get her alone. I *need* to get her alone. Now that I’ve found her again, all I want to do is wrap her in my arms and breathe her in. Go back to what we were before.

The door opens and she walks out. She walks to the bar, and I know she can feel me staring. She’s forcing herself not to look at me. Natalia leans against the bar at an open spot three stools down and places an order. She’s facing straight ahead and doesn’t look like she’s enjoying herself. Her posture is stiff.

The guy that is sitting next to me leaves.

“Natalia. Come. Have a seat,” I say loudly to ensure she hears me over the music and conversations.

Her shoulders tense up before she turns to look at me. “Why would I want to do that?” She cocks a brow in disgust.

If she won’t come to me, then I’ll go to her. I grab my beer and take the few steps to her. I stand close behind her, with just enough room between us so that we aren’t touching.

I lean in, placing my beer on the counter and say in her ear as I cage her in, holding onto the bar top. “You look good. Real good.”

She’s so close I can feel the warmth radiating from her body. It’s taking all my self-control not to kiss that spot on her neck that she likes. And as if she’s reading my mind, she brushes her hair to the side exposing her neck.

“Thanks,” she says without turning around. “Mind giving a girl some space?” She tilts her head, her neck tempting me.

“Sure.” I grab my beer and drop my arms, taking a half step back. My jeans feel tight as my eyes stay on the curve of her neck, wanting to bury my lips there. To lick and taste her delectable skin.

The bartender drops off a shot and a beer in front of her. She grabs the shot and turns around.

“To playboys that don’t realize when they’re past their prime.” She clinks her shot glass to the bottle in my hand and throws her head back, downing it quickly. She looks at me, eyes narrowed and licks her lips slowly.

One for one, Firecracker. Here we go.

“Maybe. But if I lost it completely...” I pause, invading her space, lowering my voice, “Why do I still excite you?” I glance down to her breasts, where her hardened nipples are on display through the fitted tee she’s wearing.

She looks down with me and notices what I’m looking at, then back up to me. Her lips spread in a devilish smile. “How do you know you did that? I may have been talking dirty to my *boyfriend* in the bathroom.” She takes her bottom lip into her mouth. “Or maybe someone caught my eye.” She rolls her shoulders back, accentuating her breasts further. “And since I’m in the mood...” She clears her throat. “I should head out.”

She grabs her beer and steps to the side, but I place my arm on the bar top again, holding her in place. With the back of my hand still holding the beer bottle, I let it run down her arm. She holds her breath.

“But you’ll think of me.” I give her a final wink and walk away.



CHAPTER THREE

NATALIA

IT'S BEEN DAYS. FIVE GAWD DAMN DAYS AND I CAN'T SHAKE the tingles in my body every time I think of Mateo. My body hums with a thrill I haven't felt in years... since him. He was so close and all I had to do was lean in and my lips would have tasted him again. But I can't. I won't. I will never leave myself that vulnerable again. He chose money over me. He showed his true colors, and I can't ever forget that.

I would have stuck out a long-distance relationship... for him I would've done anything. No amount of money or threats from my father could have dissuaded me. But for him— I had a price tag.

“HOW ABOUT DINNER OUT TONIGHT?” I hear my dad ask my mom as I'm coming down the stairs from my room.

My mind is preoccupied thinking about our last summer before I go off to college. Two months and... I panic every time I think about our next steps.

Knowing we had our summers; I was secure with us. But now... college, being further away from him, and no summer certainties— I'm freaking out. I want him to come with me. To leave this place and start a future with me. He wants his dad's garage.

“Not having to cook. Absolutely,” my mom responds.

“Where's Natalia?” he asks, voice gruff. I stop, listening to their conversation.

“She's in her room getting dressed. She mentioned plans with Mateo,” my mom answers frankly.

“That loser again!” He raises his voice and my body tenses.

“She’s having fun. She’s young. I’m sure it’s just a fling,” my mom’s soothing voice says.

“I don’t know why you haven’t forbidden her from seeing him.” He sounds angry and I hear an ice cube drop in a glass.

I’m waiting for my mom to reply as I listen to my dad pour his whiskey. Then my dad’s voice breaks the silence, “She should be making contacts, hanging out with the right people. What did I work so hard for and pay private school tuition if she’s just going to shun those kids? You should’ve told her no, we would not be spending this summer at the beach. She’s off to college in the fall and needs to start networking.”

A shrill, fake laugh fills the room. “Like you have ever told that girl no for anything. You want me to be the bad guy and tell her she can’t see that boy. She has you wrapped right here...” My mom pauses and I can imagine her waving her pinky at my father. “You want her to dump that boy? Then you tell her.”

I’m daddy’s little girl and always get my way with him. With both of them, really. The perk of being an only child.

I HAD no idea my dad didn’t like Mateo until I overheard that conversation. My dad ended up making it clear that he didn’t want me dating Mateo and was sending me back to the city to prepare for college. I, in turn, ran away— right into Mateo’s arms. According to the police, technically I wasn’t running away because I was eighteen, but it felt that way to both my parents and I.

His parents were nice and let me stay, but only in his older sister’s room. I didn’t care. I knew Mateo was a few steps away from me and would never let anything hurt me. Until he did. He took my heart and crushed it into a million pieces. Kept a few for himself, without knowing. It’s never been the same, still isn’t.

I loved the girl I was back then. Bright eyed and ready for any adventure. I still love a good adventure, but now I’m cautious. I love Aaron, but I’m not *in love* with him. I don’t

trust anyone with my fragile heart. It took years to piece it back together.

My phone vibrates on my desk. I pick it up, opening a text from Aaron.

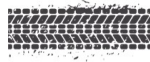
AARON

Ready for this weekend?

Ah, shit! I've been so consumed with Mateo that I completely forgot that Aaron planned a long weekend getaway for us. He has business in Florida, and he invited me to meet him there. A whole weekend away at a lovely beach was a dream come true a couple of weeks ago, before I saw Mateo again. Now it feels forced and unnatural. Mateo is invading every freaking fiber of my being.

Can't wait

I respond, with a big fat lie.



READY TO DECOMPRESS with a large glass of wine, I walk into Sol y Luna. The need to settle my mind before I jump on a plane tomorrow evening is dire. I wave at Oscar, one of Marisol's night managers and raise a finger to him. He nods at me and smiles. I love that my best friend owns a wine bar and the manager has already learned my favorite wines. I don't see Marisol around so I'm guessing she's in the office finishing up some paperwork.

I take a seat at a table, tucked in a quiet corner. I'll scroll socials until Marisol is ready to join me. She already had a head start on me since she was wine tasting earlier.

Oscar sets a glass of wine and a small carafe down on the table in front of me.

“This a Temperanillo from the Hill Country. I’ll leave you to it.” He tips his head and walks back to the bar area.

Scanning the room I’m impressed with the number of patrons for Wine Wednesday, with people still trickling in. I take a sip of the wine, loving the bold aroma and taste, while still finishing smooth. I pull up the Photogram app to mindlessly scroll while I wait.

Marisol comes out of the back with a bottle and glass in her hands after a few minutes. Her grin wide, she sits down.

“Spill!” I cut to the chase wanting to know why she’s acting like the cat that ate the canary. I hold my breath, worried she knows about mine and Mateo’s past.

“I’m actually turning a profit!”

I breathe a sigh of relief; it’s all about her. She fills her glass, then raises it to the middle of the table, waiting for me to cheers.

“Congrats! I told you! Location, marketing, and passion.” I clink her glass, then we both take a sip.

“I can’t believe it. Really. It’s not much, but I’m not starting in the red. And I know it’s early. And I have months to prove its stability, but...” She stops her verbal vomit nervousness.

I laugh. “You have been searching for your passion since I met you. I think you’ve found it in Sol y Luna and the handsome photographer I introduced you to!” I giggle, crinkling my nose.

“Technically, I already knew him, but—”

“Tomatoes, tomatoes,” I cut her off, pronouncing them differently. “I still helped.” I pat my back, laughing.

“Too bad I can’t return the favor for you.” She holds her lips tight.

“Huh?”

“Did you not notice the way Mateo was eye fucking you the other night?” Her eyes widen dramatically. “I mean,

seriously. You, chica, caught his ah-ten-tion.” She smiles and shimmies her shoulders.

I was so busy concentrating on ignoring him, I must have missed it. I take a sip and shake my head.

“No, he wasn’t. I’m sure Mr. Player is too busy trying to catch all the female attention in the room to focus on me.”

“Oh, puh-lease. You probably didn’t notice because you have Mr. Perfect at your beck and call.” She brings her glass up to her nose for a whiff before taking a sip.

I stay silent, not wanting to give anything away. This group of friends is close, and I just need to focus on moving on. For real this time. No more looking in the rearview mirror. It was safe doing that when he was only in my mind. Now that he’s going to be a part of my life, I need to let him go. For good.

“Speaking of the devil himself,” Marisol says in a hushed voice.

I turn to the door and in strides Mateo, Eliazar, and a couple of other guys I recognize from the party. I’m blanking on their names, but they also work at the garage. The confidence and arrogance they exude is not fair on the female population.

“Reporting for duty,” the cute, All-American guy with dirty blond hair and a mischievous smile says as he mock salutes Marisol.

That stupid conversation about them attracting females to this place. It wasn’t a bad idea, or wrong, but that means I’m losing my favorite spot to them. I don’t want to see Mateo hitting on women in front of me. Hell nah. That may bring out the old green-eyed monster before I can get him out of my system for good.

I haven’t had to control that part of me in a very long time, because no one has had the effect Mateo had on me. If I wasn’t a guy’s sole focus, I would just cut them loose. Every guy I’ve dated always wondered why I was aloof when a girl would hit on them, or they would jokingly flirt to make me mad. I

always said I just wasn't the jealous type, which was a lie. I am and I'm not nice about it either. I can be downright vicious. But, and that's a big fat *but*... it's only ever been with Mateo and his attention.

Eliazar gives Marisol a quick kiss and takes a seat next to her. All-American sits in the other empty chair while Mateo pulls up a chair from the table next to ours, placing it between All-American and myself.

"Ladies," Mateo says with a wide grin, sitting down. The last guy, I didn't officially meet at the party, stays standing by the table.

It's a small bistro table, so we are crowded. My chest tightens with Mateo oh-so-close. Without thinking, I take a deep breath and his scent rushes in. It's different, but familiar at the same time. I need to continue acting like he doesn't affect me, when truthfully, everything I'm doing is because of him. Everything. And I don't mean right at this moment either. My whole adult life I've spent trying to overcome that failed relationship.

"So, you weren't joking about gracing us with your presence?" Marisol teases.

"Of course not. We are here to serve," Mateo responds, his voice silky and tempting. "Jax, Ricky, this is Natalia." I look at him and he smirks. "It's Natalia, right?"

This jerk is messing with me. On purpose.

I cock a brow and smile sweetly. "Yes." I look up to Ricky and purr out, "It's so nice to meet you."

I notice Mateo out of the corner of my eye subtly shake his head. He pushes his long sleeve up his arm just enough to expose tattoos. He then says, "And on that note, we should leave you ladies that are spoken for and head to the counter. Wine is new for me, and I think I need a tasting. Maybe a damsel in distress will take pity and help me out." He stands and leaves.

My throat closes up knowing he will have no trouble catching someone's attention. Females flock to him with his

charm and charisma. Even when I was standing right there, some stupid girls would act like I was invisible. And the tattoo sleeve? He had to have done that on purpose to remind me. Did he cover my name with all the ones he has now? It feels like someone has my heart in the palm of their hand and is crushing the life out of it.

I place my hand on the bottom of my wine glass, the stem between my index and middle finger and start to swirl the wine. I concentrate on the wine spinning in the glass so I don't look at him.

"Your smile is larger than usual. What's going on? Did we interrupt some girly gossip?" Eliazar says.

"I'm in the black this month." I look up as Marisol sways in her seat with excitement.

"Seriously?" Eliazar says.

"Yup!"

He leans in and takes her face in his hands giving her a kiss. There's a pounding in my chest and a weird feeling of jealousy. Not that I want Eliazar, but wanting what Marisol has with him. The way he notices the smallest things about her, like her unusually good mood. The way she talks about how he created a space for her in his art studio so they could be together even when they were working separately.

"I'll be right back." I excuse myself to the women's room to take a short breather.

As I walk past the counter, Mateo turns to me and winks, then turns back to the counter. It was quick and I doubt anyone noticed. The ease in which he does everything never ceases to amaze me.

MATEO

I want to talk to her. I need to explain, tell her my side. Her dad took advantage of me. He let his power and money do the talking and stripped me of her. Threatened to press charges on me and my friends, while Natalia walked, or save us all and take the fifty grand. Fifty grand and stay away from her.

I didn't want the money. But the only reason my friend was in the predicament was because of Natalia and I. A final summer party where I was going to tell her that her graduation gift was not only her name on my body, but I was moving. Moving and going to college to be near her. No more struggling with the long-distance relationship which we hated.

She suggested we use one of the new houses being built in a new subdivision since it was raining, and a bonfire was out of the question. None of the houses were inhabited yet. Secluded. It was fine until...until it wasn't.

"HEY, man, we need to shut this down. This isn't a fucking bonfire, dude," Julian, my best friend, says to me.

When bonfires get too big or out of control, we can abandon them. The fire dies down on the sand or the tide comes in and crushes the flames and embers.

Natalia is tucked into my side as I respond, "Shit, I know. What the fuck are we going to do?"

"Is it that bad?" Natalia asks.

"Hell yeah, it is. Who the fuck are some of these fucking people?" Julian says gruffly.

"Fucking tourists, I bet. They were somewhere and the text of a party came through and they all came. They aren't from here, so they don't give a damn. We need to go." I step away from Natalia and grab her hand to lead her out.

“We can’t leave. What if they trash the house?” She stops me from moving.

“And if they do? What are we going to do about it? How do you suggest we get the hundred or so people crammed in here out?” I try and pull her with me again.

She pulls her hand out of mine and crosses her arms, staring at me with brows raised.

“Natalia, I can’t afford to get into trouble. I have scholarships on the line,” Julian says. “We’ve got to go.” He pulls Stacy behind him, going to the door.

“Can we at least try?” Natalia asks.

“And if they don’t leave?”

She shrugs her shoulders.

“Fine,” I say, looking at Julian. He shakes his head at me but lifts his shoulders in resignation.

I climb on some stacked sheetrock in the corner of the room and yell out, “Party’s over. Everyone needs to leave.”

An asshole yells out, “Is this your house? No. Then we’ll be staying.”

I look at Natalia and she waves her hand at me to try again.

“Let’s go! Everyone out!”

“Shut the fuck up,” the asshole says again and throws his beer bottle across the room, hitting a lantern someone placed on a makeshift table filled with alcohol bottles.

I watch in slow motion as the lantern tips over. A fire spreads quickly as the oil in the lantern spills out. People panic and rush to the door, knocking the boards being held up with sawhorses. Bottles of alcohol fall, spilling out, which only helps the fire spread.

I look at Natalia and her eyes are as wide as saucers. “Get out now!” I yell to her.

There are too many people between us and I can't get to her in the panic. Julian grabs her and pushes her out the door. It's chaos with people yelling and pushing. I'm standing on the sheetrock, scanning for a way out. I can't get to the fire and attempt to put it out with the hysteria. I wait and watch as the fire continues to spread, and people rush out. Smoke begins to fill the area and I crouch down. I jump down once the majority of the people are out.

I look around outside and cars are speeding away while others are running toward the beach. Julian is holding onto Natalia as she screams, trying to get out of his grip. Once he sees me, he lets her go and she runs into my arms.

"What took you so long?" she cries hysterically.

"I was stuck. I'm okay." I hold her tight and run my fingers through her hair.

"We need to call 911," she says through sobs into my chest.

"No. We need to get out of here," I say, letting her go.

"We have to. It's my dad's property. I'll take the blame," she says, pulling her phone out of her back pocket.

Everyone scattered and ran, except us. She was horrified and wouldn't leave. I kept trying to drag her away, get her to leave. She kept repeating that her dad was going to be so pissed at her. It was his newest project. It was his land and his houses. She called 911 and refused to leave until they got there. By then, it was too late. My best friend and his girlfriend, along with Natalia and I, were taken to the police station under arrest.

"DOES THAT SOUND GOOD?" Ricky's voice breaks me from the past.

"Huh? Yeah. Whatever," I answer not knowing what I just agreed to, but not wanting to admit I fell down memory lane. With Natalia around, that's all I seem to be doing.

“This is a red flight so we can figure out what you prefer and next time when you come in, you’ll be an expert at ordering,” the guy behind the counter says.

A couple of women holding wine glasses come up and take seats at the counter next to me.

“Newbies?” the woman closest to me says with a wide smile.

“Newbies?” Jax repeats, raising his brow.

“We couldn’t help but overhear Jon explaining wine and then offering you a flight to sample different varietals,” she says, then pulls the corner of her lip in her mouth, releasing it slowly.

Jax’s plan is working like a beauty, too bad my brain is now filled with a certain Firecracker, and no woman will ever shine as bright as her. But she isn’t mine. She has a boyfriend. A certain fact that I keep conveniently forgetting about. But a boyfriend who’s never with her. Who she leaves behind. Interesting.

“Guilty.” I turn on my megawatt smile. Will my Firecracker get jealous and pop?

“You don’t know what you like?” Her friend jumps in the conversation, her voice low with a hint of desire.

Just then Natalia walks out so I say just loud enough for her to hear, “I know exactly what I like...” I pause and glance in her direction for a split second as her back stiffens, “except for wine,” I finish.

Ricky leaves his seat and comes around to stand on the other side of the women, sandwiching them between us.

“The first you’ll be sampling is a Pinot Noir. It’s light and dry. Fruit forward and finishes nicely,” the wine guy says, pouring wine in each glass.

We pick up the glasses and down the swig of wine placed in the glass. The woman closest to me giggles and says, “You really are newbies. Wine isn’t for chugging, it’s for sipping and tasting.” She leans closer to me.

I can feel an energy on my back and I have a feeling I have a certain someone glaring at me.

I nod my head slowly and turn to face her so that Natalia can see my profile. “Guess I’m not a man of patience.”

I notice Jon, the wine steward, smiling. “To each their own.” He lets out a small laugh.

He grabs another bottle and begins pouring. Ricky has struck up a conversation with the other lady.

I grab my glass, downing the small amount, not waiting for the introduction of this wine, then telling Jon, “Gimme something with a bite. I’ll just take a glass. This is not for me.”

The cat and mouse game with this lady, who I have no interest in, is beginning to bore me.

“A Malbec.” He nods and turns around looking through open bottles.

“Something with a bite, hmm?” she purrs leaning closer.

My lips pull out because this one is too easy. Normally, this would be a slam dunk. Now with Natalia at my back, and the little eye daggers she’s throwing, I’m not in the mood. In the past, as soon as a girl paid attention to me and began flirting, mi cuete would explode. Girls found out real quick not to test her. Natalia won’t break like she did back then. She’s a woman. In control. I need a new way to get her to acknowledge me.

“Something like that,” I respond as Jon pours me a glass and places it in front of me. “I need to talk to Zar. I’ll be back,” I say to Jax.

I grab the glass, nodding at the lady standing next to me, then turning to Jax and giving him a wink to take over. Poor lady doesn’t realize she’s competing with someone who currently hates me.

I grab the chair I vacated just a few minutes ago, inconspicuously trying to move it a bit closer to Natalia before sitting down. I glance at her legs and watch as she squeezes her thighs together. I wonder if she’s wet, thinking of me?

“So, what are we talking about?” I ask when there’s a lull in conversation. I really wasn’t listening as I was too busy visualizing Natalia naked. In my bed. Her body different now than the girl I left, and even more incredibly addicting.

“Natalia’s trip that she hasn’t started packing for,” Marisol says instantly. “It’s crazy! Miss I’m super-duper organized who leaves nothing to chance, hasn’t started packing for her romantic getaway that she leaves for *tomorrow!*” She shakes her head. “Seriously. Are you running a fever?” Marisol stretches her arm over the small table reaching for Natalia’s forehead.

Natalia playfully swipes her hand away. My blood begins to boil thinking of her on a trip with who knows what prick. Alone with her. *Keep your shit together. She’s not yours. Not yet anyway.*

“No, I’m not sick.” She shakes her head. She takes a breath and I know she’s giving herself time to think of something to say as she takes a sip of wine. “I’m just swamped at work.”

“Oh my gawd. It’s one freakin’ day! If you want, I’ll take your spot.”

“To go on a romantic trip with her boyfriend?” Eliazar laughs out.

“Well, it wouldn’t be romantic with me.” She widens her eyes, shaking her head, like everyone should know that. “Sun, sand and water. Drinks by the pool. Fancy dinners.” Marisol sighs dreamily.

“Fine. When would you like to go?” Eliazar offers.

“Oh! I can’t leave right now. I have a business to run.” She laughs. “But a girl can dream... and live vicariously through her best friend.”

Eliazar and I laugh at her complete one-eighty in less than thirty seconds. This is my chance to learn about this mysterious boyfriend.

“Romantic getaway to a beach, huh?” I ask Natalia, keeping my voice neutral. “Where y’all headed?”

“Uh...” She clears her throat. I caught her off guard. “Miami.”

“Nice.” I pause, watching her fidget a bit in her seat. She takes a longer drink from her wine. “Guess Miami beaches look nothing like the Texas coast, huh?” I add to bring her back to us.

She laughs uncomfortably, “No. nothing like these beaches.”

“And where is this boyfriend of yours? He wasn’t with you the other night either.” I state the obvious, wanting to hear the reason she’s alone so often.

“He’s already in Miami. He works all the time. He has big dreams. Marisol is slightly exaggerating about the romantic getaway. Since he was going to be there on business, he decided to make it a long weekend for me.” She shrugs.

“Should I call him boyfriend, or does he have a name?” I press for more.

“His name is Aaron. Aaron Masters.” She glances at me then looks back down to the table. She’s uncomfortable talking about him.

“Big dreams, my ass!” Marisol laughs loudly. “He’s trying to prove himself worthy of her father. He wants daddy’s company when he decides to hand over the reins. Those are some BIG shoes to fill.”

Natalia widens her eyes at Marisol.

“What? Like it’s a secret.” Marisol says, shaking her head and lifting her hands in question.

“Ah! So, he’s trying to impress your dad?” She looks up at me and I raise a brow. “Has he received daddy’s stamp of approval?”

The fury that is raging through my body knowing this is almost too hard to contain. Her dad is the reason she’s not mine and here is some fucking douche that will ignore a delectable goddess for fucking money and power. Her dad would rather her be with a guy that pays no attention to her

and has the right pedigree than a guy that would fucking
worship the ground his daughter walks on.

NATALIA

“No,” I blurt out quickly.

Why in the hell did I say that about Aaron and the trip? I could have made him jealous. Dug into him a bit more since he left me and broke my heart. But no! I almost admitted what it actually is. That, more than likely, I’ll spend my days on the beach or by the pool reading and relaxing while he’s taking calls or on the golf course, schmoozing. I may get one dinner where it’s just the two of us. The others will be filled with people that are working on the project, the investors or the dumb-fucks they are purchasing from.

And why did Marisol have to add fuel to the fire? My dad hated Mateo. With. A. Passion. Just because he wasn’t rich or didn’t have the ‘right’ last name. A White last name. But my dad couldn’t know that’s the way it would’ve stayed. Look at Mateo now. A business owner. In the city. Away from the beach town he claimed he would never leave. I wonder why he left.

“Good. Let him work a bit more.” Mateo cocks a brow with a fake laugh.

“Huh?” I’m confused. I’m in my head right now and don’t get what I missed. I look right into Mateo’s eyes and almost forget what I was asking. “Wait. Good, what?”

The corner of his lip quirks up in a half smirk, then says, “Good that he doesn’t have daddy’s stamp of approval.”

My heart is beating so loud, I swear everyone at the table can hear it.

“No, I meant he isn’t trying to impress my dad,” I try to clarify. Mateo so close has me frazzled.

“Interesting. A self-assured man.” To those that don’t know him like I do, they would miss the bite that came out with this comment.

“He is,” I clip out, frustrated I can’t get myself and my emotions under control. “And on that note, I should head home to pack.” I stand a bit too forcefully and the chair wobbles, almost tipping over, but Mateo catches it easily.

“Didn’t mean to make you leave. Let me...” He pauses and stands. “Head on back with the guys.”

“No worries. I should’ve been home packing anyways.” I grab my purse hanging from the chair and walk away. I do not need any more word vomit to escape and for people to start questioning why he always has me flustered.

I don’t get flustered. That’s what Mateo taught me. Always stay in control and don’t let others see your weakness. Other girls flirting with your man? Get on top quickly and stay there. My dad wanting to control every aspect? Make him believe that’s what he’s doing, and do what I want anyways. Men in the office that mansplain? Let them, then punch them with their own words and your knowledge.

But with Mateo... he has me unglued every time.

“You sure do know how to push her buttons, dude!” Marisol says, loud enough for me to hear. I restrain myself from turning around and flicking her off because Mateo will know he got the best of me.



CHAPTER FOUR

NATALIA

THE SUN FEELS GREAT AGAINST MY SKIN. IT'S PERFECT RIGHT now, except for the Florida humidity which makes the air feel heavy. The mild springtime warmth allows me to lay out for much longer without breaking a sweat. Aaron left to the golf course earlier and I ate brunch alone before coming out to enjoy the pool and get a little vitamin D.

We got back to the hotel room late last night after dinner and a typical Miami night out at an exclusive club. I don't know who was schmoozing who. Between the Michelin star restaurant Aaron paid for and the table service at the club, compliments of his business associates, it was a lavish night out. We both passed out immediately, no real romance to speak of.

What if Aaron had initiated sex last night? How would I... crap! What in the hell am I thinking? Aaron is my boyfriend. End of story. Of course, I would have had a wonderful night of steamy action. But would I? With Mateo so firmly stuck in my mind?

I sit up and grab my phone, flipping over to my stomach. I prop up on my elbows to scroll social media. I check on Sol y Luna's traffic, and a couple of my other smaller clients. Making sure scheduled posts have gone through and checking to ensure someone is engaging when necessary. Too many times my clients post and forget to engage. I am constantly reminding them to stay consistent. It's amazing what social engagement does for businesses now.

My arms are falling asleep and so I roll up the extra towel I brought with me to use as a chin pillow and drop my arms holding the phone beneath me and the chair. I switch to my personal account and my breath hitches as a twinge of excitement hits my core. Mateo's name pops up as a follower. My hand trembles as I hit the notification with his name. On his profile there is only one picture of him. Just one of him

winking at the camera that was posted last night with the caption *Still thinking of me?* with a red heart. He has no followers and is only following me. He created a brand-new account just to follow me.

A notification pops up. He liked the picture I posted last night of Aaron and I at the club. I rarely post pictures of us, but last night I was tipsy and the guy's wife, girlfriend, side piece—I can't remember, kept pestering me to post one of us. My day to day posts are of me or the places I visit. No need to add a guy to socials until the guy becomes permanent. You spend way too much time wiping them when it all goes awry. Who needs to waste their time on that?

Marisol taught us that little lesson. Now her socials are filled with Eliazar, but he's not going anywhere. Her ring is coming soon! Not sure how long he's going to make me keep that secret. If Mateo wants to see me that badly, I'll give him something to look at. I move the side table to the foot of my lounge and place my bag on top, propping my phone as best I can.

A waiter stops by my chair as I'm trying to get my phone to stay in the right position. "Here, let me." He holds his hand out for my phone.

"Are you sure?" My cheeks heat up but I can't back out now that he saw me struggling. At least I can blame the redness of my cheeks on the sun instead of the embarrassment.

"Of course." His smile is sweet.

I hand him my phone and sit back into the lounge placing my sunglasses back on.

"I'm going to try a few angles, so you have many to choose from. Don't pay attention to me."

I close my eyes and relax. I bend one knee up just a tad and point my toes to give my legs some oomph. I move one arm and drape it back over the back of the lounge which arches my back and pushes my breasts out. Mateo's face pops in my mind and a pang of desire hits my core. I clench involuntarily, wishing his hand was running up my sun kissed

leg. Dragging his hand by the tie strings of my bottoms at my hip. Teasing me by pulling it just a tad before his fingers glide over my ribcage to find my tiny triangle top. All he would need to do is—

“Here you go, miss.” The waiter’s voice startles me out of the erotic daydream I just fell into.

Flustered, as if he could’ve known what I was thinking I squeak out, “Thank you.” I grab my phone from his extended hand.

I take a few calming breaths to regain my sanity. Looking at my photos app, there are over a dozen pictures from different angles. That guy did a fantastic job of capturing me. And I didn’t even tip him! I’ll have to find him before I leave.

Scrolling through the photos I look for the perfect one to post. One that will capture the resort vibe so I can tag it, but also make me look delicious for Mateo’s jaw to drop. My social aesthetic will stay the same so no one will be the wiser on why I posted this picture.

I choose a few to do a carousel and caption it, *Perfect spot for sun, sand and a lot of Romance*. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my heart that’s beating against my chest, and hit post. I swipe out of the app and click my phone off.

It’s taking everything in me not to stalk the post to see if Mateo responds. What would he say? Would he give our past away? I’m dancing too close to the line with him. If I want to forget about him, why am I giving him ammunition to continue to pursue me? Is he even pursuing me, or am I thinking too much about his actions? These questions are going to drown me if I don’t stop.

I place my phone in my bag and stand up. A quick dip in the pool to clear my mind should help. I leisurely swim a couple of laps and step out. The same waiter from before walks by again and I stop him and order a mojito.

Grabbing my phone from my bag, I check my work email for anything important I may have missed yesterday. The

waiter comes back with my drink, and I tip him with a twenty for the drink, and for earlier.

A selfie and quick text to Marisol distracts me for a bit, but before I know it, I'm back on socials, scrolling through the notifications. And there it is. Mateo was the first to like and comment, *Watch the sunrise, smell the salty air, feel the sand beneath your feet, listen to the waves crashing and taste...*

His comment is innocent to all, but I know it's filled with so much more.

A KNOCK on the bedroom door startles me awake. I look around and it's still dark outside. Another knock on the door. Mateo's sister is still fast asleep in the other bed across the room.

The door creaks open and Mateo sticks his head in. "Get up and get dressed. We're going out."

"Where?" I whisper-shout.

"Just come. If my mom finds me creeping in your room, she'll be pissed." He shuts the door.

I smile knowingly. His mom is very clear about our boundaries while I am a guest in their home. We may be eighteen, but his mom insists we stay in separate bedrooms and have a midnight curfew to come out of his room if we are hanging out in there. Funny thing is, we could stay out way past midnight and she never knows what we are doing, but under her roof, those are her rules.

I creep out of bed, put on a bra, grab flip flops and make my way to the bathroom. I quickly wash up and meet Mateo in the living room.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise." He hands me a hoodie, grabs my hand, and drags me behind him. He's way too chipper for it being just after six a.m.

We hop in their golf cart, and he drives toward the beach. The sky is a dark gray, the sun about to announce the

beginning of the day. The streetlights guide us up to the sand. He parks the cart off to the side once we reach the sand.

“Come on.” He steps out of the cart.

I follow him and he grabs my hand again. He clicks on a flashlight and guides us down closer to the water. The area is completely empty. The closest person is more than a football field away where a camper is parked.

“What are we doing here?”

“Indulging our senses.” He stops walking and pulls me to him. He places my back against his front and wraps his arms around my middle. His lips come down to my neck, kissing softly. I lean my head to the side, giving him free reign.

He kisses my neck. “I’m tasting your skin.” His voice is hoarse.

“Your breaths, soft moans, and the waves crashing is a symphony to my ears.”

He continues kissing and his hand glides under the hoodie caressing the skin across my stomach.

“I’m feeling the contrast of the coarse sand between my toes and the silkiness of your skin.”

He breathes in deeply and my eyes close as my head falls back against his shoulder.

“Your sweet jasmine perfume and the salty breeze have become my favorite scents.”

A few more kisses on my neck as his hand comes up to massage my breast. My breath hitches.

“And in a few minutes, I’ll have the most perfect, beautiful sight. The love of my life during a sunrise.”

HE’S REMINDING me of us. Of what we once had. That three-letter word says it all though. *Had*. Past tense. No longer. He broke us and he wants me to remember. Why would he torture me this way?

Love of his life... we were young and stupid. I don't know why I thought I would be the love of his life. How could I? We were naïve. We didn't know about life. We were impulsive.

Hot, angry tears slide down my cheeks. I'm furious at him for not choosing me. I'm irritated with myself for still wanting him. My heart has never been the same and probably never will be. I don't trust anyone; I don't want to. Or I can't. Not really sure which.

I swipe my cheeks roughly and place my oversized sunnies back on, before tying my wrap cover-up around my waist. Frustrated, I dump my belongings into my bag carelessly, then grab my mojito and make my way to the bar. I need to numb the pain I thought I had left behind years ago.

The poolside bar only has one other guy sitting at the end. I take a stool looking around.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asks.

“Shot of Patrón,” I answer and take a sip from my drink.

“Chilled?”

“Please.”

He places the clear liquid, the one that was my constant friend many moons ago, in front of me. It was the best way to quiet the dreams Mateo invaded. I take the lime off the edge and lick a bit of the salt on the rim of the glass before taking a large gulp. I stick the lime in my mouth to cut the taste. I lick the rest of the salt and place the glass down.

Deep breath.

“Tequila shot before the sun goes down. I'm going to guess...” The guy at the end of the bar says and pauses until I look in his direction. “A guy fucked up?” He raises a perfect brow.

I can't help but smile and nod.

MATEO

My jaw hits the floor when I open the stupid social media app and see the picture Natalia posted of herself in a barely there bikini. Her golden, flawless skin, curves in all the right places, and that smile. That snide smile that speaks volumes. I adjust myself, my dick coming to life with a picture. One gawd damn picture.

Desire flared to life as quickly as fury did. Her boyfriend is with her as she walks around flaunting the body that was meant for me. It's his hands running over her, spreading sunscreen. It's his bed she's sharing. I slam my hand on the couch. Fuck. What the hell am I doing?

But even in all my rage, I still want her. With every part of my being, I need her. I want to kiss every inch of her and wash away any other man who has ever touched her. I want her to crave me and *only* me.

I get up and pour myself a whiskey, needing something to take the edge off. I was never interested in these stupid social media apps until I saw her again. I knew she would be on them. She's a marketer. I didn't have her number so I had to do the next best thing— cyber-stalk her.

I scroll through her feed again. Anything to be close to her. And that's when it dawns on me. I take a large swig finishing it off. The boyfriend is not in pictures with her. She's always solo or with girlfriends. If he really meant something, wouldn't she post him too? And she had to have noticed I followed her and liked her picture. Which means she saw my post. That bikini picture is for me. Not for the boyfriend. *For me*. She's playing our game. She wants to get a rise out of me.

My thumbs hover over my phone, trying to decide what to comment. Memories. I have to get her to think of our past. My fingers fly over the keyboard with thoughts of one of our last times together.

I stand and walk to the kitchen. I grab the bottle of whiskey, placing it on the counter with my glass. I snap a picture of it. I upload and caption it, *How about a drink with me?* Talking through pictures and captions. This is a new one for me.



CHAPTER FIVE

MATEO

THE GARAGE AND REBUILDING THE ENGINE FOR THE BRONCO IS my only solace. Natalia was silent on the social app after that night. She never liked my picture or commented back. Maybe I was delusional thinking she was talking to me. I've been staying late at work every evening, not wanting to go out with the guys and not wanting to go home to stalk a stupid social media app. Staying busy is the only thing I know to do.

My phone rings in my earbuds, canceling the music I had blaring. I pull my phone out of my pocket and see Zar's name.

I swipe the screen. "Hey."

"Que onda? (*What's up?*) I haven't heard from you," Zar replies. I can tell he's in the car.

"Not much. Been working on the Bronco that came in." I drop my head to my shoulder, cracking my neck.

"Take a break tonight. Mari got a table at that new restaurant that opened near the Granary. The owners stopped by Sol and they got to talking and invited her to try it out. Mari wants to go because they're neighbors. Support each other's businesses in the area."

Do I want to go? Hell nah. But I will. Maybe Mari will drop some sort of information about Natalia. She has to be back in town by now. She said it was just a long weekend.

"Yeah. Sure, I guess. What time?"

"Seven thirty. And bring a date. That way you're not the odd one out."

"Odd one out?" I've gone to dinner with just the two of them. Why am I the odd one out now?

"Natalia is bringing her boyfriend. I didn't want to be stuck with that guy all night long, so I told Mari you would be coming too."

I can't control the laugh that escapes.

"Is he that bad?"

"Not sure. I'm meeting him for the first time. But if all he does is work, how interesting can he be?"

Zar isn't wrong. What would he and the boyfriend have in common? Zar is an artist and photographer, and the boyfriend is a... what in the hell does he do? Something with money.

"I'll be there."

We hang up and I look around, wondering who I could possibly take that won't get clingy and the wrong idea. The door to the waiting room opens and Cici walks towards me. Perfect.

"I'm taking off. Damian is in the office going over some invoices and is calling you."

"Yeah. Okay."

She turns around and I blurt out, "Wanna go to dinner tonight?"

She whips her head back, eyes narrowed, brows scrunched together. "What do you want?" Her tone is cautious, but curious.

"Nothing. I need a safe date."

"Safe date?" She stands facing me, arms crossed over her chest.

"I'm going to dinner with Eliazar and Mari tonight." I pause and she watches me. "And Natalia and her boyfriend will be there too."

"Oh..." She drags out the sound. "The girl from The Corner. Who you said you had nothing going on with." A devious smile spreads across her face. "You need to make her jealous?"

I should have known Cici would see right through me.

A FEW HOURS LATER, Cici and I walk through the restaurant, following the host to our table. Tension and nervousness prick at my skin. The buttoned-down, long-sleeved shirt I chose to wear feels constricting. I'm still hiding the tattoo from her. I wonder what she'll do when she realizes I never covered it. I can't wear long sleeves forever and it seems she's going to be a constant in my life now.

And there they are. All four of them are already at the table. The host extends his hand to the table and I pull out Cici's chair for her. I place her next to Eliazar, wanting to sit closest to the *boyfriend*. Eliazar and the dude are sitting at each end of the rectangular table, with Marisol and Natalia sitting on one side and Cici and I on the other.

I wonder if Marisol told Natalia I would be joining, but by the look of disgust on Natalia's face directed at Cici, I don't think they mentioned I was bringing a date.

I take my seat, greeting the table. "Hello. This is Cici, who you met at Ritza's birthday celebration." I struggle to keep the smile of victory off my face, knowing I got the rise out of Natalia I had hoped for. "I'm Mateo. And you are?" I extend my hand to her boyfriend who is sitting right next to me.

His eyes narrow, as his jaw clenches before he takes my hand and clips out, "Aaron. Natalia's boyfriend."

His shake is a little aggressive, but I guess I also tightened my grip a bit excessively. Both of us are trying to dominate.

I glance at Natalia out of the corner of my eye and watch her swallow nervously.

After everyone says a quick greeting, there is a lull in the conversation. Except for drink orders, no one speaks. Cici picks up her menu and begins looking it over. I'm too fascinated with how the evening will go to look at the menu. Will this evening crash and burn, or will I get Natalia's attention?

"Has anyone tried this place before? What's good?" Cici says to the table.

“It’s everyone’s first time. It just opened. The owner invited me since we are ‘neighbors,’” Marisol air-quotes with her hands. “He’s been coming into Sol for coffee during the construction process.”

“That’s so cool. Perks of owning a business in this area.” Cici smiles at Mari.

“We didn’t have a chance to talk the other night.” Cici looks at Natalia. “Do you also have a business?”

Leave it to Cici to begin the conversation with her easy going, take charge, outgoing personality.

“Uh... no. I... uh... I work in marketing. Sorry. I was so engrossed in the menu, I fell over my words.” She pulls her lips out in a fake smile.

The waiter comes by and drops off the drinks and informs us the owner has a couple appetizers started for us.

“What do you do? Cici, was it?” Aaron asks, condescension dripping.

“I’m still in school.” She shrugs. “And I sometimes work at the garage. I’m avoiding the real world for now.”

“Should the waiter have carded you?” His tone is a little too harsh for someone he doesn’t know.

“He can.” She rolls her eyes. “Need proof?” She grabs for her purse hanging from the chair.

“No.” He lifts up his hand, flicking it as if to dismiss her.

That rattles Aaron, not expecting her to push back a bit. I pat Cici’s thigh under the table. My way of congratulating her on how she conducted herself. She pats my hand and pushes it away playfully. She looks at me and smirks.

Deciding I’m not done with him yet, I add, “Or were you just trying to get my girl’s info on the DL?”

I huff out a laugh, then turn to Eliazar to change the conversation. “Any new paintings?”

“A couple. But this new one is...”

He pauses for too long which makes Mari jump in. “It’s beautiful and graceful and fluid and full of emotion. But according to your friend, it doesn’t convey it enough. And this observation is coming from a person who knows nothing, absolutely *nothing*, about art.”

I shake my head, feeling his artistic anguish. “You’re talented. I’m sure it’s amazing. Just like all your work that was on display at the show.”

He hangs his head in resignation, probably drowning in his own self-deprecating thoughts.

“I would love to see it when you’re ready. Art inspires. It enriches. It speaks,” Natalia says, wistfully.

“Do you love art too?” I look to Aaron.

“Nah. To me, it’s just paint on a canvas. Just buy something that will look good in your home and be done with it. I don’t get what Natalia sees in it.” His comment is very asshole-ish, especially sitting at the same table as an artist. And the way he pronounces her name. Nuh-tall-ee-uh. Talk about nails on a chalkboard.

“I think it’s fascinating, even if I don’t have an artistic bone in my body,” Cici chimes in. “The time. The vision. The execution. And how it stands the test of time. Museums filled with pieces that are old. Like really old.”

Mari giggles and agrees. “That’s precisely how I feel now. I could never do it, but now I’m so appreciative to understand it better.”

“It just took an artist boyfriend to open your eyes to what I’ve been trying to teach you all along!” Natalia playfully swipes Marisol’s shoulder.

Natalia used to tell me about the times she and her mother would visit museums, trying to find beauty in everything they saw. The way her eyes would dance when she would speak about a piece she enjoyed.

“What do you do, Aaron?” I ask.

“Real estate acquisition. I’m working with Mr. Reyes, Natalia’s dad, on this project.” He spreads his arms to his side. “You are sitting in a building owned by Natalia’s dad and the company I work for. A joint venture for us.”

I watch as Natalia’s body stiffens as she grabs for her drink.

“I should be at the club tonight, I have a few people I need to meet with, but Natalia begged me to come. She loves it when I join her.” He grabs her hand on the table, squeezing it.

Natalia’s eyes widen a fraction as her nose flairs, but all anyone would notice is the wide smile. Anyone, but me. I know her better than that.

“Well then, thank you for *allowing* my friend to enjoy this evening with me,” Mari says, with a hint of annoyance.

Boyfriend is working hard to make me believe that Natalia follows him around, when Eliazar already spilled their secrets. She’s Zar and Mari’s third wheel more often than she’s with him. This knowledge is fun to know. He’s peacocking. A real man secure in his relationship doesn’t need to posture.

“You’re very welcome, Marisol.” His tone is harsh; he knows she knows better. And the way he says her name? He doesn’t even try to pronounce it correctly. *Merry-sole*. Dude could try to roll an ‘r’.

“And what is it you do?” Aaron grabs his glass and takes a swig, leaning back in his seat.

“I’m a mechanic.” He may feel the need to be a show-off, but that’s just not my style.

A smidgeon of a smirk appears on Nat’s face before she schools it.

“Mechanic. An honest profession.” Aaron nods his head as he says condescendingly.

“Don’t let him fool you. He owns the garage, and Mateo and his friends restore vintage cars,” Cici says, excitedly.

Natalia glares at Cici, but schools it quickly. She grabs her glass of wine and takes a large gulp.

“Hell, yeah, he does!” Eliazar jumps into the conversation. “He restored my nineteen-eighty-two Jeep. It has the vintage look, but with all the modern conveniences.”

The waiter returns, pausing the conversation, dropping off a few different appetizers and informing us what each is, before walking away.

The conversation turns to the food and what everyone would be ordering. Not sure if Mari knows about Natalia and I, but she has kept the topics light. TV shows they are watching, celebrity gossip, and new wines she’s bringing in.

I’m not impressed. Aaron tries too hard to be the know-it-all in every topic. He one-ups whatever anyone says. Talk about an insecure man. How does Natalia not see this? I’m bored with him and his grandstanding. And every time I get the opportunity, I knock him down a few pegs. Nicely. But still.

AFTER A GREAT DINNER, we all stand to leave.

“Thank you for the invite, Mari.” I lean in, kissing her cheek. “I’ll see you later man.” I clap hands with Zar.

“I’m heading to the club. Want to join me?” Aaron asks Natalia.

I watch them through the corner of my eye and watch Natalia shake her head. “Not tonight. I have an early meeting. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” He walks away without saying goodbye to anyone else.

We all start walking in the direction of the door, but then Natalia turns to Mari. “I’m going to the ladies’ room. I’ll stop by tomorrow to tweak your website.”

“Okay. See ya, chica.” Mari blows her a kiss and continues to the door.

Cici turns to me and says, “Wanna get a drink at the bar?”

After this fuck up of a night, I answer, “Sure do.”

Mari and Zar wave, walking away. Cici and I get to the bar and she turns to me, “I’m going to go, but stay. Have a drink and talk with her.” She smiles guiltily.

“Let me walk you to your car first.”

“Nope. You might miss her. I’m a big girl. I’ll text you when I’m in my car and heading home.” She pats my cheek and winks.

NATALIA

Grateful the ladies' room is empty, I stare at my reflection in the mirror. The person staring back looks like a confident, happy woman. But underneath the surface is a frustrated, scared, lost soul. The shield I have placed around myself kept me from getting hurt. I went through the motions of getting on with my life. I dated, wanting things to work out with each guy I thought was... was... is *worthy* the right word? Fit with me, maybe.

I knew life with any of the others would not be what I had. I would never have that again. The feeling of drowning in love only comes once. But I wanted to try. Safely. In a way that ensured my heart would be okay. Where it wouldn't be damaged beyond repair, like it almost was.

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath in. Mateo and Aaron in the same room, shit, at the same table, was surreal. Each of them is confident in their own way. Forces not to be reckoned with. But how is it that Mateo can shine brighter than anyone else in the room? The way he commands attention without even trying. Aaron works on his confident arrogance, but Mateo was born with it. That's the difference, and why Aaron can sometimes come off as a dick but Mateo is always lovable.

When Eliazar mentioned Mateo and Cici would be joining us, I almost choked on my cocktail. I want to hate her. Claw her effing eyes out. But she is part of their group, and I don't want to lose my best friend. I can't place Marisol in the middle of my drama. Especially when there shouldn't be any. That was eight years ago. Cici is sweet, gorgeous and has a wonderful personality. But... He's mine. I want him to be mine.

The restroom door opens, breaking me from my never-ending thoughts. I grab my purse from the counter and head out. Hopefully everyone has made it to their cars and has driven off. Knowing Aaron, he was the first to leave. I'm

amazed he even came out to dinner with us. He is always working and networking. I can't stand eating at the club every night, around the same people, day in and day out. He's probably heading to the club for a nightcap before heading home. Is it bad I didn't want to go, and that I don't care?

As I round the corner, my eyes connect with Mateo sitting at the bar— alone. My feet stop moving. Why is he here and where is Cici? She wasn't in the ladies' room. I lick my lips and grip the clutch in my hand tighter.

He lifts his hand and motions for me to join him. My heart swells with his attention and I'm instantly furious that my emotions are betraying my brain. How can I simultaneously feel relieved, happy and rageful at the same time? I shake my head slightly. I can't, can I?

He nods ever so slightly and mouths, *Come here.*

My heart is controlling my body and responses because I start walking towards him. He stands and pulls out the stool next to him and waits for me to sit down to help push me closer to the counter. He sits back down and raises his hand to get the bartender's attention.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asks.

"Natalia," Mateo says, looking at me.

"I... uh... Can you get me a glass of the house cab? Thank you." I stumble through an answer as I'm having trouble controlling my racing heart.

The bartender looks to Mateo, and he responds, "I'm good right now."

I look down and see a tumbler of amber liquid with a large square ice cube. Straight whiskey. Is he nervous too?

We don't say anything and even though it's an uncomfortable silence, I can't think of any place I'd rather be. I want to get closer. The foot between us feels like a mile. I just want to curl up in his chest and hear him whisper, "It'll be okay."

“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?” my dad says evenly.

“I was out.” I shrug my shoulders and roll my eyes. Does he want a play by play of the night?

“Until after two a.m.?” His voice is strained like he’s struggling to control his anger.

“Yes. I was with friends. Same thing all kids do. Same thing kids do when they go off to school, like I will be doing in a month.” I start walking to the stairs.

“Who are these friends? YOUR friends are in the city,” he says before I can go two steps.

“Mateo and others from town. You don’t know them,” I respond, not looking at him but continuing towards the stairs to my bedroom.

“You are not allowed to see him anymore and you will not be coming home at this ungodly hour again. Do you understand me?” The anger in his voice is barely contained.

I whip around to face him and yell, “WHAT!?”

“You heard me. You are going back home tomorrow. You will get ready for college, go shopping, whatever you need to do. You will not be a beach bum and hang out with losers. I haven’t worked my ass off for you to associate with them—Mexicans that are happy with their place in life. That’s not what I want for you. You, my dear, have everything. Because I moved away from the damn cholo reputation Whites like to place on us. I have made a life for you, and you want to be with some boy that can’t offer you anything? You will go to college, rush at an elite sorority, and find a man more suited for the life I have built for you.”

My dad has never yelled at me. I have always been daddy’s little girl, getting anything I want. And now, what I want the most, he wants to take away. I shake my head back and forth. So what if he’s Mexican? We can make it. I know it.

Tears are streaming down my face and I can’t will them to stop. He is pissed and I don’t understand why. Why do I even have a curfew now? I’m about to head to college and won’t have one there. It makes no sense. But my dad and his

controlling ways decided tonight was the night to wait up and lay in on me.

“I’m not going back yet. And I love Mateo.”

“You don’t know what love is. When you want to go on your shopping adventures, whose card are you going to use? He does not have the means to support the life you are accustomed to. And if you think I’m going to support some deadbeat, you are wrong.”

“I do love him! I can’t imagine my life without him.”

My dad shakes his head and the corner of his lip twitches up. “That’s what you say now. But when times are hard, when money is tight, you will come back to me crying. I know what’s best. You’ll pack tomorrow and head back home with me. I’m going to bed.”

He walks past me up the stairs without another word. I’m frozen in the same spot for several minutes before I take out my phone and text Mateo, Come get me.

In my room I grab one of my duffels and a backpack and shove as much as I can in each. Pulling out my credit cards from my wallet, I leave them on my nightstand and only take the cash I have and my ID. I tip-toe as quietly as I can manage back downstairs, my arms full. The street is dark as I wait for him to turn the corner. Any other place, walking in this darkness would be scary, but here... with the warm summer breeze and the ocean in the background, it’s as if nothing bad could ever happen here.

HE SAVED ME THAT NIGHT. We were building dreams and trying to figure out how life would be when I left for school. My dad talked a big game, but I knew he’d still pay for my college. That was never a doubt in my mind.

He was scared. That’s it. I was his little girl, and I was choosing another man over him. That’s all it was. I started working that week at Mateo’s aunt’s clothing boutique in town and continued until...

THE BARTENDER PLACING the glass of wine down in front of me pulls me from my thoughts. Mateo is quiet next to me. I glance at him, not wanting to stare or get lost in him again.

“Hey,” he finally says, breaking the silence between us. His hand is wrapped around the glass. A hand I wish was on me. Anywhere on me. Beggars can’t be choosy.

I look at him. “Hey.” My voice cracks with nerves.

Knowingly, he graces me with a crooked smile. “This doesn’t have to be weird if we don’t let it.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, shaking my head ever so slightly. “How?”

“How what?” His brows come together.

“How is it not weird? We know each other. Knew each other for years before...” I stop myself, not able to say, *before you let me go*.

“We do. We probably know each other better than any of our friends.” He places his free hand on my forearm that’s relaxed on the bar.

My heart skips a beat and I sigh with the contact.

“How can you say that?”

“If they really knew us, they would know about us. You and me. They would have put two and two together. Those summers... those were ours and like me, it looks like you didn’t share them with anyone either.” His voice softens.

I shake my head. Tears collect in my eyes, but I will them not to fall.

He squeezes my arm and holds it.

Not wanting to lose his touch, I grab my glass with my free hand and take a large swig, trying to calm my racing heart. My heart has not been the same since seeing him again. It’s racing, stopping, dropping, thumping so hard.

“If it would make things easier for you, I can stay away.” His lip quivers and it feels like someone just squeezed the life out of me.

“No!” I blurt out.

As much as I regretted seeing him again, now that I know he’s here, I don’t want to let him go. Is that selfish?

“Are you sure?” He brings his glass to his lips. Oh, how I wish I could taste the whiskey on him.

He doesn’t let my arm go. I take another drink, pondering what to say. I place my drink down and move my hand on top of his.

“Uh... yeah. I am.” I bite my bottom lip, holding my feelings in. The hurt and anger. The love. The desperation for him to want me like I thought he did.

“Then it’s back to not letting this be weird. We are strangers that just met. Nothing weird about that, except your obvious contempt for me that comes out every now and then.”

I cough and my eyes widen with his brutal honesty.

“But, you have a boyfriend. So why would you hate me?” His lips pull slightly with a sliver of a smirk.

“Really?” I say, no other words coming to mind. I do want to fight with him. I want him to react. To kiss me senseless like he did before when I was acting like a brat for his attention.

That’s what I’ve been doing. I’ve reverted back to my teen ways, hoping he would react like he did back then. Anytime I was over the top, for any reason, he would take me aside and kiss me senseless until I was too lost in him to be mad or dramatic about anything. Does he know what I’ve been playing at when I didn’t realize it myself until now?

“Really?” His brows pull together and the smirk he was trying to hide is on full display.

I shrug, not wanting to admit what I was doing. Trying to save face, I add, “You’re right. It doesn’t have to be weird. I was just surprised to see you after... you know.” I cock my

head to the side, taking another sip of my drink. I place my hand back on top of his. It's taking so much restraint to not caress him or push up his sleeve to see if my tattoo is still there. "We can just go about life like normal. Two people thrown together at times because of friends. Happens all the time. And Cici is really sweet. Y'all look happy." I squeeze his hand and remove it. The temptation is too strong and I need to let him go and move on myself. Something I never allowed myself to do.

He huffs out a laugh. "Cici and I aren't together. She's just a friend. Zar mentioned it was going to be couples tonight and I didn't want to be the odd one out."

"But I saw you together the night of Ritza's party too. Y'all looked pretty cozy." I twist my body facing him, moving my arm that he was holding. I instantly miss his touch.

"She's just a friend. Well, more like a little sister. I've known her since she was a teenager. She's been friends with Ritza practically their whole lives. Damian lived at home through college. So when I went over there, she was there too."

"Oh." I'm stunned. He isn't what I thought, but I'm still confused. "You just call her up and use her to be a plus one?"

"She was at the garage, so I asked her."

Bitterness rises. She is around him. Often. He brings the glass to his mouth, and I can't help but stare at his full lips which distracts me enough to settle the feelings that just popped up.

Not enjoying the emotions at war within me, I gulp down the rest of my wine then say, "I should go." I slide off the stool and grab my clutch from the bar.

"Let me walk you to your car." He lifts his hand to the bartender.

"No, it's fine. I have to go." I take a step and he grabs my arm stopping me. I turn to look at him.

"I'm going to walk you to your car." He pierces me with a look, and I submit.

He releases my arm as he signs the tab and slides it back to the bartender. He takes his last swig of his whiskey and turns to face me, cocking his head to the door. I turn around and the feel of his hand on my lower back calms the storm inside.

He follows me to my car and when I click the button to unlock, he opens the door for me. I stop and look at him. So many words are stuck in my throat, strangling me. I want to be mad at him. Furious. But I never hated him like I thought. I was devastatingly hurt, which I mistook for hate. Could I ask him if he still... But if he doesn't...

He takes a small step closer to me and wraps me in his strong arms. I sink into his chest, his scent too familiar. I breathe in deep. One hand wraps in my hair, keeping my head close to him, and the other presses against the small of my back. My arms circle around him.

He mumbles something under his breath that I don't understand.

I pull back, looking up at him. "Huh?"

"Nothing." He shakes his head then leans down. I close my eyes as my heart stops, waiting for our lips to meet. He kisses the corner of my mouth gently then pulls away.

I open my eyes and he steps away from me and places his hand on the door. He cocks his head to the car. "Go on."

I bite the corner of my lip, hoping the pain distracts me from the tears I know are about to flood my eyes. I nod my head and slide into my car. I turn on the car and quickly reverse out, leaving him.

MATEO

I stay planted in my spot until her tail-lights disappear. *You're still mine.* That's what I was thinking, but it came out of my mouth instead. What if she had heard me? I don't know what I expected to come of this evening. Her damn dickwad of a boyfriend leaving her with no second thought certainly wasn't on my list. Tonight just confused everything even more.

Driving home, all I can think of is her. I want to tell her the truth. Tell her I didn't choose to leave her. But choosing my best friend over her doesn't sound much better either. I knew better. I fuckin' knew better. Never party on property you can't control or vacate. Entitled tourists who don't give a damn about the places they are visiting are the problem. And that's where the rule came from. Passed down from older to younger siblings. It's why my sister can still call me an amateur.

FUCK! I want her so much it fuckin' hurts. To hold her close and not let go. To drive her home and make sure she's in. To curl up in bed with her. Her soft skin against mine. That asswipe she's dating just left and didn't even wait on her to get to her car. Follow her home. Nothing. Just a quick kiss on the cheek and off he went. If I didn't know better, I would say he has a side piece, but he invited Natalia to join him at the club. She declined and told him to go on without her.

I offered her my friendship. Something I don't want because in all honesty, I want more, but that's all I can offer until I come clean. Do I sell Jax and Ricky my part of the shop and return the money? The money I never wanted. I don't even know what I signed. Was the arrangement for perpetuity? I was a stupid kid that allowed myself to be bullied into something I have regretted since that day.

At home, I pour myself another whiskey on ice and sit on the couch staring at the blank TV. I turn on my playlist to the Bluetooth speakers and open up the social media account I started just to stalk her. I have one follower; Natalia; and I

follow her. I'm set to private and changed my name as soon as she figured out it's me. She posted about dinner. A cute post about friends and a delicious dinner while promoting the restaurant. I like the post and pause thinking of a comment to have her come to my page. I swirl the glass, listening to the clink of the ice.

A country artist droning on about whiskey, wine, and a broken heart through the speakers and the idea hits me. I click a picture of my hand holding my whiskey and caption it, *Wondering about the taste of wine*. I go back to her post and comment, *Whiskey would pair nicely with that steak*. This is our only way to communicate privately.

Since she just posted, maybe she's still scrolling, so I wait. I hold my phone, staring at the picture I posted until my phone goes black, closing itself. I swipe it open and wait until it goes black to open again. This time when I swipe it open, a comment is there.

Whiskey is too dangerous for me.

She's scared and I can't blame her. Our demise is shrouded in secrets. Secrets she doesn't know exist. A dad that seized the opportunity to have me erased from her future. She was going home the day after that fateful night to get ready for college. Little did she know, we were only going to be apart for two weeks.

A few weeks before, I had gone out of town with my uncle to pick up a couple of cars for his used car business and I had secured an apartment between her university and my community college. All the pieces were falling into place. I didn't want to get her hopes up if I couldn't deliver. We would have met up and been together. Forever.

What can I say? How do I respond?

Whiskey has stood the test of time. Maybe it's time you gave it a shot.

I'm me and will always be me. I'm never going to pretend or be something I'm not. That's what she fell in love with. Me, who I am at my core, just as I love her for who she is. The

person who comes out in snippets when she's not playing the part her father wants her to be. A sassy, independent, firecracker is who she is. Not the proper lady who doesn't care if the guy she's with goes out without her. The girl I knew...

WALKING UP TO THE BONFIRE, all I hear is, "Chug, chug, chug..." A group is chanting as some tourist girl funnels a beer.

Another summer beach bonfire. That's all there is to do in a town this small. Another group of teen tourists have invaded our party. At least these ones chipped in and pretty much covered the cost of the keg.

Tourist girl throws her arms up in victory as remnants of beer shoot from her mouth.

"I won!" she yells and grabs the t-shirt thrown over my shoulder to wipe her mouth and chest. It's dark out and she's still wearing a small bikini. She places it back on my shoulder and lets her hand run down my chest. "Wanna be my prize?" Her tone is seductive.

"Uh, yeah, I don't think so." Natalia steps in front of me, not caring much for politeness or manners. "Now go along and find someone else." Natalia waves her hand in front of her dismissively.

Mi Cuete has learned to control her jealous tendencies. Last summer, she would have taken a swing first, then told them to get lost. Fuck me, her newfound confidence is the sexiest thing right now.

She turns around and looks at me, brow cocked. "Were you enjoying that?"

"Hell no! But I am enjoying you." I run my index finger from her shoulder down.

Her chest rises and falls quickly and I know she's just as turned on as I am. When she gets jealous, she wants to mark her territory and me knowing that... things are getting a little tight down there. She presses herself against me and kisses me

with reckless abandonment, not caring about anyone else around. Her tongue sweeps across my lips and I open, letting our tongues dance in unison. I lean down and grab the back of her thighs and lift her. She wraps her legs around my waist.

I walk away from the party with her towards the cars for a little privacy. She's clinging onto me for dear life. I pull down the tailgate of one of my friend's trucks and sit her down, standing between her legs. Her arms are still draped over my shoulders.

"I'm leaving soon." Her voice cracks as the full moon illuminates the fear in her eyes.

"I know, Cuete." I take a breath, willing myself to stick with the plan. Small bonfire with just her and my friends in a couple of days where I announce to everyone, I'm in fact going to college like many of my friends. "But we, you and I, have nothing to fear. We've been together for the past two years in a long-distance relationship. This is not a surprise. This is doable. We've done it."

I brush the side of her face. She nods and breathes in a choppy breath.

"You're it for me. I don't want anyone else. We're going to be fine. I promise." I place a soft kiss on her full lips.

"Promise?" she asks, and the sadness laced in her tone almost breaks me.

"I promise."

I BROKE the promise I thought was unbreakable. The plans were made. My parents and sister had been sworn to secrecy. That's one of the reasons my mom didn't make too much of a fuss about Natalia living in our home. She figured once we were out on our own, we wouldn't be staying on our own. I had rented a one-bedroom apartment that would accommodate both of us. Nice and clean, not a dump that I would have chosen if it was only for me. A safe area for Natalia to come and go.

I had my classes and a job lined up. There was a garage not far from my apartment I interviewed with. With some money coming in and the scholarships I was able to receive for being a Hispanic, first-generation college student, I figured we would be okay.

I planned everything except the weather. If it hadn't rained that night, we never would have been at the new-build house. I wouldn't have given her dad an opportunity to jump in and break us up.

Enough of going down memory lane. I can't change the past, I can only deal with the now and hopefully, the future. I swipe my phone on again and read the new message— *I have... years ago... made me sick.*

She just punched the life out of me. With seven words. Talking in code.

Must have been a young whiskey. Hadn't aged properly, I respond truthfully.

My mind drifts back to the money. I can't even prove that I didn't just take the money for the sake of taking it. Everything I signed, her dad took. I didn't get a copy. I accepted fifty thousand dollars to get Julian and I out of jail and to stay away from her. Or as her dad said, a fifty-thousand-dollar scholarship to never contact his daughter or to tell her about this arrangement. Which means he didn't tell her what he did. Let her believe either I took the money to leave her, or two, let her believe I ghosted her. As soon as I was released, my dad sent me to stay with my aunt and uncle.

He didn't want me at the house, and soon, I found out why. My sister called and told me that Natalia was there. Packing her belongings and begging my mom to tell her where I was. My sister called me, so I could hear Natalia's cries. Her pleas to see me. My mom was gentle with her, but firm. Never mentioned my night in jail or the possibility of me going back if I made contact again. Her cries broke me. Dislodged my heart to never be placed back again.

I used to wish a woman would stimulate me the way Natalia did. No one ever came close. Great sex and some fun

is what I settled for. That's all I had to offer. Was straight up with women about it too. Many tried to change my mind. A couple came close. But now that Natalia is back...

Swiping my phone open I see another message. *Maybe... but once you've been that sick, you never want to feel that way again.*

The sliver of hope I had for us disappears. She can't, and won't, trust me again. And I can't ask her to.

Got it... whiskey is a no go. I'll remember to always keep it away from you.

I click off my phone. The fun banter I thought was going to happen, went downhill quickly. I keep pushing when I know she's taken. I want her to be the girl I knew eight years ago. She's older now. Wiser. Grown and changed. I'm holding onto a past that never came to be. I need to stay away.



CHAPTER SIX

MATEO

I WALK INTO THE LOBBY AREA OF THE GARAGE. THE DOOR IS open, which is odd since Ritza's car is parked out front. She never leaves the door open when she's here alone.

"I'm here," I call out to not scare her.

"In the office," Damian's voice answers.

I walk into the office to find Damian at the desk, shuffling through papers. I take a seat in the chair in front of him.

"Why are you in your sister's car?" The muscles in his arms flex and relax as he aggressively moves papers from one stack to the next.

"The Mustang crapped out and I don't have the fucking time to look at it right now." He huffs out. "And we aren't getting paid because all these fucking invoices haven't been sent to the insurance companies. I'm drowning, man."

Damian's head falls and he grabs the back of his neck with both hands, interlacing his fingers.

"What do we need to do? I was upfront with you when I said I knew nothing about the financials and insurance part of the garage. I know cars and that's it. But if I've gotta learn now, teach me."

Damian takes in a large breath, exhaling slowly before he looks up.

"It was all good when we had Ritza here pretty much full time. She handled all this." He waves his hands over the papers on his desk. "But since she started school and is getting her life back, I hate to ask her to stay here. To commit to the garage."

"I understand. But what if this is what she wants? I never asked, but did you pay her before?"

“No. She volunteered to come in. A way to leave the house when she couldn’t go anywhere else.” He shrugs.

“Then maybe ask her if she would work for us. Work and we pay her. She needs money now. She’s flying again. And does she not need her car?”

“Javie volunteered to drive her around and he’s going to take a look at the Mustang. He’s having it towed to his garage.” He shakes his head slightly.

“Wow!” I let out a low whistle. “Trusting another man with Molly.” I bark out a laugh.

“Shut the fuck up. You know he’s good,” he says as he cracks a smile.

“I know. I just never thought I would see the day when you allowed another man under Molly’s hood.” I continue to laugh at his expense.

“Neither did I, neither did I.”

“So back to that.” I point to the desk. “If Ritza wants the job, it’s hers. We pay her like a regular employee. If not, do I learn, or do we hire?”

“We hire. You and I can’t be held up with this. As it is, we’re already swamped with the cars. The paperwork needs to be handled by someone else.”

“Agreed. Talk to Ritza today. We need to make sure we keep the business going. And as much as I hate to admit it, the insurance and collision portion of the business is our bread and butter.”

“I’ll call her later. She has class this morning.” He stands. “I even had to cancel a date tonight. Wasn’t sure if I would have my car back.”

“Why cancel? Take Ritza’s car.” I follow him out the door.

“Hell nah. I’m not taking a girl out in Ritza’s car.” He walks out into the garage.

“Who is she?” If I need to get Natalia out of my system, I’m going to need a distraction. Stat. “Any friends?”

Damian whips his head in my direction and narrows his eyes. His gaze sweeps me up and down before he says, "Since when do you ask for a friend?" He pauses and continues to look at me. He takes a step in my direction.

"Since I haven't met anyone interesting lately," I blurt out to avoid further questioning.

"So it's not about that new girl?... What's her name? Oh... *Natalia*. The same name you have on your arm." He cocks a brow.

My mouth goes dry. I can't bring our past into the present. No one is supposed to know. We are strangers.

"I see I've hit a nerve by the color draining from your face."

The garage door opens and Ricky strolls in. "Mornin'," he quips out before noticing Damian and I standing still as statues.

"What did I miss?" He glances back and forth between us.

Damian tilts his head, knowing there is more to the story but he's not going to say anything unless I give the go ahead.

"Fine! Fuck it." My head falls back in defeat.

"Woah... this has to be big." Ricky states the obvious.

I rub my forehead, not knowing where to begin and how much to share. "Truth is... yes, I do know the new girl, *Natalia*. From a long time ago."

Ricky busts out a laugh. "Well, shit! I owe Jax now!"

"Wait. What?" I look at him.

"Jax said there was something off with you the night of Ritza's party. And since when have you ever shied away from fresh meat?" Ricky smiles knowingly. "You stood around the perimeter watching. And the way she reacted to you. That was a bit harsh." He nods and Damian's lip quirks up.

"Are you going to explain?" Damian asks.

I take a huge gulp of air. “I guess there’s no way of getting out of this one.” I pause again, gaining my bearings, wondering what to share. None of it makes sense unless you have the whole story. “But I’m not explaining twice, so I won’t start until Jax gets here.”

Ricky pulls out his phone and types something. A minute later, he says, “He’s down the street.”

Damian turns away from me and begins looking over a car in the bay. Ricky starts organizing some tools that were left out when we closed yesterday, and I walk to the last bay to the car I was working on yesterday. Several minutes pass with only the sounds of tools on cars before the door opens and Jax announces loudly, “Pay up!”

Ricky busts out laughing, and Damian says, “We can finally get the story.”

They gather in the center bay that we usually try to keep empty so that it doesn’t get too crowded. I plop down on a toolbox, wringing my hands because I’m no closer to figuring out how much to reveal.

“Everything I’m sharing has to stay between us. Zar can’t know because his girlfriend is her best friend. And we all know there are no secrets between couples.”

I look around and they all nod in understanding.

“I dated Natalia for two years in—”

I begin but am cut off by Jax, “Woah!”

“Shut up and just listen.” Damian glares at him.

Jaxson raises his hands in apology and then brings his hand up to his mouth and pretends to zip it, all while grinning like a fool.

I continue, “We dated in high school and broke up at the end of the summer before she left for college. But...” I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. “... we didn’t want the breakup. Her dad... her dad paid me to stay away from her. That’s how I had the money for the garage. He never wanted

us together so when he had his chance, he used his power and money to keep me away from her.”

The words fly out quickly.

“How much?” Damian narrows his eyes, knowing there is more to the story.

“Fifty K, but it accrued interest over the years because I didn’t touch it until this.” I wave my hands aimlessly around.

“You obviously want her, so why did you take the money?” Ricky asks.

“To get my best friend and I out of jail. A party in a new construction house got out of hand and burned down. It was in her father’s new subdivision. He’s a wealthy real estate guy. Instead of running like every other kid at the party, Nat called nine-one-one and wanted to stay to make sure the fire department got there.” I take a huge breath and run my hands through my hair roughly, the frustration of that night settling in again.

The guys are all staring at me, wide eyed and silent.

“She believed her dad would forgive her, even though she had run away from her parents’ house a month prior. She had been living with me and my family.”

Jax’s jaw drops, and I explain, “In my sister’s room, asshole.” I shake my head at him, and he shrugs. “Anyway, I couldn’t leave her there alone to face the cops and firefighters. My best friend and his girlfriend at the time waited with us. We were all arrested. The next morning, I got a visit from her father with the ultimatum. Jail for me if I didn’t take the money. When I wouldn’t budge, they brought my parents in and her dad added that he would also press charges on my best friend. I couldn’t let my friend go down. He was going to college. Had scholarships.” I gulp air down. “I signed some paperwork stating I wouldn’t contact her again. And I haven’t. Until she walked into The Corner.”

The guys are quiet; I can only imagine the thoughts going through their heads.

“That’s some telenovela shit right there. Who in the hell throws around that much money?” Ricky says out loud.

“Why did she live with you?” Damian asks.

“She ran away,” I make air quotes with my fingers. “Her dad wanted her to go back to the city and hang with her school friends and get ready for college. She refused to go and left their house. It was actually the last weekend she was going to stay with me. She was leaving that next week to pack and move into her dorm. It was supposed to be a going away party for her, but also for me. I was going to let her know I was moving also. I had applied at the community college, found an apartment. All the plans we wanted were coming together. I was going to surprise her that night. Rain ruined the bonfire. She suggested we move the party to the house and things got out of control real quick.”

“You never told her?” Ricky asks.

I shake my head. “I couldn’t stay home. Too many memories of her everywhere I went. My room smelled like her. One night I had her and *poof*, the next day she was gone.” I shrug. “So, I came here instead. Decided to stick with the community college plan. Found a dump to rent. Worked my ass off.”

“Fuck! Now, that’s a messed-up story!” Jax exclaims. “What are you going to do about it now?”

“Nothing, asshole. She has a boyfriend.” I run my fingers through my hair again, then drop my head, intertwining my fingers behind my neck.

No one says anything more. They scatter, leaving me with my demons. Or demon, better known as Firecracker.

NATALIA

Soft snores wake me. I turn over to find Aaron sleeping soundly and it's past seven a.m. He never sleeps in. He's always the first one up, either to make it to the office or, on the weekends, to hit the gym. It's rather annoying most of the time. Leisurely coffee in the morning is a definite no from him, which makes me wonder why he's still in bed.

Not wanting anything from him this morning after the less than stellar performance last night, I quietly slide out of bed and head to the guest bathroom to wash up. All my thoughts are Mateo. What he's doing. Who he's with.

I open the dresser drawer in the guest room where I have old clothes I've been hoarding and dig to the very bottom. I know the minute I find it when my hand feels the soft fabric. I pull out an old, ratty high school football t-shirt. *Bobcat Athletics*. Mateo's shirt I took from his room when I packed my things from his house.

I bring it up to my nose, wishing it still smelled of him, but instead just smells like the cedar drawer. I take off my satin night top and pull it on, wanting to feel him close again. Craving him.

The sunlight drifts through the open blinds of the windows in the living room. My mind and thoughts are so scattered. Everything I thought I wanted is at my fingertips and now... now it is grating on me. A guy who had his own life so I could live mine is what I signed up for. I enjoyed my time alone. I like my space and freedom. So why is everything and anything about Aaron aggravating me now?

I fill the kettle with water and place it on the burner, before pulling out the French press. Fresh ground coffee beans would be heavenly, but, then think better of it. No need to wake the beast when I'm in this mood. While the water heats, I prep the press. I grab my tablet off the charging station and sit at my

dinette, wanting to do nothing but mindlessly scroll. The whistle of steam announces my coffee is that much closer to being ready. Grabbing the kettle, I pour the hot water into the French press and bring a tray with everything I need back to the table.

Returning to my tablet I go back to the news app I had been scrolling when an ad for a service garage slides by. It wasn't Mateo's garage, but just the mere mention of a garage has me spiraling back to him. Pressing the coffee filter down I pour myself my first cup. I prepare it, taking my time, knowing I'm about to fall down a rabbit hole.

Savoring the first sip, I hesitate before opening up a search engine. I type Mateo DeLuna and click search. Surprise, surprise, he's not the only one with the common Hispanic name. I scroll through a couple of pages of people with the same name until I find a news article from his last beach town's weekly paper. Clicking it, I read the article about how he's following in his father's footsteps and opened up his own shop. There is a familiar picture of him and his dad when he was younger, both of them standing in front of his dad's shop, and a more recent one of him and his dad at his shop. The picture of Mateo when he was little hung in the waiting room of his dad's garage.

Closing the article, I scroll some more, but don't find anything else. Since he's the only thing on my mind, I open Photogram and click on his profile. Of course, he hasn't posted since the other night. He only posts in response to something I've uploaded. Before I click on the picture of the whiskey glass, I look behind me to make sure Aaron hasn't come downstairs. I scroll through our hidden conversation and regret what I said. I do love whiskey. Always have. No matter how sick I've been because of it.

I take another lingering sip of my coffee, my mind racing. Should I reach out again? What do I say? Does he want to hear from me? I click the Message button and stare at the blank screen. Reaching out somehow seems like an invasion. But... I can't help myself.

I begin typing... *delete*. I take a huge gulp of air, hoping it fills me with inspiration of something to say that doesn't sound creepy or desperate. *Type... stare at words... delete*. I do this over and over again, some sort of variation of why I want to reach out. Should I make it about me? Or make it about him? Or nothing at all but...

I quickly type out, 'Hi', and hit send before I can think too much of it. Why did I think I needed to start with some long, drawn-out excuse? If he responds, the door is open. If he doesn't, I haven't placed my heart in danger again.

I swipe out of the message, looking around. The morning tranquility is too loud. I turn on the notifications, not wanting to miss his response.

I place my phone down and grab the warm mug and cup it in both my hands. I let myself get lost in the past—the place I've been living too often lately.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE I'm going to live a whole summer without Starbucks!" I whine to Mateo.

I have seen him or talked to him every day since I met him two weeks ago. I can't believe I was so desperate to go home fourteen days ago, and now I can't imagine leaving.

"You'll live, I promise." He laughs as he drives to their local version of a coffee shop.

He finds my dramatics to the simplest inconveniences funny. Every time I wonder how people live in such a small town with no mall or movie theater or even a Chili's chain restaurant, he balks at me and gives me his small-town gem.

The coffee shop he's taking me to is his solution to Starbucks. According to him, teens don't consume coffee here the way they do on the mainland. I laugh each time he says 'mainland' because it is less than a mile on the ferry or less than three-miles on the bridge over the water to the mainland. That term makes it seem like that they are living so far from what I consider the real world.

He parks in front of a small shack and hops out of his Jeep, walking around to help me out. We walk in and there are only a few tables which are occupied by older people. No young people loitering, studying, or playing on their computers. Old people sitting and reading newspapers or scrolling on their phones. Not a laptop in sight.

“Where do people work?” I whisper to Mateo.

“At their jobs, I would assume.” He shrugs and looks at me like I have a third eye.

At the counter, I scan the large chalkboard looking for some sort of iced coffee.

“What can I get ya?” An older woman says with a thick, Texan accent.

“Uh... do y’all have any kind of iced coffee?”

“Sure do, honey. My granddaughter just taught me how to make it. You’re the first to ask for one. I’m lovin’ it so much better than hot coffee in this summer heat and humidity.” She picks up an insulated glass and shakes it. “I even bought a couple of syrups for us. Didn’t think anyone but my granddaughter and myself were going to be drinking them.”

I clap my hands in excitement. My first iced coffee in way too long.

“Iced coffee, skimmed milk and two pumps of vanilla, please.”

The lady begins to make my coffee and I turn around to catch Mateo smirking at me.

“What?” I ask him.

“See. We’re not so bad around here.” He places his hands on my waist, stepping closer and placing his forehead on mine.

I thought I was addicted to coffee, but dang... Mateo is quickly becoming my favorite addiction.

“That’ll be three-fifty,” the woman says behind me.

I spin around in Mateo’s arms. “What?” I exclaim in surprise.

“Three- fifty?” she repeats, but quieter this time.

I usually pay almost six bucks for each drink at a large chain and this woman, out of a run-down shack, is under-selling herself. I take a five out of my back pocket and hand it to her.

“Keep the change.” I hadn’t noticed a tip jar on the counter.

I quickly walk out, not wanting her to try and give me change.

“What was that for?” Mateo asks once he’s in the Jeep.

“I pay a lot more for this in the city. I was only paying what I believe she was owed for this delicious drink.”

I wasn’t lying. This is so much better than what I usually order.

MY PHONE SCREEN brightens as a notification pops up. The one I hoped would pop up. I swipe it open and see a simple, quick response— *Good morning, beautiful *firecracker emoji**. I was dying for a response and now I’m at a loss for what to say. I keep myself from typing anything because I don’t want him to see my struggle with typing and deleting. He can see the stupid response bubble that appears when someone is typing.

**Happy face blush emoji* Send.*

**Wink emoji* is his response that comes immediately.*

Will we continue to speak in only emojis because words are too difficult? I scroll through my emojis, back and forth trying to figure out what to send when another message pops up.

Busy today?

He was always the brave one, taking the next step forward while blindfolded, without hesitation.

Me:Not really. Just a couple of errands. You?

Mateo: Nope. Relaxing on my day off.

Me: The garage is closed on the weekend?

I find it odd that they would close on a weekend when most people take cars in on the weekend when they themselves are off.

Mateo: Garage is open. My day off. Worried about my business?

My breath hitches at his correct assumption.

Me: No. Was just curious.

Mateo: Meet me later?

And my heart free falls into oblivion.

Me: Yes.

I type the three letters without a second thought.

Me: Where?

Mateo: Museum. Downtown. 3?

Me: ok

Mateo: See u there

I just said yes to meeting Mateo. I'm going to be alone with him. I place my phone back down wondering if I lost my mind. The swishing of nerves is thundering in my ears. I wish it was already three o'clock and simultaneously, I don't want to go.

"Hey." A kiss on my cheek startles me and I jump, sloshing my coffee over the brim.

"Oh... yeah... morning." I recover, shaking my head from the trance I was in. I grab a napkin from the center of the table and wipe the liquid off my leg.

"You were deep in thought," Aaron says from the kitchen, looking around. "No coffee?"

"Sorry. I made a French press this morning. I didn't know how long you were sleeping in." I point at the carafe on the table.

“Eh. I guess I’ll clean up and head out. I’ll pick some up on my way home.” He kisses the top of my head and then asks, “What are you up to today?”

“Not much. A couple of errands.” I pause, then add, “Thought I would stroll a museum later.”

Will he ask to come with me? Will he wonder why?

“Enjoy,” he responds, then walks away.

Thinking about it, he never takes an interest in what I’m doing. Or notice small things about me. He didn’t even ask about the shirt I changed into. If I’m heading to wine country with Marisol and Eliazar, he tells me to enjoy. When I go to art openings or exhibits, he says, *that sounds like the perfect girls’ night*. I finally was able to get him to see *Wicked*, the Broadway series with me, but he ended up taking it over. He gave away my tickets and had us sit in one of the boxes with a future client. He turned my relaxing, fun night out into work. Entertaining a woman I didn’t know and have never seen again.

Before Mateo walked back into my life, I was able to ignore all of Aaron’s faults, but now, they seem to be on a billboard front and center screaming at me.



CHAPTER SEVEN

NATALIA

I'M SITTING IN MY CAR, STALLING. IT IS EXACTLY THREE ON the dot and I can't seem to make my body move. Three-oh-one. I pinch myself, hoping to feel something, because I feel numb right now. A stinging pain. My phone vibrates in my hand. A Photogram notification. I swipe my phone, opening a direct message from Mateo. *Running late, or nervous?*

Damn him. He knows. He always knows.

Nervous.

Should I lie? He'll know if I do.

Come on in. I'm waiting.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly open my door and slide out, focusing on placing one foot in front of another. That's all I need to do right now. Control my breathing and make my way to the entrance. I breathe in the beautiful spring day.

I was concentrating so hard on staying calm, taming the nerves and excitement, I didn't realize I was at the entrance until I hear, "It's not that hard, Cuete."

Hearing the nickname he bestowed on me years ago affects me. A chill of calm runs down my body. He smiles at me as I come to stop in front of him. Another long sleeve shirt! I won't ask, but my mind keeps playing tricks on me. Is the tattoo still there?

"It's just a day spent looking at art. Nothing to be nervous about." His lips pull into a small smile.

I'm not nervous being with him, I'm just nervous being with him... Wait... my brain short circuited and I can't figure out how I feel. Nodding, I bite the inside of my cheek, not wanting to make him as uncomfortable as I feel.

"I got our tickets. Come on." He holds his arm out for me to walk in front of him.

I concentrate on my feet, and nothing else. If I put too much thought into why I said yes, I'll go crazy. Why I took far too long to figure out what I was going to wear. Why I didn't tell Aaron who I was spending my afternoon with.

Mateo hands the older gentleman at the turnstile our tickets.

"This is the last weekend for the special exhibition. You don't want to miss it. Enjoy." The man is wearing a volunteer badge on his chest.

"Where do you want to start?" Mateo asks behind me.

My feet stop moving and I turn around to look at him. I'm so lost. My feelings for him resurfacing. The parts of my heart that I thought were crushed and lost forever are somehow being pieced together in his presence. All while a huge caution sign is flashing in my brain.

Mateo steps closer and says quietly, "If you don't want to be here, we can go. Or I can. I know how much you love looking at art. How it calms you."

That's why he asked to come here. He knew it was a safe space for me.

I shake my head softly. "No. I'm fine. Nervous, but fine. Let's take a right and we'll loop all the way around."

Aaron has never brought me to a museum. Even when I ask, he somehow weasels his way out and I end up dragging Marisol.

"Lead the way."

As confidently as I can, I turn back around and walk. The first spacious room we enter has classic, religious pieces. They are dark, and not to my liking. I stop in front of the first piece, looking more closely. Mateo continues on to another, moving further away from me. From the corner of my eye, I watch him. His back is to me as he pauses in front of a painting depicting a battle scene.

His body language is relaxed, his arms draped by his sides. He seems to be my opposite. He's the calm to my storm.

Thinking back, he always has been. When I freaked, he listened, then he's was able to calm me down. When he walked away, I had to learn to soothe myself. I needed to grow up. To mature from the teen who acted first and thought later.

I move to him, standing so close my arm brushes his. The jolt of excitement from the tiny contact surprises me. He turns to me, his eyes dancing with amusement.

“Why do you seem happy standing in front of such a solemn painting?”

“Because you're here.” He glances down to my lips then steps away from me, moving towards the center of the room.

He glances around the room, then spins around slowly. We are the only ones in this area.

“I think I've had enough of this room. You?”

Moving next to him again, I mimic his movement, looking around, then answering, “Yes. On to the next.”

His quiet confidence has stilled the seagulls that were flying around my stomach.

“Come on.” He tips his head in the direction of an archway.

As we walk into the next room, he follows right behind me.

I may have been here before, but with Mateo and emotions flowing freely throughout my body, it feels different. With my mom when I was younger, it was finding appreciation. A reason. A reaction that it evokes. Now the familiarity of it all brings a sense of home. Getting lost in the passions of others somehow takes the pressure off of mine.

We move through the next two rooms quietly. No words. My body is drawn to him. My hand slightly brushing his or feeling his body heat when he's standing mere inches behind me, is going to my head, or more accurately, to my nether regions.

We enter the special exhibition, and my eyes are immediately drawn to a sculpture. I stand in front of it, my

eyes sweeping the smooth lines. The flow and sensuality evokes a passion within me that had been dormant. I have always felt like an alluring woman, but with Mateo invading my senses and the piece of art, I'm stimulated in a way I have never been.

He must feel it too because he moves closer, bringing his body flush against my back and then places his hand at my hip as a sigh leaves his lips. I lean back, pressing myself against him. It's odd, the familiarity I feel even after eight years. My heart pounds against my chest, wanting more but knowing I'm dancing on a fine line with my heart.

I'm lightheaded. I take a few steps to stand in front of a painting. He follows me and again, brings his body flush to mine. The piece is by a contemporary artist I'm not familiar with. It's abstract; bodies entwined, lines smooth, soft. Lips and hands pronounced. I breathe in deep. His scent is familiar and soothing.

He grips my hip, pulling my back even closer. I melt into him, wanting nothing else. Thinking of nothing else. My eyes follow the lines of the painting like a maze I need to escape, but getting lost and content with the unknown. Seconds pass. Maybe minutes. No need for words when our bodies have spoken loud and clear.

Voices and laughter break the spell the painting placed us in. I turn toward the voices to see a few teenagers full of excitement, talking animatedly.

Mateo kisses the top of my head as he moves back and his hand slides down my arm intertwining our fingers. He begins walking and pulls me gently with him toward the next room. No words are spoken as we continue. He stops in front of a dark painting.

“Kinda kills the mood, huh?” he says softly.

It's a powerful piece—a woman devastated, face distorted.

“Only if you let it.” I pause, filling my lungs with air, then exhaling before continuing, “I see a broken heart. A woman mourning. A lesson.”

“Nat, I’m—” he says. But before he can continue, I place my hand on his chest, coming to stand in front of him.

“Don’t. Not here.” I shake my head. I can’t have anything messing up the illusion I’m currently living in. Whether this lasts or not, I’m going to savor it for as long as I can.

There’s a pain in his eyes, but he nods and kisses my forehead. His lips tighten and his jaw ticks. He wants to apologize. He wants to go back. Visit a pain that I’m not prepared to handle. Not now. I don’t want to ruin today with the past.

He mouths *okay* and I turn back around, facing the painting as he pulls my body closer to his. Being with Mateo was the place I felt safest. Even after my heart was shattered, nowhere else ever gave me the tranquility of his presence.

Aaron floats through my mind. A guy I thought maybe I would spend the rest of my life with. Go through life together, but separate. I never expected him to change. He is always going to be the guy who would want success first and foremost. So much like my dad. I would smile and accompany, but then have a life of my own. He didn’t mind that I didn’t give him a hundred percent of myself. He accepted what I could give. That’s what made us work.

Every other guy wanted me to fall in love. Wanted me to succumb to their charm and lifestyle. They were boring and pushy.

But standing here with Mateo, my only thought is that I want it all. I want a shared life— I want it with Mateo. But does he want it with me?

MATEO

I'm holding onto Natalia for dear life, even though she's not mine to hold. If another guy was holding her like this, I would be pissed and he would be knocked the fuck out. I don't understand her douche of a boyfriend. What could he be doing that's so important he's not spending the day with her? She hasn't mentioned having a time limit until she needs to be back with him.

Natalia's body tenses and her chest rises and falls more quickly.

"What's your positive?" I ask her, remembering what she told me all those years ago.

"Huh?" Natalia mumbles out, coming back to me from being lost in thought.

"Isn't that what your mom used to make you do? If you didn't like a piece of art, you had to find one positive."

She spins around to face me. "You remember that?"

"Cuete, you have no idea. I remember everything," I lower my voice.

She licks her lips, making my cock twitch. She leans in just a fraction, and it takes everything in me to not take her luscious, red lips.

"Your positive?" I glance up at the painting behind her and away from her lips.

"Yeah... uh..." She clears her throat then continues, "It reminds us that life won't always be beautiful. It will also be full of pain. We can't live in blissful ignorance forever."

Her face drops and she places her forehead on my chest. I wrap my arms around her, pulling her closer. One arm clutches her waist and the other comes to her head, cradling her to me.

My heart is hammering in my chest; she must be able to hear it.

She's in my arms again and I won't let go. I'm fighting for her. Reclaiming her. She may call that dickwad her boyfriend, but she's here with me. She won't be thinking of him anymore. She won't be thinking of any other guy ever again if I have my way.

"You deserve to have all of the happiness that your heart desires. Nothing less." I take a breath and spit out, "I'm sorry," before she can stop me.

Her eyes bore into me and I'm starting to regret apologizing.

She shakes her head and takes a deep breath. She turns around and grabs my hand, leading me out of the room. As we walk, the grip she has on my hand tightens. Is she as afraid as I am that if she lets go, I'll disappear? That's my fear. I have her here with me. I don't want to let her out of my sight, because if I do, will I have this again?

She continues walking and I blindly follow. I'll follow her wherever she takes me. She continues until we are outside of the museum, and then stops at the top of the steps.

"Are you hungry?" She looks at me, a mischievous smile tugs at her lips.

"You have no idea." I cock my brow. I'm a starving man, but not for food.

"Where'd you park?" Her smile widens and she crinkles her nose.

I tip my head to the left and begin walking with her. I bring her to the passenger side of my lifted Tahoe. She looks at the car, then back at me with her brows raised.

"Maybe we should have taken my car." She holds in a laugh. "You're going to have to help me in."

"My pleasure." I'm not going to complain about a reason to have my hands on her. I have floorboards that come down,

and she really doesn't need assistance, but I'm not complaining.

I open the door and that's when she notices the floorboards slowly lower. She continues holding my hand and places one foot on the board while using my arm to steady her. The *oh shit* handle is right in front of her, but she uses me instead.

I step away and close her door, not enjoying her being out of my reach. I quickly go around and hop in.

"Where to? Or do I decide?" I turn to her. I quickly scan her body and catch her tightening her legs together. Her toned, tanned legs are exposed with the short dress she's wearing.

"Azucar. The Spanish tapas place. On Elm." She takes her bottom lip in her mouth and bites it gently.

"Your wish is my command." My cock is hardening and if it continues, I won't be able to hide crap.

I pull out and begin driving. I switch the station on the radio and instead of grabbing the steering wheel again, I casually drop my hand on her thigh. Sue me. I know she has a boyfriend, but she's here with me. That's gotta mean something.

Her thigh muscle relaxes at the contact, her legs opening just slightly. She leans her body closer to the arm rest, then places her hand on top of mine. This moment... is... *perfection*. If I could freeze time, this would be it. Natalia is relaxed, smiling, and most importantly with me. I dreamt of this, never believing it would happen.

We drive in comfortable silence, except for the occasional directions she gives me. She's at ease, changing the radio stations and not finding the need to fill the quiet with unnecessary chatter.

I find a parking spot and she leads me into the restaurant. The hostess greets us and Natalia requests a particular table. The hostess nods, and with a smile, she leads us to the small table in a corner. She places the menus on the table and walks away. I pull a chair out for Natalia, then bring the chair that is on the opposite side of the table closer to her, not wanting her

across from me. She leans her body a little closer to me. A couple of hours with her and I'm hooked.

Natalia picks up the menu that's in front of her and she places it on mine. "Do you want to look over the menu or do you trust me to order?" Her words come out breathy.

"Have at it," I respond, knowing it's her way of telling me that she already knows what she wants and is just being polite. This is the old Natalia from when we first met. By our second summer, she would call the shots when she wanted, trusting and knowing I'd follow.

Her eyes sparkle when those three words leave my mouth. I wonder if she's looking back also.

I look around, taking in my surroundings, never eating here before. It's in a historical district. This street of old houses has been converted into local restaurants, bars and shops.

"Is this a regular stop for you if you know what you want?" As soon as those words are out, I wonder if this is a place she comes to with the douche.

"Mari and I found it when we were looking at areas of town for Sol y Luna. I would find properties, then we would hang out somewhere in the areas during the day and night. We spent months looking for the right location. This strip was actually her first choice, an established busy area, but then my dad gave her a great deal on the rent for her current location. It's only for five years but it's enough to get her started strong."

Her dad. The biggest prick of them all. It looks like he's continuing to buy his daughter's attention. I clench my jaw, not wanting any words to come spilling out that will ruin us before we have a chance to try again.

"Hi. I'm Jason. Have you decided what you would like?" a waiter says.

"Yes," Natalia responds smiling. "We'll take a carafe of the sangria and..." She picks up the menu and begins ordering several dishes, then hands him the menus.

While it feels like nothing has changed between us, eight years have gone by. Eight years of Natalia I don't know. And her helping Mari with her shop, it sounds like she works for her father, which would probably place a huge obstacle between us. I decide to bite the bullet.

“So, you work for your father?” My heart stops, waiting for her answer.

Her eyes widen and she shakes her head vigorously. “Oh gawd no! I couldn't. I work for the C&C Group. My dad is still pressuring me to be a part of his company, but I can't.” Her eyes drop to the table where she is playing with her hands.

I place my hand on top of hers and squeeze, knowing she's uncomfortable and it's going to take more than a couple of hours to be back to where we were before. First and foremost, I need her to dump the jerk.

“Hey.” With my other hand, I lift her chin to look at me. “Where are you going?”

She shrugs her shoulders, then turns her hand over and clutches mine, her lips tight, pulling down. I run my thumb over her lips, wanting to kiss away the sadness that seemed to overtake her. I'm curious about her reaction to the statement.

“We don't do this.” I slide my hand back, placing it on her neck.

“Do what?” she mumbles.

“Hide. We have never shied away from any conversation. Even if we knew it was going to be hard. Even when we knew it was going to cause a fight.” I pause, watching her eyes go through a mix of emotions. I bring my hand between us and point between her and I. “We are different. Have always been different. We were each other's safety. Talk to me.”

She's quiet for a few moments, her hand clutching mine like it's her lifeline.

“I don't wan—” she begins, but Jason walks up interrupting.

“Here we go.” He places two wine glasses in front of us then begins pouring our drinks. He places the carafe down and ensures we have everything for now as we wait for our food.

When he walks away, I say, “You were saying...”

She picks up her glass with one hand, leaving the other still in mine, taking a long sip of her Sangria then says, “Try it.” Her fake smile appears.

I do the same. “It’s good,” I agree. It’s fine. Punchy with a kick. Not something I would order on my own, but good just the same. “I’m waiting. Don’t try to avoid.” I cock a brow, not letting her weasel her way out.

She glances around, taking a large breath then begins again, “The past. We have one. And...” She drifts off.

I give her the time to gather her thoughts, knowing it’s ingrained in her to plaster on the plastic persona she was raised in. Anything other than perfect is not to be tolerated. It was that way then, and I’m sure it is still that way now. She takes a large gulp of her drink and I wonder if she’s needing liquid courage to be honest with what’s on her mind.

“Never mind,” I say, feeling bad for pushing her. Maybe she doesn’t want me the way I hoped.

She sucks her lips into her mouth, then strains to smile.

“Our past didn’t end in the fairytale I thought it would. And I don’t want to go back there. Talking about my dad... somehow it takes me back to us. Back then. I eventually forgave him for what he did, but...”

She forgave him. But for what? What did her dad tell her? Did he tell her that he paid me? That the money was a bribe to stay away.

I’m trying to relive a dream that is never going to happen. “Like I said, never mind.” I try to pull my hand from hers and her eyes widen as she grips it harder.

“I never in a million years thought I would see you again. I thought you were part of my past and that was it. My present

was easy. It's me. That's it. But now you're here. And all those feelings from..." She drifts off, tears collecting in her eyes.

"I feel them too," I say, hoping the meaning is the same. "It's like the eight years between never happened."

A single tear slides down her face as she bobs her head.

"Our ending was messy and—"

I interrupt, "I never meant to—"

She blurts out, "Don't. I don't want to hear it. Not now. Not ever. I just..." I stop breathing, waiting for her to finish. "I don't want to mess this up. Whatever this is... I don't want to lose it by bringing up the past."

I swipe the couple of tears that have fallen with the pad of my thumb.

A dish being placed on the table startles me, forgetting we are in public. The waiter drops it off and quickly scurries away, probably noticing the intense conversation, and the tears.

"I don't want to lose it either, but you gotta tell me what you want. What are we doing? You have a boyfriend."

I don't want to be her friend. I don't think I could ever be just her friend. I'm not noble. I need her as mine, or not at all. I sure as hell won't be able to see her with anyone other than me without seeing red and murdering the fucker.

"Aaron and I are..." She pauses and I instantly tense hearing her label them as a couple. Irrational anger courses through me. She's not mine. I'm possessive over a woman who may not even want me.

"Y'all are?" I say through gritted teeth.

"Convenient." She shrugs. "I have my life and he has his. We only come together when he needs me."

I'm clenching my jaw so hard, I could break a tooth. What in the hell does 'needs her' mean?

She brings her hand up and places it on my cheek and rubs softly over my tensed jaw.

“Hey. Stop,” she whispers. “No one, not ever... not even Aaron... has been us.”

I lean into her hand, wanting her so damn much. She leans into me and brushes her lips past mine in a gentle kiss. She drops her hand and places it on my thigh.

“What are we doing?” I repeat.

I will drop bills on the table and take her home now to worship every inch of her, but she hasn't answered.

“What do you want?” She turns the question around on me.

Fuck it! She wants to know what I want?

“I want you. I've always wanted you. I want to kiss your perfect red lips until all memories of other guys have been erased. I want to explore this body I've been deprived of. Run my hands over every inch of soft, supple skin. Then follow it up with kisses.” I pause when she grips my thigh and I glance down and notice her legs squeeze together. “I want to wake up tangled with you every morning and make love to you every night. I want to hear about your day. I want all the little things. Pure and simple... I want you to be mine.”

She sucks the corner of her bottom lip in her mouth and watches me. What is she thinking?

“Your turn. What do you want?”

She continues biting her lip, looking at me then glancing around the room.

I give her a few seconds then press again, “I gotta know.”

She sighs, then says, “I'm scared.”

I turn my body to completely face her and take her face in both my hands. “I know. I am too. But not enough to not try. It has always been you. It was never supposed to end—”

She shakes her head and says, “Don't. I can't go back. I don't want to rehash the past.”

I run my finger over her lips, wanting to taste her. She puckers her lips and kisses my finger.

“What do you want?”

“I— uh...”

She doesn't trust me. She thinks I left her by choice, and she doesn't want to hear about it. I let her go and unbutton the cuff of the shirt I'm wearing. I was lucky to have been wearing a long sleeve the night she surprised me at Ritza's party. And every night I know I may see her, I also wear a long sleeve, covering the evidence that I never let go. I begin rolling up my sleeve and her eyes widen. Her gaze drops to my arm filled with ink. I push up the sleeve and place my arm on the table, palm up so she can see her name.

“You still have my name?” She runs her fingers over my arm, tracing her name.

“I told you, it's *always* been you.”

She gets out of her chair and sits on my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck tightly. She's trembling.

“How do we do this?” she mumbles into my neck, excitement zapping throughout my body at her breath on my neck.

I place my hands on her shoulders to push her back so she can see me.

“First and foremost, I'm not sharing you. Your boyfriend has got to go.”

She bobs her head. “But everything else? We aren't new. It's not like we just started dating and are getting to know each other,” she counters.

“We're kinda new. We have eight years in between that we don't know.”

She glances around the room; I'm guessing remembering we are in public. She scurries back to her seat.

“It's new, but it's not. Like this can't be a first date be—”

“This is definitely not a first date. You have a fuckin' boyfriend you need to get rid of,” I interrupt, growling out angrily. Not necessarily at her, but the situation.

“I know.” She places her hand on my cheek. “And that will be remedied.”

I nod my head once, calming down yet again.

“Today... today we’re friends. Enjoying the day. But... how do we go forward? With our friends? With us?” Natalia ponders.

“We tell the truth. It was us, we separated and we’re back together. Easy as that.” In my head, it’s easy. Us back together is inevitable in my mind.

“You make it sound like a piece of cake. You know they will ask questions. Want to know everything. And that takes us back to the past where I refuse to go.” It tumbles out of her mouth as her brows pull together.

I wonder why she is so adamant about not talking about our past. What did her dad tell her? Did he say I instigated wanting to be paid? That’s the only thing that comes to mind why she refuses to discuss it.

“They will accept whatever we tell them. We can keep the past simple.” I grab her hand. “We were young and stupid. We ended. We saw each other again and here we are,” I say to try and ease her mind.

Her lips pull in a soft smile. “Okay.” She grabs her glass and leans it to me. “Today we’re friends.”

I lift my glass and clink it with hers, “Friends.” I take a sip then say, “But not for long.” And I wink, smirking at her. She squirms in her chair and my mind goes to her, naked and putty in my hands. Her body melting for me like it did once upon a time. I want to run my hand between her legs to feel how wet she is just by spending the day with me. She’s been clenching her legs often and her nipples are standing at attention beneath the soft fabric of the dress she’s wearing.

Is my Firecracker ready to explode? I casually place my hand on her bare thigh, the tablecloth semi hiding my hand, and a loud sigh escapes her. She spreads her legs a fraction, and I glide my fingers up, stopping and rubbing softly. She moans softly and closes her eyes.

I lean in close to her ear and whisper, “You’re ready for me, aren’t you?”

Her breath hitches and she opens her eyes, pulling back to look at me. She licks her lips, then answers, “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

She’s still playing these games. Acting like she’s not turned on, but her body always gives her away.

I look around to make sure we don’t have unwanted eyes on us. “Want me to check myself?”

She answers, “I dare you.” And then she spreads her legs a little more.

I shake my head, my smirk growing. “You should know better by now than to dare me to do anything.”

She places her elbows on the table and leans toward it, camouflaging my hand even more. She cocks a brow. “I triple dog dare you.”

“Your wish is my command.”

My fingers dance around her skin, going up painfully slow. She spreads even more, her eyes intense with need. I get a faint whiff of her arousal. Her breath is shallow and fast.

“Please,” she moans, moving up in her chair.

My fingers skim up and cup her warm center, feeling her panties soaked. My cock is straining against my jeans, ready to relieve her need.

I push her panties to the side and stroke her clit a couple of times before sliding a finger in her heat. Her head falls forward with a whimper. I remove my finger and adjust her panties. Her head comes up looking at me. I place the finger covered in her juices in my mouth, sucking her taste off of it.

“Delicious. I’d much rather dine down there.” My eyes glance at her crotch.

Her chest is rising and falling quickly as she nods.

I move in so close that I can feel her breath. “Need my cock to fill you? I’m ready to exhaust you with orgasms until

you can't see straight.”

Her mouth pops open and she shuts it quickly.

“Take me home.” Her words come out breathy.

She meets her lips to mine, but I move back.

“Why'd you...”

Before she can finish her question, I say, “I will not share you. When you are mine, you're mine. End of story. You have a boyfriend you need to deal with.”

“I know. And I will.” Her shoulders fall.

“I'll be waiting. As soon as you say that you and the douche are done, I will make your body explode. Until then...” I shrug.

A sadness fills her features. “I need you.”

“You have me. You've always had me.”

My cock is pissed at me, but I will kill a mofo if I find out he has touched Natalia intimately after we were together. I could have made Natalia come right here in the middle of this restaurant. She was soaked, her center welcoming my finger, already clenching. Her tits calling out to be grabbed. But I won't. Not yet. Not until she is one hundred percent mine.

I grab her chin, brushing our lips past but not lingering. “Let's eat, I'll take you home and you can get to dumping you-know-who.”

She straightens up and moves back in her chair, crossing her legs. “Fine, we'll do it your way.”

Mi Cuete is throwing one of her infamous temper tantrums because she didn't get her way.

“Your temper tantrums turn me on.” I grab an olive and pop it in my mouth.

She rolls her eyes as she tries to hold a smile.

“Just remember the faster he's gone, the faster you'll see stars.”

We spend the next couple of hours drinking and talking. The more we drink, the harder it's becoming to say no to her and she has not made it easy. She has offered herself to me in every way possible. Once I get home, I will have to rub a good one out to relieve the painful blue balls.

NATALIA

I'm light-headed and way too giddy for a twenty-six-year-old career woman. But Mateo does this to me. He makes my head spin. Has me eating out of the palm of his hand. And he knows it. He knows how worked up I am. How I am so darn close to an orgasm with all the teasing the past couple of hours. I swear if he asked me, I would spread eagle right here in the parking lot and let him ram his delicious cock into me over and over. Oh gawd, just thinking about it has me wanting more.

I'm leaning against my car, needing the support, after Mateo brought me back to the museum parking lot.

"I don't know if you're okay to drive home." He presses his body to mine and runs his nose along my ear. He breathes in. "Jasmine." His breath teases my oh-so-sensitive skin.

"I'm fine. I promise." I fill my lungs with air hoping to center myself.

I wrap my arms around him, grabbing his ass and pulling him in closer. The feel of his hardness on my stomach is turning me on all over again. His chest rumbles and he swoops down grabbing the back of my thighs bringing me up. I wrap my legs around him, my head swimming with the dirtiest of thoughts.

"Do you want this?" He pushes his hardened cock into me. "You want to feel me stroking you? Sliding in and out of your wanting pussy?"

"*Please,*" I groan.

"As soon as you break up, this..." He rubs himself against me. "Is all yours."

He lets my legs go and places me back down, moving away from me.

"Uber or are you driving?"

“I’m driving,” I respond, practically growling out of frustration.

“I’ll follow you. Now open your phone.” He places his hand palm up in between us. He’s way too calm right now, while I feel out of control with need for him.

“Why?” I cross my arms over my chest, pushing my boobs up. On purpose.

He glances down, smirks, and moves his hand closer to me.

I get my phone out of my crossbody and open it, handing it to him. I see him type something in, a smirk growing on his face. He swipes, then clicks it off and hands it back to me.

“What did you do?” I swipe my phone open again, trying to figure out what he did.

“Go to your texts.”

I click my messages app and the most recent message sent to a number I’m not familiar with is just a firecracker emoji. Just as I was about to close it, a message comes through.

UNKNOWN

☐ *is ready and waiting.* ☐

I laugh at his not-so-subtle message.

“Fine. It’s happening tonight.” I playfully roll my eyes, forgetting my frustration with his easy way of life.

He steps closer to me, placing a kiss on my neck, then says, “Good. I can’t wait to taste you again.”

He steps away and opens the driver’s door. He tips his head toward my car, waiting for me to get in.

I purse my lips and grab his crotch. He’s rock hard and all I want to do is rub his length and slide it into me. Forget about teasing him, I’m freakin’ desperate.

“He better be ready.” I squeeze him gently.

Not sure if I turned him or myself on more.

“You have doubts?” He smiles at me.

“Yes!” I exclaim too loudly, wanting him to prove otherwise right now.

“I’ll keep you up all night tonight, Cuete. Just give me the word and your pretty, pink pussy will be satisfied over and over again.”

He grabs my wrist and removes my hand, bringing it up to his mouth. He kisses my palm and releases it.

“I’m following you home. Get in.”

Damn him. How in the world does he have such restraint? I listen and get in. I reverse out and drive away. I look in my rearview mirror and there he is, following me just like he said he would.

I need an ice-cold shower and some time to decompress before I go over to Aaron’s to break the news. There’s no way I could go over there now... I haven’t even had sex today and I swear, I smell like it.

I have not felt this aroused ever. Never in my life. I just want to get home and touch myself to give me relief. Sex with Aaron was fine. It scratched the itch. I usually had to take charge to ensure my orgasm. But right now... Now I’m swimming in all the naughty thoughts.

My phone ringing in the car startles me. I notice ‘Mom’ on the screen. Ugh... I don’t want to deal with her right now but know if I don’t answer, she’ll keep calling.

I press the button on the steering wheel. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, mija. What are you doing?”

“I went to the museum downtown and out to eat with a friend.” If only she knew with whom.

“That sounds lovely. And while I’d love to chat about it and the new exhibit, I just called to remind you about the fitting tomorrow. We’ll be over at twelve thirty.”

WHAT? How could I have forgotten about her charity ball next weekend?

“Okay. Yeah, sure. I’ll be ready. I have to go. Bye, Mom.”

“Bye, sweetheart.”

I push the button hanging up. I pound my head on the headrest a couple of times. Another week without Mateo. I can’t go to Aaron’s and break up with him tonight. He’s my escort. My date.

I wouldn’t mind going alone or even asking Mateo to take me, but Aaron’s parents will not only be there, but will be sitting at my parent’s table as well. I have no doubt Mateo would be able to charm Aaron’s mom, but with my dad and Aaron’s dad, it would make for a very uncomfortable evening.

There’s absolutely no way out of this. I’ll have to wait until after the ball. Tears of frustration and sadness fill my eyes. The life I want is just within reach and it feels like it’s slipping away. What if he doesn’t want to wait? What if he gets mad and decides to walk away?

My heart is being strangled yet again. I swore I would never place myself in any relationship where I could feel like that again. I’m not even in the relationship and I’m falling down the depths of despair.

I wipe my tears roughly with the back of my hand when I enter my neighborhood. I park in my driveway and quickly get out, waving to Mateo as he continues driving past. The way he was teasing earlier, I figured he would stop. But I guess he also is at the limits of his restraint.

I walk into my home, closing and locking the door behind me before I throw myself on the couch. I refused to listen to Mateo’s apology or explanation about our past because I didn’t want to relive the pain. That was the worst heartbreak I’ve ever experienced, and I didn’t know at the time if I would survive. I went through the motions of getting ready for college. I went crazy on my dad’s credit card because it was partially his fault. I left for college, vowing to never live under my dad’s roof again. And I did just that.

I tried to push Mateo to the back of my mind while rushing my sorority and the parties. I jumped from guy to guy. Drank

way too much. Shopped and accumulated so many unnecessary things. All trying to numb myself. None of it worked. I was an empty person who was the life of the party. The only thing that saved me from failing was my sorority's mandatory study hours and probation when my grade point average dropped.

An apology or explanation frightens me. What if I'm not satisfied with it? What if it makes me feel worse? My dad offered him money to break up with me and he took it. Then ghosted me. I tried to see him. I called him endlessly for a couple of days. I wanted to plead with him that we didn't need the money. He never cared about it before, so why now? What was more important than me that he needed the money for?

But I never got an explanation. He disappeared and his parents wouldn't tell me where he had gone, and I was shipped back to the city to prepare for the 'debutant' life my dad wanted for me.

The last time I saw him was at the police station. My dad arrived to pick me up and he refused to take Mateo, Julian, and his girlfriend. We were all eighteen, so I don't understand why they couldn't just let us go on our own. I was so scared that night that it didn't occur to me. But years later, when the memories flood, that is what I don't understand. Was there bail and my dad only paid mine?

"LET'S GO!" my dad says through clenched teeth.

"But..." I try and stall.

Mateo, Julian, and his girlfriend are sitting in a communal drunk tank kind of cell.

"I'm not going to tell you again. We are leaving." My dad places his hand on my shoulder and shoves me to start walking.

The officer that let me out, standing by my father, is a family friend of the DeLuna's. I've met him before, but today he's on duty having to deal with a very angry father and

businessman. The officer grimaces and slightly shrugs his shoulders. He's powerless against my father and his resources.

I look back at Mateo and he mouths, I love you.

HE LOVED ME, but he accepted my dad's bribe. How could he do both? How could he explain that? I don't want to know the *why*. I want the present with him. He wants me. I can feel it. He kept my name on his body all these years. He could have easily covered it when he was getting all that work done, but he didn't. It has to mean something.

The separate life, I do my thing and Aaron does his, doesn't appeal to me anymore. Mateo is the future. My future.

I thought I would be visiting Mateo later tonight. That we would watch the sunrise after a night of unimaginable orgasms. Waking up tangled in each other late tomorrow afternoon. My throat closes up with the thought of not being able to be with him for another week. I feel like I'm a teenage girl again, drowning in emotions.

My phone vibrates in my hand.

MATEO

I'll be up waiting.

I throw my phone on the side chair, beyond frustrated. Nope. I don't want to do this. Live two lives for the next week. I scream into a pillow until my throat is raw.

Finally, I get up to grab my phone from the chair. I walk to my bathroom to check my makeup and freshen up. I might as well shower in the morning before the dresses and seamstress arrive. Washing Mateo off me now doesn't sound appealing. I strip down and pull out a satin pajama set and crawl into bed, building the courage to call Mateo.

I open my phone and go to the text he sent and create a new contact. An uneasiness is sitting at the pit of my stomach. My finger hovers over his number, unsure of what to say or how to explain. The phone ringing startles me and I drop it on

my lap. I pick it up to see Aaron's name on the screen. Knowing I can't avoid him, I swipe to answer.

"Hey." My voice cracks, so I clear my throat.

"Hi. How was your day at the museum?" he begins and I can tell he's calling me from the car.

I squeeze my eyes shut and take a deep inhale, releasing slowly as I say, "It was good." Short and simple.

"I'm glad. I'm heading downtown to the martini bar and thought you'd like to join."

He's calling me when he's already on his way there. No text when he's getting ready or finds out. Just last minute, hey *I'm going, wanna join?*

No, I don't want to go. I don't want to be with you at all. But... and that's a BIG FAT BUT, I have to for now. Keep the peace for my mom.

"Oh no! I just washed my makeup off and slid into bed." I fake disappointment.

"You sure? We'll be there for a while, so you have time to freshen up. Ted's wife will be there," he presses.

I was THAT girl. I let him do this because I wasn't invested. He called last minute, and I would join to keep this façade going. The perfect power couple. He had the pretty, rich, agreeable girlfriend. I had my freedom.

Before today, I would have called him to 'check in' before I got into bed. Freshen up if he wanted me places and I wasn't already doing my own thing.

"Yeah. I'm sure. Sorry."

"Okay. Well then, I'll call you tomorrow."

I drop my phone on the bed and rub my face roughly. Not the best thing to avoid wrinkles according to my mom. I know this isn't normal. But it worked for me. It's what I was comfortable with. We were a couple on paper. Never investing too much in the other. But I still feel guilty. Guilty for lying to

Aaron. And the strangest thing is I feel guilty for cheating on Mateo!

I pick up my phone and call Mateo. I can't put this off. It rings only twice before I hear his voice, so dang husky.

"Well, that was fast. Are you ready?"

"Uh... well..." stumbles out.

"What's going on?"

"I... uh... can't—"

"Can't what exactly? Don't dance around what you need to say. Say it." His frustration flows through the phone.

"My mom hosts a charity ball every year and it's next weekend. I can't break up yet. Aaron's taking me and his parents are sitting at our table. I wouldn't care about not going with him if his parents weren't going to be there. I would much rather you take me, but with his parents and my parents —"

"Babe, take a breath," Mateo interrupts.

My mind, heart and breath are all racing with what comes next. What happens now? How do we navigate this really uncomfortable situation? I can hear his breath over the phone, and I wish he was here to just hold me tight. Tell me everything is going to be okay. Fix the mess I just got myself into.

My phone starts to ring and I pull it away as Mateo says, "Answer the Facetime."

"I'm a mess right now," I pout out. I don't have makeup on. I'm sure my eyes are red from holding back tears of sadness and frustration. My hair is pulled up in a crazy big scrunchie.

"Answer." The firmness of one word somehow calms me.

"Fine," I murmur as I touch the button.

His face and soft smile appear and tears flood my eyes with no warning.

“Aw, baby, talk to me. What’s wrong?” His brows pull together.

I just shake my head back and forth. How can I explain to him if I don’t fully understand myself?

“What did I remind you of this afternoon?”

I shrug my shoulders wanting to stay in my misery. I wipe the tears that have fallen away with my hand and hold my breath, hoping they stop. Not able to look at him, I look at my blanket and begin picking at imaginary lint balls.

“Hey. Look at me,” he says softly.

I bring my eyes to meet his through the screen and a heaviness weighs on me.

“What do you want?”

“You,” I whisper out.

“Are you sure?”

I bob my head, chewing on my bottom lip.

How can he be so dang steady through this, while I feel like I’m spinning out of control? I need him to hold me steady.

“Then you have me. I told you, it’s always been you.” The decisiveness of his tone lifts some of the weight.

I bite down on my lip harder, holding back a question that’s about to spill out, but will make this conversation more difficult.

“Say it,” he demands.

“What?” I feign ignorance, watching him through this small screen.

He lifts a brow with a pointed look.

“And you’re okay waiting on me... with a boyfriend. All week. Not knowing. Yeah, right. How fucking awkward is that?” I blurt out, feeling more like a sixteen-year-old girl than the woman I am.

“I’ve waited eight years, I can wait another week,” he says with certainty.

With his declaration, the scattered pieces of my soul begin to merge, bringing me back to who I once was.

“Fine.” One word, because I don’t know what else to say.

“But you will call me every night.”

My lips spread knowing we may make it through the week.

“Okay,” I agree automatically. “But... what are we going to do?”

“We are going to spend this week getting to know each other again, without the distraction of...” He cocks his brow with a devilish smirk.

“Are you saying I’m too distracting?” I tease.

“Cuete, you know you are. And you know the power you hold.” His tone is serious.

Does he not realize he is the one with all the power?

“I don’t feel like it.” I look away, not believing I admitted that out loud.

“Maybe you don’t feel like it because you’re hiding again. Those summers we spent together, you bloomed and became a strong-willed, independent woman. You stood on your own and pushed back for what you believed, no matter the consequences.” He pauses and I can feel his gaze even though I haven’t looked back up.

“But I’m guessing being back with your parents, that spark dimmed and is laying dormant until you light it again.”

My eyes come back to his, knowing he speaks the truth. The only thing I have pushed back on or refused to do is work for my father. I rushed, got a business degree, dated ‘parent approved’ guys. I live in a house purchased by my dad, in a location he wanted me to live in. And a slew of other small things I thought didn’t matter. Individually, they don’t. But when that many are pieced together...

“I fell back into my old habit of letting my parents direct my life. I didn’t even realize it until just this moment.”

“Are you sure you’re ready to let that go? We both know I’m not your parents’ first choice for you.” He shakes his head in resignation. “Probably not even in their top ten choices.”

“Yes. I have to. Seeing you again just magnified the feeling that I’m not comfortable in my own skin. And I haven’t been. Not in a really long time.”

“Okay. Then it’s settled. I’m waiting for you. But... I have a question... that I really hate asking. And a stipulation.”

I clear my throat before responding, “What are they?”

Tendrils of nerves prick at my skin.

“Am I correct to assume that the boyfriend does not live with you?”

“Correct. He does not live with me.”

“You know neither of us share well.” His tone has an edge.

“Share?” I push, knowing what he’s insinuating but needing the confirmation.

“Are you planning on screwing your boyfriend this week, or is it something he will be expecting?” His nostrils flair.

I cough, choking on my saliva, not expecting it to be laid out so bluntly.

I straighten my spine, metaphorically speaking, and answer, “No, I do not want to fuck my boyfriend. And whether he’s expecting it or not, I couldn’t say. But NO... I will not be having sex with anyone this week,” I state firmly.

“I mean it. I don’t share what’s mine,” he growls out.

Wanting to fight with him like we used to, I say, “Who says I’m yours?” I narrow my eyes at him in a challenge.

“This does.” He pauses, then says, “Who was your pussy creaming for earlier today?” He licks his lips then brings his fingers to his mouth. “I wish I could still taste it.”

How does he make such vulgar language sound so freakin’ HOT?

“Maybe it was a fluke,” I continue to spat.

“What would I feel right now if I spread your lips and sunk a finger into you? Would it be warm, inviting and oh-so wet?”

I swallow hard, his dirty words going straight to my core.

“If you pan the camera down, would I see nipples so hard they would be calling me to suck them?”

Frustrated he has me hot and bothered again, I shoot back, “And what about you? Is your cock throbbing, wishing for a release?”

His lips spread in a devilish smirk. “Yes. Thinking of doing all those things to you has me needing to rub one out and I’ll be thinking of you when I do.”

My breath hitches. He’s so dirty. So forward. And it’s exciting the hell out of me. Like tonight at the restaurant. I’ve wondered about hidden sexual activity out in public, but... I was never brave enough to try. Or had a partner so daring. They have all been extremely vanilla. Not even a sprinkle here or there.

“Good. Then I’m not alone in my sexual frustration.”

“I need a little peek of what I do to you. Bring the camera back so I can get a glimpse of your perfect swollen tits.”

“I’ll one up you.” I say, wanting and *needing* to be a little daring.

I move the camera back slowly, then pan down so he can see me laying in bed. I pan back up, lingering at my breasts, then with my free hand I cup one breast and squeeze it.

Mateo groans and I hold a giggle. I slide my fingers around my already hardened nipple, flicking it softly and giving it a pinch. I watch as Mateo licks his lips, like he’s waiting to eat his last meal.

“I can’t see anymore. I’m going to fuckin’ explode,” he groans out. “Unless you want to watch me pleasure myself while watching you... you need to stop playing with me.”

I let out the giggle I was holding. Could I watch Mateo masturbating? Imagining it was me. Would he want to watch me? Could I play with myself with him watching? My heartbeat races with the thought. But I'm not ready. I don't think, anyway.

"Wicked woman." He sighs.

"No. Not wicked. I just want you to know what you do to me. The only one that does this to me. The only one who has ever done this to me," I say, brutally honest.

"And I want to continue to do that to you. For you. For the rest of my life."

"So then, now what?"

"We talk. We almost got carried away with sex and we're not even in the same room. The thing I said wouldn't get in the way of us getting to know each other."



CHAPTER EIGHT

MATEO

SUNLIGHT DRIFTING THROUGH MY WINDOWS WAKES ME. I crack open only one eye, not ready to face the day after the all-nighter with Natalia. She fell asleep on the phone. Her deep breaths mine. No one interrupted our time last night. No late-night booty call requests. Which was a good thing because I would have lost my shit.

She's the same girl I met all those years ago. The sass, the temper, the spoiled girl attitude. All still there, but somehow more mature.

One day. It only took one day for her to wrap me around her little finger. It was probably hours, but I'll stick with one day.

And now...one week of wondering what conversations she's having with the asshole. One week wondering if he's expecting something. One week wondering if she's going to need to turn him away. One week wondering if her lips are tainted with his. One week of torture I told her I would endure. Promised I would endure.

I grab my extra pillow and cover my face, blocking the light coming in. My phone vibrates on my nightstand. I grab it, hoping to see Natalia's name. Instead,

DAMIAN

Meet me at the gym at 10:30?

Needing something to help me release all this pent-up frustration, I answer.

see u there.

I toss and turn for a few minutes before I decide to get up. I wash up and head to the kitchen to make a pre-workout drink. If I'm going to go hard today like I need to, I better get

ready. My phone vibrates on the counter, and I pick it up expecting to see Damian's name, but instead I'm greeted with a firecracker emoji. I can't control the smile that overtakes my face. I haven't even read the message and I'm already grinning like a lunatic. I swipe it open.

NATALIA

How is it that I miss you already?

Just as I was about to start typing my reply, the three dots appear, telling me that she's going to say something else.

I don't want to do this week without you.

If it was up to me, you would be in my bed right now.

I wish I was.

Me too

But since I can't change that, a week of texts and phone calls are going to have to do.

I'll call u later

This week is going to suck. I grab my shaker bottle and head for the door.

DAMIAN and I finished a circuit of weights, and I still had the itch to kill someone, so I have been hitting this damn bag for-fuckin- ever. I'm sweaty, tired, and still aggravated. My fists connect over and over. I keep seeing the boyfriend's face. Him wanting to kiss Natalia. Him calling her for more. Him stopping by her place. Him. Him. Him.

I hit harder and the visions still come.

"What did that bag do to you?" Damian yells to get my attention over the music blaring in my ears.

I punch one last time, grabbing the bag to stop the swing and look at Damian.

“Nothing. Just in a piss ass mood, I guess,” I grunt out, exhausted but feeling no better.

“Let me guess...” The side of his lip quirks up. “Natalia again?”

I shake my head, while starting to unwrap my hands.

“Mentiroso,” he says, barking out a laugh.

He calls me out on my lie. “Fuck it.” I throw my first wrap towards my bag sitting on the floor. “I spent the day with her yesterday. She’s mine. Said she would break up with the boyfriend. But then called me back and said she has a stupid ball or some shit to go to next weekend. And of course, he’s her date. So no break up. And I get to sit around and wonder all week what the hell she’s doing with him.”

His eyes widen and he lets out a low whistle.

“That’s some messed up shit right there.” He shakes his head. “Good luck with that.”

“Really? That’s all you have to offer. Good luck?” I grab my bag and shove the other wrap in it and zip it shut.

“What do you want me to say? Off the boyfriend?” He snickers.

“Yes. That would be more helpful,” I respond dryly.

“Come on. I’ll buy you lunch. Jax texted to meet him and Ricky. Let’s hit the showers and get out of here.”



I’VE NEVER FELT SO out of sorts before. The past couple of days have been fine. Work. Gym. Eat. Talk on the phone with Natalia. Repeat. She’s called me the past couple of nights, but it was getting late and since she hadn’t called, I decided to call her. Being sent to voicemail knocked the wind out of me and

now my brain is playing tricks on me. Or it's telling me what I'm trying to ignore.

I'm scrolling through channels and nothing is getting my attention. Not even one of the *John Wick* films, my favorite, can get me out of the funk I'm currently simmering in. What in the hell is she doing? That's what I want to know. And since I was sent to voicemail, I refuse to text. Not going to happen.

I hate feeling like this. I've never been this person. I'm confident, some say cocky, but it works for me. It has kept me from drowning in things like this. But Natalia. She's the only one that can do this to me. I'm tethered to her like no other. Since that first day I saw her standing on her balcony all alone. The way she was holding herself. Her hesitation to acknowledge we caught her staring.

I walked around that stupid bonfire, lost and bored until she graced me with her presence. A quick peck good-bye at the end of the night on her boardwalk sealed the deal for me. She was always going to be mine. Until she wasn't. But she's here again, just beyond my fingertips. I can't grab her yet.

Screw this! I throw the remote on the couch and get up to change. I can't sit at home waiting around to find out she's choosing the life she has now. I need a drink. I slide on jeans and an old concert shirt that was laying on a chair. I'm not trying to impress, just trying to forget.

I walk around the corner to a small neighborhood dive bar. Most of the barstools at the bar are open so I choose one away from the others, wanting to drown in the misery alone. The bartender walks up and I order a whiskey neat and a beer.

She places the drinks in front of me and I hand her my card. "Keep it open and keep 'em coming." I pick up the beer bottle.

She tips her head and walks toward the register.

I grab the glass of whiskey and down the whole thing. The burn is welcome. Usually being the social guy, I'm able to make small talk with anyone anywhere I go, but I don't know what to do with myself sitting away from everyone. I open my

phone and go to the stupid social media app Natalia likes to post in. No new posts since our day together at the museum. I scroll through all her previous posts, not sure what I'm hoping to find. Now I understand how people get addicted to these stupid apps.

I finish the beer and the bartender leaves me another one without me asking. Tired of scrolling and finding nothing, I scroll back up to the top, wondering if she'll post so I can figure out what she's doing and why I was sent to voicemail.

A new picture pops up. She's at some fancy ass restaurant. A man's hand in the background of the table. The boyfriend. So that is what she's up to tonight. Perfect. Just perfect. I grab the new beer and take a long swig.

I type out a comment, *Hope it's worth the price*. My finger hovers over the 'post' button, wanting her to know I saw the picture, but wanting to keep my cool.

I grab my beer, about to down it when a woman says, "Here alone?"

Glancing from side to side at the empty stools, then back at her and say, "Looks like it."

Asshole move. I know.

"Mind if I join you?" She places her hand on the back of the stool.

"Be my guest." I flick my hand at the empty stool.

Should I warn her that I'm not in the best mood to deal with people today? But if Natalia is with her boyfriend, why can't I spend the evening drinking with someone too? I erase the words I typed out and set my phone down. I look back at the woman, allowing my eyes to sweep her from head to toe. Beautiful. Maybe on the prowl with the amount of cleavage on display.

"I'm Jessica," she says, taking a drink from her glass.

"Mateo," I respond flatly.

"Come here alone often?" She asks a cliché pick up line.

“Pretty much always. The bar is walking distance from my place. Makes it easy to get a necessary drink away from the house when needed.”

“If you need a necessary drink that often, then I would say you need a new job or girlfriend.” She shrugs her shoulders, shaking her head.

She raises her hand to the bartender and points at her drink. I stay quiet, unwilling to get into the why of my drinking. The bartender places her new drink on the counter.

“Which is it? Job or girlfriend?” she pushes, then takes another drink.

“Neither,” I huff out.

She doesn't respond, instead opens her phone and begins scrolling. I watch her and begin to get annoyed that she's ignoring me. First Natalia and now this random woman.

“Why are you here alone?” My tone is harsher than necessary.

“To get out of the house. Nothing on TV. Bored. Figured a drink or two chatting with someone is better than nothing.” Her brows lift with her shoulders. “Are you going to share why you're in such a pleasant mood?”

“Nope.”

“Okay.” She goes back to looking at her phone.

My phone on the counter begins vibrating; Natalia is calling. I send it to voicemail. It rings again, and I send it to voicemail again. It begins ringing again and Jessica places her hand on top of it.

“I'm going to take a wild guess. The person calling is who has you in this mood.”

I scowl at her. “Get your hand off my phone.”

She lifts her hand and I watch the phone vibrate until it stops.

“Since there was no name on the screen, just an emoji, I'm going to take another wild guess. That's either your side piece,

or *you're* the side piece.” She smirks as she narrows her eyes studying me.

I pick up the whiskey glass in front of me and wave it at the bartender. I need this chick to go away. I need Natalia to stop calling me. I need peace!

The bartender places another shot down, and I waste no time chugging the shot.

Silence. My phone vibrates again with a text from Natalia. I refuse to open it and give her my time when she was just with...

“You’re pretty mad, huh?” Jessica says, still looking at her phone. “Been there. Felt that. Sorry.”

“How do you know what I’m feeling?” My muscles are taut with frustration.

“I don’t know exactly. But I’m guessing she—it’s a she right? I’m guessing she let you down somehow. That’s the reason we get mad at people. They let us down somehow. Whether it’s romantic or not. Our expectations weren’t met, and they become the villains in our stories.”

She explains it so easily; I had never thought about the simplicity of anger.

I nod my head. “You’re right.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Nope. Not really.”

“Well then. Let’s get your mind off her for the moment. What do you want to talk about?” She smiles.

She begins telling me about her day at work as an elementary school teacher. It was a day of chaos in her classroom, and I don’t know why anyone would voluntarily pick that profession. She has me laughing at the stories kids tell about what happens at home and the crazy parents.

“What the fuck? Really?” Natalia’s voice startles me.

I turn around to find Natalia glaring at me, then turning her attention to Jessica, shooting her a look that could kill. She

looks back to me and steps around to my free side and climbs on my bar stool straddling me. She takes my face in her hands and knowing she's about to kiss me, I place my hands on her shoulders.

“What? You want her instead?” she spits out angrily.

The jealousy I witnessed many times as a teenager is making an encore.

“I don't want another man's seconds,” I snarl.

“You're not!” She pushes herself against my hands trying to get closer.

“Where were you?” I wait for her to answer to see if she'll lie.

“At dinner...” She takes a breath, exhaling before continuing, “with my parents, Aaron, and his parents.”

“I know. I saw,” I state flatly. “Hope it was worth the price.”

Tears instantly well in her eyes, and I want to take the pain away, but mine is too raw right now. I keep my hands on her shoulders, unwilling to budge. I've made all the concessions so far; she's going to have to meet me halfway.

We're in a stand-off, neither moving or wanting to make the first move.

“Well, that was fun... for a minute. Now it's boring,” Jessica says, with a hint of sarcasm.

Natalia whips her head to face her. “Then leave. No one asked you to stay.”

“So far, my guess is you...” Jessica points at me while taking a drink then placing it down before continuing, “are the side piece. You...” She points at Natalia, “Were with your boyfriend... husband...” Jessica shrugs.

Natalia's eyes narrow and her nostrils flare.

“Anyway...” Jessica continues, unaffected, “But by the way he was sitting around drowning his misery and moping and the way you stormed in here... way too jealous, I might

add... I would say you need to get your shit together because this..." She waves her hand back and forth to us. "This ain't healthy. Entertaining? Sure. But..." Jessica shrugs, pinching her face. "You know what I'm saying."

"Who the fuck do you think you are? Trying to tell us..." Natalia snarls.

"I'm Jessica. Hi. Nice to meet you." She smiles in spite of Natalia's demeanor. "I teach first grade. You don't scare me. Try dealing with twenty temper tantrums at once. Now, *that's* scary." She mock shivers, her smile widening. "I'm going to leave you two to figure it out. Good luck."

We watch her down the remainder of her drink and walk away before we face each other again. Natalia's stiff body sags, the tears from moments ago fall freely. Seeing her defeated, I wrap my arms around her pulling her to me.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I ask, still hurt and angry.

"Because I didn't know, I promise," she says in my neck. She sits up and begins to slide off my lap, but I hold her in place. She rolls her lips in her mouth, chewing on them.

"Go on," I prompt her.

"I thought I was meeting my parents for dinner, but when I got to the restaurant, Aaron was there with his parents. My parents said nothing. When you called, my mom had just got mad at me for taking a call from Mari. I couldn't answer and pretend it was her or even text because she was in a crazy mood..." She bows her head.

"You could have gone to the ladies room," I say, not knowing why I want to find fault in her story. "Texted or called from there."

"You're right. And I tried. But then Aaron's mom decided to join me and was chatting the whole time. Didn't give me a free moment. It was like I was held hostage for the evening." She turns around and grabs the napkin from under my drink and wipes under her eyes, looking back up at me. "What did you mean by *hope it was worth the price?* "

I clench my jaw, somewhat regretting my statement. Wanting her above all else is clashing with my jealousy and anger. Maybe I should let her go. Let her live the life she was living. I may not have let go yet, but eventually the time would have come and I would have covered her name on my arm.

“Well?” she says, when my silence lingers.

“The price of losing me,” I say, watching for her reaction.

“Oh... uh...” She looks around the room, avoiding my gaze. She lifts her leg, shifting her weight and slides off my lap. She grabs her keys where she had slammed them down on the bar when she sat on me.

She begins walking away. The soul crushing emptiness that hits me is unbearable, sparking my rage.

“That’s it? You’re leaving?” I jump off my stool and shout, getting the attention of the few patrons in the bar.

“What do you want me to do? You said I lost you!” she shouts back, more tears streaking her cheeks.

“Fight for us!” I yell at her.

Her eyes widen, but then she shakes her head in resignation. “But what if you don’t fight for me?” she shouts back, then chokes out through a sob, “Again.”

She guts me with one word. *Again*. Leaving her at eighteen is a decision that will haunt me for the rest of my life. I didn’t fight hard enough for her then, and I’m pushing her away now. She wouldn’t be here if she wanted her life with him.

I’m frozen in my own fear as her gaze sweeps me up and down. Her body quivers with sobs. She turns around and takes a step before everything registers in my brain. I’m about to lose her again.

“Wait!” I take a couple of long strides to her and pull her into my arms. “I’m sorry,” I say into her hair while rubbing her back with one hand, holding her close with the other. Her body quakes as she cries in my chest.

I push her away slightly, cupping her face and wiping the tears with my thumbs. “Let me close my tab.”

The sadness in her eyes, that I just caused, is too much. I step away and she wraps her arms around her middle, hugging herself.

The bartender places my tab and card on the counter, ready for me to sign, guessing I was about to jet with the display we just put on. I grab the pen, adding a hefty tip since this is a usual hangout.

I place an arm around Natalia and walk her out. Grabbing the keys from her hand I unlock her doors and help her in, before getting in the driver's seat. The drive to my townhouse quick since it's, less than a quarter mile away. I exit the car and come around, opening her door, extending my hand to help her out. Neither of us has said anything. Unlocking my front door, I guide her in.

Natalia standing in my home is surreal. She looks around, then steps away from me, sitting on the couch, sliding off her heels and curling up in the fetal position. I follow her and sit next to her. I grab one foot and begin massaging it.

NATALIA

I can't shake the hurt that is ravaging through my entire body. I knew... know... he's the only one that can mutilate what's left of my heart. But I wanted to trust he was going to heal what was broken inside of me.

The price of losing me. I was losing him again. And I didn't even have him. I was terrified of this. What would happen if we didn't work out. I have no words. A fog has entered my brain. Numbness following.

A chill runs through my body, letting me know I'm still alive even though I don't feel a thing now.

"Baby. I'm sorry. Talk to me," his voice says, though it sounds far away.

Sleep. Something to take me away from the nightmare.

"I need you to talk to me." His voice is firm. Demanding. He's always in charge.

I close my eyes, wanting to escape this hell. A life I wanted and lost. Again. What did I do to deserve this?

"Look at me, Cuete!" he orders.

Feeling lips on mine startles me. His scent. His calloused working hands on my face. The haze that fell over me lifts. I open my eyes to Mateo's soft brown ones right in front of me.

"There you are. Don't you dare leave me like that again." He places a soft kiss on the corner of my mouth.

I look around and don't recognize my surroundings. "Where are we?"

"My house. I figured we didn't want to continue our drama at the bar." He's holding my face, kneeling on the floor in front of me.

"Oh." I don't want to admit I don't know how we got here.

“What happened?” His brows pull together.

“I lost you.” Saying the words out loud is another agonizing punch to the chest.

“You didn’t lose me.” His eyes water. “I’m sorry. I was mad. I was jealous. I was a dick.”

“But you said—”

“I know what I said, baby.” His hands run through my hair. “But that’s what we do. We test each other, saying stupid shit. I guess it’s time we grow out of that, huh?”

I nod, knowing he’s right. I hate to admit I’ve been doing it too. “Habits are hard to break.” I shrug my shoulders.

“We have three more days of this agony.” His hands fall from my face, placing them on my bare legs.

“Will we make it?” I clasp my hands together, willing them not to shake.

“I think so.”

Not the most reassuring answer he could give. He was always the one keeping us on track. Steady and strong. That’s what I need right now.

“You think so?” I chew on the inside of my cheek.

“I can’t give you certainties. If I do and it all falls apart, it will kill me. I can’t break a promise to you. Not again.”

I tense and my breath hitches at his insinuation of our past.

His thumb starts rubbing small circles on my thigh. “You have no idea how much I want you. How badly I wish I wasn’t in competition with some dick that doesn’t appreciate what he has with you.” His voice is pained.

“There’s zero competition.” I glide my fingers down the side of his face. “I don’t want Aaron. I don’t want a life with him. But I also don’t want to rock the boat with my parents. I want them to... wish that they accepted our relationship. But if I break it off with Aaron, so close to this stupid ball, I know my mom will have a conniption fit. And I need her on our side.”

He nods, leaning his face into my hand. “We’re fine,” he says. I just wish he sounded more certain.

“Sunday... on Sunday, I’ll be one hundred and fifty percent yours.” I lean forward, meeting my lips to his. I have always been Mateo’s. I never had a doubt when I was eighteen. And now at twenty-six, I’m terrified, but there are still no doubts I belong with him.

The kiss begins soft and sweet, but turns desperate, tongues clashing, tasting; the need to breathe is no longer necessary if I have Mateo. He grabs my waist and pulls me closer to him, our bodies flush against the other. My insides are exploding at having him between my legs again. Even if there is a clothing barrier. My hand runs down his back, his muscles tensing and relaxing under my touch.

He pulls away, breathing erratically, placing his forehead on mine. “Stay with me tonight. Nothing will happen. I meant it when I said I will not take you until you are mine. And only mine.”

“I’m only yours. Have only been yours. But I understand.” I kiss his nose. “Yes, I will stay with you.”

“No one will be looking for you?” I know he means Aaron when he says no one.

“No one ever does.” I answer the question I know he really wanted to ask.

He stands up, pulling me with him. “Come on.” He walks up the stairs and I happily follow.

All of the stress and anxiety from the night has exhausted me. He goes into a bedroom and I look around. Small, but clean and simple. He opens a drawer as I stand looking around. A few pictures of him and friends are scattered about. Cologne and a valet are on his dresser.

“Put this on.” I turn to face him and he has his hand extended, holding a t-shirt.

“Are you sure we can do this?”

I want nothing more than to sleep with Mateo, in both ways the word infers, but I'm not sure if we can keep it PG rated. We are, after all, us. And while one part of me wants to unzip my dress now and let it slide down, I want to respect his wishes. We are standing on shaky ground, and I can't mess this up.

"Thanks." I grab it from him and ask, "Where can I change?"

He points at me with a look of pure, unadulterated desire. "Right there." His tone drops and I watch as his Adam's apple bobs.

"Are you sure?" I lick my lips, thinking this is the best and worst idea simultaneously.

"Need help?" He takes a step in my direction.

I move back and bite the corner of my lip, holding a smirk. My heart is pounding against my chest. Part nerves, part excitement, part fear.

I bring the zipper down on the dress I'm wearing, keeping my eyes on Mateo. I lower one side from my shoulder, pulling my arm out. Then moving the shirt to my other hand I pull out the next and hold the dress in place.

"Last chance to tap out." I run my hand over my shoulder and down my arm.

"And I said change right there." He cups his crotch, adjusting himself, and I instantly feel heat at my core.

I drop my arms and let the dress fall to the floor. He takes a large breath and grabs the neck of the shirt he's wearing and pulls it over his head. He's standing in front of me, shirtless, in all his masculine glory. The teenage body I was so familiar with is gone and in front of me a strong, broad chested man stands. His arm is covered in tattoos and others are scattered around his chest and shoulders.

"You're not done," he growls out. His eyes are dark with desire.

“This...” I unclasp the bra in the back and let it slide down and drop to the floor. “Is yours. Only yours.”

He takes two large strides to me and grabs the t-shirt I’m still clutching in my hand and slides it over my head. I push my arms through the armholes and smile.

“Tapping out?” I run my index finger down his chest.

“Keep teasing and let’s see how long you last on Sunday, Firecracker.” I swallow hard, knowing he does things to me.

I roll my eyes, loving the banter, but not wanting to push it too far. I pull the covers back and get into his bed.

“And if you want to see the goods, all you have to do is ask.” A confident smirk spreads across his face, as he unzips his jeans. I look up to meet his eyes.

He pulls his jeans off and his rock hard cock pops out, straining against the boxer briefs. My core tightens, wanting something to relieve the need. He comes to stand on the side of the bed I took. His erection is on display right in front of me. All I need to do is sit up and take him in my mouth.

“This is my side.”

“Take it from me,” I challenge.

He pulls the covers off me and picks me up. He walks around the bed and places me down.

“Jerk,” I tease him as he walks around and gets in.

“This has always been my side. You know that.”

Memories of him laying on his bed in his room fill my mind. On the nights that we were able to finagle sleeping together, I would always crowd him on his side. I wanted to be close.

“But you can join me on my side.” He extends his arm, welcoming me close.

I place my head on his chest, my body flush against him. He wraps the arm I’m resting on around me and places his hand on my hip and his other hand covers mine on his stomach.

“If no one looks for you, for the next three nights, you’re here... in my bed,” he whispers in my hair.

“Okay,” I say immediately, not wanting to be any place else.



SOFT KISSES on my shoulder surprises me when I wake. It took a couple of seconds for my brain to remember where I was. A sense of peace washes over me.

“I’ve got to get up and open the garage,” Mateo says, his breath tickling my neck. “Stay in bed if you want. Go back to sleep.” He places a last kiss on my shoulder and slides the arm under me out.

I roll over watching him. He extends his arms over his head, rolling out his neck. His lean muscles taut then relax as he moves.

“Keep looking at me like that and it’s going to be really hard to keep this non-sexual for the next few days.” His lips curl up as he walks away and goes into the bathroom.

No light is coming in from the window, so I reach for my phone to check the time. Six a.m. Does he usually wake up this early to go into the shop? I roll on my stomach, getting comfortable for a few minutes more.

THE ALARM on my phone startles me awake. I run my hand on the bed where I dropped it earlier, not finding it. I sit up to find the offending sound when I notice Mateo plugged it in his charger on the nightstand. There’s a key sitting on an open, torn envelope with something written on it. I slide the key off and pick up the envelope.

The key is for you. Come and go as you wish. Love you, M

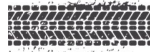
I turn the envelope over and it's some of his mail. I laugh to myself. This is so him.

I open up my texts and send him a quick message.

Good morning. And thank you! ♥ N

In the bathroom, I'm horrified when I look in the mirror. I have mascara under my eyes. Lipstick smeared off my lips. I look crusty and he saw me looking like this. My head flops down and then I remember this isn't a first hook up or a first date. That gruesome time when you have to wear the mask of perfection to attract. Mateo has seen me at my best and worst.

I get dressed to head home and get ready for the meetings I have scheduled in the office later today.



MARISOL

Wine tonight?

A TEXT GREETs me when I return to my desk from the last meeting of the day.

Absolutely

I respond, smiling.

I would love to spend the whole night curled in Mateo's arms, but it would be too tempting to go further if we spend too much time together. I want to be able to respect him and Aaron. I may not be handling this as well as I could, but... the heart wants what the heart wants.

How incredibly cliché. I hate that I just used that saying.

If it wasn't for my meddling parents, my relationship with Aaron would already be over. May have been over long ago. The comfort he provided as a buffer for my parents was too

strong to overlook how bored I was. I didn't have my parents constantly down my throat about settling down and I had my freedom. I was so blind to it before. But now with Mateo back in my life, I can see so clearly what I was doing.

Finished for the day... heading your way,

MARISOL

Come on over

Is her response. She must need a break.

I'm going to Sol y Luna tonight for a bit. Mari wanted a wine nite.

I text out to Mateo as my lips curl up as a sense of joy fills me that I'm sharing my life with someone.

I never told Aaron my comings and goings. If he texted or called, I would share what I was doing or where I was, but other than that, I did my thing. And I never thought about where he was. Now that I think about it, I didn't care. Did he wonder or care where I was? Was I just a convenience for him too? That last question is a small hit to the ego, if I'm honest. Was he using me like I was using him?

MATEO

Hmmmm... strange. I'm having a wine nite too.

The response comes back a couple of minutes later as I'm finishing organizing my desk for tomorrow.

My chest tightens... Do they know? What? Why? I continue to stare at my phone. Seconds, minutes, hours pass. My dramatics are setting in, but I... My phone vibrates in my hand.

Stop freaking out. Zar said Mari needed a break, but didn't want to leave Sol. He's bringing food and wants her to be able to relax and watch her business at the same time.

I gulp down a large breath as everything in my body relaxes. How does he always do that?

Three dots appear as I was about to respond and then,

You were freaking out weren't u? 😊

No

Jimmy Fallon GIF saying 'Right...'

👍

See you later 😊

I WALK into Sol y Luna scanning the small area looking for Mateo. I sigh, not sure if it's because I'm glad he's not here yet or because I want to see him already. These contradicting emotions are exhausting. I want so badly to say damn to everything and jump right in, but on the other, I want to take things slow. But there's no such thing as slow with Mateo. Everything about him calls out to me. As a sixteen-year-old, my parents thought it was all infatuation. And maybe it started that way with his magnetic personality, but he is my puzzle piece. Mine.

"Hey, Chica!" I call out to Marisol, waving at her behind the counter.

She raises her hand and signals for me to give her a few minutes. I nod my head once, smiling. She points to the corner, and I turn to see a few tables pushed together and a reserved sign.

I look at the tables and the chairs, wondering who else they invited. If Eliazar asked Mateo, I'm guessing the rest of the guys at the garage. But other than Mari and myself, we will be outnumbered by the guys once again. I choose the chair that is placed in a corner, hoping Mateo realizes we shouldn't be

sitting next to each other when he arrives. It will be too hard not to reach for him. To sneak a little something.

One of Mari's employees walks over to the tables and starts to place wine glasses at the table.

"Thank you."

She gives me a small nervous smile, her hand slightly shaking as she places each glass down. I giggle internally, knowing Mari is probably on all her employees to make everything perfect. And since they will be waiting on Mari and her friends, they are a little high strung until Mari gives them the good feedback. Mari wants this shop to thrive and knows it begins with happy customers and employees.

"What can I get you while you wait?" she asks me with a slight tremble in her voice.

"Just water for now. Thank you." I pull my lips out in hopes it conveys a reassuring smile for her.

Mari is harmless, but since she invested all the money her parents said they would give her into this business, and she has finally found her passion, she is extra diligent on ensuring its success. Sol y Luna is her baby.

I pull out my phone to check emails and pass the time until everyone arrives when I see a text notification.

AARON

Dinner tonite?

We just had dinner together last night and he's asking me out again. That's unusual since it is rare that we have dinner more than once a week. Either one of us works late, or we're just too busy to see each other. Never that I can remember have we gotten together two days in a row. At least, not in months. I'm sure we did back when things were new and exciting. But then we fell into a comfortable pattern of our *see you when I see you* relationship.

Sorry. Can't. Having wine with Mari.

You can have wine any nite with Mari. I planned something special for us.

My stomach cramps and an uneasiness falls over me.

Special?

Yeah. I've been listening to you. I've been too involved at work and I haven't been giving you the attention that you deserve.

No. No. No. This cannot be happening now. After all the time we have been together. I was trying to get his attention. *Was*. But now I want him to ignore me the way he always did. Why now?

oh

Is the only response I have because really, what am I supposed to say to that?

Meet me at Perry's

Next week. I'm already here and we are going over some marketing strategies.

Fine. Meet me at my place after.

Not tonight. I have an early meeting.

I tell him a bold face lie. I won't be seeing him until he picks me up for the Gala.

Then I guess it's good night.

Good night

No 'I love you'. No 'kiss emoji'. No 'miss you'. Just a 'good night' because I didn't do what he wanted. I didn't bend to his will. I guess I always did since I was grasping for the little time and attention he would show me. I never believed or

thought there was someone else. He is too self-centered, like my father, I knew business came first.

But why is he pushing now? I need air. I stand walking towards the door. I wave at Mari and signal her with my hand that I'll be right back. I push the door open and thick humid air fills my lungs. I storm towards the bistro tables surrounding the splash pad. With the evening setting, I only see one family there.



CHAPTER NINE

MATEO

AS I PULL INTO THE PARKING LOT, I SEE NATALIA RUSH OUT OF Sol y Luna. I throw the car in park and notice Marisol pushing the door open, watching her. Tired of waiting and not giving a fuck who sees us, I rush to catch up to her. She falls into a chair and bends over, placing her face in her hands, rocking back and forth. I jog the last bit to her and pull her up wrapping her in my arms.

“What happened?” I squeeze her tightly, not wanting to let her go.

Her head shakes but says nothing.

“Talk to me,” I say in her hair.

“Um...uh...it’s...” she mumbles into my chest.

“Say it.”

“Aaron asked me to dinner.” She says so fast that it sounds like one word.

Just the mention of his name has my body tensing.

“So tell him you can’t. No big deal, right?” I say, wondering why that upset her.

“I did, but...”

“But.”

Her chest expands against me, then she pulls away from me. She lifts her phone to her face, swiping at something before offering it to me. I grab the phone with one hand as my other fists.

I read through the messages, grinding my teeth at his insinuation of what he wants.

“Why did you show these to me, Natalia?” I hand the phone back to her.

She shrugs her shoulders, then says, “Because I didn’t want to say it out loud.”

“And...” I’m tired of her dancing around the subject and not saying what it means.

“And, what?” She crosses her arms.

“Why did the messages upset you? Are you upset because you had to turn him down? If you want him, *vete con el (go with him)*. You have no ties to me. You’re his girlfriend.” The words to inflict pain leave my mouth before I have time to think clearly and stop them. The jealousy coursing through me is too strong.

“Fuck you!” she says laced with venom.

Regret is instant and her response is the nail in the coffin.

“You’re right. I’m an asshole.” I cup her face in my hands, pulling her to meet our lips in a desperate kiss.

My hands wrap in her hair as she clasps her hands behind my neck. She opens her mouth and my tongue dives in, tasting her. Nibbling her plump lips. Breath is no longer needed because she is what brings me life. I slow us down, peppering kisses on her nose and cheeks.

“Tell me, why were you upset?” I whisper to her, placing my forehead on hers.

I have her wrapped in my arms as her hands are draped on my shoulders, her eyes adoring me while also filled with worry.

“Because it was weird. He’s never asked me to dinner two nights in a row. Or invites me over after I’ve been out. It’s strange. It caught me off guard. I wasn’t expecting to hear from him until Saturday. That’s the way it’s always been. A dinner sometime in the week and a weekend night. That’s it. That’s all our relationship consisted of.”

“Do you think he knows about us?” My protectiveness over Natalia spikes. I won’t give her up without a fight. Even if I just told her to go. Our need to get a rise out of each other is too ingrained in us, but it’s something I need to work on.

“No. He couldn’t. How would he?” She bites her lip. “I’m sure it’s just a fluke.”

I kiss her quickly, not wanting to let her go, but she wants to keep up appearances of us as strangers. I straighten up and pull her into my chest looking toward the parking lot, noticing the guys watching us. Then I remember Mari at the door and look towards her shop and see her also standing, taking in the show. I clear my throat, knowing I need to tell Natalia we had an audience.

“Uh,” I begin, while rubbing her back, “I think our friends know about us now.”

Her body tenses.

“How?” she asks, not moving away.

“They watched our spectacle right now,” I mumble out.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.” She pulls back, thumping her forehead on my chest.

I hold her head still and place a soft kiss on her lips, piercing her with a look to chill.

“Fine. Screw it. We have a couple more days. We’ll just tell them we can’t explain anything now. I’m not in the mood.” Her body loosens and she steps away.

“Whatever you say.” My lip quirks up.

She takes my hand and pulls me behind her toward Sol as Mari dashes inside.

“You have to handle this when we get inside,” Natalia says just before we enter Sol.

I nod my head once, then open the door for her to walk in. She finds a seat and I pull out the seat next to her, just as Mari walks up carrying a bottle of opened wine in each hand with narrowed eyes and a tight smile. She places the bottles on the table and turns back around, going back towards the bar. She picks up one of the bottles and serves herself a half glass and drinks it in one large gulp.

“Epa le. (*Woah.*)”

“Back up. I need to take the edge off,” she whisper-shouts at me as she begins to chew her lip.

I brush loose strands of hair off to the side of her face and kiss her cheek, trying to calm the nerves I know are building in her. Chairs scraping is my cue to pull away. My friends all take a seat, pointing me with looks of relief and confusion.

“We’re here!” Jaxson says too excitedly.

“I brought out a few bottles to try out.” Mari places three more bottles down on the table before taking a seat. “And I noticed Nat already tried the new chardonnay.”

Nat rolls her eyes and responds, “I did. It was alright.”

Mari barks out a laugh and responds, “Then take your next pick.” As she waves her hand back and forth past the bottles.

Damian picks up a bottle and pours himself a glass and the guys follow. Nat picks up a bottle and pours herself a hefty glass and then fills mine, not asking what I want. I let it go, knowing she’s gonna spin out of control if I say anything.

“Sorry I’m late. My last client took longer than expected,” Eliazar says, just as everyone was done pouring their glasses. He takes the chair next to Mari and says, “Hello, beautiful.” He gives her a quick kiss, then looks around and says, “Why’s everyone so quiet?”

The guys all shrug their shoulders, shaking their heads, grunting out unintelligible sounds.

Mari barks out a laugh. “Let me sum it up for you... Nat stormed out of here like her ass was on fire. Then I walked out and watched Mateo save the day. You know... a kiss to the princess’s lips and the story ends happily ever after.” She’s overly dramatic in her rendition, hands flailing about.

“What?” Eliazar points a look at me.

I shrug while smirking. “Pretty nice summary. Thanks Mari. You know, Magic Mateo and all.” I wink at Mari.

Natalia hits me in the stomach playfully while Jax laughs and exclaims, “Hell yeah, he is!”

I huff out a laugh and finish, “But seriously, for the WHOLE story... it’ll have to wait for another day.”

Natalia drops her head on my shoulder, and I hope this conversation can end like this. I turn and kiss the top of Nat’s head.

Eliazar’s eyes widen a smidge before he throws his hands up in front of him. “Fine. Whatever.” He shakes his head.

“Not to sound unappreciative or anything... thanks Mari for inviting us, but... I think next time we need more even numbers,” Jaxson says, breaking the ice and the guys chuckle under their breath.

“I’ll work on that.” Mari shakes her head, smiling and rolling her eyes. She then turns to Zar and asks, “The food?”

“I decided to order. It will be delivered in a bit. I didn’t want to carry it all in.”

“You should see the Jeep Wrangler that came in,” Ricky tells Zar. “It’s probably in worse shape than yours.”

“No shit,” Zar says as he pours himself a glass of wine.

“Yeah. Luckily, we still have Javie coming in and working with us. I don’t know what we’re going to do when his shop opens,” Jax pops into the conversation.

“Y’all hire a guy who is opening his own shop?” Natalia asks the table.

Damian nods, then elaborates, “Him and his brother will have a general motors garage. You know oil changes, car break downs, shit like that. They won’t be dealing with collisions.”

“Oh. If he has his own shop, why work for you?” Nat questions further.

“His sister,” Jax says as I blurt out, “Ritza.”

“Ah.” Nat smiles.

I don’t think she realizes how tangled our two garages may end up becoming with those two being a couple. It will do well

for the both of us. We can always refer people back and forth between our places.

The conversation continues with no more mentions of Natalia and I. The more the wine flows, the more affectionate Natalia becomes. No more hiding. She has my hand, rubs my leg, leans into me, all tells of an established couple. Little does she know that the guys already know why. It will be up to her to explain to Mari.

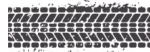
NATALIA

All our friends know, Mateo and I are an ‘us’. They are respecting our wishes to wait for an explanation, and everything seems fine. Never in a million years did I believe I would have Mateo back, so I never had to think about how I would explain our history and how I can fall in love with someone instantly. When he walked away from me, I cried for him until there were no more tears to shed.

I spoke of him as my ‘ex’. I never gave him a name. His name was too hard to hear. I didn’t want anyone bringing him up. Somehow, when people don’t know a person’s name, they never bring them up in casual conversation. I didn’t have to worry about a college friend saying, “*Hey, remember when you cried your eyes out for Mateo?*” or “*Remember when Mateo broke your heart?*”

When there is not a name to attach to a memory, people conveniently forget about it. The heartbreak isn’t real if a person isn’t attached to it.

Soon, I will need to explain to Marisol who Mateo really is and what he means to me. The guy who I kept hidden in the depths of my soul. The one who stole my heart and never returned it. But today, our friends can silently wonder, their curiosity looming.



MY PHONE CHIMES, waking me. I ignore it as I feel Mateo’s arm squeeze me a little tighter, his morning hard-on pressed against my ass. I breathe in. Today... it all ends today. I just want to fast forward through the charade of the last week and be able to stop the hiding and the lies.

It chimes again and Mateo stretches back and picks up my phone from his nightstand, handing it to me.

MOM

See you tonight. And wear the red gown.

I roll my eyes even though she can't see me.

There are three gowns in my guest room right now. She made me keep a few after the fitting, her mind not made on which she thought I should wear. Each of them are gorgeous, but I was leaning toward the black. But to keep the peace and my sanity, I'll give in to her suggestion.

I'll wear the red.

"Breakfast before you leave?" Mateo groans out as his hand glides up and down my thigh.

My body is oh-so sensitive and each innocent touch heightens the need that's growing in me. Sleeping with Mateo for the last few nights and keeping it completely innocent has been difficult, to say the least. But tomorrow... tomorrow. That's when the real fireworks will begin.

"What kind of breakfast?" I rub my butt into his erect length.

"I was actually talking about food, but..." He leaves his sentence hanging and his hand slides from my leg to my warm center.

His fingers pull aside my silk short bottoms and panties, entering my folds. A moan escapes as I roll my hips forward into his hand.

"I need to feel you," I whine out, begging.

Two fingers enter me and I open my legs, giving him more access. His lips come to my neck, licking, sucking and peppering kisses. His fingers scissor inside me as his thumb rubs on my sensitive nub. I'm climbing so quickly, a heady feeling washes over me, then he pulls his fingers out.

“Babe!” I complain, rolling my hips back into him.

“Delicious.” His fingers pop from his mouth.

I reach back and grab his cock in my hand, rubbing it through his boxers. He grabs my wrist and brings my hand back in front of me. He moves away from me and pushes me down to lie flat on my back and he climbs on top of me.

His erection presses into me and I moan out again, pushing my hips up for more friction.

“You are not mine yet.” He kisses my cheek. “Twenty-four hours, give or take, depending when you decide to dump the ass.” He kisses the other cheek. “After that, your orgasms are mine.” His lips meet my neck as he rolls his erection into me. A quick peck on my lips and he rolls over.

“Breakfast?” he repeats.

“Argh!” I complain, which brings him to laughter. “Fine. Let’s eat.” I sit up, not wanting to eat, but not wanting our time together to end quite yet either.



WALKING through the hotel to the ballroom, I watch as a couple, obviously on vacation, struggle to corral their two young kids. The little boy and girl are freely dancing around as the dad struggles with to-go food bags and the mom has a stroller and a backpack. Even in their chaos and apparent exhaustion, the couple is smiling. Just as I am about to turn away, the man places the bags he was carrying in one arm and with his free hand, he smacks the woman’s butt. She turns around, a gleam in her eyes, and I watch as she mouths, *love you*, to him.

“Did your mom tell you what items were in the silent auction?” Aaron says, grabbing my attention away from the family.

“Huh... oh... no. She didn’t,” I stumble over my words.

“You didn’t ask?” his brows furrow.

“No. I never bid on anything. I always come, smile and do my daughterly duties. That’s it.” I shrug.

“We’re going to have to change that, aren’t we?” He smiles at me.

“Why? It works,” I say, almost defensively.

“I’m sure your mother will want you to take it over for her one day.” He grabs my hand and places it at the crook of his bent arm.

“This is my mother’s baby. This is all she does. She’s not giving it up,” I say, my body tensing with his assumption.

“I know. I just thought...” The words fade as he sees a few people he recognizes.

I take a deep breath and turn myself into the arm candy I know he loves me to be. I’m doing this for my mother. I am always on my best behavior for her.

“Jerry,” he says as we reach a few men standing outside of the hall.

The second floor is filled with people mingling or congregating around the bars ordering drinks.

“Aaron.” He takes Aaron’s hand in a firm handshake and then tips his head at me. “Natalia.”

I say a quick hello, before excusing myself to find my parents.

I glance around, seeing the same faces. I now realize my life has been on an endless loop. All the same faces and all the same conversations. Even things that should sound like an adventure sound dull and without life.

I stop when I see my parents walking toward a small group of people. My mom is beautiful, trying to fight time, but doing it gracefully. She still amazes me. She is my father’s winning ticket. She basks in the attention and spotlight.

“Hey, chica!” Marisol startles me from my thoughts.

“Hey, gorgeous.” I smile at her. “And you clean up pretty good,” I tease Eliazar who’s standing behind her.

He shakes his head and smiles at me.

Mari drops her voice, “You’re here with Aaron?”

I nod once. “You’ll know everything soon. I promise.”

Her relaxed smile tells me she’s on my side no matter what.

“Have you checked out the silent auction yet?” Mari asks, her smile devious.

“No. Why?”

“Come on.” She grabs my hand and pulls me behind her.

Tables and stands are filled with different pictures of items and QR codes to place your bid. I scan the area and my eyes land on a painting. The painting I saw months ago when Eliazar got his first break at a gallery.

“How?” I turn to face him.

“Don’t know. Claudia from the gallery called me and asked if I would be okay donating a piece for a silent auction. I figured, why not? May be a good way to get my name out there.”

“Wow. And yes. It is.”

“Didn’t realize it was your mom’s charity until Mari mentioned it,” he continues.

“Congratulations are in order! I’m sure Claudia asked because she believes in you.”

“Let’s get a drink to toast,” Mari says.

“Go on. I’m going to check out the other items.” I want some time alone.

I dragged Marisol to the gallery for that opening. We saw this exact painting, but she didn’t see what I saw in it.

“SEE THAT SPECK HERE?” I point at a spot in the painting, one that’s free of all the random, colored madness that the weave of the canvas shows.

Marisol nods.

“That’s hope.” I point, then wave my hand around the rest of the painting. “This is anger. This is frustration. The colors. The paint left in places, not brushed out in gentle strokes. But here...here in this tiny spot, hope resides. Maybe in all of this pain or anguish or I don’t know, but right here, it can start over.”

I SAW Mateo in that speck that’s free of unruly paint. If only I had the strength to ask him what happened. Why wasn’t I enough? And now he’s here. In my life. I could ask but it’s easier playing the *what if* game if you control the answers. When the answers could destroy you...

Pulling my phone out of my clutch, I scan the QR code, and place a bid. I also set the alert to text me if someone out bids me. This painting needs to come home with me, even if my dad ends up paying for it.

I say a quick hello to my parents and congratulate my mother on another amazing charity ball. If I’m honest with myself, I do love these. The dresses and dancing. The ambiance. This is the first time I’ve ever felt stifled at one.

I’m with Marisol and Eliazar ordering drinks when Aaron comes up to me. “I have some people I’d like to introduce you to.” He grabs my hand and takes a step away.

“Eliazar has ordered me a drink.” Pulling my hand out of his, I respond, purposefully saying his name because Aaron didn’t even acknowledge him or Marisol.

Eliazar hands me a drink and Aaron clips out, “Thanks.” Aaron then looks at me. “Ready now?”

Not wanting to make a scene, I turn to Marisol and whisper, “I’ll see you at the table.”

I had asked my mother to sit Eliazar and Marisol at our table.

I follow Aaron around the room for the next twenty minutes until the music stops and my mother announces that dinner will be served shortly.

THROUGH THE COURSES, conversation is light. My mom is surprised to learn that the artists whose painting she is auctioning is sitting with her. Like me, she enjoys the beauty of art in all its forms. She is the reason I grew such an appreciation for it. Summers when I was young were spent strolling the grand hallways of museums. Even when a piece didn't appeal to us, she would make us find one positive and speak it aloud. Every piece is someone's truth, she used to say.

Aaron tries to bring the conversation to business more than once, but my mother or his remind the men that tonight is a reprieve of their usual. And I, for one, am truly grateful.

I watch as the wait staff begins placing slices of chocolate ganache cakes in front of each person at our table and they skip me. Not that I really need it, but at the moment I feel like comfort eating chocolate. Aaron has been less than cordial with Marisol and Eliazar. How does he expect to have a relationship with me if he can't even get along with my best friend and her soon-to-be fiancé?

A woman startles me when she sets a plate in front of me with a Tiffany blue box. My eyes widen and tears immediately fill. I look across the table at my mother and her eyes are dancing as her hands cover her mouth. This can't be happening. Not now. At this moment. What in the hell is he thinking? I can't. I won't.

I pop out of my chair, ready to run.

"Natalia." Aaron stands with me and grabs my hand.

I shake my head at Aaron, willing him to stop whatever he is about to say. The answer he's expecting is not going to come.

“I adore you and it would ma—” He ignores my warning.

“Don’t. Not now,” I hiss, interrupting, shaking my head as tears spill down my cheek.

“Na—” He tries to begin again, but I pull my hand out of his.

Mateo. Mateo. Mateo. One name is scrolling through my head. I don’t know if I would have said yes had I not seen Mateo again, but now that I have... I know I’m not in love with Aaron. I don’t think I have ever been. He has been a great distraction. Someone that could keep my parents pacified. He was a place marker, nothing more, nothing less.

I grab my clutch and run. Away from prying eyes. Away from the humiliation of having to do this here. Away from my parents’ disapproval. Away from Mari’s knowing eyes. Away from the life that no longer suits me.

The area outside the ballroom is empty, everyone inside enjoying their meals. Just as I was about to step on the escalator going down, I hear, “Natalia. Stop. Talk to me.” Aaron’s voice fills the quiet.

I turn to face him, knowing now’s the time. “I’m sorry. But I can’t.”

“This is what we have been planning. Talking about.” Aaron’s eyes narrow.

I reach up, placing my hand on his cheek, hating that I’m hurting him. This was never my intention. But now I remember who I wanted to be all those years ago.

“I’m sorry. I really am.” My hand comes down as I grab his and pull him to a quiet corner. I was never going to have the conversation here, but now it looks like it’s necessary.

Once I stop, he pulls the blue box from his pocket and presents it to me. I start shaking my head, but he continues, “Maybe I shouldn’t have done it in front of everyone. You’re right. This is supposed to be for us and I made a spectacle.” He gets down on one knee and I instantly feel nauseous.

“Don’t... stop! The answer is still no. I can’t.”

He stands back up, his jaw tensing. “Why can’t you? This is what you’ve wanted.” He seethes.

“It was never what I wanted. Or maybe it was. Once upon a time. But have you even been paying attention to us? Really paying attention?” My mind is scrambling trying to figure out how to explain this without bringing Mateo into it.

“What do you mean, paying attention to us?” he says through clenched teeth.

“We aren’t really a couple. What projects at work have I been working on? What did I have for dinner last night? When was the last time you did something I wanted to do, like stroll a museum, go to a gallery opening, or the ballet?”

“What does dinner last night have to do with us?” He rolls his eyes.

“Everything. Relationships are built on the little things. Knowing I had lunch this week at a new place and felt sick afterward. Thinking I had food poisoning, but luckily whatever I had just upset my stomach. My excitement that I had a client love my proposal and extended my contract. A wine night with friends to unwind midweek.” I shrug. “We don’t have any of those things. The only thing I know you did this week was a merger that would impress my father. Outside of work?” I shrug. “I can only guess your days consisted of early morning work, a midday workout and quick lunch, and dinner with the same business guys, if you went out that is. And how do I know that? Because that is the same routine you’ve had since I met you.”

“You would know if you came over more. If you asked,” he counters.

I grab his hand, clutching it in both of mine. “You’re right. And it goes the other way too. You could come over. You could spend time with the people I love. But you chose work and connections more.”

“I was trying to make a life for us. For you.” His rebuttal is the same one I’ve heard my dad use.

My lips pull out, knowing they are cut from the same cloth. I saw it and I ignored it. “Thank you. And I know you were. But did you ever consider that maybe that was not the life I wanted or needed?”

“Your spending habits say differently.” Sarcasm drips from his words like poison.

“If it’s there, why not?” I drop his hand, annoyance overriding the sadness I had for him. “But it could be gone tomorrow, and I could survive. I have my friends. I have a life and a career I enjoy. I want to savor life. Not be tied to money and power. That’s not me.”

“You used me!” he spits out angrily.

“As you did me.” I cock a brow. He wants to run my dad’s business, plain and simple. “If my father wasn’t who he is, would you have continued with me and my insistence on not joining you at every business function you wanted me to?”

Silence. No counter. No rebuttal. No denial.

“I really am sorry. We’re not good for each other. It’s over.” I tip toe and place a kiss on his cheek. No reason to be enemies, just two people who once knew each other. I pat his chest, then straighten his tie and slide my hands down the lapels, tugging his jacket in place gently. “Goodbye.”

I turn and walk away. Each step is a step closer to Mateo, but the dread of my dad’s wrath is tucked in the back of my mind. Marisol and Eliazar are standing by the escalators, watching me approach. I know I won’t hear from my parents until tomorrow. No way they would draw attention to our family drama during the gala.

“What are we doing?” Mari asks.

“Take me to Mateo’s. Please.” I suck in my bottom lip as I grip my clutch tighter.

“Come on.” Eliazar extends his hand to me and I grab it as he leads me on the escalator.

In the car, my clutch vibrates. I pull my phone out to see a couple of missed texts from my mom and an alert from the

silent auction.

I send my mom a quick message,

I'll call you tomorrow and explain.

She won't reply, her focus is on the gala tonight. She just needed to let me know how disappointed they are in me and my behavior.

Clicking the button for the auction app, I notice I was outbid by a hundred. I raise the bid by another couple of hundred. The bidding closes at midnight, so I set an alarm for eleven fifty-five to ensure I have the last bid.



CHAPTER TEN

MATEO

I'M SITTING AT THE STUPID CORNER BAR AGAIN, WISHING THE hours would pass a whole lot quicker than they currently are. Jax has made friends with everyone here, like that's a surprise. I needed someone around me so that I didn't text Natalia incessantly to check how she is. I know she can take care of herself. But knowing she's with *him*... was too much to handle on my own.

I scan the pool table for a shot to take while Jax is flirting with some girl who walked by. I crack my neck for the millionth time tonight; my whole body is tight holding in my need to... I don't have any idea what I want to do. I bend over, pointing my cue at the white ball and call out, "Corner pocket," tipping my head in the direction.

The ball rolls in easily, and I scan the table again. Just as I'm about to take my next shot, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out to find a text.

ELIAZAR

Shit went down tonight. Be ready.

What went down? How the fuck is he going to send me a text like that and not give me more information.

WTF!

I respond angrily.

I'll let you know as soon as I know.

What do you mean you don't know? What went down?

Give me 10 min.

Why 10?

“Are you gonna take your shot?” Jax yells over the music in the bar.

I wave a hand at him while continuing to stare at my phone.

“What’s going on?” he inquires.

I shove my phone in his face. He reads the texts and lets out a low whistle. “Oh shit.”

No response. A couple of minutes pass by and still nothing.

What’s going on?

Still nothing. I decide to stalk her location like she did mine before. I didn’t pay attention to her requesting for me to share my location on texts. That’s how she found me here the last time. I pull up our texts and click her location. She’s still at that stupid hotel downtown.

“Come on. I’ll buy you another beer.” Jax pats my shoulder, trying to get my attention.

I follow him to the bar and we both lean on it, waiting on the bartender, when my phone vibrates.

ELIAZAR

I’m dropping Nat off at your place. In case she hasn’t told you.

She’s coming over? Why? What happened? I know better than to text Zar again, but I do it anyway, knowing he’ll ignore me.

What happened

I turn to Jax. “I’m heading home. Zar said he’s bringing Nat to my place.”

“Go on. You’ve got a girl to take care of.” He smiles, nodding his head once.

Natalia has not texted me. No word from her since before she left for the gala. And then these cryptic messages from Zar. What could have happened for her to leave early? For him to be driving her to me. Each step back home I’m filled with the same question, over and over.

I walk in my front door and continue pacing. Minutes feel like hours. The need to punch something, anything, to let out my frustration is overwhelming. I just need to know. A key in the lock has me rushing to the front door. I pull it open to find Natalia standing with a blank look on her face.

I wrap her in my arms and look to the street. Eliazar waves and drives away. With her back in my arms, everything in the world feels whole again. She sags into me. My hand is gripping the back of her head, pressing it into my chest.

“What happened?” I ask gently.

She says nothing, just pushes herself against me.

“Come on.” I pull away and guide her inside.

She looks gorgeous made up like this. The dress looks like it was made for her, which knowing her mom, it probably was. The red is a bold choice, which she pulls off effortlessly. But in any other color, she would have been the most noticed woman too.

“Not that I don’t want you here, but why are you here?” I ask again as she sits on the couch and pops off her heels.

“Aaron proposed.” She looks me in the eye.

I’m sucker-punched. The pain is instant as the air leaves my lungs. And she’s here because...

Words to ask the right question are stuck. Is she leaving me? Is that why Zar would not answer my questions? But if he proposed, why isn’t she there celebrating with him? A proposal never came into my mind. Were they that into their relationship and it was right in front of my face and I didn’t see it?

“You’re not going to say anything?” Her head drops on the back of the couch. Her gaze on the ceiling.

“What do you want me to say? Congratulations.” My voice is flat. Everything I thought I had, even though it was just outside my grasp, is gone. *Poof*.

Her head shoots up, glaring at me as she says, “Why would you congratulate me? It was a shit night. I thought I could go, dance, drink, make nice and break up tomorrow. But instead...” She pops up off the couch, pointing at me angrily. “I was mortified that I had to say no to a freakin’ proposal—a gawd damn *proposal*—in front of everyone. Right there at the table, he has a waitress drop off the dang blue box on my dessert plate. All the expectant eyes on me. And when I whispered to him not to do it, he continued. Whatever possessed him to think that was a good idea? You should have seen the people gawking and I’m sure I’m the talk of the night now!” The volume has increased with each word, and she practically shouts the last sentence.

“You said no?” I ask for clarification.

“Yes, I said no.” Her face scrunches up, as she continues to wave her arms dramatically.

The weight that was just pressing on my chest at the thought of losing her again lifts. I reach out to her and bring her down on my lap, kissing her. A deep sigh escapes her as she settles on me. Her hands run through my hair as she pushes her chest against me. Our tongues dance, exploring, savoring.

I pull away. “I don’t want to jump to conclusions... You and the ass are over? You broke up?”

“Yes. I ended things with him.” She brushes her hand along the side of my face as her eyes narrow. “What did you think?”

I kiss her neck, wanting to avoid admitting I thought she was coming to end it with me. The uncertainty surrounding us. The years that were wasted. Everything and everyone in between. We were us eight years ago. And even though we

still feel like us, those years that were stolen from us, leaves gaps for doubts to run amok.

Her body relaxes as I continue kissing and licking. I take advantage of the slit in her dress and run my hand up her thigh. Her soft mewl, and her moving her leg as much as the dress will allow, gets me hard. But before I can reach her center, she clamps her hand around my wrist, pulling it away.

“Thought you could distract me?” She points me with a look.

“Kinda.” I smirk.

“Spill. What was going through your mind?” she presses.

“Nothing. Not important. You’re here. It’s over with him. We can move on.” I don’t want to admit I’m scared. Terrified of losing her again.

She stands again. Her body away from mine is instant torture. “You will not be getting any, and I mean *any*, until you talk. You make me spill my guts, now it’s your turn.”

I sit up straighter and cross my arms over my chest. Battle of the wills. Our favorite game.

“Okay.”

Natalia’s eyes gleam mischievously. She walks a couple of steps further away from me, then turns back around and her hands go to her back. The sound of a zipper fills the room. She lets her dress fall to the floor and all she has on underneath is lacy, nude panties. Her nipples are peaked and ready for attention.

“What are you doing?” I adjust myself, my jeans uncomfortable now.

“Waiting on you to answer the question so you can give me what you promised.” She cocks a brow.

Not wanting to torture us any longer, I blurt out, “When you said he proposed and looked... the way you looked, I thought you had come over here to let me go. Walking away from me to the life you’ve been working for.” I lean over, my elbows on my knees, head in my hands, not wanting her to see

my brokenness. This is not me. I don't pine, not for anyone... except for her.

I see her pedicured toes on the floor as she places her hands on my shoulders and pushes me back against the couch. She straddles my lap and cups my face in her hands, keeping my gaze on her.

"It's us now. No ands, ifs, or buts. There's no going back now. You're stuck with me. No more doubts. No more games." She licks her lips. "This week has sucked. Big time. But I can't have you doubting us anymore. I need you, the way I needed you before. I've only ever needed you." Tears pool in the corner of her eyes.

"I love you. Eres mi todo (*You are my everything*)," I say before crushing her to my chest. I kiss her head, soaking up the feeling of her being mine again.

"I love you too," she mumbles out, her face against my neck.

She kisses my neck as her hand runs down my arm.

"I need you," she whispers out as she presses herself into me harder.

I push her back and devour her mouth. A starved man finally getting a meal. Moans fill the air, hers and mine, mixing together. Hands exploring, hips rolling, lips and tongues tasting. My senses are overloaded with her.

I sit back, gulping down air. She's watching me through hooded eyes and her tongue slowly swipes across her lips. Her fingers graze down my chest and find the hem of my shirt. She pulls it up and I raise my hands to help her remove it. Her eyes follow all the ink on my chest and shoulders. Her chest rises and falls with each breath. She traces the lines of the cross draped over my shoulder with her index finger, before going down my arm until she reaches her name.

"Why do you still have my name? I'm sure you've dated others since me." She continues looking at my arm, tracing her name with a featherlike touch.

I grab her chin between my thumb and index finger and bring her gaze to meet mine. “It never felt right to cover it up. My tattoo artist has asked about it a couple of times, but I never seemed to be able to pull the trigger.”

“I’m glad you kept it.” Her voice is husky.

I slide my finger down her throat and between her breasts that are taunting me to suck them.

“How glad?” I cup a breast and squeeze it firmly.

Natalia’s head falls back as she moans loudly, her hips grinding against me.

“Make love to me,” she says through labored breaths. I haven’t even started on her yet.

I take a nipple in my mouth and suck hard, giving it a little nibble. She pushes herself into my face harder. Rolling my tongue around her perfect, pink peak, her hips grind harder. I grab her hips, holding her in place, and she whimpers with the loss of friction.

“How wet are you for me?” I whip my tongue over her other nipple.

“Feel for yourself.” She lifts up, challenging me.

Glancing down, I notice the dampness of her thong. Hooking my fingers on the side, I tug until the delicate fabric breaks and her pussy is on display for me. It’s so tempting to slide my fingers between her wet folds, but I won’t give in to a frenzied orgasm. Pushing myself up off the couch with her in my arms, she wraps her legs around me. She’s slick against my stomach.

Once in my bedroom, I place her on the edge of the bed, and stand to look at her. She’s a goddess in my bed.

“Spread your legs wider.”

She pushes herself up a little higher and brings her heels to the edge, letting her knees drop open.

“Good girl.”

I drop down on my knees, my lips meeting the inside of her knee, then sucking and licking up to her hot, wet center. My tongue swipes between her lips and she bucks up, pushing herself into my face. My arms press on her thighs, keeping her down and her legs spread, as I begin sucking and licking her pussy. Two fingers glide into her easily, as I nip, suck and lick her clit, while my fingers scissor then twist until I find her spot.

“Is my firecracker ready to explode?” I growl out, then suck on her nub.

“Mateo!” she yells out as her walls squeeze around my fingers.

I continue finger fucking her, enjoying watching her come undone by my hand. When she comes down from her high, I pull my fingers out and stand in front of her.

“Look at me.” She slowly opens her eyes, gaze drunk.

Sticking my fingers in my mouth, I suck them, popping them out.

“You are mine. Now and forever. No one, but me, will ever get to taste this sweetness again.”

“I’m yours.” She sits up and grabs at the button on my jeans. She undoes the button and unzips my pants, pushing them down and pulling my cock free. “But don’t you ever forget...” She holds the base and juts out her tongue, swirling it around the head. “This is mine. He will never again play with anyone but me.”

“Show me how much you want him,” I taunt her.

“He’s not playing with anyone else.” She squeezes my base gently and rubs up and down. “Say it.”

Both of us are fighting to get on top.

“He’s only yours,” I relent to her.

She opens her mouth and takes my cock into her mouth. The warmth of her mouth and her hand pumping my base, is too much. I need to unload, but I don’t want to do it in her mouth. I pull out.

“Not yet.”

I push the jeans off my ankles and open up the nightstand. She slides up on the bed then says, “I don’t want to use one,” when she sees the condom in my hand. “Are you clean?” She rolls her lips in her mouth, biting them.

“I am.”

“I’m clean and on birth control.”

“Are you sure?” My mind is jumping for joy being able to feel her, but questioning why she feels that way.

“Yes. I need you. Only you. Our last summer together, we planned for it to be just us. No condoms between us anymore. I got on birth control, and we waited. It’s not us with a latex barrier.”

I let it slip between my fingers and it falls to the ground.

“Come here,” she says in a hushed whisper.

I crawl on the bed to her, as she lays down on her back. I hover over her, bringing myself lower to meet her lips. She hooks her feet on my ass and pulls me down on top of her, but I keep some of my weight in my arms.

Our kiss is slow, but needy. She wraps her hands behind my neck as she lifts herself to rub on my length.

“Drop your legs.”

Her legs fall to the side and I grab my erection and ease into her waiting core. She pulls me down, our lips finding each other once more. She is the only girl I have ever been bare with, and the feeling of her is overwhelming. I begin to slowly thrust in and out as she groans in pleasure. Her hands grab my ass cheeks and pull me to her as she rolls her hips. I pull back just enough to slide my hand in between us to rub her bundle of nerves.

“Ohhhh... Right th...there.” She stumbles over words.

I continue rubbing and I thrust hard into her as she grips my cock. A few more thrusts in the chokehold her core has me in and I find my release. My semen floods her as she continues

to squirm under me, our bodies slick with perspiration. I begin to lift my hips and her hands hold me in place. I kiss her flushed cheeks, swiping a few strands of hair that are stuck on her forehead back.

“I need to get you cleaned up.”

“No. Not yet. I need to feel you.” Her voice cracks.

“You have me.” I brush my lips past hers.

I can feel the pounding of her heart. “What’s wrong?”

A tear slides down the side of her face toward her ear as she stares at me, a storm brewing in her eyes.

“I’m scared.” She looks away.

“It’s you and me. I’m not saying it’s going to be easy or that it’s going to be perfect, because we weren’t any of that before.” I peck her lips. “But we will do it all together. The way we should’ve done it before. I never should’ve left you. It’s my biggest regret.”

“Stop. I don’t—”

I interrupt. “If this is real, and we want it to last... there can be no more secrets.”

I try to roll off, but she tries to hold me as more tears fall. I pull out and sit up against the headboard and pull her up to sit on me. I need to look at her as we relive the past.

“I don’t know what your parents told you about that night. And if you want to share it with me, I’m all ears. But what I’m about to tell you is *my* truth.”

She bobs her head a couple of times.

“I walked away from you to get Julian and myself out of jail. Your dad threatened to press charges against us if I didn’t break up with you.”

“What? That’s... but I saw the check. You took the money.” She’s shaking her head, trying to push off of me, so I hold her hips in place. She crosses her arms across her chest covering herself. I pull up the comforter, handing it to her. She wraps it around herself.

“Yeah, I did. But not at first.” I wait until she’s settled to continue. “The next morning, after your dad took you home, he came back to the police station. He handed me the check and a contract. Take the money and walk away.” I pause taking a breath, remembering it like it was yesterday. “I refused and I tore up the check and contract, so your dad left. Julian and I were still being held. Your dad comes back with my parents. He hands me another check and contract and says the same thing but then adds that if I don’t sign and take the money, he will press charges against not only me, but Julian as well.”

Her eyes widen, so I continue.

“Julian had a college acceptance and scholarships on the line. I couldn’t let him fall for my mistake.”

“I was a mistake!” she exclaims angrily.

“No, mi amor. You were not the mistake. That stupid party was. I knew better. We never mess with houses because there are too many vacation fools that don’t give a damn about our island.” I run my hand down her face filled with sadness. “I was too preoccupied with surprising you with my news that I wasn’t thinking.”

“What news?” Her voice is low and curious.

“Our future. I had found an apartment and registered for classes at the community college close to you.”

“Wait. What?” Her hands come up to my chest.

I nod. “Cuete, I was planning out our future. I wanted you to have a home. Like you said, my parents’ house wasn’t your home. So, I found us a dump to start with. Somewhere you could stay during breaks when the dorms were closed, if you wanted.”

“You did all that? For me?”

“No.” I kiss her. “Not for you. For us.”

“I always thought...” She leaves the sentence hanging.

“That I took the money and ran,” I finish for her.

NATALIA

All this time I thought he was able to be bought. I had a price tag. That my dad had waved money at him and he chose it over me. That I was only worth a measly fifty grand. My dad lied to me all these years. My mom had to have known and she let me believe the lies. She saw me at my worst. Knew how much pain I was in and sat there telling me that *guys will be guys*. But he wasn't. Never has been. He has always been the one person I could count on.

Tears are flowing down my cheek and he swipes them gently.

“It's only ever been you.” He kisses me.

I don't know what to say. Words are failing me. I kiss him in return, the desperation of years lost. He pulls the comforter I used as a shield away from me and his cock twitches under me. My core tightens again, ready to feel him again. Wanting and needing the connection.

SATED AFTER A FEW MORE ORGASMS, I'm lying on my side, head on Mateo's chest, letting my fingers drag up and down his ripped abs.

“How big is the blow back going to be?” Mateo asks.

“Huge, I think,” I reluctantly answer, not wanting to think about it now.

“Will he go by your house? Try and change your mind. Try to get back together?” he continues.

I hadn't considered that. But with the way we ended and how bad he wanted to work with my father, I can't rule it out either. My parents will also probably try to change my mind.

“Honestly, I don't know. Maybe.” I can't hide anything from Mateo now. I will not let lies or miscommunication ruin

us again.

“Will you stay here? I don’t want you at your place alone. No telling when he may come knocking.” There’s an edge to his tone.

“He’s harmless, really,” I say, hoping it calms him.

“Most people seem harmless until they are cornered,” he throws back at me.

“But he’s not cornered,” I counter.

“He is. You bro... or more accurately, I took you away from him. His way to get closer to your dad. I took his meal ticket.”

“His meal ticket?” Those words grate me the wrong way.

“Mari mentioned he was trying to impress your dad. My guess is to work for him. Play nice. Be in your father’s league. He no longer has that if you broke it off.”

He’s right, Aaron did want to work for my dad. Always talked about us taking over my dad’s company once he retired. Something I never wanted. Was I ever what Aaron wanted? Or was I a means to an end? He would have been stuck with me for a lifetime.

“I... uh...” Not wanting to admit I didn’t see or want to acknowledge this sooner, I stumble over words.

“Stay with me,” Mateo presses.

“Yes.”

I relax as Mateo tightens his hold on me. My mind spins with everything I didn’t see or refused to see before. Which has turned into dissecting every single part of my relationship with Aaron and why he responded the way he did. Did everyone see it but me? Did his colleagues know? Was I the punchline? *It’s okay if my girlfriend doesn’t accompany me to all my work functions because soon, I will have the grand prize— her father’s company.* I’m so stupid.

I’m in my head spiraling when Mateo’s deep breaths and soft snores bring me back to the present. I can’t change the

past, but Mateo is my present and future. A few deep breaths to clear my head and I close my eyes, desperately wanting sleep to take me.

I WAKE TO AN EMPTY BED, which surprises me. I didn't feel or hear Mateo get up. I look to the nightstand where, maybe, he left me another note. Nothing.

I sit up bringing the sheet up with me covering myself as I look around. His room, the one I've been sleeping in the past four days, is feeling more like home. It only took four days for me to overtake his room. Not wanting to have to wake earlier than normal to get dressed at my place for work, my things have taken up residence in his bathroom and his dresser.

When he asked me to stay, did he mean temporarily? We just got back together, officially, last night. Looking around his room, I would suspect a girl is about to take over and move in. We couldn't move in with each other already. That's ridiculous. *Isn't it?*

Just as I am about to work myself into a tizzy, the bedroom door opens, and Mateo walks in with a cup of coffee.

"Morning, beautiful." He hands me the cup.

Mateo is dressed in athletic shorts, t-shirt, and tennis shoes.

"Good morning," I say before taking a sip.

He bends over and kisses my forehead.

"I'm heading to the gym to meet the guys. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

"Oh." I don't know why I'm surprised by this. It's all so—couple-like and normal.

"What?" He cocks a brow at me.

"Nothing." I shake my head. "It's... fine. Really."

Mateo barks out a laugh and sits on the bed.

“Anytime a girl says something is fine, it’s anything but fine.” He’s still laughing. “What’s wrong?”

I shake my head again. I can’t admit I’ve never had a real relationship. Not like this one. Or hope this one to be. I had *I’m going to start my day so please get going so I can lock up behind you* kind of relationships. Or with Aaron—*I’m starting my day now*—not *I’ll see you in a couple of hours* type. Once we left each other, it was for days on end, usually.

Has he? My gut clenches with the thought of him bringing coffee to another woman and leaving her in his bed while he does his thing. I want to claw the girl’s eyes out. A girl I don’t even know, or know if she exists.

He’s still staring at me, waiting. He knows I’ll spill my guts to him. I always have. There’s just something safe about telling him my crazy that he understands and calms.

“It’s just weird.” I shrug. “Too normal. You know, ‘I’m going out. See you later.’ As I come and go from your townhome. That’s a big step in a relationship. Leaving the person there to snoop to their heart’s content.”

Another laugh escapes Mateo’s lips, his smile wide.

“Cuete, you can snoop all you’d like. As long as I can have you in my bed every night.” He takes the cup from my hand and pushes me down as he crawls on top of me. hovering, brushing his lips past mine. “You are it for me. I will be a happy man as long as I have you. And it would be even better if you woke in my bed every morning. Well, our bed. But we’ll work on that later.”

He presses his lips to mine, swiping his tongue past my lips for entry. I open, letting our tongues explore. He kisses down my chin and neck, pushing the sheet away until he reaches my breasts that are already swollen and ready for attention. His warm mouth covers my nipple as he sucks it gently. I push up my hips, wanting to feel him again.

He kisses back up to my mouth and says, “I’ve got to go. We can continue this later.”

He winks at me and jumps out of bed. The cocky bastard. I roll my eyes and he laughs again as he walks out of the room.

I grab the cup and my phone from the nightstand. I take a sip of the coffee, finding the strength to turn my phone on and see the aftermath of last night.

Power on. Wait.

My phone lights up and I type in my passcode. Seconds seem like minutes as I wait for everything I missed last night to come through. It vibrates in my hand continuously as texts and voicemails flood in. I take a deep breath and open up my texts first. Much easier to read than listen to what I'm going to assume is my mother lecturing me.

My dad is the last person to text me, very early this morning. One text. That's all he's left me.

DAD

Fix it with Aaron.

Four words demanding I bend to his will. My fingers hover over the letters, trying to formulate what I want to say. What can I say that may appease him?

This is my life. How can I explain my choice of a lifetime partner in a way he can understand? The man he wants me with may not even want me, but instead the power that is associated with our name.

I can't.

I hit send and mute the conversation. I don't need to be reminded how disappointed he is in me. I already know.

The next text I open is from Mari.

MARI

Call me for brunch.

A smile spreads across my face. Her subtle way of saying, *Tell me everything.*

Our fave spot. 1 hour.

Next, my mom's messages. She sent me over a dozen texts last night. The last after one a.m.

MOM

Why?

Her last message was one word. Why? I hope to be able to explain it to her, where she will understand and accept it.

I'm sorry. Meet for lunch this week?

I extend an olive branch to my mom. She may be the only way to bring my father around. I'm not sorry about saying no. I'm only sorry that it happened the way it did. Aaron blindsided me with a proposal. We had not even talked about it. Don't couples talk about it prior to it happening? Was the ring even me? Or was it what he thinks I should wear? Something monstrous and gaudy.

I stare at Aaron's name on my phone. There are texts waiting for me to read, but... I'm just not quite ready yet. What more could be said after I said my peace last night?

A notification pops up as I'm staring at my phone.

MARI

See u there.

My best friend and mimosas are in order. I toss my phone on the blanket and crawl out of bed, not ready to face the wrath of my parents I know will come much too soon.

I'M SITTING in the small bistro, mimosa in hand, waiting on Mari. My mind is scrambling with everything that has happened in the last twelve or so hours. I don't have the strength to listen to any of the voicemails. Listening to voices

filled with disappointment in me. No, thank you. Aaron's texts have remained unopened.

"If it isn't the runaway bride," Mari says while laughing and taking her seat.

"We weren't at the altar!" I roll my eyes and suppress a giggle. It's much too soon for that kind of joke, yet it hit a funny bone.

"Yeah... well... I'm sure to Aaron it felt about the same." She grabs her glass and takes a long drink. "Chug a lug. You've got some talking to do."

"And now you're on Aaron's side?" I ask, surprised by her comment.

"Hell no. Just saying Aaron isn't the type of guy who likes to look like a fool in front of his peers." She shrugs. "And that's what you did."

I drop my head in my hands, feeling stupid, yet again, for not even thinking about that. I was only thinking about my parents sitting at the table. But I'm sure others noticed. And maybe he had even told some people.

"You didn't even think about that, did you?"

I shake my head. "I was only thinking of me and my parents, really. That my dad was going to be pissed."

"I figured. That's why we met you out of the ballroom. I didn't want you to have to go back in there." She pauses, and I can tell she's holding back.

"Go on," I press.

"When we got up, there were already people talking. Whoever the couples were to the table on the left of us," she mumbles out.

I finish what's left in my glass and pour another.

"Are you ready for a doozy of a story?" I ask her.

"I'm all ears." She fills her half empty glass.

"I've known Mateo since I was sixteen."

Her eyes widen. “Wait! What?!”

“My dad bought a beach house. I met Mateo that first summer we went.” I close my eyes, remembering that day on my balcony like it was yesterday. “Gosh, he was bigger than life... He’s been that magnetic person since the first moment I met him. I fell in love that summer.”

With the turn of a key, the memories I had kept locked away came flooding out. This is the first time I have spoken about Mateo and our past to anyone. Each memory fills my heart a little more until I finally feel free again. The pain that surrounded me with thoughts of him, have faded. I have been walking through life with the hurt of losing. I never moved past the pain, instead, holding on to it tightly. I made it a part of who I was.

Once I start talking, I can’t stop. I shared our three summers and the new information I learned last night.

“Holy shit!” Mari exclaims when I finish the story. “Y’all are like a freaking fairy tale.”

I laugh. “That would be a messed-up fairy tale.”

“I knew something was up. I just knew it. Mateo can charm the panties off anyone. And you instantly, and I mean instantly, shut him down. Even if you had a boyfriend, he is too smooth. You can’t help but flirt with him. Even just a little.”

“Yes, I know. Thank you.” Knowing Mateo’s charm has been aimed at others sends me into instant jealousy.

“What’s wrong?” Her eyes narrow.

“Nothing.” I hate to admit my jealousy is getting the better of me right now. With *thoughts* of other girls with him, not even a real scenario.

“Come on. What is it?” she pushes.

“Ugh... I love him. Gawd, so much. I never stopped. And I love his personality, it’s what drew me to him. But...” I stop. Admitting that I’m jealous over a past where he wasn’t even mine, that’s crazy.

“But...” Mari drags out the word.

I take a long swig of my drink and drop my head. “Thinking about him with other girls... well... it sends me into a... jealous rage.”

Mari laughs obnoxiously loud. “Chica, I love to see your human side.”

I lift my head, cocking a brow in question.

“You have seen all my ups and downs. Hearing all my stories and insecurities, having gone to high school with that vapid bitch. Me floundering around life, not knowing what I wanted to do. Not able to connect with anyone. I didn’t hide myself. All my struggles were a blaring billboard.”

She pauses, her lips pulling down, then she continues, “But you... you hid them. Camouflaged them so no one really knew you. I’m your best friend and I feel cheated out of not knowing you. I love you to death, but you always came off... well, perfect. Perfect job. Perfect boyfriends. Always happy. Successful. Gorgeous. I would have never thought you had this side of you. The side that gets jealous. That loves a guy who isn’t the perfect on paper, boring guy. That...”

“That what?” I ask.

“That’s human. Who feels. Who has ups and downs. You hide that part of you so well, I didn’t even know it existed.”

“Of course I’m human and have feelings,” I argue.

“I know. But you never showed them. Let’s take Aaron for example. Y’all have been dating for a year. He goes out without you. To bars, travel, dinners. And never once did you ever seem jealous about the time away from you. Or even care. Eliazar and I have only been together like three months and we do so much together. Dinners, bars, friends. You’ve spent more time with my boyfriend since we got together than your own.”

“That’s probably because I didn’t love him. I stayed because it was convenient. To keep my parents happy and off my back.”

“And now? Your parents aren’t going to be happy.” She points out the obvious.

“No, they aren’t.” I bite my bottom lip with excitement. “But now I have Mateo. It was always him. I’m different when I’m with him. I can be free. Not having to mold into the perfect daughter my parents can parade around.”

“I’m glad to make your acquaintance.” Mari extends her hand across the table.

I roll my eyes and take her hand.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

NATALIA

SINCE THE TEXT FROM MY MOM CAME IN, MY STOMACH HAS been in knots. *Tuesday. Alexander's at noon.* Nothing more. No question. No phone call. No asking me to call her. Just four words in text. I asked her if my dad would be joining and her response was, *What do you think?*

I think, no. He's furious right now and doesn't want to see me. Then I think, yes. He wants to be able to make me do what he wants. But I knew better than to press for a definite answer. She may not even know herself. He may have her try and do his bidding. Send my mom in to smooth things out, before *BAM!*, blindsiding me with demands.

Kisses on my shoulder bring me back to the present. My racing heart begins to slow down. Mateo's lips are grounding me to this moment.

"Get out of your head," he murmurs as he continues kissing across my back.

I began to spiral out of control last night and he's trying to distract me from the lunch with my mom that's looming over me.

His hand runs up my leg gently, up my side, then cups my breast. He slides his other hand under me and finds my center, rubbing gently.

"Feel my touch and let your mind relax." His voice is low and soothing.

He moves my panties to the side and strokes through my folds and a soft moan escapes my lips. His movements are slow. Caressing, then dipping a couple of fingers in my core, only to be pulled out again.

"Mateo," I groan as I start rolling my hips to gain friction.

"Uh-uh." His hand moves to my thigh. "I'm in control right now." He nips my earlobe. "Let me take care of you."

His lips meet my neck, licking, kissing. His hand slides between my legs again, teasing, stroking, gliding in. My release is building painfully slow, until he slides a couple of fingers in and strokes my clit with his thumb. I explode, moaning out his name.

I stay tucked into his chest, not wanting to move. His protective hold, keeping me together.

He runs his fingers through my hair, then massages my scalp. I focus on his touch, grounding me to the present.

“You’re going to need to get dressed soon.” Mateo announces after a few minutes of quiet. “Lunch is in less than two hours and you need to shower.”

“What are you trying to tell me?” My heart races again.

“Only that if you want your mom to know what we’ve been up to last night and this morning, go without showering,” he teases.

“I don’t want to go,” I whine.

“Then don’t. Walk away. Break it off with your parents. But you and I both know that’s not what you want to do. You want their approval. And if and when it doesn’t come, what then?” His tone betrays the strength he’s trying to show.

“Then I walk away.” I roll over to face him. “It’s me and you, right?”

“That’s all I’ve ever wanted.” He kisses my lips gently.

“Okay. Well, then, showering it is.” I take a deep breath in, closing my eyes, building my energy to face today.

MY HANDS ARE SHAKING as I walk up to the hostess stand. I knew better than to be late, so I’m actually a few minutes early. Maybe I can get seated and have a few sips of wine before she shows.

“Reservation for Reyes.” I try to smile politely, but I fear I’m coming off more Joker-like.

“Yes. The other party is already here.” My stomach free-falls. She’s never early, always fashionably late. “Right this way.”

Each step I take, my legs feel heavier. My eyes land on her back sitting at a table. She always asks for tables, not finding sliding in and out of booths lady-like. I spy a bottle of wine in a bucket, *thank gawd*.

“Your guest,” the hostess announces to my mother.

My mother nods her head, the only acknowledgement to the hostess.

“Hello.” My voice cracks. I can barely get out one word without my nervousness blaring.

I take my seat and grab the bottle from the chiller, not waiting on anyone to fill me up. I take a long sip, not caring what my mother thinks since she can see how uneasy I am.

“Good afternoon. I’m Caleb and I’ll be waiting on you today. I see you have already filled your glass. Can I start you with anything else?”

“Two Asian salads with tuna, just seared. Thank you.” My mother orders quickly, and with a pointed look, she dismisses the waiter.

I’m frozen in place when her eyes meet mine, noticing the fury she’s carefully controlling. While I knew she was not happy, I expected this from my father, not her. My throat closes as I squirm under her watchful eye. Silence. I fear everything I say will be construed incorrectly. I take another drink of wine to give myself something to do.

“You wanted to have lunch, Natalia. You caused a scene and thought a lunch would suffice. Your dad and I have given you the world and this is how you repay us. Embarrass us in front of everyone we know. Your father wanted to come, but I forbade it. Both of you yelling would have been... no need for that type of behavior.” She glances around the room. Probably to make sure there is no one she knows before continuing.

“Now, I don’t know what came over you on Saturday, but enough is enough. You will accept Aaron’s proposal, and all

will be well. I explained to Aaron that you hate surprises and did not like the attention. It's all smoothed over. You will have a year-long engagement and I've already called and left a message for Diana to book the ballroom. Give me a couple of weeks to recover from the gala and I'll begin planning the engagement party."

I'm too stunned to speak. She's planned everything without consulting me. She thinks that she can tell me what's going to happen with my life without any input.

"Uh..." I just want to scream *No, No, No!* over and over, but I know that won't be received well. "It's just... uh..."

"Just spit it out already, Natalia." The way she says my name as if I'm bothering her boils my blood.

"No." One word is all that I allow to exit my mouth.

"No, what?" She begins fidgeting with her hands as her face falls just slightly.

She's not certain I'm going to comply. She thought she could get the upper hand by beginning and thinking she was laying down the law.

"I will not be marrying Aaron. I broke it off with him that night. I didn't just turn down the proposal, I also ended our relationship."

Her eyes narrow. "He did not mention that when I spoke with him last night. From what I understand, he was just giving you time to adjust to the thought of marriage."

"What do you mean, you spoke to him last night? You haven't even spoken with me to ask what I want. What I need. How can you be talking to him about MY future when you haven't even asked me what I want," I whisper-shout, not wanting to make a scene, but still wanting my mom to understand what she's doing is wrong.

"A mother knows what their child needs. I'm thinking of your future. Aaron will provide for you, just like your father did. He's a good man. Enough is enough. We allowed you to find your career. To live on your own. To live your life. Now it's time to settle down."

I bring my glass to my mouth and gulp down the remaining wine before filling the glass again.

“Again, I’m not marrying Aaron and I’m not getting back together with him. It’s over. It was over a long time ago. We’ve been going our separate ways for a while now. I never wonder what he’s doing. A relationship shouldn’t be that way. I should want to be with him. Spend time with him, even during those mundane weekend mornings. But I don’t. I don’t even think about him when I’m not with him. That’s not normal for a couple that’s in love,” I plead with her. The need to tell her about Mateo is building. The need to ask why. Why she let me go through that much unnecessary pain? Why she decided to take away the person I loved and trusted the most?

“Love will come. What you have is security. You have a man who will secure your future and the future of your children. That’s what matters. Your dad and I have made a life for you. A life that includes financial security. Something your dad and I didn’t have growing up. We clawed our way up. Being brown in a white man’s game,” she hisses. “You WILL NOT throw away everything that we have so carefully curated for you.”

Stunned into silence, my brain scrambles for an appropriate response. In their own weird way, they are looking out for me. I’ve never known the type of poverty they were raised in. I have always been more than comfortable. I don’t want her to take my wanting to live my own life as me not appreciating the life they have given me, but I do want control.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I will never know the life you and Dad lived to get where you are now. But I do want a relationship built on love. And I have that. I had that a long time ago before it was stolen from me.” A sadness I didn’t know I could feel for my parents fills me. Resentment and frustration I’m used to, but not sadness for them.

“What are you talking about? I thought you just said you didn’t love Aaron.” Her brows pull together.

“Ladies,” the waiter interrupts, placing the salads in front of us. “Is there anything else I can get you? Some fresh ground pepper?”

“That will be all.” My mother flicks her hand towards him like she’s shooing a fly away.

She stares at me, waiting for an answer. I bite the inside of my cheek, hoping I can get through the next part of this conversation.

“Mateo.” Saying his name gives me the strength I need to continue. Knowing he’s a phone call away, ready to save me if I need.

Her eyes widen as her shoulders stiffen.

Before I can continue, she says, “Why in the world would you bring him up now? After all these years?”

“Because I ran into him recently. Because I...” I stop, knowing I’m about to drop a huge bomb.

“You ran into him. So what? You have a life with Aaron, and I’m sure he has moved on with his also.” Her dismissive tone irritates me.

“Because I still love him. And he still loves me. Because everything I thought I knew... everything you told me about taking the money and forgetting about me is a lie. He never wanted the money. He only wanted me and that scared the shit out of you and Dad. You threatened him to stay away. Not only him, but his friend too. That’s why he caved. He caved to protect his friend. He... he was my everything and you stole that. You let me crumble into a million pieces. You saw how devastated I was. And still you did nothing!” Hot angry tears begin to slide down my face as my voice increases.

“Enough, Natalia. This is not how we conduct ourselves in public.” She scolds me like I’m a five-year-old playing at the table.

I shake my head. “Don’t. Don’t treat me like a child. In one breath you want to marry me off for power and money, and the next you want to scold me like a child. You can’t have both.”

“I will scold you like a child if you act like one,” she says through gritted teeth.

“Being angry is not acting like a child,” I disagree. “I came here wanting to explain what I want with my life. I’m an adult and will be making my own decisions. Me. I will. I will decide who I’m in a relationship with. Who and when I decide to marry. It’s my life and I should be in control of those things.” I cock a brow.

Surprisingly, she stays quiet, picking up her glass and taking a drink.

“I would say I’m sorry, but I’m not. I don’t need or want the life that you and Dad have planned out for me. I want the life I dreamed of when I was eighteen. The life that Mateo is promising me now. The one we plan together.”

“What life?” She leans in. “Dating a mechanic that has no future. That’s the life you want? To live paycheck to paycheck struggling to get by. It may seem romantic now, the blue-collar worker that has the time to devote to you. But when there’s a mortgage and babies, and there’s not enough to cover the lifestyle you have become accustomed to, what then? The rose-colored glasses fall, and you would have let a man like Aaron get away.”

“How do you know he’s still a mechanic?” That one sentence stuck out like a sore thumb.

My mom’s back stiffens as she works her jaw.

“How do you know?”

“Your father has kept tabs on him to ensure he followed the contract he signed.”

“You mean to tell me you knew where he was this whole time? I walked through life broken, thinking I’m only worth a measly fifty grand. That for the first couple of years after losing him, I slept with guys trying to feel something. Anything. Guy after guy... hoping I would catch feelings.” I shrug my shoulders. “But I never did. Good thing, because if I had and they lost interest, I may have never recovered. I was

so wrecked that one little dismissal may have thrown me over the edge.”

“Now you’re being melodramatic. Your dad did what he thought was best. That’s it. Every parent wants the best for their child. That’s all we’ve ever wanted. You’re angry that we wanted the best for you? That we didn’t want you to struggle the way we did? We wanted more for you. We gave it to you on a silver platter and you’re angry at us for it?”

“Mom. You’re not listening. I’m not mad that you want the best for me. But I am angry that you took my decisions away. That you want to continue to take them away. I’m twenty-six years old. I should be making these choices for myself.” I reach over the table and lay my hand on hers. “I love you. I really do. But Mateo is my life. He’s my future. I hope you can come to accept that.”

I stand, leaving my salad uneaten, and walk away feeling stronger than when I walked in.

MATEO

Focus on the job at hand. This engine is not going to rebuild itself. I don't have the patience to work on the newer cars in the shop right now. All the computers and gadgets. The plastic that crushes or breaks and just needs to be replaced. I need to destroy and rebuild— an engine from the eighties will do the trick. Take everything apart, clean, inspect... tedious work that requires focus. That's exactly what I need to keep my mind off of Natalia at lunch with her mom.

I've only been here a couple of hours, coming in late to stay with her this morning. Help calm her. Be the rock she needs. The guilt that's coursing through me for leaving her feels unbearable at the moment. The what ifs want to claw their way to the surface. But that was then. I can't go back and change the past. All I can do now is give her the future I had promised.

"Hey!" Jaxson's voice and a tap on my shoulder startle me from my concentration.

I pull out the Airpod from my ear, the rock music that was blaring stops. "What?" I don't have the energy to deal with anything but this engine right now.

"Who pissed in your cereal this morning?" Jax laughs, never taking anything to heart.

I exhale loudly, trying to ease my edginess. "Sorry. I... never mind."

He shrugs, his lips pulling out. "Just wanted to know if you needed any help."

"Nah. I'm good. Rather work alone today."

"Let me guess. Does it have to do with Natalia? We haven't heard much about her since you decided to give us your version of a romantic drama." He wiggles his brows, smirking.

“Callate. (*Shut up.*)” I shake my head, holding in a laugh. Only Jax can lighten a situation with ease.

“It’s true.” He laughs to himself. “It’s all smooth Mr. Suave hitting on each and every girl that passes us. Then, all of a sudden, he’s head over heels over a lady who he just met... At least, we *thought* he just met.”

“That about sums it up.” Ricky walks over joining the conversation.

“What the...” I want to protest in some way, disagree, but... everything he said is true.

“And you haven’t given us much. Dropped the bomb that she’s your ex. Then we are witness to a... romantic drama, as Jax likes to put it. Then nothing. We’re assuming y’all are together. But you’ve been tight lipped about it, so... you know us. We just keep on talking,” Ricky says nonchalantly.

He’s right. I haven’t given them anything. I just kept going like everything was normal. But it’s not. I’m dating a girl who was my girlfriend in high school. Who was dating another guy up until two days ago. A guy who proposed to her. And not only am I dating her, she’s practically living with me. If I had it my way, she would.

“Fuck,” I say under my breath, more to myself than to the guys. “What can I say? This situation is so messed up... I... she’s my everything. But everything else.” I take a breath figuring out what to say. “Her parents hate me. The guy she was dating proposed to her on Saturday night. She turned him down and broke it off with him. Her parents love that guy. She’s at lunch with her mom discussing why she broke it off with the douche. I don’t know... possibly telling her about me. The only thing I do know... is I love her. Always have. Never stopped.”

Once I started talking, I couldn’t stop. It all came out in one breath.

“She’s your girlfriend. Got it.” Ricky tips his head once. “Now that we got that straight, need help?” He points at the engine block.

“Nah. I got it.” I hold a smile. “You cabrones knew I was wound up and decided to be nosy.”

Jax starts laughing. “Sue us.”

He turns around striding to a car that just came in from an accident a few days ago when I notice the garage door open and Natalia walking towards me. I make my way to her, opening my arms and she tucks herself in my chest. Her rigid body begins to soften. With my hands greasy and dirty, I don't want to touch her, but want to hold her at the same time.

“Hey.” I whisper, “I'm all dirty, baby. You're going to get grease on your clothes.”

“I don't care,” she mumbles out. “I just needed to feel you. I'll go home and change before I go to the office if I need to.”

I wrap her in my arms, avoiding touching her with my hands.

“Want to talk about it?” I ask, looking around, knowing the guys are pretending not to watch.

She exhales loudly. “I do. But it's a long talk.” She pulls away. “I...” Her eyes meet mine. “It was a shitty lunch. I didn't eat. I just... after... I just needed to feel you, see you. Make sure it was all real.”

I brush my lips past hers, “It's you and me, Cuete. Always.”

Her eyes drift closed, as her shoulders relax. She opens them again as a smile emerges. “That's all I needed.” She puckers her lips and tiptoes to kiss me gently. “I'll see you at your place after work?”

“Baby, that's not even a question. I want to see you every night after work. I expect it.”

She nods and her smile widens. “Okay. Bye.” She turns around and walks out of the garage, back into the waiting area. I walk out the bay door to watch her get in her car and drive off.

Coming back into the garage Jax exclaims loudly, “Que cute.” A chorus of laughter fills the bays. I raise my hand and

throw the finger, spinning around for all of them to see.

And now to wait a few more hours to find out what happened at lunch with her mom.

THE MASSAGING SHOWER head is beating on my shoulders and neck. The warmth and pressure is welcome today. I spent the rest of the afternoon alone working on the Bronco engine, not in the mood to deal with anyone. Thankfully, Damian handled the office until Ritza came in after her class and the guys were busy finishing up a few cars to get them out of the garage with the arrival of parts.

Showers are always the first thing I do when I get home, needing to wash the garage grime off before I can relax. Are Natalia and I living in a fantasy? I'm blue collar. No way around it. While I may own the garage, I still like getting my hands dirty and can't see myself leaving the manual labor anytime soon. She's high society, office and designer clothes. All I could think earlier was getting her clothes dirty with my sweat and grime.

"I'm home!" Natalia yells.

She's home. That one, four letter word soothes the feelings of inadequacy that were beginning to surface.

The bathroom door opens and Natalia walks in. She stops in front of the glass shower door, her eyes scanning my naked body. She licks her lips, then takes a step back, placing her hands on the counter as she lifts herself up to sit.

"What are you doing?" I'm getting hard with her eyes taking me in.

"I'm enjoying the show."

"And what show would that be?" I grab the base of my cock and stroke it a couple of times.

Her chest rises and falls as she clutches the edge of the counter. Her legs spread a fraction.

"Cat got your tongue?" I tease when she doesn't respond.

I turn off the shower and open the door. I step out, not bothering to grab a towel, noticing her pupils dilate. If my Cuete wants to see me, who am I to take that privilege away?

“You should have joined me.” I stand in front of her.

“I should have,” she rasps out.

I lean in, placing my hands on either side of her, bringing my forehead to hers. Damn, I want to take her right now. Feel her silky skin, listen to her soft moans, taste her sweetness. But the way she came to me this afternoon, she needs more than just a temporary reprieve from her troubles. I reach out and grab the towel off the hook and wrap it around my waist.

Frown lines crease between her brows. “Why...”

I cup her cheeks, pressing my lips to hers in a soft kiss. “Tell me about today. We have all the time in the world for—” I wink. “But we are working on standing on solid ground. For that, we need to communicate.”

A pained smile appears. “Okay.”

I kiss her forehead and walk into the bedroom. I towel dry quickly and grab a pair of athletic shorts, sliding them on. Natalia leans against the door frame of the bathroom, watching me. I grab a t-shirt and pull it on.

We make our way to the living room, sitting on the couch. She sits with her back against the armrest, tucking her legs under her and grabbing a throw blanket she must have brought with her. She leans her head on the back cushion and takes a deep breath, closing her eyes.

“It didn’t go well, but I guess you figured that out already,” she begins and I stay silent, giving her the time she needs to find her words. “My mom is ready to marry me off. She spoke to Aaron. Said she smoothed things over for me and that I would accept his proposal.” She opens her eyes.

“Can you believe that? Since when does a mom accept a marriage proposal? I mean... damn. She was already planning an engagement party and a wedding.”

Anger surges, and I clench my jaw shut, holding back everything I would like to spew out.

“I walked away. At least for now. I don’t know if she or my dad will reach out again. Or if that’s it for us. I don’t know anything, really. But she knows about us, and I’m guessing now my dad does too.”

“You told her?” I knew she was going to explain why she broke up with the ass, but I wasn’t sure if and when she would be telling her parents about us. I was preparing myself to be her dirty little secret.

“I did. I don’t want to hide it anymore. And she pissed me off when she admitted to tracking you.”

“Tracking me?” Her parents knew where I was this whole time.

She nods her head. “Yes. She said my dad just wanted to make sure you followed the contract and stayed away from me.” She scoots closer to me, curling herself in my side.

That stupid contract. I don’t even know what the hell I signed. I can’t jeopardize the garage. Our dreams. I need to come up with fifty grand to pay that shit back, if and when the time comes.

I pull her onto my lap, hugging her tightly. Her dad said I would never amount to anything, but here I am, a business owner. I may not be a millionaire, but it’s profitable and half mine. My friend, Damian, and I had a dream and here we are, living it out. Having the garage, being an owner, fills me with pride. I need to figure out a way to keep it.

“How about we leave town this weekend?” I ask her, wanting to escape real life for a couple of days.

“Where to?” Her tone is curious but happy.

“I think we need to remember us. Beach?” I want to take us back to where we began.

“Yes.”



THE GUYS WERE good about covering for me this weekend. That's the thing about starting a business, you're always working. We share openings and closings, and weekends. Even if it isn't our weekend, we all always end up at the shop anyway. Ritza has been a lifesaver the past few weeks, agreeing to work for us pretty much full time when she's not in class, which gives us another pair of hands in Javie. But we need a couple of full-time people up front. That way Ritza can stay with the books and not be distracted with customers. We can't continue pulling people from the front end and garage and expect to expand business.

Natalia has had control of the music as a variety of genres have filled the car. She's adorable, singing everything between Taylor Swift pop songs, to Luke Bryan country, to old school Warren G rap. Any song that comes on, she's happily singing along. The drive has been quiet except for the music and a few stupid conversations about drivers.

I wonder if she's as nervous about revisiting our past as I am. The thrill of going back, forgetting all the problems we live in now is amazing, but as much as I would like to think we were perfect then, we weren't. We were teens. Jealous. Possessive. Immature. But damn, did we love hard.

I WALK THROUGH ALL the people on the secluded area of the beach that the local teens have adopted as their own. This area is out of the way, not easily accessible, and all ours. Except for the few young tourists who manage to get invited, this place is ours. The cops leave us alone because we aren't flashing our underage drinking. That, and who wants to arrest and ticket their own kids, family, or friend's kids?

Natalia texted me that she would meet me here since I got off work late. She hitched a ride with Julian. Knowing he has

eyes on her settles the jealousy that crept up when she told me she was coming without me. Irrational? Probably. But damn, she's my fucking world.

I walk through the crowd and haven't seen her or Julian. My fists clench, wondering where she's at. In the distance, I see Julian. I jog towards him and notice he's arguing with Becky.

"Hey. Where's Natalia?" I interrupt, not caring about their drama.

"I left her by the fire. I had to..." He waves his hand toward Becky.

"What? You had to what?" Becky yells at him.

I take that as my cue and start looking around, when I notice Jake standing by the dunes. Just then, Natalia walks behind him and taps his shoulder. He turns and smiles at her.

Red clouds my vision and I storm up the dune and take the first swing, punching Jake.

"What the fuck, Natalia?" My rage turns to her. I call her by her full name. A name I don't use anymore.

"I had to pee and as you can see, Julian is busy." She points to where they are. "Jake, I'm sorry."

"What the fuck are you apologizing to Jake for? He knows better." I glare in his direction.

I could have handled Julian with Natalia, barely, but Jake? Hell to the no. He's just waiting to swoop in and take what's mine. That's who he is. Who he's always been.

Jake stands back up, having fallen by the unexpected hit. He bucks up, ready to take me on. Natalia glances between us. She takes a quick step closer to me jumping and wrapping her arms around my neck. Not ready to catch her and being unsteady in the soft sand, I fall back with her in my arms. She presses her lips to mine. I pull her down, cradling her head with one hand and grabbing her ass with the other.

This girl is mine. Mine.

“Where are we staying?” Natalia breaks me from the past.

“We can stay at my parents’ house. They’ve been out of town this week. I called them to let them know I was coming and would be taking my Jeep out.”

Her eyes widen. “You still have your Jeep?”

I nod, a devilish smirk pulling out remembering all the fun times we had in it.

“You’re fuckin’ kidding me.” She playfully slaps my arm. “Wow! Now that’s really going to be a blast from the past.”

She sits back in her seat with a dreamy expression. She’s remembering the Jeep just like I am.

A weekend full of memories, from the past and creating new ones. That’s what I want. I want us to remember the love and passion we shared at such a young age. If we could love that hard then, there’s no reason why we can’t now. Everyone else be damned.

Crossing the bridge to the island, it feels surreal with Natalia sitting next to me. I never thought this day would happen. I place my hand on her thigh and squeeze. She glances at my hand and opens her legs. She places her hand on mine and slides it higher to her warm center. The dress she has on gives me all the access I need.

Her chest rises and falls as she lays her head back on the headrest. “I’m waiting,” she purrs out.

I slide my fingers under her panties and begin to massage between her wet folds. A soft moan slides from her lips and I continue while sliding a finger in. She grabs her breasts and squeezes, opening her legs wider. My cock is straining against the fabric of my shorts. She rolls her hips, losing herself in the feel of my touch.

Too soon, her legs clap shut as her walls squeeze against my fingers. I pull my hand out and lick my fingers, enjoying her taste before grabbing one of the napkins from the take out we ate earlier.

She turns her head and opens her eyes, and all I see is the past and present merging together. The memories I kept locked up tight, freely flowing now.

“I was at least going to wait until we got to town.” I cock a brow at her, holding a smile.

She shrugs, nonchalantly. “Well, I couldn’t wait. Sue me.” She purses her lips.

“Your wish is my command. All you gotta do is rub the genie,” I tease her.

“You may regret that.” She laughs out. Not sure if it was my corny joke or the fact that I just gave her free reign.

Natalia is looking out the window as we get closer to town.

“A golf club?” Natalia points at the sign for the club.

“Yup. The town has changed quite a bit since...” I stop. Not wanting to bring up the crappy past, but knowing we are walking on a landmine. Each step, a memory, good or bad.

“Since I left.” She finishes for me.

I nod. “It opened a couple of years ago.” I decide to bite the bullet because it’s inevitable we will hit one that is about her father anyway. *Keep Her Wild* didn’t have a chance. That was the town slogan when the new development began. All the locals were upset at the progress. “I guess it’s part of your dad’s development. Once the neighborhood he created took off, the golf course came with it. Technically, it’s not in the city limits though. And all those houses we passed are not in city limits either. You know the locals don’t like it and have protested ’til they’re blue in the face, but nothing could stop it. That subdivision, from what my uncle is hearing, will end up self-sufficient. Their own small grocery store and a couple of restaurants. A country club type area.”

“Sounds like my father.” The disdain dripping from that statement is loud.

Her eyes are wide as we drive through town, some things exactly the same, others changed, torn down, or updated. The

hurricane five years ago got the island pretty good, and many businesses were able to update with insurance money.

We park in my parent's driveway. She opens the door before I could turn off the car and jumps out. She stands in the driveway, spinning around taking everything in slowly. I come around to stand close to her and she breathes in deep and smiles.

"Gawd, how I missed that smell. The salty ocean breeze was my favorite." Her eyes close again.

I know she's reminiscing. This is the reason that I didn't come home often after our ordeal. Everything here reminded me of her.



CHAPTER TWELVE

NATALIA

I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD BE HERE AGAIN. NOT ONLY AT THIS beach, but standing in the driveway that became my safe harbor. I take another deep breath in. The humid, salty air fills my senses. No other beach has this smell. I don't know what it is. I love the beach, and have been to many over the years, but none, thankfully, had a scent quite like this.

Mateo comes up behind me, wrapping me in his arms. I lean back into him, feeling like I'm dreaming, but it's actually my life. The happily ever after I dreamt about as a teenager can come true.

“Happy?” Mateo's husky voice sends chills down my arms.

My eyes fill with tears, everything rushing back, the happiness and pain rolling together. How can I answer? I am happy. Really, I am. But I'm scared. So many emotions rage through me. A large tear falls and hits his arm that's across my chest.

He spins me around, looking down at me. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing, I promise. It's... it's just...” I gulp down a sob that's threatening to escape. I exhale slowly. “Everything flooded in so quickly. All the feelings from the past. The excitement, happiness, love and then the pain... I don't know. I just felt overwhelmed for a moment.”

A knowing smile appears, and he kisses my forehead, pulling me into his chest in a tight hug. “Come on. Let's change and find something to eat.”

Is it possible to feel like a teenager again? Everyone says they never want to go through that time in their life again, but I beg to differ. Sitting in Mateo's old Jeep, driving through town, I

feel like that teen girl, ready to take on the world. All those big dreams of independence I had and abandoned, are reappearing. I was fearless then. Was ready to defy my parents if needed. My parents stole that from me. Stole eight years of what could have been pure bliss.

Mateo parks at a burger and raspa joint that also sells frozen daiquiris. We ate here often, meeting everyone for food before heading down to the beach for the bonfires. As much as I would like to believe that it was simple then, it never was. Now that I think about it, in the back of my mind I always knew my dad didn't like Mateo. He never once invited him over for dinner like he did with my guy friends from school. Never asked about him or our relationship. I think I always knew and just refused to see it.

"Hey," Mateo calls out to me as I'm watching all the people. I look at him, smiling. "What are you thinking about?"

I bite my lip, trying to hold my smile from getting any bigger. "Everything and nothing. If that's possible. It's the feeling. Being here. Sitting at a table we've sat at before. The only difference is I'm enjoying a frozen margarita instead of a coconut raspa."

I scan the patio area— teens enjoying themselves, families with kids running around, couples huddled together. This town makes living seem so easy. Enjoyable. No pretenses. No expectations. Just be.

"I forgot how much I love this town," Mateo says, pulling my attention again.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't really come home anymore. I only come home for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Twice a year, and I only stay a couple of days. It was too hard coming home. You were everywhere here. And I didn't want to think of you anymore."

The last sentence punches a hole in my chest and I nervously bite the insides of my cheek.

"It hurt to remember you." His nose flares and there is a sadness in his eyes.

I know exactly what he means. I reach out and grab his hand, clutching it.

“We don’t have to hurt anymore.” I say the words I want to believe.

He leans in, brushing his lips past mine. “No, we don’t.”



MATEO TAKES the top off his Jeep and we head out to the beach. A cooler full of drinks and snacks for a day of relaxation. Of doing absolutely nothing but listening to the sound of the ocean and soaking up the warmth of the sun.

The beach is not too packed yet, mainly locals and people from the city from the mainland across the bridge. Families have set up tents and barbecue pits, enjoying the spring weather. I’m laying out, hoping the heat on my back turns into a golden tan. Mateo is next to me, head on his crossed arms, eyes closed. Muscles and tattoos on full display. I begin tracing a design on his shoulder.

“Hmmm,” he hums out. “Are you ready to go?”

“No. Just couldn’t keep my hands to myself,” I tease.

“Nobody said you have to.”

“I don’t think the parents of littles out here would be so keen on me doing what I’m fantasizing about.” I don’t recognize my voice with the huskiness.

“Do tell.” He rolls to his side and props his head on his hand.

I hope my cheeks are already red from the sun so he can’t tell my face is heating up with a blush of excitement.

He cocks a brow when I stay quiet for too long.

“Well... I was just thinking of tan lines.” I roll over and match his position. “Then, I thought it would help if I could tan topless. And if I was topless, and you... well, you couldn’t

keep your hands to yourself if I was topless. And of course, things would escalate. You would have your way with me here. Out in the open. Under the warm sun.”

His eyes drift to my breasts and he licks his lips. “Is that an invitation?”

My core clenches with the thought. “You are always invited.”

I run my tongue over my teeth, waiting on his move.

He stands up and extends a hand to me. I place my hand in his and he pulls me up with him.

“Maybe I can do something about that fantasy of yours.” His voice husky in my ear.

He turns toward the water and pulls me with him.

A wave comes in and hits our feet. “Holy crap, that’s cold!” I stop moving forward.

“It won’t be for long.” Mateo pulls me behind him, not letting go of my hand.

The cold water causes chill bumps to erupt all over my body, but I continue following him. As soon as it hits my stomach, I stop again.

“Don’t stop yet,” he laughs.

It doesn’t seem like the water temperature is affecting him at all. There are very few people braving the cold water. It’s too early in the season for the Texas sun to heat the water. My teeth begin to chatter as I shiver, but I follow anyway.

A wave is coming in and looks taller than me, so I stop again. Mateo scoops me up and dunks us completely, letting the wave go over us. I wrap my legs around his waist and hold on to his shoulders as he continues walking until we are hidden in the water up to his mid-chest. He brings his lips to mine in a heated kiss that tastes of him and the salty water.

“No one can see my wandering hands now,” he says between kisses as he squeezes my ass.

I'm instantly turned on and tighten my legs around him to cause friction.

"Nuh-uh. Be a good girl and loosen your legs." He kisses down my neck and pats the side of my thigh.

My head is swimming in Mateo and all the sensations. The cold water, my body temperature heating up, his hands, his groans, our public display. I relax my legs as he licks and nibbles my ear lobe.

His hand comes between us, and his fingers begin rubbing my sex over my bathing suit. A loud moan escapes my lips but is covered by the sounds of the ocean.

My lips meet his neck; sucking, kissing, licking him. I pull myself closer, rubbing my chest to his. He slides his fingers under my bathing suit and I'm instantly full with his fingers in me. I can't control my moans of pleasure. He strokes me and I want more. I roll my hips, chasing the release. He slides a couple of fingers in, pumping, scissoring, and rubbing the ball of nerves with his thumb. I clutch his neck tighter as the feeling builds. The excitement of being out in the open. His possessiveness of always wanting his hands on me. His attention. It's all gone to my head. I want him to fuck me senseless.

"That's right, Cuete. Ride my fingers. I wish I had one of your perky nipples filling my mouth right about now."

I'm so close.

"Explode for me." His voice is husky as his breath tickles my ear.

"Mateo!" I cry out.

I ride out the wave, his fingers deep in me. He removes his fingers and holds me tight against him.

"You are... the most exquisite woman." His hand roams down my back and cups my butt.

I pull back to look at him. The love and mischievousness dancing in his eyes, reminds me of us.

“I am, am I?” I brush my lips past his and swipe my tongue out teasingly.

“You know damn well you are.” He nibbles my bottom lip. “But I think it’s time I get you out of the water. Your lips are turning blue.” He smirks.

Funny how he made me forget how cold the water was until this moment.

THE LAST REMNANTS of colors after the sun sets fill the sky. After a lazy day on the beach, it’s just like old times, not worrying about showers or dressing to impress. From the sand to small local restaurants that allow you to come as you are.

“One last drive on the beach before we go back to the real world tomorrow?” Mateo asks me after an early dinner.

“What do you think?” I reach across and run my fingers through his dark brown hair.

I let my hand run down his neck and slide it down his arm. Us in the water earlier is running on replay in my mind. His adventurousness. His presence. I squeeze my legs together, the need for him again growing.

“Getting a little needy?” Mateo licks his lips, but his eyes stay straight. How could he suspect my thoughts?

“What?” I laugh, trying to play it off.

He places his hand on my thigh, squeezing it. I spread my legs without thinking. We are in Mateo’s jeep. No cover. Doors that don’t cover much of anything. And I’m ready for him to have his way with me again.

“What do you want me to do to you?” He glances at me before looking back at the road to the beach.

“I’ll leave it up to you.” I turn my body towards him and brush my hand over my breast slowly. “What do you want to do to me?”

“You’re about to find out.”

He drives a ways then switches it into four-wheel drive and goes up into a small hidden area through the dunes.

“On second thought...” A memory of us in this Jeep from a couple of weeks before we were torn apart pops in my mind. A very vivid, hot, I’m getting extremely wet thinking about it, memory. “I want a repeat... of that night. The night you were jealous. Where—”

“The night we christened the Jeep.”

“FUCK. I NEED YOU. RIGHT NOW,” Mateo growls against my lips.

“Take me where you want me.” I run my fingernails down his bare back.

He pulls me behind him, leading us away from the party to his Jeep. With the top off, we have zero privacy. He places me in the passenger seat and runs around and hops in the driver’s seat. He glances at me as he turns the key in the ignition. I run my tongue across my lips, then bite the corner.

He pushes the clutch and throws it in first gear. Wanting to tease him, I reach over and cup his crotch and start rubbing.

“How about I come to you?” I purr.

“How?”

I look back and watch the bonfire get smaller the further we go, letting the darkness of the night shield us.

He takes his right hand off the wheel and I crawl over the stick shift to straddle him.

“Hmmm.” I lick his earlobe as I roll my hips against his hardened cock.

“Always full of surprises, Cuete.”

“Only for you,” I say in his ear, kissing down his neck.

Mateo groans loudly as I feel his length twitching and continuing to harden under me. He pulls over, the bonfire a

speck in the horizon and no one is around. He throws the gear in neutral and pulls the handbrake up.

“You’re a dangerous woman, amor.” He grabs my hair and pulls it down. My head whips back, my neck exposed for him. He bites my neck, and another moan leaves my lips.

“I need you,” I pant out, wet and ready for him.

He lets my hair go and says, “Lift yourself up.”

I do as he says, and Mateo works to push his swim trunks down, releasing his rock-hard cock. I have Mateo’s shirt covering my bikini. He rubs my warm center and I push down against his hand. He moves my bottoms to the side and slides a couple of fingers through my slickness.

“I love that you’re always wet and ready for me.” With the light of the moon, all I see is the fire in his eyes.

I’m taking deep, needy breaths ready to have him fill me. I grab his length and guide him in as I come down. I begin riding him out in the open. The sound of the waves, and the salty breeze all remind me that we could be caught if anyone decided to drive this far out. The excitement of being caught heightens the experience.

He lifts my shirt, moving my triangle top to the side, taking a nipple in his mouth and sucking it. I push my chest into him, the sensations overwhelming. He moves to my other, showing it the same attention as I pulse myself against him, chasing my release.

“Clench my cock with your tight pussy,” he growls with a rumble in his chest.

“Mateo!” I’m climbing higher.

He grabs my hips, guiding me as he begins pumping into me harder. My core begins tightening and I’m floating in light-headedness. He’s still pumping, ready to let go. I feel his warm ejaculation fill me.

I drop my head on his shoulder, not wanting to move. This connection is too intense to break. Is it odd to want to feel him inside me? Always. A baby with him flits through my mind but

I know we're not ready. That's why I started the pill as soon as I turned eighteen. Planned Parenthood is a savior, so my parents don't know.

Mateo kisses my shoulder, pushing me back so that he can meet his lips to mine.

"I love you," he says against my lips. "You're it for me."

I'M STILL STRADDLING MATEO, him deep inside me. Finding him again awakened the need for a little risk.

"As amazing as I remember the last time, nothing compares to tonight." Mateo kisses me with passion. Lost in his touch again, I miss him when he pulls back and says, "And as much as love knowing my cum is in you, I need to get you cleaned up." He reaches back to grab a beach bag.

Not wanting to let the connection go just yet, I roll my hips, nibble his neck and say, "How about you fill me some more? Round two?"

MATEO

The drive back is filled with smiles and laughter. The ease in which we came back together is almost too good to be true. Her parents' disapproval is still lingering, but having her close lets me ignore anything and everything that may explode around us.

Our hands clasped together on the center console, her soft relaxed smile, and her body leaning toward me make me the happiest man alive. She chose me at sixteen, and she's choosing me now at twenty-six.

As we reach the outskirts of town, I begin wondering if she'll go back to her place. The thought of her not in my bed sends nervous pricks through my body. My mind scrambles for reasons to have her stay with me. Between her parents and the douche, one of them is bound to make a surprise visit trying to trap her.

"Need to pick up any more stuff from your place before we head home?" I stress the word home and hope my subtlety pays off.

"Aren't you going to get tired of me if I keep crashing at your place?" Her voice is teasing, but I detect a strain.

"Never." I squeeze her hand.

"But..." she begins and stops, squirming around in her seat, pulling her hand from mine.

"But what, Cuete?" I ask when she doesn't continue.

"Uh... I don't know. My mind is scrambling on why it's probably a bad idea."

"Let's go over these reasons then." I shake my head and let out a small huff.

"Be serious." She slaps my arm playfully.

“I’m plenty serious. Start.” I point a look at her, challenging her.

She rolls her eyes. “Fine... I guess I’ll start with the most obvious one. We just got together a week ago.”

It’s my turn to roll my eyes. “I was ready to move in with you eight years ago and that has not changed. Unless it’s a problem for you... then, next reason.”

“Really? That’s it?”

“What do you want me to say? I’m scared. I am. But the only thing that frightens me is losing you.”

“But—”

“But what?” I interrupt. “I’m telling you I want you at my place in OUR home. And if you don’t like my place, as soon as my lease is up, we’ll look for something else.”

“Okay, but what if I want to redecorate?” she continues to push.

“Then go for it. If it will make you happy, then do it.”

Her eyes widen just a fraction. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“As a heart attack. Why does this surprise you? You know I don’t agree to things or say things just to say them.”

She shrugs. “It’s just odd. I forget you’re not like other guys. Other guys are either full of it, empty words, or cling to independence until they’re forced to give it up.”

“Anything else? What other reasons you got?” I don’t want to talk about ‘other guys’ so I change the subject.

She huffs out a breath. “I got nothing.”

I stifle a laugh. “I thought you said there were many reasons.”

“Shut up!” She gives me the stink eye.

“Back to my original question. Do you need more things from your place?”

“What do you think?” She gives me a devilish smirk. “But don’t say I didn’t give you a chance to keep your manly, independent space.”

It’s getting dark by the time we drive up to her subdivision. She crawls over me to punch a code to open the gate, kissing my face and grabbing my junk on her way back to her seat as I drive through the gate.

“Can’t be giving my code out to just anyone.” She smirks.

“Four-nine-five-two-pound.” I continue looking forward, teasing back.

“Don’t be using it to—” Her head whips back. “Shit!”

“What?” She scares me as she continues staring back.

She flops back in her seat, hitting her head against the headrest, then turning back again. I can pretty much guess who was driving that Mercedes G-Wagon which passed by. Too flashy for her parents, but perfect for an insecure prick.

She finally settles when I watch the taillights drive through the gate and turn away.

“That was Aaron.” Her voice is flat.

“Figured.” I continue to stare forward, gripping the steering wheel so tightly, my knuckles are turning white.

“I just want this to be over.” Her voice cracks and I turn to face her. Tears fill her eyes. I pull the Tahoe over and place it in park.

“Come here.”

She crawls over the console and straddles me, clutching my neck tightly. I run my fingers through her long, chocolate, wavy hair. All weekend she has let her hair dry naturally, not straightening it like she usually wears it.

I let her cry for a bit then say, “Let’s go get your stuff and will worry about the rest next week.”

She can sell or rent that house for all I care. I don’t want her staying there anymore.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MATEO

TIME IS TICKING AND I NEED TO FIGURE OUT WHERE I CAN GET a fast fifty grand. I don't know anyone who has that kind of cash laying around to loan me. I legitimately need to figure out if a bank can loan me the money. My only worry, I would need to use the garage as collateral. And it's not only mine.

The guys and I are sitting at a restaurant on Tuesday night while Natalia is having dinner with her parents at the restaurant next door. I brought the guys here in case she needs me.

I take a long pull from the beer the waitress just dropped off. She's cute and extremely flirty, so of course, Jaxon and Ricky are all over it. Amazingly, Damian has been quiet, not even bothering to place his name in the race. I hate that I asked the guys to dinner for the sole purpose of blind-siding them.

I decide to drop the bomb after a few minutes of shooting the shit.

"I told y'all about the money I was paid to stay away from Natalia. Well... uh... I'm not sure if I ... if I'm going to have to pay it back. You know... cause I won't give her up again. So... uh... I need to come up with fifty large real damn fast. And the only way I know to do that is, rob a bank or have them lend it to me." I rub my sweaty palms on my jeans.

"Are you sure her dad is even going to want the money back?" Damian asks, stone-faced. He has the most to lose since the business is half his.

I shrug and shove a few fries in my mouth. I finish chewing and continue, "No sé. (*I don't know.*) It's a real cluster-fuck. We even saw the douche driving out of her subdivision on Sunday night when we went to get more of her things. Her parents are pissed. They want her with him. He wants her, I'm guessing, for her father's company."

"What are you gonna do?" Jax asks. "And why tell us?"

“Because if he gets a loan, he needs to add Fast Lanes as collateral,” Damian says, with a hint of annoyance I don’t miss.

I nod my head once. “I’m stuck and I can’t figure any way out.”

“But what if her dad doesn’t want the money back?” Jax adds.

“Then I don’t need the loan. I give the money back and end of story.” I shrug, bringing a wing to my mouth taking a bite.

The table is quiet, everyone eating, lost in their own thoughts. Damian really is the only approval I need, but I wanted to be up front and honest with Jax and Ricky too.

“Do what you gotta do. I’ll sign whatever I need to,” Damian says, then gulps down his beer and lifts it for the waitress to see.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll give you the money,” Ricky pipes in, looking down at his food.

“What?” I say, unsure if I just heard him correctly.

“I’ll give you the money,” Ricky repeats himself.

“Wha-... How?” I stumble out.

“I’ve got a bit of money stashed away,” he says face stoic.

“You just have fifty grand laying around?” Damian asks skeptically, his eyes wide.

“In fact, I do.” Ricky looks around the table.

Jaxson laughs. “Now this is a story I gotta hear!”

Ricky finally cracks a smile. “I was a high school hustler and successful gambler. I didn’t blow my money or make it rain. I kept quiet and as soon as I turned eighteen, I opened up a trading account and invested. I’m not too bad at the stock market. I’ve diversified a bit.”

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me?” Damian exclaims, shaking his head. “How did we not know this?”

“I haven’t told anyone until now. No one knows. This allows me to do what I love without worrying about my salary.”

“Hell yeah, you can!” Jaxson claps his hands. “Damian, you’re next. What’s your big secret?”

“Secret?” Damian’s eyes widen for a split second before he schools his expression.

“Yeah, secret. Mateo hid Natalia, the love of his life. Ricky hid that he’s a hustler. What’s yours?” Jax laughs.

Damian just shakes his head and ignores his question.

“Okay. But for real. Let’s get back on track.” I pause and look at Ricky. “You’ll buy me out?”

Deep creases form between his brows. “No, I’m not buying you out. I’m lending you the money. Interest free. Just add to my salary until it’s paid off, or you make payments. Whatever you’re most comfortable with.”

“I can’t do that. If you give me the money, the garage is yours. As much as I want to be a business owner, I won’t be a beggar.”

“No. It’s still yours. I don’t want the business. I like the freedom of working and walking away. You and Damian have all the ins and outs of this place. It’s an interest free loan. No more, no less.” He sits back and takes a drink of his beer, smiling.

“Are you serious?” I’m still skeptical. When things are too good to be true...

“Yes. The whole point of having this money stashed is me having the flexibility to do what I want. If I no longer feel the garage and want to do something else, I can. I’m not tied to anything and can fill my soul.” He picks up his beer and raises it in the middle of our table. “To friends. Salud.”

We all pick up our beers and clink them together, drinking. One hurdle of ensuring my life with Natalia has been cleared.

NATALIA

I walk up to the door of Grand Margarita with a slight throbbing behind my eyes. The muscles in my shoulders are so tight, I swear they must be pulled up to my ears. I quickly let the hostess know I'm here for my reservation and excuse myself to the bar. I gave myself a few extra minutes to be able to take a shot of liquid courage.

I raise my hand at the bartender, getting his attention quickly, not wanting to accidentally be seen by my parents. As the bartender begins walking up, I loudly say, "Patron." And hold up one finger.

He nods and turns to the shelf behind him. He pours a shot and drops it in front of me. "Ten."

I drop fifteen dollars on the bar, grab the glass and down it, concentrating on the soothing burn. I roll my shoulders front and back a few times, hoping they loosen.

Back at the hostess stand, she greets me again and walks me to the table.

"Thank you." I take the seat that faces the whole restaurant as she places the menus on the table.

The waiter stops by and I order a margarita, chips, and guacamole. Comfort snacks are desperately needed. I scan the room, jealous of all the smiling faces. Carefree. Happy. I want this chapter closed and over.

The knots in my stomach tighten with each second that passes waiting for them. I knew this day was coming, but somehow, I'm still not ready.

My mom obviously told my dad about Mateo because I've gotten a string of messages from him expressing disappointment. Then anger. Then threats. His insistence on my union with Aaron is absurd.

Then messages from my mom expressing concern for my reputation. How will it be perceived if I'm seen with a tattooed, blue-collar worker? If she knows he's tattooed, my dad has done more than just track him. Which worries me. What will they do out of desperation or retaliation?

Even discussing where to meet became contentious. I decided to text them together, that way there is no misunderstanding when things are relayed to the other.

We need to talk.

DAD

At the house. 7 sharp

Not wanting them to control the situation, I counter.

Not at the house. I don't want you to blindside me by inviting Aaron.

My phone rings and my dad's name appears. I refuse to answer. A couple more calls and then a text.

DAD

Fine. We won't invite Aaron, even though he should be a part of this conversation.

Since I have ended my relationship with him, no, he does not need to be a part of the conversation. Meet me at the Grand Margarita at 7. I've made reservations.

DAD

I will not go there. Meet us at the club. 7 sharp.

If you want to talk, Grand Margarita. I won't budge on this.

Anywhere my dad chooses would give him an advantage. His people. His reputation. His connections. I want neutral

ground.

MOM

I don't think that place is suitable. We will meet at J's steakhouse.

Grand Margarita is fine. You won't have to worry about the optics of our conversation. No one will know you there.

Another few minutes pass and I know they are communicating with each other.

MOM

We will meet you at 7 sharp.

KNOWING Mateo is next door with the guys gives me some comfort. I wish I could walk out of this place right now and go to him instead.

The waiter drops off my drink just as my parents walk up.

“Hello, Natalia,” my father says as he pulls a chair for my mother to sit down.

“Mom, Dad.” I nod my head in acknowledgement.

The waiter glances around us, probably feeling the chill from the icy greeting.

Before he can ask what they would like, my dad has grabbed all the menus and barks out, “Tequila Azul, chilled for me, and a skinny margarita with Azul for my wife. That will be it. Thank you.” He hands the waiter the menus.

I guess we won't be eating.

The waiter's smile quickly fades as he turns and walks away. But that's my dad. That's the presence that got him to where he is. He can dominate a room in an instant. He was able to do this before he had the money to back him up.

“You wanted to meet. To talk. We’re here,” my dad says, placing his forearms on the table leaning in.

I clear my throat, then take a drink. What do I want to say? Or better yet, how?

“I don’t want to marry Aaron,” I blurt out childishly, the pressure of knowing they are waiting for me to say something.

“He is a perfect match for you. He indulges all your whims and gives you your freedom. What else do you want?” my dad says without emotion.

“But I don’t love him. And I don’t think he loves me either. Why would we marry?”

“Love does not pay the bills. Love does not secure your future. You, my daughter, are a brown woman living in a white man’s world. I am securing your future and the future of my grandchildren. Do you think a white man would have to work as hard as I did? Been turned away from loan after loan when first starting out? No. Their last name and pale complexions open the door. And I’ll be damned if I did all that work for you to throw it all away.”

The passion, anger, and frustration my father expresses pulls at my heartstrings. I know he wants the best for me. But times have also changed. I don’t have rose colored glasses and believe that the world is perfect for me, but I also know so much has also changed. My dad is stuck in the racial injustices of the past.

“Dad,” I speak quietly like I’m trying to calm a bear. “I know love won’t pay the bills. But the world is not the same anymore. What you experienced is not the same for me.”

My dad opens his mouth, so I place my hand up to stop him. “Yes. Money played a huge part in getting me where I am. I’m not so blind that I don’t realize that. But I have a career. One that I love. I make good money. I can support myself if I need to. Does your money make life more fun? Of course. I’d be stupid if I said otherwise.”

“Exa-” my dad begins, but I interrupt.

“But not enough to give up on love for the rest of my life. I can live without designer things or first class travel, but I can’t live without love. Who would I be sharing the happiness money brings? Because I don’t share it with Aaron. I never did. Money without love is emptiness.”

The waiter comes back with my parents’ drinks, the chips and guacamole. “Can I get you anything else?”

I shake my head. “Thank you.”

He gave me a short reprieve from the conversation. A little time to consider what I want to say. What I can say to hopefully change their minds.

My parents take a sip from their drinks.

“Love grows, sweetheart. Did you even give it a chance?” my mom says, drink in hand.

“We were together for close to a year. If it didn’t grow then, why would you think it would grow after?” I lick the salt from the rim of my glass, knowing my mother hates it, before sipping out of the straw.

“You are going to throw all this away for some mechanic?” My father narrows his eyes.

“His name is Mateo. And I’m not throwing anything away. I’m finally getting what I want,” I snap back.

“A nobody that can’t even support you. What happens when you have kids? You can’t stay home with them. He doesn’t make enough to support a family,” my father huffs.

I grab a chip and scoop out a huge glob of guacamole, shoving it in my mouth. I chew slowly, on purpose, so I don’t say something I may regret later. I’m furious, but I won’t give him the satisfaction of knowing he got under my skin.

I take a breath. “I just mentioned I have a career. I make money. Together we will handle everything that we need.”

“Sweetheart, it sounds romantic now. I know. But those feelings don’t last. What’s the leading cause of divorce? Money. Especially when there’s not enough of it,” my mom adds her two cents.

“Mateo co-owns his garage. It might do great. Take off. And then what excuse would you be giving?” I defend Mateo and his ability to provide.

“He doesn’t have the drive. The ambition. Never has and never will,” my father states.

“Then we will have to agree to disagree. His drive and passion is cars. It’s just not your passion.” I shrug my shoulders and sit back. “Mateo and I are together and are going to stay together.”

“I don’t even know why we are indulging her with this conversation.” My dad looks at my mom. “We own her house. She has our credit card. She lives her life at our expense.”

“And what do you mean by that? You own my house?” I can feel the heat on my neck as my anger appears.

“What do you think it means, Natalia?” my father says, gruffly.

“I don’t feel like guessing. Why don’t you spell it out for me?” I say through clenched teeth.

My father downs the rest of his drink, too calmly, with a sinister grin.

“It means, *mi hija (my daughter)*, that if you want to continue living life as you know it, you will do as we say. You think your paycheck is going to get you far? I pay that credit card bill every month. I know what you spend on clothes and going out. You have a car payment. That’s it. And yet, you still live off of us. And I’m not faulting you for that. We raised you to want and enjoy the finer things in life. And now that you’re hooked, how will you let go?” The gleam in his eyes thinking he has won has my blood boiling.

I smile sweetly. I live off my parents so that I can save my money. I opened up an account at another bank. A bank that does not do business with my father. Where I could have my own money and not have it scrutinized by him.

“Thank you for reminding me how shallow you think I am. It’s always nice to get such a flattering view of yourself.” I grab my purse strap hanging from the back of my chair. I pull

out my wallet and slide his Platinum AmEx out and place it in front of him. “This belongs to you. Thank you for allowing me to use it for as long as you did. As for the house, I will be out of there by the end of next weekend.” I take a long slow breath, holding all the words and obscenities that would like to come out.

My mother’s eyes widen as her lips turn down. “Where will you live?” Her voice cracks.

“At home.” I square my shoulders.

“Home?” my mother inquires.

“Wherever Mateo is, that’s home.”

My father’s brows furrow. “That’s sweet. But he won’t have one soon. He’s in violation of the contract that he signed. He owes me fifty thousand dollars.” My father does not waiver.

Whoosh. All the air feels like it was just sucked out of the room. I knew my father paid him. How did the thought of my dad punishing me with that money escape me? I school myself and won’t let him know he made a move I was not expecting.

“I see.” I raise my chin slightly in defiance. I’m scrambling with thoughts of how I can salvage this. Save Mateo from being punished just by choosing me. “Then I guess we’re done here. For good. Goodbye.”

I begin to stand, when my mother exclaims, “What do you mean, for good?”

I stay sitting and shrug. “I want to live my life the way I choose. My life. My choice. Dad has made it perfectly clear that my choice is not an option.” I pause, choosing my next words to make the most impact. “I will live my life as I see fit. I will not have you trying to intervene in my future choices. From this moment on, we will live as strangers. I’m simply Natalia Reyes. No longer Natalia Reyes, daughter of John Reyes. My children will only have one set of grandparents that they will know and love. You will only be known of by name. You will not dictate their lives either.”

“You can’t mean that! You would keep grandchildren away from us?” My mother’s voice is desperate.

“I’m not keeping them away, your choices are. Why would you want to know these future grandchildren if you do not accept their father?”

“That’s enough. Natalia has made her choice. Let that boy know he will be hearing from my attorney.” My father stands abruptly. He extends his hand to my mom, and she slowly stands, tears collecting in her eyes as she watches me.

My father glances at me one last time before he throws a hundred-dollar bill on the table. He turns his back and guides my mother out of the restaurant.

I sit as still as a statue, watching them until they turn, and then my body crumbles. If I wasn’t in public, I may have slid right out of the chair. Fifty grand. I have that in savings, but it was for a business venture or investments. Something I wanted to do away from my father. I grab my mother’s unfinished drink and slam the remaining liquid, not wanting to do that with mine because... brain freeze.

The waiter stops in front of me. “Can I get you anything?” His voice is soft and full of concern.

Anger and sadness are clashing within me, which has me craving all the food.

“Can I get an order of the sampler, please?” A large appetizer to feed four people seems appropriate. Quesadillas, flautas, queso and fajita nachos may be excessive, but...

I lick my glass, savoring the salty goodness, and take a large swig, one that won’t cause a freeze. My brain is scrambling on what the next steps are. I thought for sure my mom would intervene. I could tell she wanted to, but my dad... He just won’t budge on what he thinks is best. *His* best. Not mine.

I won’t be asking anyone for help. Mateo and I will figure it out. But I hate that I’m the cause of him going through this. His livelihood. Everything he has worked so hard for.

I take out my phone, wanting desperately to call Mateo. Wanting to vent and scream at the world. But I can't. He's with the guys and I don't want him to worry about this. Not yet. Just a few more hours of peace. A solo dinner for me so he can have one last worry-free night with his best friends.

I pull my cell phone from my purse; what better way to distract myself but with work. I scroll through different social platforms to study new trends while waiting for my food. I always like to give my clients a combination of what's trending and something new to them.

In a strange way, work calms me. My focus is on something other than the problem I'm facing.

Before I know it, my food comes and my margarita is empty. I order a beer and begin to feast.

I've made a dent in the pile of food sitting in front of me when my phone vibrates.

MATEO

Don't want to bother u but just reminding u that I'm right next door if u need me.

Tears instantly well up. He always seems to know when I need him the most.

I type out...

I need you

...and hit send before I can talk myself out of it.

I'm coming

Mateo's response is instant. No hesitation. No thinking. He's a man of action.

I look around like a doe-eyed girl, waiting for him to appear. To hold me and remind me that we will get through this too. His eternal optimism.

I look down at my phone, fingers hovering over the keyboard wanting to type out, *hurry*. I feel a shift in the energy of the room. I look up to find Mateo striding toward me, followed by his friends. The power they exude when they are together is unmistakable. Women's heads turn to gawk.

Mateo reaches me and pulls me out of my chair, enveloping me in his arms. His presence is an instant shield from anything bad. The tears that I had been trying to hold for the past few minutes fall. The weight of everything I was trying to ignore settles on me. Not wanting to face the world and the uphill battle, I hide my face in Mateo's chest. His hands sliding up and down my back gently. Chair legs sliding on the floor and throats being cleared has Mateo moving me away from him and sitting me back down in my chair. The guys are now sitting around my table, and they must have grabbed an extra chair from a neighboring table.

The waiter stops in front of our table.

"Finally. This beauty needed some muscle after..." He leaves his sentence hanging.

Mateo points a look at me, opening his mouth, but the guys begin ordering before he can say anything.

"Didn't go well, huh?" Jaxson starts as soon as the waiter walks away.

"Something like that." I keep it vague, not sure how much Mateo has shared with his friends.

"What did he threaten you with?" Mateo asks, voice strained.

I pause, deciding that if he brought his friends, he trusts them with our story. "Money. What else? My house. Or technically, theirs. His credit card that I use."

"I told you I didn't want you there anyway. You have a home. With me." Mateo's shoulders relax a fraction.

"And..." I bite my lip.

"He wants the money back," Mateo finishes my thought.

The guys all look around at each other as I nod my head.

“It’s fine. I figured that he would. He’ll get his money back.” Mateo’s jaw ticks.

“How?” Heat is rising in my neck from the frustration.

“I got a loan.”

“Really?”

He nods his head.

“Forget about what happened. It’s all taken care of.” Mateo grabs my hand and squeezes it.

The waiter comes back with a round of beers and as soon as he walks away, Damian lifts his and says, “To found family.”

Everyone lifts their drinks to the center, clinking them together.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MATEO

EVERY NIGHT THIS PAST WEEK, WE HAVE BEEN AT NATALIA'S house packing. Or, technically, her dad's house. She has struggled with what to take and what to leave, since he purchased most of everything. We will be spending this weekend finishing all the packing and moving her out completely.

"I don't know what to do about the kitchen," Natalia whines, leaning on the counter.

"Why?" I ask as I finish taping another box she has filled.

"If I'm being honest, I pretty much bought everything in here with my dad's card." She spins around slowly.

"If you want it, take it. If you don't, leave it. I think my kitchen is pretty stocked, but I don't need anything fancy." I shrug, knowing I'm not much help.

I don't know if her dad will be that petty to come after her for kitchen items, but maybe it would be safe if she left them.

"Fine. I'll take what we need and leave the extras." Her crooked smile tells me that she's about to pack the kitchen and mine will be thrown out.

Each night, some of her décor came home with us and she has slowly been making my place more to her liking. Instead of being exhausted after a full day of work then packing, we come home and she spends another thirty minutes to an hour decorating or organizing.

I wish she would slow down, let herself process everything that's happening, but she has been going non-stop like the energizer bunny. My biggest fear is that she'll regret this decision. The decision to be with me when it registers everything that she's giving up. Am I enough to leave a life of privilege?

She begins opening and closing cabinets, examining all the contents. I open a new box and begin taping it for her to use.

“Why don’t we finish the kitchen and all the last-minute stuff tomorrow? The guys will be here on Sunday to help me load the U-Haul.” I begin massaging her shoulders.

She begins to sag under my hands. She takes a long breath in, releasing it slowly. My thumbs make circles above her shoulder blades, kneading knots out as she groans and tightens from the pain. Several minutes pass, as I keep placing pressure on different areas.

I kiss her neck. “Let’s go home and finish tomorrow.”

“What if this is a mistake?” Natalia says, just above a whisper. I don’t know if she meant to say it out loud.

Pain shoots through me with the question. I was dreading the day she came to that conclusion. Her life was too comfortable to give up. I take a couple of steps back until I hit the counter behind me.

“It’s not too late for you to change your mind. They’re your parents and I would understand if you’re having second thoughts about cutting them out of your life,” I respond diplomatically, even though I want to be anything but. I love her enough to let her go if that’s what she wants. Her happiness is all that matters.

She whips around, her nose flaring.

“Don’t! Not now.” Her breaths are heavy. “You can’t doubt us now when I’m falling apart. I need you to be the strong one. To carry us like you always have. I don’t know what I’m doing. I need to feel like I’m doing the right thing.”

Tears well up and a single one slides down her cheek. As much as I want to be that for her, I’m terrified also. I want to be the strong one. The one who has no doubts. But every time I think of her walking away, I freeze. I don’t see a future.

Her arms come around and she hugs her middle as her head falls, chin to her chest.

“I want to be that for you. And I wish I was stronger... but... I know what pain and heartbreak feel like. I’m just as scared as you. Maybe more.”

She brings her head up slowly, tears flowing freely. “Why more?”

She chews her bottom lip.

“Because I’m not the one giving anything up. I’m gaining the world.”

She cocks her head, narrowing her eyes.

“I’m gaining you. I have the privilege to have you love me. But you... you may be gaining me, but are losing money and family in the process.” I shrug, the hurt of her thinking this may be a mistake consuming me. “If it’s too much for you, you need to tell me. Let me go.”

Her eyes widen as she shakes her head. She takes the few steps to me.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been selfish.” She reaches up and places her hand on my chest. “I’m so used to you centering me. Being the rock. I forgot about you and how you felt through all of this.”

She tucks herself into my chest, wrapping her arms around my middle.

“I feel like I’m spinning out of control. So many things are changing. I... as much... I don’t know. I want my parents. I hate that they are being like this. But I can’t go back to Aaron. Not when my heart found its home.” She tightens her grip around my center.

The fog that had clouded seeing my future with her slowly lifts and I wrap my arms around her, holding her close. I kiss the top of her head, my racing heart going back to normal.

“Cuete, I want to be that for you, more than anything. But right now, when you doubt or question, it sends me into a panic. I’m just better at hiding it than you.”

She pulls away, wiping her cheeks as she looks up at me. “Okay. I want a life with you. I have never loved anyone in my

life, but you. I need you. Have always needed you, even when you weren't there. No more doubts about us or my decision. I get scared and I let my mind go awry. I won't anymore." She places her hand between us. "It's us. It's always been us, and will always be us. Shake on it." Her lips pull into a small smile that reaches her eyes. A contentment.

I take her hand, wanting nothing else in life.

NATALIA

Looking around my semi-empty house, an overwhelming sense of sadness looms over me. While I don't regret my decision in choosing Mateo, I am devastated my parents wouldn't budge. Even with the threat of losing me. Who am I kidding, my threat has now become a reality. My family is gone. Now it's up to Mateo and I to create a new one.

Strong arms envelope me. Arms that have provided me safety and security since the first time I was tucked in between them.

"Are you okay?" Mateo says close to my ear. His breath on my neck sends shivers up and down my spine.

"Of course," I croak out, not expecting him to ask and not wanting to worry him.

"Honestly?"

"No." I fill my lungs with air and exhale slowly. "I just..." I shrug. "I'm sad and pissed at the same time. Both directed at my parents for pushing this." I wave my arms around the room. "But I can't do what they want, because I want us."

He squeezes me tighter, his chin propped on my head.

"I'll drive the U-haul to your place," Damian announces from the open door.

I pull away from Mateo and slide the house key out of my pocket, placing it on the entrance table. I type out a simple, straightforward message to my mom.

I'm all moved out. I left the key on the entrance table.

Send.

Walking out the front door, shutting it behind me and hitting the button to lock it, feels like the end of a chapter. All

I need to do now is flip the page for my happily ever after.

I turn away from the door, sun shining bright, to Mateo standing with the guys. His family. Who, I guess, will now become mine.

“My dad invited us all over for a barbecue later today. It’s my parents’ way of saying they miss us,” Damian announces to the group as he looks at his phone and then types something out.

“Hell yeah!” Jaxson says as Ricky follows up with, “Count me in.”

Mateo looks at me, brows raised.

I shrug. “Sure,” I say, giving him a small smile.



I’M SITTING on a plush outdoor couch, taking in Damian’s parents’ backyard. It’s a beautiful, homey oasis. The yard landscaped around a small pool is eclectic, with mix-matched décor that all flows together. This is a place for family. A place to come together for fun. I compare it to my parents’ backyard. While my parents’ backyard is gorgeous— magazine worthy, really—there is no life in it. No personality.

We’re Mexican. We should add some flair. But my mom reserves that part of her for specific rooms in the house that are only ours. The rest of the house is sterile.

Hindsight can be brutal, allowing you to notice what was right in front of you. I can’t decide whether I really didn’t notice, or if I refused to acknowledge these things until I was essentially kicked out.

“Can I freshen up your drink?” Damian’s mom, Maria, asks me.

“I’m good. Thank you,” I respond, hoping she sits down and talks to me. I’m tired of sitting in my own thoughts while

the guys play corn-hole.

“I’m glad you joined us.” His mom sits on the couch opposite me. “The guys never bring any girls to our barbecues. I was beginning to think they would stay bachelors forever.” Her smile widens mischievously.

Her statement catches me off-guard. “Really?”

“I’m afraid so. The only girls that ever came that aren’t family are Cici, Ritza’s best friend, or their friends. But the guys, they only bring themselves.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I just take a sip of my drink.

“But now that one fell, the rest will follow.” She winks conspiringly.

As if the guys know Damian’s mom was talking about them, Mateo, Ricky and Damian walk up and take a seat. Jaxson walks over to the grill and begins talking with Damian’s dad.

“I’ve missed these.” Maria puts her arm around Damian’s broad shoulders and leans into him. His mom looks so small beside him. Damian’s tall and solid; broad chest, muscular and a little intimidating.

“She’s come really far. She’s doing amazing.” I barely hear Damian’s hushed voice.

“When’s Ritza getting here?” Damian’s dad yells from the grill.

“I’m here. I’m here.” Ritza’s voice comes through the screen door.

The screen door slides open and Ritza walks out followed by Cici and Javie.

Ritza walks straight to her dad’s open arms. He holds her tight as she tucks herself in tightly while Javie stands behind her. Cici joins us on the patio and sits on Julia’s free side. I watch as Damian stiffens and shifts slightly away from his mom.

“Hi, Mom,” Cici chirps out, smiling, leaning in to give her a hug.

“Hello, Cecilia.” Maria smiles. “Where’s that new guy of yours?”

Damian’s jaw starts to tick and he fists his hand.

“He’ll be here later.” Cici shrugs. “Work or something.” Her lips turn down.

“Mija, I don’t know if I like a guy that doesn’t put my girl first.” Maria shakes her head.

“It’s fine. It’s new. And it probably didn’t help when I told him that Damian and,” she waves her hand around the patio, “all of them would be here too. A family dinner with a bunch of guys that aren’t related.” She giggles uncomfortably.

“What are you trying to say? We aren’t family?” Jaxson acts hurt.

Maria kisses her cheek then looks at Jaxson.

“Of course you fools are family.” Her lips pull out in a huge grin.

“That’s what I thought.” Jaxson tips his head, satisfied, then opens the cooler. “Anyone need anything?”

The relaxing evening continues and I’m able to temporarily forget about my own troubles. Listening to all the conversations, and whispered talks, I’m not the only person who has to deal with crap in their life. Everyone here has complained about one thing or another. And to be honest, I’m feeling a little selfish for thinking my own troubles were the only ones.

Crap! I sound like such a child. Self-centered and spoiled. But I guess I am. *Was*. I may have been raised that way, but I won’t let it continue to define who I am. Looking around, this is what Mari and I had been striving for. A normality that our parents wanted to escape. To become something different. Why can’t you have both worlds? Success and realness. Family. True love.

I'm lost in my own thoughts, but Javie catches my attention when he says, "Alex is freaking out that business is slow. Wants to do right by Lola and her family."

"It was that way at Fast Lanes. We had sporadic business for months," Damian shares.

"I know. And I'm sure, logically, he knows too, but since it's Lola's money... well, there's a bit of added pressure."

Lola's money? I knew they looked like complete opposites when I met them at Ritza's birthday party, but...

"Give us some of those discount cards you were talking about. When people come by, we can pass them out. Send some business your way," Mateo says.

"I TOLD YOU!" Ritza exclaims, laughing.

"Bonita, I was not going to ask your brother or his friends to advertise our business. That's—"

"Smart marketing and advertisement," Ritza chimes in.
"Thank you, Mateo!"



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MATEO

IT'S BEEN WEEKS. NATALIA AND I HAVE FALLEN INTO AN EASY routine. Work. Home. Amazing sex. Dinner. Friends. It almost seems too easy. Too comfortable. Waiting for the other shoe to drop. For something to go wrong. Something to let me know this isn't my life. We're still waiting to hear from her dad's attorney about the fifty grand. I thought I would have heard something by now. But no. The waiting game continues. I have a plan. The money is ready to be wired. I just want that over with so I can relax. If I still have that money, it almost feels like Natalia isn't mine. Which is completely fucked up. Like I'm buying her. I'm not. But that's the way this stupid money has made me feel. I can't really have her if I have the money.

“What's wrong?” Natalia turns over and snuggles into my side. Her naked body pressed into mine keeps the morning wood at attention.

“Nothing.” I deny my raging thoughts.

“I can hear you thinking.” She glides her fingertips over my abs.

“You cannot hear me thinking.” I huff out a laugh.

“Yes, I can. Wanna know how?” she challenges me.

“How?”

“Your breathing changes. It's not your relaxed, long breaths. It's short, frustrated sighs.” Her hand goes down and grips my length. “Need me to help you relax?” She begins stroking me as she places her top leg over mine. I can feel her warm pussy on my side.

“If you can,” I taunt her.

“You doubt?” She sits up, hair disheveled from a night's sleep, but eyes full of hunger.

“Prove it.” I smirk.

“My pleasure.” Her voice goes down an octave as her lips meet my chest.

She kisses and licks her way towards my cock. Teasing. Her lips are so close to him, I can feel her breath. She fists him and strokes a few times. She watches me with hooded eyes, licks her lips, and juts out her tongue, gliding it over and around my tip, tasting the precum seeping out. A guttural moan escapes, and she knows she has me. She winks at me, giving my cock a peck and opens, taking him in her warm mouth.

She hums in appreciation and the vibration, along with her sucking, makes me harder.

“Be a good girl and take all of him.” I place my hand on the back of her head.

She pulls up, my cock popping out of her mouth. “Your wish is my command.” She gives me a dirty smile.

She licks up and down my shaft, then opens wide and takes him in. Her soft gags as she pumps me in and out is my undoing. I unload in her mouth.

When I’m done, she swallows and licks her lips. It’s the sexiest fuckin’ thing. I grab her shoulders and pull her up, devouring her mouth. She pulls away, sitting up and grabbing her breasts, massaging them. “Told you I’m a great distraction.”

“You better sit up here,” I throw a pillow on the floor and pat an area by the headboard. “...and spread those legs for me. I need a little more distraction.”

“Are you saying I haven’t done my job?” Her eyes are full of fire as she nibbles on her bottom lip. “Because... I’m sure I can come up with something else.”

She pinches her nipple and moans in pleasure. One hand slides down her stomach, under her panties as she begins stroking herself.

My cock hardens again watching her. I want to feel her ecstasy. I want to give it to her.

“That’s it.” I sit up and grab her waist, moving her to the top of the bed. She giggles in pleasure.

She cocks a brow and keeps her legs closed. She licks her top lip seductively as she covers her breasts with her arm.

“Keep it up,” I warn her. Her teasing is doing things to me.

“Oh, I will,” she says breathily.

My hand lightly traces a path from the top of her foot all the way up the outside of her leg. She squeezes her legs closed, as her body starts to turn to putty under my touch. I hook my finger on the sides of her panties and begin sliding them down. Her breath hitches.

Wrapping my hand around her wrists I move her arms away from her tits that are peaked and swollen, waiting to be sucked. I spread her legs, moving myself between them, taking her breast in my mouth, sucking it while massaging the other. She groans in pleasure and lifts her hips, trying to rub herself on me. I gently bite her nipple. Sounds of pleasure escape her lips as she pushes her chest in my face.

Kissing and licking my way down, I swipe my tongue between her folds. Her sweetness and sex aroma fills my senses. I pull back, looking up at her as she exudes a fire of want.

As soon as I turn and lay on my back as she grunts out, “You’re going to leave me like this?”

“Hell no. I need you to sit on my face. Bring that pretty, pink pussy over here.”

Her chest rises and falls, a moment of hesitation and fear crosses her features.

“Get up. And straddle my face.” My tone is stronger, firm.

She slowly gets up on her knees and crawls over to me. She brings her leg over as she glistens even more above me. I stroke her and she bucks with the contact.

“Lower yourself.” I place my hands on her hips and bring her down until she’s right on my lips.

I swipe my tongue and she bucks down on my face. That’s my girl. I continue the assault over her engorged clit, then fill her with my tongue. Swiping, licking, biting, I continue to work her into a frenzy. As soon as I slide two fingers into her, I pay special attention to her clit, and she starts to come undone, her walls begin to grip my fingers.

I pull them out. “Ride your release out on my cock.”

She quickly maneuvers back and the guttural moan that leaves her lips, as her eyes close when fills herself with my rock-hard dick, is a fantasy coming to life.

“Ride him,” I groan out as her walls tighten and grip my length.

She lifts herself and comes down a few times, beginning to ride me. Finding her pace and pressure. Her breasts bounce with her rhythm. I thrust up, matching her pace. She leans forward, kissing me harsh and needy as she rolls her hips, brushing her sensitive nub against me.

Moans and deep breaths mingle as our tongues dance in unison.

“Mateo,” she breathes out my name as I feel her walls tighten around me.

“That’s it. Come for me.” I grab her hips and guide her to her ecstasy. I hold mine for just a moment longer, wanting to ride out my release. A few more pumps and her body is quaking and I let go.

Her body droops lazily on my chest, my dick still inside of her. Our breathing begins to return to normal.

She gives me a quick kiss then says, “Now to shower for work.” She clenches her muscles, squeezing my cock.

“Not so fast.” I roll us over, placing myself on top.

I begin kissing her, from her lips, to her neck, to the mound of her breast while giving her nipple a little lick, down

to her stomach, to between her legs. I spread her folds, watching my semen drip out of her.

“Do you know what seeing this does to me?” This has to be some sort of primal, animalistic fantasy. Wanting your girl to walk around with you inside of her.

“What does it do?” She comes up to her elbows, looking at me between her legs.

I swipe through her folds and she moans, bucking her hips, her head falling back. I rub the cum over her belly and thighs.

“Call me a caveman, but I want to mark you as mine.”

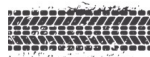
She picks up her head, her eyes sparkling with love and mischief.

“Then mark me.” She bites her bottom lip.

“Is that a dare I hear?” My pulse starts racing with excitement on how far she’ll go and tease me.

“Take it however you like, but I’m yours. So, mark me.” She cocks her brow, daring me.

How in the hell did I get so lucky with a girl like Natalia?



I’M LOOKING over a car that one of the new guys just wrapped up on. Making sure all is well, and the new guy who is temping is up to par. Our reputation is on the line. I don’t need anything to jeopardize our business, especially when I’ve already done my fair share of throwing a damn curveball.

The door to the waiting room opens and Cici walks out and says, “Mateo. Some guy is here looking for you.”

I grab a towel from the hood of the car and wipe my hands as I walk to the door. Once I reach Cici, standing with her hands on her hips, I ask, “Who is it?”

She lifts her shoulders to her ears. “Some suit.”

The other shoe has dropped. Probably a lawyer or courier dropping off Mr. Reyes's demand for the money. I pull the door open and step inside, Cici follows behind me.

"I'm Mateo," I inform the guy standing in the middle of the lobby area.

"Mr. DeLuna." The man hands me an envelope then says, "Sign here."

I sign and take the envelope, relieved and pissed at the same time. I knew this day would come, but was secretly hoping her dad would come around. A foolish man's dream. The man walks out the door and I slide the papers out of the envelope. Lots of legal mumbo jumbo, but there it is. Fifty grand to be paid back to John Reyes.

Fuck it. I was never supposed to have that money anyway. I have Natalia in my life and that's all that matters.

NATALIA

I'm still thinking about this morning's tryst on my drive home from work. Mateo makes me feel alive, powerful, adventurous... like anything is possible. I don't have to tame myself to fit someone's mold of me. He loves me for who I am, not who he thinks I should be. I've spent too much time thinking the past few weeks about my relationship with Aaron and how I let it go on as long as I did.

He's still trying to contact me. He was sending texts until I blocked his number. Then he resorted to sending me emails. Always talking about how 'right' we are for each other. Declaring his love for me. Over the top words that aren't him. Just a way to get my attention and maybe make me sympathetic. What I haven't seen is what we were to each other. How we fit together or are perfect for each other.

My relationship with Mateo is brand new, but I know the reasons we are perfect for each other. Why I love him. Why I can't see my life without him. Just like I can read when he's stressed without him saying anything, he can read me when I need comfort and security. Mateo knows when I need him to be my shield, blocking the negativity building in my mind when the disappointment in my parents' decision haunts me. He reminds me of our future.

The music stops and the phone ringing comes through the car speakers as Mateo's name fills the screen.

"Hey!" A too big smile spreads across my face just seeing his name.

"Hey, baby!" The cheerfulness in his voice forced.

"What's wrong?" Worry sits in the pit of my stomach. He doesn't hide anything from me, so why now?

He clears his throat softly. "Why do you ask?"

"Mateo." I'm not playing this game with him. "Spill."

A huff of a breath comes over the speakers before he says, “I got the paperwork from your dad today.”

“Oh, babe. I’m sorry. But at least now we know, and we can move on. Put it in the past and move forward.” I need to be the strong one now. I know it must be hard to give your dream away. Well technically, it’s still his, but he feels he’s buying his dream back now.

“I know.” His tone is defeated. “I wanted it to come. I needed to know. Like you said, move forward. But now that it’s here...”

“You have t—”



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MATEO

TIRES SCREECHING AND A LOUD CRASH INTERRUPTS NATALIA'S sentence. Her scream. Car horns. She was in a car accident. Shit! I hear her groan and begin shouting her name. More groans, but she says nothing.

"What's wrong?" Damian is by my side.

I tap the speaker button and click on the app to find her location. "Natalia has been in an accident. She's not responding." There is a pounding and muffled yell coming through the speaker.

"She's on 510 going west, looks like she was coming here," I say out loud for no reason. "I'm going to her. Call Jason to tow her car and bring here. It's a dark blue BMW, X Five. Tell him right before the Oak exit." I'm shouting as I'm running out of the garage and Damian is following me.

I hop in my Tahoe as Damian hops in beside me. He has his phone out and is typing on the screen. I back out, no time to ask what he's doing or why he's coming.

I have tunnel vision; my only thought is Natalia and wondering if she's okay. I drive through side streets knowing the freeway will be backed up by now and I won't be able to get to her in time. Damian is speaking with Jason on the phone and it seems he heard about the accident on the radio already.

My fists tighten around the wheel at every stop sign. All I need to do is get to her. Ramming the car in front of me who's driving under the fuckin' speed limit might be wrong, but for a split second, I considered it.

As soon as Damian finishes his call to Jason, I press Natalia's name on my phone. It's ringing and no answer. Why isn't she answering the fucking phone? The light up ahead has been green and I know if this damn driver doesn't move, it will turn. I bang my hand on the steering wheel, cursing. Fuck

it... there are no cars coming at me. I pull around the slow driver, honking.

“It won’t do Natalia any good if you get in an accident on your way to her,” Damian says matter-of-factly.

I know he’s right, but I can’t seem to slow down. Finally, the feeder road is up ahead. Four-wheel drive and oversized tires come in handy during times like this. I pull out through the backed-up traffic and drive on the grassy area until the police lights are right above me.

I shoot out of my car and run up the hill to the accident. Natalia’s car is totaled. Just by looking at it, I know. The entire rear area of her car is accordioned in, being rear ended by a large delivery truck. I rush to the ambulance, not seeing Natalia in the car. My heart is racing.

Natalia is laid out on a stretcher, her eyes closed.

“Natalia. Baby.” I reach for her.

“Sir,” an EMT says to me, “You are?”

“Mateo. I’m her boyfriend,” I answer and then ask, “has she been conscious?”

“Not really. It seems like she wants to, but hasn’t fully opened her eyes yet,” he answers. “We’re about to load her up and take her in.”

Looking around, I don’t see Damian.

“I’m going with her,” I tell the EMT.

I call Damian and he answers on the first ring. “How is she?”

I watch them load her in as I answer Damian, “Unconscious. Can you come up and wait on Jason? Get her purse and phone from the car. I’m going in the ambulance. I’ll let you know what hospital we go to.”

“On it.”

I end the call, climbing in the ambulance behind her. They close the doors, and the sirens begin. The EMT begins working on Natalia. Cutting open her top and placing

electrodes on her. Her chest is rising and dropping slowly. Her breathing seems normal. I grab her hand, bringing it to my lips. I won't lose her now. Not when I just found her again. Tears fill my eyes.

"Talk to her. Maybe she'll respond to you," the EMT tells me after he finishes placing all the contraptions to monitor her vitals.

"Natalia. Cuete. I need you to open your eyes. Tell me you're okay." The words desperate. "Please, baby. Tell me what happened. Fight with me. Something. Please. I need you. Anything."

The seconds tick by. She's completely still, except for the movement of the vehicle.

"Just squeeze my hand. Can you feel me holding your hand?" I pull it to my lips again. "Open your eyes."

I place my forehead on our joined hands. The Our Father prayer falls from my lips. A prayer so ingrained from childhood, I remember it word for word, yet I can't recall the last time I said it.

"Natalia." The EMT says her name.

I look up and her eyes are fluttering, but not staying open. A small bit of relief washes over me, but I need to know there's not any internal damage.

"Cuete, baby. Can you hear me?"

She groans, but doesn't form any words.

"She's awake. That's a good sign. Keep talking to her." The EMT is looking at the machines, seeming busy, but I have no idea what in the hell he's doing.

"Cuete. I need you to stay awake, okay? Don't close your eyes."

A tear slides down the side of her face. I gently wipe it away, bringing my lips to her forehead.

"You're going to be fine. I promise. I'm here. I'm not leaving you."

The pain I see in her eyes is too much to bear. I want to take it away. Carry it for her. She's too beautiful a soul to have to endure the pain she seems to be in. A few more tears slide down.

"Hey. Don't cry, love. You're fine. I'm here." I'm scrambling for what to say to her to ease her worries.

Her lips open and another painful groan escapes.

"Don't try to talk. Just stay with me. We are already heading to the hospital."

Another groan and then a strangled 'love' escapes her lips.

"I love you too. You're my whole world." I bring her hand to my mouth again.

I want to hold her. I want my words to be true. My body is trembling in fear. A fear I don't want her to see. So I do the only thing that I can think of.

"Damian's new chick came by the garage earlier." Start gossiping to get our minds away from the present. "She's okay, I guess. As hot as she is, Damian doesn't really seem into her though. Seems too high maintenance. Not sure if she'll last."

A small quirk of her lips lets me know I'm succeeding in pulling her mind away from the pain.

I continue babbling about the guys until we reach the hospital. They roll her away, leaving me alone, my heart and soul drifting away with her. I sink down into a chair, pulling out my phone to call Damian.

A COUPLE of hours pass and still no word about her. They came out earlier to ask her name and officers arrived shortly after Damian. He was able to collect her things from the car before Jason hauled it off.

"Still no word?" Ritza walks in with Javie and Cici in tow.

"No," Damian answers, shaking his head.

Ritza pulls a couple of bottled waters out of a bag that Javie is carrying and hands one to me and the other to Damian. Ricky and Jax just left to go to the cafeteria to get something to eat.

“Thanks,” I say out of habit, zoned out, my mind solely on Natalia.

They begin talking around me, but all I hear is blah, blah, blah... nothing making sense. Nothing registering. More like Charlie Brown’s mom speaking. My mind is on replay of this morning. Waking up with her in my arms. Her soft, warm body curved into mine. Her hair splayed across the pillow. Content and happier than I have ever been. Planning on the day when I would pop the question. Knowing without a doubt I’m spending the rest of my life with her.

Time ticks by... My friends are in and out of the waiting area we were sent to. I haven’t moved. Fear has me frozen in place. My body is stiff.

The door opens and in walks her parents with Aaron. Her dad points a look at me while the douche looks at me, sneering. A waiting room full of fucking alphas should make him nervous, but I guess he ain’t that smart.

“Mateo,” her mom calls my name.

I take a deep breath in, not wanting this interaction now.

“Yes, ma’am.” I stand, rolling my neck out.

“Has the doctor said anything?” she continues.

“No. I’ve been waiting since we got here.”

“We’re here now. You can leave,” her dad cuts in with authority.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I bite out, nostrils flaring, muscles tensing.

“You are not family. You do not belong here,” he counters and I see douche from the corner of my eye with a smirk.

“Not yet. But she will be my wife,” I say through gritted teeth. “You will have your money back, and she and I will be

done with you.” I feel the guys’ mood in the room change.

“I doubt you even have the money to pay this hospital bill. How in the hell can you take care of her?” Douche decides to insert himself in the conversation.

My whole body goes rigid; I’m stiff as a statue, holding myself from beating him.

“I may not have your money, but you have no idea how to make Natalia happy,” I grit out, fists clenched by my sides.

One side of his lips pulls up. “It’s all about the money. Money talks. That’s what makes women happy. Natalia just needs a bit of adventure.” He shrugs. “I’ll let her get it out of her system and she’ll come back on her knees, begging me to take her back.”

I want to knock the fucking smirk off his face.

The door opens again and a doctor walks in.

“I’m Doctor Harris. For Natalia Reyes.” He scans the room as I step toward him.

“Yes,” I answer as her dad does the same.

The doctor begins speaking, not allowing her dad to pull them away for privacy.

“She is sedated, and we will be keeping her that way for now. She had a serious concussion and a slight swelling in her brain. We want to keep her as calm as possible until the swelling goes down. She also has a cracked rib. But other than some bumps and bruises, she seems fine.” He pauses, looking around the room.

I’m frantic and want to see her now, but with her parents here, I know it will be a challenge. Damn it. I’m cussing up a storm internally. I am filled with so much fury and nervous energy, I feel like I’m going to crawl out of my own skin.

“Does anyone have any questions?” the doctor asks.

“When can—” Both her father and I begin and stop, glaring at each other.

His eyes narrow, then turns back to the doctor. “Please have someone escort him out. He is not welcome here. He is of no relation to Natalia. Her fiancé is with us.” He waves his arm in douche’s direction.

My fists clench and I take a step toward her father. Hands on each shoulder hold me tight.

Ricky comes in close, whispering in my ear, “Y’all aren’t married. Those are her parents. We gotta go. We’ll figure it out.” He grips my shoulder a little harder.

It’s taking everything in me not to go after her damn father. Or the douche. Right now, I wouldn’t care which. I look at her mom and as soon as our eyes meet, she looks down, avoiding my gaze.

“Let’s go.” Ricky shoves me lightly.

“I’ll go for now. But when she wakes up, you better be ready for Natalia’s wrath. She won’t be happy you kept me from her.”

The doctor looks between us uncomfortably.

My hands are tied, like Ricky says. I’m her boyfriend. That’s it. Nothing more. I have no legal ties to her. But that sure is hell going to change as soon as she wakes up. I will not have her parents keeping her from me. I need to figure out how I can see her. Let her know I’m always going to be there for her. No matter what.

I begin walking to the door the doctor came through, Damian and Ricky still holding me, ensuring I don’t do anything stupid. Or holding me in case her dad or the douche say anything to set me off.

I can’t believe I won’t be able to see her. I... My body sags with the realization that I don’t have the means to fight for her. All I have is wrapped up in a business I shouldn’t have anyway. That money was never mine. Maybe her dad was right, I was never meant to amount to anything.

But Aaron. He can give Natalia the world. Anything her heart desires, would be hers.

“Don’t go there, man.” Damian’s voice breaks through the spinning thoughts of defeat.

I drop my head, shaking it. There’s no hiding I’m fuckin’ broken.

“You’re giving up? Really?” Jax’s tone has a hint of challenge. “Mandilón (*Pussy*). You’re telling me Natalia has more cojones (*balls*) than you?”

The fog I was just getting lost in starts to lift. Shit! I let her dad and the douche get into my head and let me think he beat me. Again. I’m not eighteen anymore with no experience. Natalia will not be happy her parents are there. Especially not with the prick. And that they kept me from her.

“You’re right.” I take a deep breath, rolling my shoulders back. “But how in the world can I get in to see her?”

“Really? You think it’s going to be hard?” Jax pipes in happily. “We schmooze the nurses after visiting hours. Her parents should be gone by then.”

Ritza and Javie cackle loudly behind me as my eyes widen. Only Jax would think to use our pick-up power in a hospital.

“Not a bad idea,” Damian says, while Ricky replies, “Makes sense.”

“This isn’t a bar, guys,” Ritza quips behind us.

“True, but I don’t mind taking one for the team.” Jax spins, walking backward, while smirking at Ritza.

BACK AT MY PLACE, the guys and I are sitting around my living room, take-out bags scattered about. They have some movie playing, but I don’t know what’s happening because my mind is on Natalia. My phone buzzes in my lap and I jump. My first thought is Natalia’s texting me, but instantly remember, I have her phone. I look at the screen and a text waits.

MARISOL

Tell Nat to call me. I've been texting her, but she hasn't answered.

Mari! I hadn't thought about her. If I can't get in to see her tonight, I can ask Mari for help. I can't tell her this through text. I hit her name.

"Did your phone die, chica?" Mari says upon answering on the first ring.

"Mari. Sorry, it's Mateo," I say, stopping, not knowing how to proceed with the news.

"Oh. Uh—"

"Mari, I hate to be the one to tell you... I mean, I hate having this conversation at all. But..." My voice gets stuck in my throat and the guys mute the TV.

"Spit it out!" Mari says angrily.

"What's going on?" Eliazar says in the background.

"Nat was in a car accident. She's in the hospital, in the ICU. I'm not there because her dad kicked me out," I blurt out, the words running together with the speed I said them.

"Wait. What?"

"She's okay, I think. All I know is that her brain is slightly swollen from a major concussion. They have her sedated now so that she remains calm to let the swelling subside. A large delivery truck rear ended her. I heard the accident happen. I was on the phone with her. I was able to get to her and she woke up in the ambulance. But then her parents found out about the accident, came to the hospital with her ex and her dad kicked me out."

"Oh my gawd," Mari says quietly, then continues, "Babe, Nat is in the hospital. She was in a car accident."

I listen to Mari tell Zar what has happened.

"She's in the med center. Methodist ICU. I'm going to try and go after hours tonight. At least for a bit. I want Nat to hear

my voice. She needs to know I'm there for her. But," I pause, knowing I'm about to ask for a huge favor. "In case we aren't able to finagle me in, will you go visit her? If her parents are there, tell them you'll stay with her, give them a break. And that way I can sneak in."

"You don't have to ask me twice. I can't believe her dad is being like this. I know image is everything. And I always thought *my* parents were bad. Nope. Hers take the cake," Mari says in disbelief. "But even if you get in tonight, I'll still get you in during the day. Nat would kill me if she found out I didn't help you." A small giggle comes through the phone. "And you know I'm right."



I'M nauseous walking through the halls of the hospital. I wish I didn't have to be here. That Natalia and I were safe in our home, cuddled in front of the TV. But instead, I have to figure out how to flirt with the nurses just enough to soften them to let me see her. Our booted footsteps echo in the quiet hall.

The nurses' desk comes into view. No one seems to be around, until we turn the corner. Three nurses are in the area. One is looking at an open binder, another on the computer, and the last is a guy and he's the one that notices us first.

"Visiting hours are over. You'll have to come back in the morning," he promptly says.

The other nurses look up from their work, their eyes dancing to each of us.

A lump forms in my throat, blocking any words from escaping. I'm so close. I want to start sliding doors open to find her.

"Good evening," Ricky says with a smile. "Yes, we realize visiting hours are over. We were just hoping you could help our friend out. If not, we completely understand." He lifts his

hands up nervously, palms out. “But, can you at least hear him out?”

The nurse at the computer asks, eyes narrowed, “How can we help?”

I suck in a large breath of air, preparing myself for more bad news. “My girlfriend, Natalia, is in one of these rooms. She’s the love of my life. I would marry her right now if it meant I could sit by her side until she wakes up. But since we’re not married, her dad kicked me out. He’s rich and powerful. And I’m a nobody. I just want to see her. Let her know I’m here. Hear my voice.”

The lady at the computer turns around and looks at the lady with the binder, then the guy, before a large smirk spreads across her face. She nods her head a couple of times. The guy nods in agreement, looking at the nurse standing beside him.

The nurse with the binder gives me a small grimace. “They are really strict about visiting hours in the ICU and we really shouldn’t let you in.”

Time freezes and all I can hear is static in my ears. I close my eyes.

“But... I guess I can let you in. Just for fifteen minutes, though. I don’t want us to get in trouble in case someone comes in,” she finishes.

A breath whooshes out. “Thank you.” I smile. “Where do I go?”

“Before you go in, please know she looks pretty banged up. Black eyes, probably from the airbag contact. And she won’t wake up. She’s heavily sedated while we monitor the swelling in her brain.”

I just nod, wishing I could take her place.

“Follow me,” the same nurse says coming around the counter.

I follow her past several rooms before she stops. She pauses before she slides the door and pushes the curtain aside.

There lies the woman who stole my heart when I was sixteen years old. My chest tightens seeing her like this.

“Is she in pain?” I ask softly, fear coursing through my bones.

“No, sir. The doctor has her on some pain medication, but not much right now while she is sedated. When she wakes up, he’ll probably increase it though, depending on how she feels.”

“Oh. Okay... uh... so she will...” My voice fades, unable to finish the sentence.

“Will?”

“She’ll... uh... wake up?” My voice quivers.

“I can’t say with a hundred percent certainty, but yes. We just want her calm while her brain heals. Doctor does not feel there is any damage. Just an extreme concussion.” Her tone is filled with authority. “Talk to her. Let her know you’re here. Let your voice be her reason to heal.”

Tears I did not expect filled my eyes. The nurse pats my shoulder and gives me a small push to move into the room. I take slow, controlled steps, letting my gaze sweep her still form. I pull the chair up closer to the bed and sit down, grabbing her hand. The small connection is my only lifeline right now.

“Cuete, baby. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here sooner to comfort you. To calm any fear. I wish I could take all this from you. Just know it wasn’t my decision not to be glued to your side. But that’s a conversation for another time. You don’t need to worry about that right now.”

I drop my head on her bed. What do I tell her? What can I say to her? Can she hear me?

“Oh gawd, do I love you. Do you realize how fuckin’ terrified I was when I heard the accident? And when you didn’t answer me. I have never been that scared in my life.”

I swallow back a sob that wants to escape. She doesn’t need to worry about me if she can hear me. I need to carry it

all.

“But you’re going to be fine. That’s what the doctor said. You just need a few days of rest. Let your body get over the trauma it experienced. That’s all this is. You will be back to yourself in no time, I promise. I’m walking every step with you... Just know I can’t be here the whole time. But I will come as much as I can.”

I take a breath in.

“I guess I should let you know that we’re getting married. Soon. I’m not waiting any longer to spend the rest of my life with you. I know, I know, I need to find a ring. I will. That is a priority now. And that way, no one can ever keep me from you. I can always protect you. Carry whatever stress or uncomfortableness you face for you. You are mine and I am yours... Only ever yours.”

With nothing of substance left to say, I begin to babble on about my day and the cars that came into the garage. Just the typical daily conversation we usually have during dinner. I ask her questions about her clients, even though I know she can’t answer me.

A throat clearing brings my attention to the door. “I hate to interrupt, but... uh...”

I nod, smiling. “I won’t overstay my welcome.”

I bring Natalia’s hand to my lips, placing a tender kiss on her palm before standing.

Walking out, I turn to the nurse. “Thank you. Really. I needed to see her.”

The sparkle in her eyes lets me know if she’s on duty, I will be able to spend a few minutes with Natalia while she’s here.

DAMIAN DRIVES us all back to my townhouse where the guys left their cars. The ride is quiet until Jax exclaims from the front passenger seat, “Are we gonna tell him yet or not?”

“Tell me what?” I look to each of them from the back seat. Damian’s gaze pierces me from the rearview mirror.

“Well, it seems Natalia’s dad has made some people mad. His demands. His attitude. His treatment of the staff...” Damian begins.

“That’s not a surprise. He walks around acting as if he’s the biggest dog in the room,” I reply, not at all shocked.

“But since he’s acting like an ass, they now want to do something to go against him. Like let in the one guy that he has told them to never let in. He gave them your description and told them they were to call security if you tried to see her.” Ricky smirks.

“Little does her dad realize that you can charm the pants off anyone. And having us there as back up helped your cause. I mean... look at us.” Jax’s ego is a little too large.

“Or it was the sincerity and love they heard in his voice,” Damian retorts.

An unexpected laugh bubbles up and I can’t hold it in. Leave it to Damian to knock Jax back down to reality.

“Which means, whenever you want to see her and her parents aren’t around, you will be let in. And if it had to be after visiting hours like tonight, they will let you in for a few minutes. You have the clear to see her,” Ricky says, finishing the story.

The tightness in my chest loosens up just a bit. Enough to take what feels like the first real breath since I heard the accident.



THE NEXT SEVERAL days go by in a blur. I wake and go into the garage. Working mainly in the office, waiting for Mari’s call to meet her at the hospital. Sneaking in and spending time with Natalia for a few minutes. Back to the garage to keep me

occupied. Then showering and heading back to the hospital after hours to see her again.

When I saw her car in the garage for the first time after the accident, I was sucker punched. It's totaled. The frame is bent, which will usually total a car, but even if it wasn't, the entire back half was demolished. If she was driving anything smaller than her crossover, she might not have made it. How fast was that fucker in the delivery truck going and why didn't he slow down in rush hour traffic? I could kill him.

IN HER ROOM, while Mari is standing right outside, I drone on about the guys and how lonely I am without her. Wishing she was home with me. My fifteen-minute timer goes off and I stand, scanning her still form. Her black eyes are starting to slowly fade, still awful, but not as dark. Her complexion is pale. I kiss her forehead softly, letting my lips linger on the warmth of her skin.

The door slides open and Mari quirks her eyebrow up.

"I'm going."

One last look at her and I walk out the door.

Leaving her room before heading back to the garage, a nurse stops me. "I just thought you should know. She's going in for another scan later today. If the swelling has decreased, they will start waking her up probably tomorrow or the next day. I'll let the night staff know to give you the information."

My throat tightens. "Thank you. Really."

I'M DISTRACTED the rest of the day, wondering how her test went. Wanting desperately for them to wake her up, but wanting her to rest peacefully and with no pain if that would be better. I've dropped too many tools to count. Cussed out a couple of the mechanics that were doing nothing but trying to help me. And it doesn't help that I continue to see Natalia's car and the damage. I'm counting down the hours until I'm back at the hospital.

The nurse from the first night is the only one at the nurses' station when I arrive.

“Hi.”

She smiles when she sees me and nods her head.

“She’s doing fantastic. The doctor will be in again tomorrow and they will be waking her.”

“Uh...” I hate to bring our drama into the hospital, but feel it may be important. “You know that her parents hate me. And don’t want us together. But what I haven’t shared was that she had stopped contact with them a few weeks back. When they disowned her for choosing me. So uh... what happens when she wakes and sees them? And I’m not around. If she gets angry or scared...”

I can’t let them wake her and not know she could stress herself again with them here. And worry if she doesn’t see me.

“I really can’t say anything to the doctor. Then he’ll know that we have been breaking protocol. But I can suggest that we wake her with no family around.” She shrugs, her lips pulled down.

“Okay, yeah... I guess. Do you know what time? I can be here. Close. In case she needs me.”

“I’m sorry. The doctors never tell us when they will be around.”

“Thanks.” I walk away towards her room, wondering how I will be able to protect her tomorrow.

Again, I spend our time talking about my day. I let her know how well she’s doing and everything that will be happening tomorrow. I hope she can hear me and knows I’m doing everything I can think of to be here for her.

A tap on her door tells me my time is up. I stand up, kissing her cheek and whispering, “Don’t worry. I’m here. I’m always going to be here. Even if you don’t see me right away.”

Back in my car, I call Mari and tell her the news. I’m going to need her close to her parents tomorrow so that she can call me if Natalia needs me.

NATALIA

“Watch her vitals,” a strange voice says. It sounds like I’m in a tunnel and it’s far away.

“All normal,” someone else says.

“Is the pain medication ready?”

“Depending on how she responds, I’ll adjust.”

A dream. I’m floating. But I want to open my eyes. It’s that weird lucid state between a dream and consciousness.

Beep. Beep. Beep. That sound is annoying. I slide my hand to feel for Mateo. I’m at the end of the bed. This is not my side of the bed. My eyelids are incredibly heavy.

“Natalia. Can you hear me?” the strange male voice says.

Panic. Why is a strange man with me? The annoying sound beeps faster.

“Calm down, Natalia. Please. You’re in the hospital. I need you to wake up and tell me how you’re feeling. Can you do that?”

Hospital. What am I doing in the hospital? Open your damn eyes. The beeps. All I can hear are the beeps.

“Come on now. Open your eyes. Talk to us. Tell us how you’re feeling. Are you confused?”

No shit, Sherlock, I’m confused. Where’s Mateo? Why isn’t he talking to me? I know he would be here. He wouldn’t leave me scared and confused.

“Ma—” The sound that leaves my mouth is unintelligible.

“Talk to us. What’s on your mind?”

My eyes flutter open to a small room and a man with a doctor’s coat is standing over me. Fear fills me.

“Are you in pain? You can just nod.”

Pain? I try to move my body and yes, it seems to be achy all over. But I need Mateo.

I clear my throat and try to moisten my mouth which I now realize is extremely dry. A nurse with kind eyes holds a glass with a straw in front of my lips. “Small sips.”

I open my mouth and the cool liquid feels amazing. I clear my throat again and finally say, “Mateo.”

“Who’s Mateo?” the doctor asks.

“My boyfriend.”

“Oh. Right. Your family is waiting outside. Let me check you over first. We’ll get any pain you have under control and then I’ll call them in.”

My heart settles. He’s here. I knew he would be here.

I let the doctor examine me. And while I am in pain, it’s somewhat tolerable. They explain the car accident and I remember a vision of seeing Mateo in the ambulance. Question after question, I continue to answer. Since it was a brain trauma, they are ensuring I have my memories and am cognizant. After several agonizing minutes, the doctor goes to the door to call Mateo.

But instead of Mateo, my dad, mom, Aaron and Marisol walk through the door. The stupid machine begins beeping faster again.

“You must be Mateo.” The doctor holds his hand out to Aaron.

“What? No.” The scowl on Aaron’s face is instant.

I look to Mari, eyes wide. She just nods and begins typing on her phone.

“What are you doing here?” I try to move but groan in pain.

“Natalia.” My mom comes closer to the side of my bed.

“Stop.” I look to my mom.

“You can leave Aaron.”

“He will do no such thing!” my dad exclaims.

I look to the doctor. “I only want Mari here.”

The doctor looks confused, bouncing his gaze from me to my dad.

“Where’s Mateo?” I ask.

“You’re confused. Mateo was your boyfriend in high school, sweetheart. You’re engaged to Aaron now,” my mom says softly.

I shake my head. “No, no, no.”

Aaron takes a step closer to my bed.

“Stop,” I say, lifting my hand up.

The nurse turns to the beeping machine and turns the volume down.

“Natalia. You answered the year correctly earlier. Are you confused now?” The doctor’s brows cinch together in question.

“No, I’m not.” Adrenaline begins to course through my veins, and I want to walk out of here and find Mateo. “Please make them all leave. Except Mari.” I point at my friend who is still typing on her phone.

“Let me speak with Natalia. Why doesn’t everyone step out for a few more minutes? This additional confusion and stress is not good for her.”

I close my eyes, the pounding in my head intensifying.

“We will be staying. I’m her father and this is her fiancé. Go ahead and do any other exam you need, but we will stay.”

“Please. I need her calm and your presence seems to upset her,” the doctor presses.

“We will not be leaving.” The air of authority in my father’s tone is the one that makes people succumb to his commands.

“Natalia,” Aaron says with his smooth voice, which only grates on my nerves further.

Tears well up; I'm helpless in this bed. In a hospital with a brain injury. Will people believe me? Why is my dad doing this to me? I need to go back to sleep. That's when I know I heard Mateo's voice. When my dad is not around, I need to ask Mari what's going on. To help me. She's giving nothing away, avoiding my looks.

Booted footsteps are getting closer. I know those steps. I open my eyes and look to the door. Mateo walks into the room, his eyes meeting mine.

"I'm here," he says to me.

"He is not welcome here. Please ask security to escort him out," my dad says to the doctor.

"And you are?" The doctor looks to Mateo.

"Mateo. Her boyfriend." He steps to the side of my bed closest to my mom.

"And you have a fiancé?" The doctor glances around the room as the nurse is typing on her phone.

"No," Mateo and I answer at the same time.

We look at each other and smile.

"I turned Aaron's proposal down and broke up with him. I'm only with Mateo. And I haven't seen my parents in weeks since they were upset I would not listen to them and marry Aaron. So, you can kick my parents out," I inform the doctor.

"Natalia, when are you going to learn that he's not right for you?"

My mom looks to me, her eyes pleading to listen. Aaron takes a step closer to the bed.

Mateo rolls his shoulders back, his face stone, eyes narrowed. "You can stop there."

Aaron halts as his eyes sweep Mateo. The tension in the room escalating quickly.

The doctor looks around the room nervously, then says, "Okay. I'm going to listen to the patient. Mateo, you may stay. I'm going to ask everyone else to please exit the room."

Aaron takes that as his cue and is the first to walk out, followed by my dad and mom.

“I’ll be back later, chica. Give you two some time,” Mari announces, walking out.

Mateo pulls a chair close to my bed, grabbing my hand and placing his forehead on the bed.

I place my other hand on the back of his head, running my fingers through his hair. Having him here calms me.

He raises his head, his eyes filled with unshed tears. “How are you feeling?”

“Better now that you’re here.”

“Seriously. Are you in pain? Do you need anything?” His voice cracks.

“I hurt all over. And I have a headache. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Yes. I need to know how I can help. Let me tell the nurse so they can get you something so you’re more comfortable.” He begins to stand but I clutch his hand, not wanting him to leave.

“No, stay. I’ll get that stuff later. Tell me why my parents were here.”

He tells me what has happened over the last few days. The clever ways he came to visit me, and Mari doing her part to help.

“And I know I don’t have a ring, but we *are* getting married. No one is keeping me away from you ever again.” His voice is firm but full of emotion.

My heart is bursting. There is nothing I want more than to be married to Mateo, but it wouldn’t be me if I didn’t give him some kind of grief.

“Was that your proposal? It needs work. Try again.” I smirk, biting my lip trying to hold in my happiness.

His lips pull, holding a smile. He kisses my hand. “When I was sixteen, I met a girl. A girl who ended up turning my life

upside down. Who challenged me to be better. Want more. Protect harder. That summer I gave my heart away and never got it back. What I thought would be just a summer fling, because this girl was way too good for me, turned into something more. Summer after summer, love grew. And even through all our missing years, it was always you. My feelings never changed. No one could light up my heart the way you do. Natalia Reyes, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Through each word he said, tears of joy collected. Everything I wanted at eighteen is happening now.

"Yes," I nod my head, sniffing.

He brings his lips to mine in the gentlest of kisses.



**CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN**

MATEO

NATALIA IS TUCKED IN BED UPSTAIRS AFTER RETURNING HOME from the hospital, after one additional day of observation after they woke her. She still needs time to heal from the concussion and cracked rib. She was incredibly lucky. No memory loss. No lasting damage.

I begin to clean up the takeout containers of Chinese food I ordered for dinner. Leaving her here alone while I'm at work freaks me out. What if something happens and she needs me? What if I can't get to her fast enough? She's been trying to ease my mind, telling me to go to the shop. I finally agreed, but only for a few hours. Mari will be here while I'm gone. A compromise.

Turning off all the lights downstairs, I grab her phone to take upstairs when I notice a text from her mom. Curious, I open it.

MOM

I'm sorry for everything. Can we talk?

My body tenses, anger coursing through. For her. For me. For us. That's it. That's all she has to say? Everything. What's everything? The urge to swipe and delete is real, but I also want her to have her parents, if possible. I can swallow that large pill for her.

I hold the text down, debating if I should mark it unread. Let her read it tomorrow and decide what to do. But I can't lie to her. I won't lie to her. I need to tell her I read it and let her handle it the way she feels right. I need to trust in us.

I WAKE EARLY, Natalia on her back, not cuddled into me like always, but her hand clasping my forearm. I slide out of bed quietly, not wanting to wake her. I wash up and head

downstairs to start some breakfast. I carry a tray with a couple of scrambled eggs, toast, coffee and juice to the bedroom. Lucky me that she brought her kitchen here or I wouldn't have had a tray for her.

“Good morning, Cuete,” I call out to wake her. “Let's get you up for something to eat.”

She groans as her arms come up to cover her face. I place the tray on the dresser and stand by the side of the bed.

“Do you want me to help you sit up?”

Her chest rises and falls slowly. Big breaths like the doctor instructed her for her ribs. She moves her arms down and opens her eyes, and a small tug of her lips greets me.

“I need to pee.” She slowly starts to turn to her side.

I grab her arm to help pull her up to sit. She groans as her face twists in discomfort. I guide her to her feet where she takes another deep breath. I move to the side to hold on to her as she walks to the bathroom.

“Babe. I love you, but I don't want you in the bathroom with me.” She's taking small, slow steps.

“Fine. I'll get you settled and step out. You can call me when you need me to help you back up.”

“Nope.” She stops at the door to the bathroom. “You stay here. I go in there myself.”

“But...”

She points me with a glare. I let go of her arm and take a step back, raising my hands in defeat. A crooked smile appears, and she walks in, closing the door behind her. I sit on the bed, staring at the door. A couple of moans worry me, but I know she would call if she truly needed me. She's independent and in pain. Not a good combination right now.

I wait, ready to go in as soon as she calls. But the minutes pass as I listen to the groans, flush, and faucet running. She's insistent she can do it alone. She has nothing to prove to me, but I know in her head, she's proving to her parents that she doesn't need them. Never mind they can't see her now.

The door opens and Natalia stands, holding the frame. I widen my eyes at her in question, waiting for her to let me help. With a small nod of her head, I grab her arm to help her steadily walk to the bed.

“Do I have to stay in here? I can’t lay in bed all day. I’ll go crazy.” Her tone is on the verge of whining.

“Cuete, you need to let your body heal. The same reason they sedated you to keep you calm and unmoving. But I’ll make you a deal...” I pause, waiting for her to fight me.

She’s quiet for a few moments.

“What’s the deal?” I’m surprised she didn’t argue.

“When I get home, I’ll either carry you downstairs or help you down and we can watch a movie. And if you can withstand that, then we’ll keep adding more time.”

She sits on the bed and lets a long breath out. She’s tired from just walking the twelve feet to the bathroom and back. And tonight, I know she’ll want a shower.

“But...”

She’s about to counter, so I interrupt, “I’m not having you walk up and down the stairs solo or with Mari. If I’m with you, I know I can carry you if needed. I can bear your weight if you want to walk and work on your strength. I’ll call Mari and leave explicit instructions on not allowing you downstairs. And if you pester and annoy her, I’ll have her call me and I’ll come home and deal with you.” I smirk and raise a brow.

“Fine.” She huffs out and moans loudly when she tries to lift her leg on the bed.

I grab her calves and lift them, placing them on the bed.

“I’m going to need to do this on my own... and...” Tears fill her eyes as she chokes on the last word.

“And you will.” I sit next to her and bring her in my arms.

“But—”

“But nothing. I’m here to take care of you. You’ve wanted Mari to slow down at Sol. Now you gave her a good reason.

All she has to do is sit here with you and watch movies, talk, enjoy each other's company. It's the pause and reset you both need."

She pulls away and looks up at me, full of admiration.

"How did I get so lucky?"

"I'm the lucky one."



I'M DOING last checks on a car that the new guys have finished. The money I still need to pay Natalia's dad is on my mind. I was served the papers, but Natalia had her accident the same day. I haven't told her about it, not wanting to worry her. Which reminds me of her mom's text I forgot to tell her about this morning before I left. I was so worried about her comfort and setting her up before I left, it completely slipped my mind. I can't text her about it. Shit.

I start the diagnostic machine and take out my phone to call her and let her know when Damian's voice cuts through the music and garage noise.

"Mateo! Come on in here."

I turn, looking at him, but he just turns around and walks back in.

I grab the rag on the hood and make my way to the office. The waiting room is empty and a new girl we hired part time is at the counter, spinning on the stool, probably bored. Ritza hasn't trusted her to do anything but greet customers and answer the phone. Pretty sure we're paying her too much to spin in a chair.

I step into the office and am surprised to see Natalia's mom sitting in the office.

"Uh... hello, " I greet. My mind is spinning with reasons why she's here, especially without her husband.

“Mateo,” she clips out. Her lips pull together tightly.

“How can I help you?” I stay rooted in my spot, as Damian walks past me, closing the door behind him.

“It’s more like, how I can help you.” She waves her hand to the chair next to her.

I take the seat, wanting to show at least a little bit of decorum before I cut off any offer she thinks I’ll take.

“Thank you, but I’m fine. I don’t need your help.”

She glances down at her hands, grasping the purse in her lap.

“Sorry. Old habits. I should’ve said, how we can help each other.”

She looks back up at me and I stay quiet, not trusting anything that comes out of her mouth.

When I refuse to respond, she continues, “Natalia is stubborn. She’s just like her father. And I’m the one stuck in the middle. I can’t lose my daughter. I thought we could give her time and she would see she didn’t want to live normally. I thought... well... I guess you can figure out what I thought.”

“That she would miss the money more than me.” My jaw clenches, not wanting to sit here any longer.

“I want to make amends with her. I don’t want to live my life without my only daughter. I can’t be taken away from my future grandkids. I... I...”

I hate that I’m starting to feel bad for this woman. This woman that didn’t care one iota about me. But she is Natalia’s mom. I can’t stand in the way of Natalia and her mom.

“Okay. But how can we help each other?”

“Encourage her to talk to me. Let me back in.”

“Then what... you talk badly about me? Try and persuade her to leave me again? Try and break us up?” Frustration coursing through me, I stop myself from saying anymore.

“No. I know if I do, Natalia will cut me out for good. And... and I can't. I listened to Natalia's father. I always follow. But not now. Not when the price is this high.” A single tear slides down her cheek. She dabs it, dropping her gaze once more.

“Okay.” I breathe in, not wanting to fully commit to anything. She's here on her own and we both know Mr. Reyes is the one in charge.

It's quiet, neither of us speaking, avoiding each other's gaze. What feels like an eternity passes, but I'm sure it is just a couple of minutes. She mentioned helping me, but I'm the only one helping. She must think I'm stupid. But all of this will be up to Natalia.

“Look. I'm not here to get in between you and your daughter. Like you said, Natalia has a mind of her own. If she wants a relationship, I won't ever stand in the way.” I stand, hoping she gets the hint. I'll call Natalia now, let her know about your visit. Then let her decide what she wants to do.

“Please.” She points at the chair, then opens her purse and pulls out a paper folded in half.

I sit, curious. She extends her arm with the paper to me, nodding her head.

I grab it and unfold it.

It is a notarized form signed by Natalia's father. I scan it and see that he is forever rescinding his claim to the money he gave me.

“If my daughter chooses not to be a part of my life, at least I know I could help in some small way.” She swallows back emotion.

I stare at the document, not knowing what to say.

“And that's how we can help each other.”

I look up to her and her face holds so much hope.

“Thank you.” I take a breath. “Really. Thank you. And I'll speak to Nat tonight.”

“Thank you.” She stands and extends her hand to me.

I take her hand and she says, “I hope we can get to know each other.”

“Me too.” I return the sentiment, meaning it.

“I’M HOME!” I yell as I walk through the front door, knowing Mari is upstairs with Nat. I’m giving them full warning that I’m coming up if they are having ‘girl talk’ they don’t want me to hear.

As my foot hits the landing to the second floor I hear Mari whisper-shout, “Speaking of the devil himself.”

I laugh, knowing she said it on purpose.

“Yup. The devil himself.” I walk in, straight to Nat still in bed with three different drinks on the nightstand.

Mari is still sitting in bed with Nat, as they have their eyes glued to the TV. I kiss Natalia quickly and turn to look at the screen. There is a group of women screaming at each other. Guilty pleasure TV, I’m guessing.

“Stay. Enjoy. Finish. I’m going to take a shower.” I grab clothes from a drawer and walk into the bathroom, shaking my head.

Like Eliazar said, when he began dating Mari, Nat came as a bonus, and now I have Mari as a bonus.

I walk out of the bathroom and Nat is alone in the room.

“Mari left.” She smiles at me.

“How was today?” I sit on the foot of the bed.

“Not as bad as I thought. Kinda like in school when you stayed home sick. But now your bestie gets to stay with you.” She laughs, then moans in pain.

“Good.” I smile, hoping to cover the nerves of talking to her about her mom. “Do you want to go downstairs or wait and try tomorrow?”

“Actually...” Her eyes dance around the room. “I’ll try tomorrow... maybe. Walking to the bathroom takes a lot.”

My lips spread knowingly.

“Shut up.” She rolls her eyes.

“Hungry yet?” I ask, prolonging the talk.

“Nah... I think I might have gorged on too much junk food.” The wrappers and cups from their snack debauchery are all around the nightstand and floor.

“So, more like a hookie day instead of a sick day,” I tease with a kiss.

“Ha. Ha.” She begins to scoot herself down, huffing through the discomfort.

I watch her, full of pride. She can do anything.

“So... uh...” I stumble not knowing how to begin.

“If this is about the text from my mom you didn’t tell me about.” Her lips pull down.

“I’m sorry. I never—”

She interrupts, “Please don’t apologize. I can’t believe they did that at the hospital. What if I really had lost my memory and they fooled me into believing...” the words begin to trail away and her nostrils flare.

“Your mom is really sorry.” I pause, not believing that I’m actually going to plead her mom’s case now.

“Don’t. She listened to my father and his stupid... never mind. I don’t want to talk about them.” She takes a breath, letting it out slowly. “The more I breathe deep, the less it hurts. Or maybe I’ve fooled myself into believing it.”

“Or maybe you’re healing... but I need to talk to you about your mom.” I pause, waiting for her eyes to meet mine. “She came by the garage today. And yes, she really is sorry. She wants a relationship with you. She wants to try again.”

“Not if she doesn’t accept us,” she’s quick to counter.

I stand, grabbing the folded document from earlier. I return to the bed and hand it to Natalia.

“What’s...” She opens it and her eyes skim the page. “My da... uh...” She clears her throat. “Where... what...”

I chuckle as I watch Natalia’s brain short circuit. She is taken completely by surprise.

“Don’t laugh.” She exaggerates a frown. “I’m flooded with questions.”

“Take a breath and let me.” I explain the text from last night and the visit from her mom and everything she said.

“This is your call. I will support whatever you want. I only want you.” I lean down and kiss her shoulder.

“Are you sure? What if...”

What if they try intervening again? What if they go back on their word? What if this is a set up? All things I’ve considered.

“We take it as it comes. We. You and I. But again, this is your decision,” I stress to her. I don’t want to be like her parents, dictating what she can or can’t do.

She nods her head. “Okay.”

No more. No explanation. I’m left wondering what she’s decided.

NATALIA

Step. Pause. Step. Pause. How many steps are there? It's taking me forever to walk down these dang stairs. And I can only imagine what it will feel like going up. After being up and moving around, I'm dreading it already.

"Want me to carry you?" Mateo asks after I spend too long resting on this step.

"Yes. But no." I clench my jaw, preparing myself. My foot lands on the next step and I bring the next one down to meet it. "At this rate, I'll be speaking to my mom on the stairs." I huff out a defeated laugh.

"You are the strongest person I know. You got this." The passion in Mateo's tone gives me the jolt I need to take the last four steps a bit faster.

I've been home for a few days, and this is my first day coming down the stairs. I've been able to get up and out of bed on my own. I'm still incredibly sore, but it eases a bit each day. Mateo and Marisol have been my saving graces. Taking turns sitting with me, binge watching TV, napping, and reading.

My first real shower felt amazing, though I wish I wasn't in so much pain. Mateo's strong hands washing my hair and running his hands all over my body was such a turn on. But any way I moved, I was reminded of the pain. His knowing smirk would have aggravated me, but his gentleness and patience kept me from blowing up in frustration.

Mateo guides me to the couch and gets me comfortable before going to the kitchen. Trying to make it down the stairs, the minutes seemed to fly by, but now the wait is agonizing. My mother is never late. I pick up my phone to look at the time as the doorbell rings.

My throat closes up and I cough to clear it. Mateo opens the door to my mom standing across the threshold

immaculately dressed as always.

“Hello, Mateo.” She greets him with a tight smile.

He nods his head and pulls the door open wider, welcoming her in. Her eyes find me, and her steps quicken before she sits opposite me on the couch.

Mateo comes to me and brushes his lips past mine, whispering, “I’ll be upstairs if you need me. Use your phone, don’t yell.” He taps the phone in my hand.

I don’t want him to leave, but at the same time I know I need to face this alone.

“Mrs. Reyes.” Mateo tips his head and disappears up the stairs.

“He’s leaving?” The surprise in her tone can’t be missed.

“Yes. He knows this is my battle. My decision. My life.” I take a breath to let that sink in for my mom before I continue. “He will support me in my decision, no matter what it is,” I throw in out of spite.

“I deserve that,” my mother quips with a hint of sadness.

“You wanted to meet.” My stomach twists in knots.

“I know I hurt you. I should have known better than to get involved. You are too much like your father in that respect. He should have known. We raised you to be independent. To stand on your own. But then we wanted you to bow down to our wishes. That was never going to work.” She drops her head, as she rubs her hands on her slacks.

“How do we move on?” I wonder out loud, not seeing a solution.

“The only way, I think, is to start over. I want to get to know Mateo. I want us,” she waves her hand between the two of us, “...to do what we did before. Shop. Lunch. Talk. Your father will take some time. Not because he doesn’t love you, but because he does. Like you, he thinks he knows best, and he needs time to adjust his thinking. To... get over his bruised ego. He’s still angry, but proud at the same time. He knows

you will always stand behind your convictions. You won't cower."

Listening to my mom, I realize my parents' conundrum. While a strong-willed, independent daughter is a parent's dream, it is also their nightmare. And especially to my dad, who enjoys control and submission. An ache in my chest forms, but not from the accident, from missing my mom. Tears well.

"Are you willing to give it a try?" my mother's voice quivers.

I nod with a small smile.

"Good." Her lips pull out, as her eyes brighten. "How are you feeling?"

"A tiny bit better each day."

The small talk continues for a few minutes, before I ask, "Do you want to stay for dinner? Not sure what Mateo was going to pick up."

"Are you sure? I don't want to intrude."

"I'm positive. If you meant it when you said you want to get to know Mateo." A small test before I get my hopes up.

"I'd love to."

THE NIGHT FLIES BY. Conversation flows, my mom asking many questions of Mateo and he is open and honest with her about everything. He even informs her about marrying me as soon as I feel better. He admits his fear of them interfering again. She tries to ease those concerns, but I'm not sure if he believes it. At least, not yet. And if I'm honest, I don't quite believe it either. We laugh and shed a few tears. And when it's over, a promise to see me again next week.

I'm not fully convinced by one night, but I'm willing to keep an open mind. If my mom can keep my dad from trying to take control again, this might work.

Mateo closes the door behind my mom and then comes back to sit on the couch.

“Well...” He cocks a brow.

I shrug. “I’m surprised, but happy.”

“Let me carry you to bed.” He stands.

“I can walk, but help me up.”

He places his arms out in front of him so he can help pull me up. I stand, gulping air, my face pinching.

“I’m going to carry you up.” He places his arm under my knees and I wrap my arms around his neck as he lifts me gently. My body is still protesting, but grateful.

He climbs the stairs effortlessly, holding me close. His scent and the heat of his body stirring the urge for more while also being extremely tired. I have not put on any make-up or styled my hair since before the accident. And Mateo still watches me with a fire in his eyes.

Mateo places me in bed and brings the covers up. “Do you need anything? A pain pill or ibuprofen?”

I have been trying to avoid the pain medication the doctor prescribed. Tonight, I think I need one.

“I’ll take a pain pill.”

He leaves the room and returns with a pill and a glass of water. He hands me both, then begins to strip off his clothes for bed.

My hand freezes at my mouth as he grabs the collar of his shirt and pulls it over his head. I want to run my fingers over his rippled muscles and tattoos. To feel him again.

He lifts his head and catches me watching.

“Cuete, as soon as you are pain free, I’m having my way with you.”

“Promises, promises.” I roll my eyes, wishing I could handle it now.



EPILOGUE

MATEO

WALKING INTO NATALIA'S PARENTS' HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS, I am stunned speechless. As much as Natalia tried to warn me about her mom going over the top with decorations, I was not expecting this. This isn't over the top, but magazine worthy Christmas perfection. Not a normal person decorating their home for festivities, but a professional designer ready to showcase their home for all to admire.

Making amends with her parents has taken time and there have been a few setbacks caused by her dad, but her mom always smooths things over and makes things right again. She is determined to ensure she has her daughter in her life. So, if I'm the person who Natalia is choosing, she is supporting our relationship.

Thanksgiving was rough. He was upset with my choice of career and tried to buy the garage for me so that I could singularly "own" and manage it. Or supervise. Or I don't know, just not work on cars anymore. The one thing I want to do. I like owning it but want to work on the cars. To restore vintage vehicles and make them new again.

We were close to moving back into her house, or more accurately her dad's house, until he again tried to push too hard, and Nat decided she would not take any financial "gifts" from him. She didn't want the pressure of her dad trying to collect later.

Their home is filled with people, all dressed to impress and mingling. Not my idea of a Christmas Eve. My holidays are filled with food my mom and aunts made, casual dress, fun games, Santa tracking for the younger ones, and one present at midnight. We'll be heading down to the beach tomorrow to spend Christmas day with my family.

"Mateo," Mrs. Reyes says with a hint of relief in her voice, then looking at Natalia, "Darling." She briefly hugs her then

air kisses her cheek.

“Hi, Mom.” Natalia smiles brightly.

“Let’s get you a drink.” She waves her hand at a waiter walking around with a tray of champagne.

We each grab a drink and take sips.

“I lost your father a bit ago. He was talking to Mr. Davis about the construction problems on the new boutique hotel. But he mentioned wanting to talk with you both.” Her lips pull out as her eyes gleam.

I’m not sure how I feel about this. Is she warning us of what’s to come or is it actually going to be some good news? I look down at Natalia and her shoulders have tensed.

“Go. Mingle and we’ll find you in a bit.” She sees an older couple walk in and she waves and heads in their direction.

“This is normal for you?” I whisper in Natalia’s ear.

“Kinda.” She shrugs. “It wasn’t so bad in high school because my friends and their parents were invited. It turned into another party for us. Drinking all night... with parental permission.” She winks.

I shake my head, smirking.

“Come on. Let’s get some food. My mom always has the best caterers.” She grabs my hand, leading me through the house.

Natalia has introduced me to several people, friends of the family. I smile and shake hands. I follow Natalia’s lead, letting her catch up with people before gliding on to the next group. Her ex is standing with a group of men talking but I’m not surprised. Is this her dad’s surprise? Too bad I already placed a ring on that beautiful finger of hers.

We agreed not to elope as she builds her relationship with her mom again. Her mom would like to plan our wedding.

“What’s he doing here?” I nudge her shoulder and cock my head in his direction.

“Friends of the family.” Her lips pull down. “His dad is the man to his right.”

I drop my head to the side, cracking my neck. The muscles tense in anticipation of another altercation.

A hand on my shoulder startles me and I whip my head around to find Mrs. Reyes behind me.

“Natalia, your dad would like to see you two in his study.” She raises her eyebrows in amusement.

Natalia looks up at me and shrugs. She interlaces our fingers and begins following her mom.

I take one last glance back at Aaron, wondering if he will also be following. He looks at me, wearing a scowl, but doesn’t move.

“Natalia,” Mr. Reyes says as we walk through the door. “Mateo.” He tips his head, tone flat.

“Hello, sir,” I state politely.

Natalia gives her dad a kiss on the cheek and a quick hug before stepping back to my side again.

“I wanted to give you your Christmas present before you leave tomorrow. I figured maybe you could use it.”

“Okay.” Natalia drags out the word. She looks up at me and I take a breath, not knowing what to expect.

“I know you haven’t always agreed with my decisions when it comes to you, but know that I did them all out of love. I wanted the best for you. I wanted you to have everything that your mom and I had to do without growing up. I didn’t want you to struggle the way we did when we first started. Life isn’t always fair for people with brown skin. You have to prove yourself worthy before you even get a seat at the table.” He pauses and picks up a manilla envelope from his desk. “This is a pre-wedding gift.”

He hands the envelope to Natalia. Her mom leans into her dad’s side, smiling brightly. Natalia slides documents out and begins scanning them over.

“Are you serious?” she asks, her brows pull together, her tone not revealing whether it’s good or bad.

“Under yours and Mateo’s name. It is one hundred percent owned by you and Mateo,” her dad says. I’m still lost and wondering what’s happening.

“Dad.” Tears spring to Natalia’s eyes as she crashes into her dad for a bear hug. He holds her tight as he rubs her back.

I’m stunned silent, not knowing what’s happening, but not wanting to break this moment with Natalia and her dad.

After a few moments, Natalia pulls away and looks back at me.

“My dad has given us *the* beach house.” She stresses the word ‘the’.

I glance at her parents and then bring my gaze back to Natalia. A chill runs through my body with the fear of them buying her love. Small acts to get her to leave me. What am I saying, a beach house is a fucking large act. Shit.

I plaster a smile to cover my reservations about his motives. “Wow. That wasn’t necessary.”

Mr. Reyes tips his head. “Maybe not, but according to my wife, it was the least I could do. I know I have been the thorn in your side since the beginning. I will no longer stand in the way of your happiness.” His eyes dance between Natalia and I.

Natalia hands me the document she is holding. I scan it and the owners of the home are Natalia and I. Just us. Not like her house which caused the dispute a few months ago. He added Natalia’s name, but he was still the owner. On the beach house deed, his name is nowhere to be found.

I glance up at him and he points me with a knowing look. He knows I was doubting his intentions. “It’s yours.” He gives me the smallest tip of his head and a quick pull of his lips.

“Thank you.”

“I’ve been told that I need to start accepting the inevitable. This is my start.”

He's a man that is used to getting what he wants, so this is hard for him. I'm not who he thinks is best for his daughter, but is surrendering his judgment for his wife and Natalia.

Natalia goes in and hugs him one last time, giving him another kiss and whispers something in his ear. Whatever she said makes him smile larger than I've ever seen and seems to relax him. She pulls back and I go in to shake his hand.

"Again. Thank you." What else can you say when someone gives you a house?



MY BEACH TOWN has changed and grown over the years. The town fought so hard to 'keep her wild', and not accept advancement or the intruders coming in. But it happened anyway. But as much as it changed, it still stayed the same. Just like there was no taming Natalia there was no taming the town. They both evolved into something better.

"What are you thinking?" Natalia reaches over and squeezes my thigh as I drive into the subdivision of our new vacation home.

"Keep her wild." I glance at her, thoughts of christening the new house spinning in my mind.

"Wow. I had forgotten about that. All those signs and stickers around town. The fight against development." She breathes out, a small smile emerging. "So many memories."

"And now to make new ones." I park and turn off the Tahoe. I jump out, running around to the passenger door.

I open it and Natalia jumps in my arms, wrapping her legs around my waist. "Which room are we starting in?" She nibbles my ear and my cock jumps to life. She unwraps her legs and I place her down.

"Come on." She grabs my hand, pulling me to the front door.

I take the key and unlock the door. She steps in and I follow. She spins around the room as I take everything in. I've only been in this house a couple of times when her parents weren't home.

I look around the house that is now ours. It's bigger than my parents' home. The home I grew up in. Natalia steps in front of me.

"This is for us. Come with me." Her voice is gravelly with need.

She pulls me behind her, intertwining our fingers, walking up the stairs. She opens a door and walks in. This must have been her room. The bright pink accessories against the white walls. She opens the balcony door and steps outside. The sun is setting, just peeking over the horizon.

"This is where it all began." She looks up at me, a mischief in her eyes. "It was my first night here. I was counting down the days before I could go back to the city. But then you showed up and changed my life forever." She picks up her hands between us, showing nine fingers.

"I remember." I pull her close, bringing my lips to hers.



A TEXAS SIZED THANK YOU!

Thank you for spending time with Mateo and Natalia. I hope you enjoyed their story as much as I loved writing it.

Love the book? Please review!

As a small indie author, I appreciate any reviews. Reviews help future readers decide on the next book they will be picking up. Please take a couple of minutes to drop your review. Please visit [Goodreads](#), [Bookbub](#), and [Amazon](#).

If you post on social media, please tag me. I LOVE to see all the beautiful pictures and mentions.

Thank you, Thank you, Thank you!

☐ Tori



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THANK YOU!



TORI'S BOOKS

Graffiti Hearts Series

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Book 2

[Beautiful Serenity](#)

Book 3

Fast Lanes Series

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[Naive in Love](#)

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ABOUT TORI ALVAREZ

Tori Alvarez is an educator by day and author by night. She spent her days daydreaming different stories and scenes so she finally took the plunge and began putting them down on paper.

She writes real, honest romance with a hint of steam. She is a sucker for happily ever afters, so you will always find them in her books too.

Tori is a Texas girl, born and raised. She lives in South Central Texas with her husband, daughter, dog & cat.

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