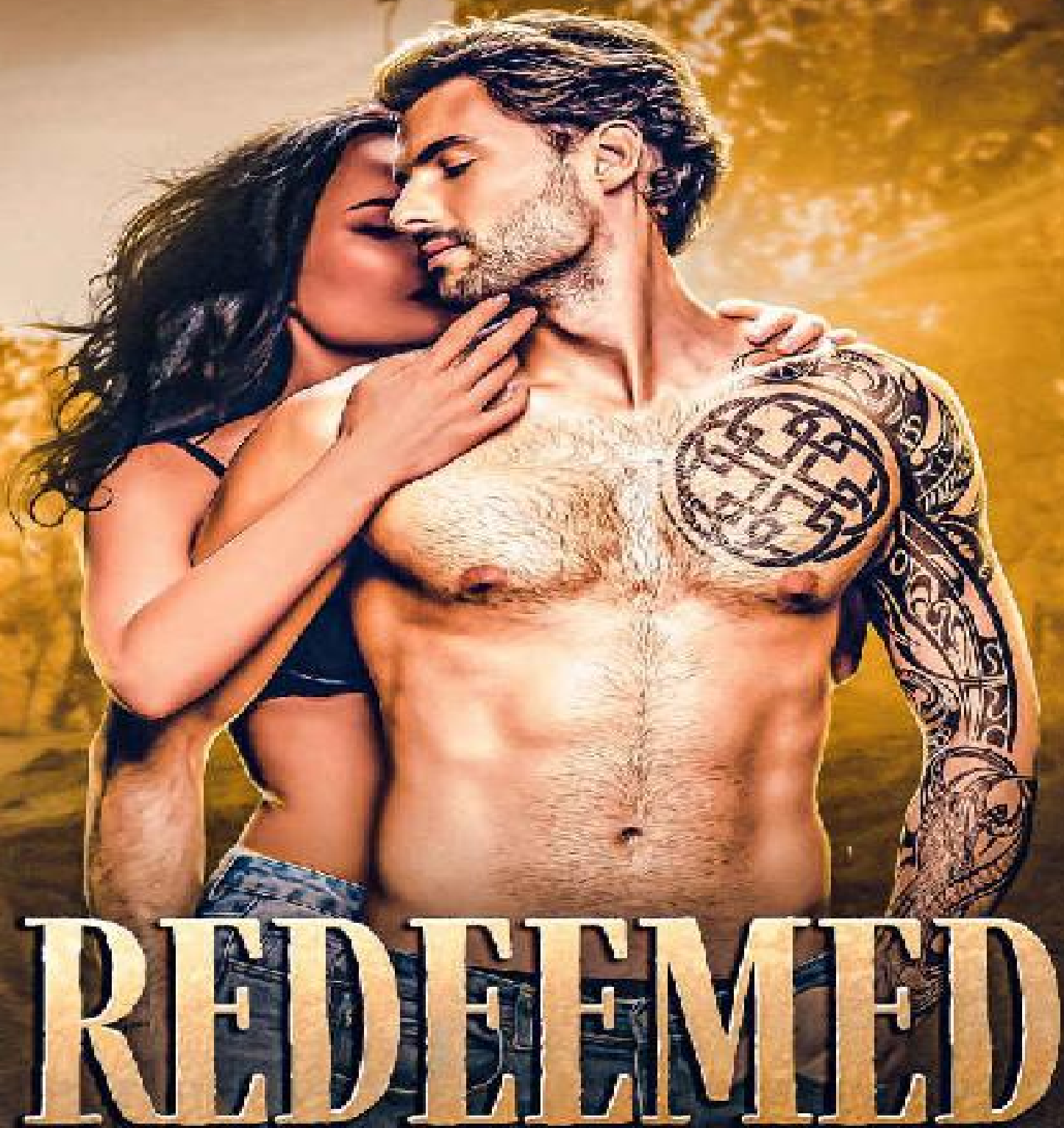


DALLAS RYAN



REDEEMED

BOOK THREE OF THE
GLADEWATER SERIES



Redeemed

Book Three of The Gladewater Series

Dallas Ryan

Copyright © 2022 by Dallas Ryan

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Contents

Author's Note...

1. All His Fault
2. Finding a Husband
3. Hey, Baby
4. Cuervo, Chicken & Waffles
5. Whittling and Worrying
6. The Fake Boyfriend
7. Fall Y'all
8. Meet & Greet
9. No More Shiny Barbies
10. The Taste of Chocolate
11. It's All Pretend...
12. Red Lipstick

13. A Mountain in a Suit
14. Obsession
15. Like a Popsicle
16. We Really Need a Lock
17. That's a Yes
18. Don't You Dare Stop
19. Tweety and Sylvester
20. Delicioso
21. Dreams and Opportunities
22. Stolen Kisses
23. A Secret Not Shared
24. The Man Mountain Cometh
25. Doubts and Decisions
26. Menudo and Lies
27. A Tale of Two Boys
28. Burning
29. Déjà Vu
30. Impending Doom
31. Get Out!
32. A Tsunami of Tension
33. Pushing Buttons

34. Tres Leches and Baby Booties
35. Audacity
36. A Green Sauce
37. A Posh Nightmare
38. Flashback
39. Rage and Rescue
40. Redeemed
41. Epilogue
42. More From Gladewater...
43. BONUS! From the Common Grounds Kitchen...
44. Thank yous!
45. Meet the Author

Author's Note...

IN THE WORLD OF 2022, trying to write diverse characters has, unfortunately, become controversial. Who is 'allowed' to write diverse characters is a thing. This makes me equally sad and mad. If an author is not purposely writing to be disparaging, we should be embracing diligent efforts to bring everyone into our stories as long as due diligence is paid to trying to be real and respectful.

In *Redeemed*, Sofia happens to be a Latina living in Texas. I could have ignored the fact Sofia was Latina, other than mentioning her name, but I was excited to embrace the Texas/Mexican culture she was a part of. The same culture that I was surrounded and raised in having grown up in South Texas, except that I'm a white woman. I believe the themes of interfering but loving families, crazy exes, and finding the love of your life, despite it all, are universal themes no matter what culture you may claim, or what color or gender you may be. In the end, this is a romance about two people who realize that the one they love has been right in front of them all the time. I hope you read and enjoy it in the spirit it has been intended. Peace.



Chapter One

All His Fault

*H*E COULD SEE HIS breath. It formed puffy clouds in front of his face, blocking his view of the room. He continued to search, calling her name. He nearly tripped over a small foot clad in a pink pump at his feet. Maggie! He yelled for help. His limbs were like blocks of ice as he tried to get them to move. He tried desperately to reach her. She seemed to move farther and farther away from him the harder he tried. Everything was white. The freezing fog surrounded him, and he kept losing sight of that one small pink foot that gave him a direction to follow. He had to get to her. This was all his fault. Blue lips suddenly flashed in his vision. Her lips were blue. Oh, God, he had to reach her. Had to get her out of here. There she was. He could touch her now. He picked her up. She was so small in his arms. So cold. It was like picking up a block of ice. Her arms and legs hung across his arms, lifeless- a broken doll he didn't know how to fix. He heard voices screaming around him. He spun, not knowing what to do. All his fault. She was dead and it was all his fault. A ragged scream tore from his throat.

“Noooo!” JT cried as he bolted upright in bed. His body was slick with sweat, the covers tangled around his legs. He kicked them away and lurched

up to sit on the side of the bed. He scrubbed his hands across his face and through his hair until it was standing on end. *The goddamn dream again. When was it ever going to stop?* It had been several months since the event that caused his nightmares, and his sister was fine. Maggie was floating on cloud nine, in fact. Her husband, Zane, was moving to Gladewater from Dallas to start the Heart & Brain Center with their friend, Dani. They were house hunting like mad, disgustingly in love, and expecting twins for God's sake. He didn't understand why he couldn't move past this. Yes, he could. Because it was his fault. He'd been thinking with his dick and brought that crazy bitch, Shawna, to Dani and Levi's rehearsal dinner and she'd almost killed his sister.

He growled at himself and stalked off to the bathroom. He stripped off his sweat-soaked pajama bottoms and leaned on the sink, regarding himself in the mirror. Dark circles were taking up permanent residence under his chocolate brown eyes from lack of sleep and his normally honeyed complexion was sallow in the harsh lighting. He knew he couldn't blame the fluorescents, though. He hadn't had a decent night's sleep in months and his appetite was off. If he didn't make himself get into the gym soon, the muscles padding his long limbs were going to deteriorate and he was going to look like a scarecrow. He ran a hand over the thick blonde stubble on his jaw. He needed a shave but figured one more day wouldn't make any difference.

"Fuck!" he barked in frustration as he flung open the shower door and stepped into the steaming spray. He let the water beat down on top of his head for several long moments before grabbing the shampoo. His brown sun-kissed hair was longer than usual and was starting to curl at his neck. He couldn't be bothered to care. He hadn't felt the need to look presentable lately. Since he was in the kitchen all the time at Common Grounds - the cafe

and catering company he ran with his sister, Maggie – and sworn off dating since *the incident* with Shawna, his appearance just didn't seem important.

He obviously had no decent radar to ward off the crazy and he couldn't take the chance of anything like that happening again. His little sister was too important to him to risk it. Before *the incident*, however, JT had thought of himself as somewhat of a ladies' man. He liked women. He liked being around them. He especially liked them in his bed, or on a table, or in his truck. His body was frequently letting him know it hadn't cast a vote for his self-inflicted celibacy.

This morning was no exception and the water cascading down his body had his cock standing to attention despite the nightmare. It didn't take much stimulation these days and taking himself in hand was becoming an all too frequent occurrence. However, it was that or finding a willing woman and that was definitely a no-go. JT's hand moved to circle his hardening shaft ready to get the job done. He braced himself against the slick tiles and stroked himself quickly. Bringing himself off had become a routine, a chore he had to get through, to make that part of his body leave him alone for a few hours, so he could focus and get his work done. His hand moved faster aided by the slickness of the soap. He worked very hard to not bring up any female images in his head to help. They all seemed to morph into Shawna's too fake face these days. Easier not to use any imagination and just feel the mechanics of his palm on his flesh. He uttered a low groan as he felt the familiar tingle starting at the base of his spine. His balls drew up hard and a low moan escaped his lips as his release overtook him. He stood still, catching his breath as his cock, finally placated for a while, went soft in his hand. It was always a hollow victory these days and not the joyful completion of a night of flirting, touching, kissing, and finally fucking that he used to enjoy. He

dropped his head to the cool tiles as his breathing returned to a normal rhythm. *Something has to fucking give.*



He had cinnamon rolls in the oven and was grinding up some fresh pork from a local farmer to make sausage when the door to the kitchen swung open. Sofia blew in with a smile. “Mornin’ boss!”

He didn’t think he had ever seen Sofia Benevides unhappy. Even when customers were giving her a hard time, she maintained her sunny disposition. He didn’t know what he and Maggie would do without her. She wrapped a black apron around her waist and leaned over to grab a coffee cup from the shelf. “So, what are your magical hands making for the specials today?” she asked him cheerily, filling her cup with their fresh, house brew.

JT stopped the grinder and wiped his hands. “Cinnamon rolls and fresh sausage patties for breakfast and I’m falling back on enchiladas with Mexican rice for lunch. I came in last night and made them up so they’d be ready to go first thing today.” He gestured toward the large pans in the fridge as he opened it and stored inside. “I’ve also got some of that ground bison left so you can add bison tacos with pickled red onion and cilantro.”

Sofia wrinkled her nose and JT shook his head. He was well aware of her aversion to the herb. “You’re the only person I know who doesn’t like cilantro but, if it will make you feel better, I’ll just sprinkle some on top and they can pick it off if they want.”

Sofia gave him a look over her coffee cup. “It takes like soap. I can’t believe with your palate, you can’t taste that!”

“It doesn’t. You’re just weird,” he told her, but a smile tugged at his lips, a shadow of the JT she was used to though dark circles showed under his chocolate brown eyes.

He hoped the teasing about the cilantro would redirect her attention from the fact that he was in the kitchen late again last night. Unlike his sister, Sofia rarely chastised him about the longer hours he had been keeping the last few months, though he was well aware that she worried about him. Everyone seemed to be worried about him these days despite the carefree front he tried to keep up. “JT, it’s your business and all but...”

“I know, you don’t have to say it,” he interrupted. “I’m working too much, not taking care of myself, need to get out more, yada yada yada. I’m fine, really.”

Sofia didn’t look like she believed him one bit, but she didn’t contradict him. She simply sipped her coffee and gazed at him with her expressive eyes. They were espresso brown, almost black, and tilted up just a bit in the corners. *How have I never noticed that before?*

“Really, Sofia, I’m fine,” he repeated as she continued to gaze at him knowingly.

“Did I say anything, boss?” she replied with a quirk of her lips. “I’ll just go get the specials on the board.” With a flip of her long, black ponytail, she went back through the swinging doors and out to the cafe.

JT shook his head and gave a wry smile. He didn’t need Sofia to tell him he needed to get his shit together. He knew. He just didn’t know how.

Chapter Two

Finding a Husband

SOFIA PUSHED THROUGH THE swinging doors back into the dining room to address the specials board for the day. After working with JT for so many years, she knew better than to push him to express his feelings as that was the quickest way to get him to shut down. She couldn't get over her concerns, however. JT had withdrawn from his friends, his business, his life since his sister was nearly killed. No one had been able to convince him that he was not responsible for Maggie's attack just because he had unknowingly brought his brother-in-law, Zane's, crazy ex-girlfriend to the party as his date. She missed his easy, trademark 1,000-watt smile and his constant teasing. He didn't even bicker with Maggie anymore. He seemed to walk on eggshells around her and she couldn't miss the way his eyes constantly followed his sister around the cafe when he wasn't cooking. He seemed to always be waiting for something dire to happen.

Even so, she couldn't deny the pull he had on her, the attraction she'd had for him almost from the start. She'd never acted on it and was pretty sure he'd never seen her as anything other than their waitress, or more recently, their front of house manager. Unlike most of her jobs before, he'd never put

even the slightest move on her. She appreciated that he had always treated her as a professional but, she had to admit, she wouldn't say no to a little extra attention at this point. Her feelings for him since the incident had only intensified. She wanted him to lean on her but had no idea how to encourage him to do so. *He's your boss. You're just going to have to get over it already.*

It didn't help that her mother and sister were constantly worrying about her finding a man and settling down. Her family was very traditional. Very protective. Overprotective in Sofia's estimation. At thirty, they were panicking that she was going to end up la solterona, a spinster, with a house full of cats if she didn't find some man to marry and take care of her soon. Though they wanted her to have the security they felt marriage provided, no one seemed to ever be good enough for her either. They had liked one guy she had dated and that had been back in high school. That relationship blew up when he had left for college. Since then, there hadn't been many men who caught her attention and those who did, didn't live up to her mamá's high standards.

They expected her to be more like her sister – married with kids and staying home to care for her family. They couldn't understand why it didn't bother her to work long hours at the café and work on marketing for the catering and event side of the business on top of that. They always told her how proud they were of her, yet, in the end they really just wanted to see her married. They didn't want to hear about the sense of purpose and accomplishment it gave her. Not to mention, it kept her next to JT. Of course, she couldn't tell them that.

She remembered the discussion she had with her mom and sister last weekend. Sunday dinner had always been one of her favorite times of the week. Sunday was one of the few times she got to catch up with her papá and

her brother, Tomás. They worked as long of hours as she did and couldn't stop by the café to visit during the week like her mamá and sister could. It was typical of what she went through every time she was at a family function.

“Mija,” her mother, Evelyn, cajoled. “How are you going to find a husband if all you do is work in that coffee shop? You’ve got to get out and meet new people. New men!”

Her older sister, Selena, who at thirty-two, already had 3.5 children, invariably chimed in. “Yeah, Sofia, you need to get to Dallas and meet some eligible bachelors! You’re never going to find a man in this little hick town. I bet Tia Magda, in Irving, could find you someone. She loves to matchmake! You know she found Cecilia's husband for her.”

Selena always conveniently forgot that she had met her husband, Andres, in high school in their ‘little hick town’. Sofia could only roll her eyes and try again. “No! No matchmaking. I’m not looking for a husband. I love my job! And Maggie and JT have made me a manager and are training me to help with the marketing,” Sofia told them for what felt like the millionth time. “I can take care of myself. I don’t need you or Tia Magda to fix me up with some random man.”

She studiously left out that a big reason she loved her job was 6’2, tattooed and covered in muscles. Did she mention he could cook, too? She knew it was stupid to carry a torch for her boss for this long, but she couldn’t seem to help herself where JT was concerned.

“I could at least get Magda’s number for you and you'd have it if you change your mind,” her sister responded, completely ignoring Sofia’s protests.

“Selena...” Sofia started in exasperation, but then stopped. She was wasting her breath. She knew tomorrow, she would inevitably be getting a call from

her tia, or worse, a call from some of the men on Tia Magda's list of successful prospects. Magda should run her own dating app with the lists of eligible men she always seemed to have available. Sofia wondered why, if they were so great, they were still in Magda's line up?



Sofia refocused on her task. JT truly had a gift in the kitchen. Everything he made was delicious, but he hadn't developed any new recipes for months. Coming up with new variations on old favorites had been one of his favorite things, but now he was just falling back on what they had always served. She hoped the customers wouldn't notice and would just enjoy their favorites.

Maggie, JT's sister and co-owner of Common Grounds, came down the back hallway just as Sofia was finishing the board. She looked at the specials and gave a sad shake of her head. She saw it too. "How is he today?" she asked Sofia quietly. "He was already gone when Zane and I got up at five."

"The same," Sofia told her. "He was here late last night making enchiladas and, based on the amount of sausage and cinnamon rolls he has ready in there, he's been here at least a couple of hours."

Maggie blew out a breath. Even though they were still living together until she and her husband, Zane, found a new house, she saw less and less of her brother. He came in after they were asleep and left before they awoke in the morning. When she did see him, he barely spoke. She even tried provoking him into bickering with her, but no amount of poking seemed to raise his ire. She'd also heard him cry out in his sleep more than once this week. She'd begged him to get professional help, but he'd refused. She didn't know how to help him.

“I’m completely out of ideas,” Maggie admitted. “I think he’s getting worse instead of better. Zane gave him the name of a psychologist friend of his, but he refuses to call her.” Maggie dabbed at her eyes bright with tears. “I want my brother back.”

Sofia wrapped an arm around Maggie’s shoulder. “I know. It’s just going to take some time. The whole thing with Shawna really tore him up. Maybe once the trial is over, he can get some closure and move on.”

Maggie gave her a tremulous smile. “I hope so. I don’t know how many times I’ve told him it wasn’t his fault. If there’s any fault to be had, it’s mine for refusing to tell him everything. Even if I mentioned her name, he might have realized who she was, but I was being stubborn. Zane tried to tell me, but I wouldn’t listen.”

“Stop that right now,” Sofia said vehemently. “What happened to you was nobody’s fault but that crazy woman who attacked you. You can’t predict crazy. Even though she thought you and Zane were broken up, she still came after you. Who could have predicted that?”

“I wish JT could see it that way.” Maggie sighed heavily. “He needs something else to focus on, to get him out of his head.”

“I know he’s looking forward to becoming an uncle,” Sophia said, smiling towards Maggie’s belly that was growing by the day. The twins were definitely making themselves known. “Maybe that will help distract him and pull him out of his funk.”

Maggie gave her a sweet smile and rubbed her belly. “I hope so, but the Beans won’t be here for several more months.”

“Hopefully, we can think of something before then. I’ll keep trying.” Sofia assured her.

“Thanks, Sofia. As usual, you’re a lifesaver.” Maggie tried her best to

match Sofia's cheerful face. "Come see me after the breakfast rush and we'll go over this weekend's events."

"Sure thing, boss," Sofia replied with her trademark grin.

Maggie smiled indulgently at her. "How many times do I have to tell you that you don't have to call me boss? Really, Sofia, not only are you management now, but also a good friend. Just Maggie will do."

Sofia shrugged her shoulders. "After five years, it's just a habit, but I promise to try, boss," she said cheekily.

Maggie chuckled and shook her head before going back down the hall to her office. Sofia wondered if JT thought of her as a friend now, too. She hoped so.

Chapter Three

Hey, Baby

A COUPLE OF WEEKS later, Sofia was finishing up a marketing update report for Maggie when Jenny, their new server, came to find her.

“Sofia, there’s a man out here asking for you,” Jenny said as she rapped on the doorframe to Maggie’s office.

Sofia looked at her quizzically. A man was an odd description in a town as small as Gladewater, where they knew just about everyone by sight, if not by name. “Who is it?”

The girl shrugged. “Don’t know. Never seen him before. He and a buddy came in and asked for you specifically though.”

Sofia had a sudden lump in the pit of her stomach. Surely it couldn’t be one of Magda’s fix ups. She’d specifically told her sister and Tia Magda, no. She pasted on a smile. “Tell them I’ll be out in just a minute.”

Jenny nodded and returned to the dining room with her instructions. Sofia stood slowly and rounded the desk. She retrieved her black servers’ apron from the coat rack and tied it on like battle armor. She had a bad feeling about this.

In the dining room, Jenny pointed her to the two men at a table near the window. They looked nice enough. Both attractive and dressed well. One in a crisp, white dress shirt rolled up to his elbows, dress slacks, and the prerequisite Texas businessman dress boots. The other was in dark jeans and a long sleeve Western shirt with pearl buttons. Summer cowboy hats sat on the empty chairs next to them. City boys, probably.

Sofia put on her best professional smile. “Hello. I’m Sofia. How can I help you?”

The man in the dress shirt looked her up and down slowly before answering. He gave his friend a calculated look. Both turned to Sofia with smiles that she thought looked more predatory than friendly. She stood still waiting for the man to address her directly.

Dress pants stood and held out a hand. “Sofia, my name is Michael Long and this is my friend, Hector Olivares. I received your name from Magda Flores. She said I should look you up if I was ever in the area, and, well I was in the area.” He chuckled at his own perceived humor giving her a smile with lots of white teeth.

Sofia looked at his hand before reaching out and giving it a perfunctory shake. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy Gladewater, but despite what my aunt may have told you, I’m not looking for a date.”

He gave her a condescending smile. “Ah, well, aren’t we all looking for love, though? It would be a shame to let a woman as beautiful as yourself sit on a shelf.”

Sofia smiled tightly. “Again, gentlemen, I’m sorry you’ve wasted your time. Can I get you some lunch?”

“Woah, this one is wound up tight. I think she needs you to loosen her up, man,” the second man muttered under his breath. They both snickered.

Sofia saw red. She didn't care what Tia Magda thought of her. She wasn't going to put up with men treating her this way.

Her voice grew low and menacing. She threw a finger up to point directly at them as she spoke. "Look, assholes. I wouldn't go out with a sorry excuse for a man like you even if you were the last one on earth. How dare you come in here, to my work, and disrespect me like this! You both get up right now and disappear from my sight and never come back!"

"Now, wait a minute, here," Michael said, grabbing her around her upper arm. "There's no need to get all riled up, baby."

Sofia jerked her arm from his grip. Her voice grew louder. "I am not your baby and don't touch me!"

At that, JT came barreling out of the kitchen in Jenny's wake. The young woman hadn't liked the way the men had been leering at Sofia and had gone to fetch JT.

He arrived just as Sofia jerked her arm away. "What the hell's going on here?" he asked, his tone hard and menacing.

The man glared at JT and took his measure. Several long moments ticked past before the man spoke. "Nothing," he finally said. "A misunderstanding. We were just leaving. Come on, Hector."

The men grabbed their hats and stalked out the door. Michael looked back once and gave Sofia an angry look.

JT stood with Sofia until the bell over the door tinkled and they were gone. "What was that about?" he asked, fists clenching over the way they had grabbed Sofia.

She looked around, suddenly embarrassed that this had happened in front of customers. She was glad it was, at least, near the end of the lunch rush and

there weren't too many people around. "Not here," she whispered, "I'll meet you in the kitchen."

"Jenny, can you please make sure everyone has everything they need?" Sofia requested. The girl just nodded, her eyes wide, and went to do what she was asked.

"I'm so sorry, JT. That never should have happened in front of customers. I totally get your being mad at me."

"Mad at you? Hell, Sofia, I'm not mad at you but I was about to wipe the floor with that asshole for touching you like that! Who were those guys?"

Sofia blew out a long breath and leaned against the counter, wrapping her arms around herself. "That was apparently supposed to be a 'blind date' but no one bothered to tell me I'd been set up on one."

JT still looked angry but now confusion laced his expression. Sofia sighed again. "Remember I told you about Selena wanting me to contact my Tia Magda to set me up on a dates? Well, apparently, Selena talked to her and Magda started matchmaking without my knowledge. She apparently gave this guy my information and told him he should just 'drop by' if he was ever in the area. I think he was given the idea that she had a desperate niece in Gladewater, if you know what I mean." Sofia could feel the flush rising up to her hairline.

"Your aunt sent those guys all the way out here to check you out?" JT asked incredulously. Sofia nodded. She wouldn't meet his eyes and that made JT even more upset. Her family was treating her like a piece of meat and had embarrassed her. He ran his hands through his hair and paced in a circle trying to get his temper under control.

Finally, he stopped in front of her, placing a finger under her chin and tipping her head up to meet his eyes. "I'm so sorry they're doing this to you,

Sofia. It's messed up. Does your mom know about it? I can't see her signing on for sending random men into your work. I mean, my mom is constantly on me about giving her grandkids before she dies but she's not sending random women to my work."

He flashed her a grin and for just a moment, she saw a glimpse of the old JT in his mischievous eyes. "Although, I could stand to see a parade of honeys coming through my door." The grin died a moment later. "Lord knows I'm not doing too well picking them out myself," he mumbled under his breath. "Anyway, I don't know why they think you can't get your own dates – you're sweet, upbeat, knock out gorgeous – you could have any man you wanted."

Sofia stood there stunned. He'd said it so matter-of-factly, like he hadn't just spun her whole existence on its axis. *He thinks I'm sweet and knock out gorgeous? Breathe, Sofia.*

JT suddenly realized what he had said and how much he meant the compliment that had just spilled out of his mouth. By the odd look on Sofia's face, his confession may have been too much but somehow it felt right.

"Hey, how about we get out of here when we close up and go see if the Hawaiian ice truck is still open?" JT asked, casually reaching up to tuck a wisp of hair that had come loose from her ponytail behind her ear, suddenly needing to touch her in some small way.

"Uh, I'm sorry, what?" Sofia asked, his quick touch bringing her out of her reverie. She'd completely missed what he said.

"I said, how about we go see if Gary has his Hawaiian ice truck opened still after we get done here. Last time I talked to him, he said he was opening this week and, hell, it's still hot enough for it."

"Sure, that sounds good," Sofia agreed, trying to regain her composure.

“I’d better go help Jenny get everything finished up then. See you in a few.”

Sofia tried to slow her heart as she walked back through the swinging doors to the dining room. JT thought she was pretty. She couldn’t contain the grin that broke across her face as she picked up a pitcher of tea and headed to the nearest table.

Chapter Four

Cuervo, Chicken & Waffles

THE NEXT WEEKEND, SOFIA was coming home late from Sunday dinner at her sister's house that had almost turned into a fight over what Tia Magda had done. Selena thought she had been clever in contacting Magda for Sofia, even though her sister had declined the suggestion. She thought Sofia had needed a little push for her own good. Once Selena had heard about their tia sending the men to Sofia's work, however, she was horrified.

"Oh my God, Sofia! I'm so sorry!" Selena cried when Sofia told her what had happened. "I can't believe she did that! Maybe it was a misunderstanding?"

"Uh, no," Sofia retorted. "They were obviously given my work address. I was humiliated. And it could have been worse if JT hadn't been there to make sure they left. The one guy was really aggressive."

Mrs. Benevides' hand came to her mouth in shock! "I cannot believe my sister would do such a thing! I'm going to talk to her. Matchmaking is one thing but not like this. I don't know what she was thinking."

"Thank you, Mamá," Sofia said, giving her mother a hug. "I really don't

want to go through something like that again."

"Of course not, *mija*! We want you to find a husband but someone who will treat you like *la reina que eres*." (*"the queen you are."*) She took Sofia's face in her hands. "Now, there was a man in the bank the other day...."

"Mamá, stop!" Sofia laughed. "I promise I can find my own husband when I am ready for one."

A smile crossed her mother's lips. "Sé que puedes, *mija*. Sé que puedes." (*"I know you can, darling. I know you can."*)

Sofia left hoping that the matchmaking was over, but still exhausted from dealing with all of it. She loved her family so much, but they could be a lot. When she saw a faint light coming from Common Grounds' front windows, she slowly drove to the back of the building and, sure enough, there was JT's Jeep. She was too wired over the evening at her sister's and knew she wouldn't sleep anytime soon, so she decided to see what JT was working on tonight. Maybe she could help. She parked, used her keys to open the back door, and headed down the hall toward the kitchen.

"Hey, JT, it's just me," she called as she came to the swinging kitchen doors, not wanting to startle him. "No need to call the..." The words died in her throat as she pushed the silver doors open.

He was sitting on the floor, his back against the prep station, bottle in hand. When he slowly glanced up at her, the devastation in his chocolate brown eyes tore her heart completely in two. Her very being wanted to throw herself down next to him, cradle him in her arms and tell him everything was going to be okay; that she loved him, and they could get through this together, but she knew that would be the quickest way to shut him down entirely. Instead, she swallowed hard and calmly went to sit next to him.

She held out a hand. "I could use some of that after the night I've had.

Care to share?”

He blinked at her dully, but then held out the bottle towards her. She took a pull of the Cuervo, sputtered, and held onto the bottle.

“So, what’s going on, boss? Anything I can do?” Sofia asked in the most casual tone she could muster.

“Maggie and Zane found a house, today,” he said slowly.

“That’s good news, though, right? Now you’ll have your own bachelor pad,” Sofia said, trying for a chipper tone. She knew him so well that she could easily guess what he was thinking. Maggie had found someone else to protect her. He’d proved he wasn’t up to the task, and she blamed him for her attack at the hands of Zane’s ex and was getting away from him. It was completely illogical, but he was still carrying so much guilt.

“Yeah, of course,” he said with forced bravado, putting a hand back out for the bottle. She pretended she didn’t see the hand. “Trying to live with those two has been a trial. They’re all over each other all the time. It’ll be great to be able to walk into my kitchen and not have to worry if everyone has their clothes on.”

Sofia giggled despite herself. Zane and Maggie were disgustingly happy and couldn’t keep their hands off each other, even with the babies coming. She could only imagine what it was like within the confines of their own home.

“See? It’s all good. At least you’ll get some peace. My family, on the other hand...” She discreetly moved the bottle of Cuervo to her other side, not giving it to JT. “Aunt Tia is truly making my life miserable with trying to marry me off.”

JT turned a bit to focus on her. “After what happened the other day, they’re still at it?”

“I hope it's over,” Sofia grumbled. “But I can't be sure. Mamá is going to talk to her and tell her to stop. Selena confessed she did call her and set her on the matchmaking despite me telling her not to.”

This set the protective adrenaline spiking in JT's bloodstream and started to penetrate the alcoholic haze. “You're joking. Didn't you tell her what those guys said to you?”

Sofia waved a hand in dismissal. “I did. They thought it was awful. Selena was very apologetic. She never thought Tia Magda would go so far.”

“That's just wrong, Sofia. You shouldn't have to put up with that. That guy was way out of line.” JT's face hardened. “He'd better not ever come in here again.”

Sofia patted his arm and gave him a wistful smile. “I'm sure he won't. There'd be no reason. He lives and works in Irving. He was only out here to check out the merchandise.”

Sofia heard a noise she had never heard before emanating from JT's chest. *Did he just growl?* She cleared her throat and continued. “Like I said, hopefully nothing like that will happen again after Mamá talks to her. I'm sure it will be fine.”

That noise came again, low and feral, from JT's chest. It gave her a fluttering feeling low in her belly. *Dios mio.*

“No one better pull that shit again while I'm here is all I can say,” JT said, pushing himself to his feet. He swayed a little but once he steadied himself, he reached a hand down to Sofia. “You'd better come get me immediately if *anyone* harasses you in the future. I'm not gonna have anybody treat you like that again.”

“JT, really, you don't...”

“Nobody, Sofia. I mean it.” His bleary eyes from a few minutes before had

sharpened to espresso brown points as he gazed at her now. The look he gave her seemed possessive. Before she could wrench herself away from his penetrating stare and respond, he blinked, and she caught a glimpse of the old JT peeking out. “Now, I’m hungry,” he said suddenly. “You want something?” He started rattling around in the cabinets and Sofia smiled. “I could eat.”

Thirty minutes later they sat at the counter, enjoying leftover fried chicken and freshly made cinnamon roll waffles.

“I can’t even justify all these calories as a midnight snack since it’s only 10:30,” Sofia said, humming in pleasure around another bite of waffle. A drop of maple syrup dripped from her lip and JT reached out a thumb to catch it. His eyes caught hers as he brought his thumb to his lips to lick off the sweetness.

“You had some syrup...” he said, not breaking eye contact for several long seconds. *Jesus, what am I doing?* He cleared his throat and tore his eyes away to look back at his plate. He shoveled food into his mouth.

Sofia brought a napkin up to her lips. She could still feel the heat of his thumb on her bottom lip. *I’m such a goner.*

They ate in silence for a minute, the clinking of silverware on plates the only noise in the empty space. “These are amazing! Why haven’t you put them on the menu?”

JT shrugged. “Just made them up. Think they’re that good?”

She hummed in pleasure again. “They are practically sinful! And if you made some cinnamon syrup...”

He wiped his mouth and nodded thoughtfully. “That would be good. Thanks, Sofia. I think I’ll try that. Maybe Saturday we can offer it as the breakfast special.”

Sofia grinned. There was a little bit of the old JT still in there. “Sounds perfect, boss.”

Chapter Five

Whittling and Worrying

THE NEXT DAY AFTER Common Grounds had closed, Dani, who had been one of his best friends since childhood, found JT sitting on the bench in front of the café, a pile of sawdust gathering in a pile at his feet from the stick he was whittling on with a small knife. She immediately knew something had happened. His sister, Maggie, had been her first friend when she moved to Gladewater at only eight years old to live with her aunt and uncle after her parents were killed by a drunk driver. JT was soon her second one and the three had been thick as thieves growing up. She could read him as if he were her own brother and JT only whittled when he was especially anxious about something.

She plopped down next to him on the bench. “So, this looks familiar. Looking to make another weapon to stab Zane in the eye again? Maggie will probably frown on that this time.”

The last time she had caught him whittling a stick into a sharp point, as he apparently was no carver, it was after Zane and Maggie had gone through a particularly ugly break up. At the time, she had teased him about stabbing his soon to be brother-in-law in the eye with it trying to lighten his mood.

He gave her a side-eye but kept adding to the pile of sawdust at his feet. “I guess Maggie told you she and Zane found a house.”

Dani smiled broadly. “She did! The old Whitaker place. It’s gorgeous!” she gushed. “It’s going to be a showplace again once Maggie is done with it.”

JT nodded. “I’m sure it will be. I think she’s planning on using part of the property as an event space for the business. There’s a gazebo out in the gardens that’s actually been kept up and the barn can be renovated without too much fuss.”

“I see twinkle light installation in your future,” she said to him playfully. “I’m sure Levi and Zane will just *love* to help you install them since they are such experts now.”

JT snorted. Zane and Levi, Dani’s husband, had installed thousands of tiny, white twinkle lights in the rafters of Dani and Levi’s barn under Maggie’s strict instruction. It had been beautiful, but the men were still complaining about the work months later. “Yeah, I’m sure they’ll be ready to jump right in to volunteer for that job.”

“So, seems like the move isn’t really making you stress whittle,” Dani said knowingly. “What’s really going on?”

He finally put down his now very pointy stick and folded up his knife laying his hands on his knees. “I’m worried about Sofia.”

“Sofia?” Dani looked at him with a sharp question in her peridot green eyes. “What’s wrong with Sofia? I just saw her a bit ago at the General and she looked fine.”

“Did you hear what happened in the cafe the other day? With the men?”

“No, I haven’t heard. What happened?”

JT proceeded to tell her the story about Michael and Hector and the things they had said to Sofia. Dani’s face flushed red with anger. “They had the

nerve to come at her like that in public? I hope you threw them out or worse.”

“Yeah, I threw them out when one of them grabbed her by the arm, but she had already told them off. I didn’t know the whole story until after they were gone. I only caught the tail end of it, but I’d never seen her so mad.”

“Our little Sofia getting in some men’s faces and cussing them? I can’t even imagine it,” she said. Sofia was always so upbeat and unflappable. It must have been really bad for her to go off on someone, and in the café no less.

He chuckled a bit at the memory of the men's shocked faces as Sofia dressed them down. He had missed most of what she had said but seeing her standing there, one finger right in the man’s face and the other on her hip had been a sight to see. “She was magnificent, actually. She gave them what for, that’s for sure.”

Dani gave him a little side-eye, catching the appreciation in JT’s tone. *Hmmmm, that’s interesting.*

“She's hopeful it's over. Her mom was going to talk to her sister about stopping the crazy matchmaking efforts but that doesn't mean they don't still want her married off." He sliced another couple of pieces of wood off the main stick. "Mama likes to get a dig in at me now and again about how she’s going to be too old to enjoy her grandchildren if I don’t get with the program, though I guess Maggie has given me a break from that for a while, but she’d never be sending random women to work that she picked out for me!”

“Yeah, your mama is over the moon over these babies. Those are going to be a couple of spoiled kids,” Dani said. “But damn, I hate that Sofia is going through that. There must be some solution.”

JT picked his stick and knife up and held them up. “And that’s why I’m whittling.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, watching the people go about their business on Main Street, lost in their own thoughts. Dani suddenly sat up straight. "I may have thought of something."

JT stopped whittling. "What?"

"What if..." she said slowly. "You were dating Sofia."

He gaped at her. "I can't date Sofia. That wouldn't be right."

"Not really date her," she explained. "Be her pretend boyfriend. That way her family would have to back off. Sure, you might not be their first pick for her, but you are good looking." She paused when he gave her a side-eye. "So people tell me. I can't see it because eww, you're practically my brother, but anyway..." She huffed out a breath in exasperation before she continued. "You're also a successful businessman and popular in the community. What could they say against you?"

JT started to protest again but Dani stopped him with a hand. "No, listen. It's diabolically perfect. You've been telling us you've sworn off women," she started with an eye roll. "You and Sofia have been friends and coworkers forever, and she needs a honey to get her family to back off. Voila! Fake boyfriend to the rescue!"

He started to open his mouth again to tell her why it wouldn't work but then shut it and thought. It actually was a plausible idea, but he couldn't imagine Sofia agreeing to it. "I see what you're saying, and it could work, but I doubt Sofia would go for it. How would she find a real boyfriend if she was pretending with me?"

Dani looked at him like he was a bit slow. "When is the last time you saw Sofia with a boyfriend? She's been devoted to the café and y'all. Look at her. If she wanted a man in her life right now, don't you think she'd have one? She's a real beauty and sharp as a whip besides."

Thinking about it, JT had to agree. She was gorgeous with that shiny, raven's wing black hair, and dark brown eyes. Full red lips, even without a stitch of make-up on. *Stop it, idiot. You're just feeling deprived. It's Sofia for God's sake!* He shook himself and rubbed the back of his neck. "I guess I could talk to her about it. See what she says."

"What's the worst that could happen? She tells you no and you're insane," Dani quipped. "You can always blame me for the idea. Feel free to throw me under the bus if she has an aversion to it." She grinned at him. "Though something tells me, she'll jump at the offer."

JT shrugged. "I'll talk to her tomorrow and see what she thinks. Thanks, Dani."

"I hope it works out for you, bud. Now, I'm off to drag my husband away from the damn cows so he can take me to a fancy dinner in Tyler." She sighed wistfully. "God, I love saying that- my husband." With that she was off, and JT went back to whittling. This time, he had to figure out if this little plan of Dani's could really work.

Chapter Six

The Fake Boyfriend

LATER IN THE WEEK, JT caught Sofia pacing in the back hallway. Her face was tight and her eyes red like she'd been crying.

“What’s wrong, Sof?” He asked, putting a hand to her shoulder to stop the back and forth.

Sofia wiped a stray tear that had slid from her eye. “I’m just so mad, I could spit,” she said. “Tia Magda is at it again.”

JT rubbed a hand up and down her arm to try to offer comfort. “What did she pull this time?”

“My phone has been blowing up all morning with calls from random guys who said they got my info off of some dating site. I called Selena to try to figure out what was going on and she found me on Love4UDallas! Magda posted a picture of me and statistics without my permission! I’m going to have to change my phone number now.” Her face turned red, and JT could tell she was about to blow.

“Hold on a minute,” he said and walked toward the dining room calling for Jenny. “Hey, Jen. You okay with everything for a few minutes? I need to go over a couple of things with Sofia.”

“Sure, JT. Everyone has their orders for now. No worries.” She smiled at him and batted her eyelashes over her baby blue eyes, but he was oblivious.

“Great. Thanks,” he said and went back to Sofia. He ushered her out the back door and motioned for her to take a seat in his Jeep.

They sat in silence for several long moments. "Did you call her about it?" JT asked, rubbing her shoulder.

"No, I was too mad. If possible, Mamá was even madder. She's going to call her and let her have it." Sofia tried to smile but failed miserably. "Who knew Tia Magda could do something so crazy?"

Finally, he looked at her and started to speak. “So, I was talking to Dani the other day about what your family is putting you through. I know Magda has obviously taken things to the extreme, but I know they still talk a lot about you getting married.”

Sofia covered her face and groaned. “Oh, no, JT. That’s so embarrassing.”

He pulled her hands away and tilted her chin up to meet his gaze. “It’s not embarrassing. You’re not doing anything wrong. Anyway, she came up with an idea that might help us both.”

Sofia looked at him quizzically, silently waiting for him to continue. “She said if I was your boyfriend then your family might leave you alone. Your *pretend* boyfriend,” he said in a rush when her mouth dropped open. “If we pretended to be together then your family would have to quit trying to fix you up with and mine would quit worrying about me not dating. Win, win.”

Sofia didn’t speak but continued to stare at him, eyes wide. “I thought it was actually pretty brilliant but if you think it’s dumb then...”

“A pretend boyfriend,” Sofia repeated slowly. “How would that work?”

“Well, I haven’t really thought it all out, yet,” JT admitted. “But I’m thinking we just tell everyone we’re dating and hang out together. I imagine

we'd have to be seen out in public together, other than at work events, of course..."

"Would there be PDA involved?" Sofia interrupted.

JT ran a hand across the back of his neck, feeling slightly uncomfortable. "I would imagine so. At least a little. I mean, only what you were comfortable with."

Sofia's mind was racing. Could she do this? With the way she felt about JT, could she keep her heart intact if they were just pretending?

JT worried as her silence grew longer. "It was a stupid idea. Never mind. Pretend I didn't say anything. We'll figure something else out."

"No," Sofia said quickly. "I think it might actually work." She smiled and held out a hand to shake. "Put her there fake boyfriend."

A slow smile spread across JT's face as he reached out and took her hand in his. She had actually agreed. He couldn't believe it. He grasped her proffered hand tightly and shook, then continued to hold it for several beats longer. "Who should we tell first?"

"Well, we could just kinda show up together at the Fall Y'all Festival this weekend. It would be weird if we made some kind of announcement, wouldn't it?" Sofia opined.

"You're right," he agreed. "If we really were dating, we wouldn't do that. Okay, I'll pick you up at eleven on Saturday and we can go together."

Sofia nodded but then she frowned. "Are we telling Maggie, though?"

JT's mouth turned down mirroring Sofia's frown. "I hate to lie to my sister, but part of the whole exercise is to get her to stop worrying about me not dating, so I don't think we can." He scratched his chin in thought, the stiff bristles making a rasping sound under his fingernails. Sofia wanted to reach out and feel it, too but held back. It was too soon to be touching him. "Dani is

going to know, though, obviously, since it was her idea. She's not going to like the idea of keeping it from Maggie but I'm going to have to convince her."

Sofia gathered her courage and reached out a hand to cover the one that rested on his thigh. "I'm sure you'll figure something out. Dani trusts you. And I'll go along with whatever you come up with."

His hand turned and he took hers, intertwining their fingers. He searched her face, her almost black eyes, her high cheekbones, those plump pink lips that he suddenly wanted a taste of. He shook himself mentally. *Cut it out, dude. Fake boyfriend, remember?* He gave her hand a quick squeeze and sat back in his seat placing his hands on the wheel.

"Okay, then," he said. "Operation fake boyfriend will commence at 1100 tomorrow morning." He threw her a signature JT grin.

Sofia let the air that had been held in her lungs at he released her hand. "Great. 11 am tomorrow."

Chapter Seven

Fall Y'all

J T PULLED UP IN front of Sofia's apartment at a quarter to eleven that Saturday. He rubbed his hands on his jeans. He was suddenly nervous. This would be their first public 'date'. He was dismayed at how not fake it felt. He took a deep breath and went to get out of the Jeep to go to her door when he saw her coming down the sidewalk toward him, a big smile on her face. She was in a jewel-toned flannel shirt tied at her waist over a black tank top and black jeans that left nothing to the imagination. Rather than her normal ponytail, her hair was down with two small braids on the sides keeping the silky black strands out of her face. JT swallowed hard then raised a hand in greeting. *Quit staring at her like a dumbass, dude.*

When she stood before him, he leaned forward and kissed her quickly on the cheek, not sure of the protocol. "Hope that was okay," he whispered near her ear.

Sofia looked down at the ground but smiled. *Was she blushing?* "Sure," she responded a little breathlessly. "We're a couple, right?"

JT nodded and opened the passenger door for her. The metal gave a loud creak and he cringed. "Sorry about that. I haven't had any passengers lately.

I'll get some WD-40 and take care of that."

She waved away his concerns as she rolled down the window. "No worries, bo...uh, JT," she said. *This calling him by his name instead of 'boss' was going to be more difficult than I thought.* "It's not a big deal."

She settled herself in the passenger seat and pulled her seat belt in place while he rounded the hood to get in the car. When he climbed in, they both just stared at each other a beat. JT cleared his throat. "Okay, here we go," he said, putting the truck into gear. They rode in silence for a couple of long minutes before JT continued, "So, I thought we should talk about the whole PDA thing. I don't want to make you uncomfortable at all, but I want 'us' to be believable."

He gave her a sideways glance. "What do you think?"

Sofia looked at him and away quickly and started to pull at a loose thread on her shirt. "Well, I guess whatever you'd normally do. I mean, it's not like we're going to be making out under a tree or anything, right?" *Oh, but wouldn't that be wonderful!*

"Uh, no," JT said, suddenly unsure of himself. "But, I was thinking hand holding, my arm around you, the occasional kiss, maybe? No tongue, of course." He gave himself a mental face palm. *Smooth, JT, real smooth. Now she's bound to be even more uncomfortable.*

Sofia was quiet for a beat trying to get the mental image of JT's delicious mouth on hers, their tongues dueling, tasting each other for the first time. She gave herself a little shake. *Dios mio! Stop it before you embarrass yourself.*

"Uh, yeah, that sounds like a plan," Sofia answered, trying to put a trace of her usually bubbly self into her words. She gave herself a silent pep talk. *You can do this Sofia. It's just pretend so you can get Magda off your back and make the rest of the family relax a little.*

Luckily, at that point, they had arrived at the town square where booths and tables were set up all around the perimeter with food and drink to buy from local churches and businesses as well as activities for the kids. Maggie and JT had chosen not to set up a booth for Common Grounds this year. With Maggie's pregnancy and their events schedule, they thought it best to sit out this year and Sofia had to agree. There were plenty of other choices.

One of the most popular booths was always the ladies of the Methodist Church selling baked goods. She knew from Dani that Miss Etta, Miss Lu's caregiver, had her famous Texas Sheet Cake for sale. It was always one of the first to go and she hoped she could get a piece before they were all sold out. JT's chocolate cake was a showstopper, but Miss Etta's was heavenly. She could smell Bubba's Roadhouse's brisket smoking from the opposite end of the square and wafts of cinnamon and nutmeg coming from the Southern Baptist church's booth selling hot, mulled cider. Children chased each other around and climbed over hay bales that had been set up to play in. Everyone was having a good time, enjoying the relatively cool day and the company. She truly loved fall, especially in her small town. Even if they didn't get the trees turning bright colors, fall in East Texas had its own kind of charm. Though it could still get hot during the middle of the day, they did get a bit of a nip in the air that was always refreshing after the long, hot summers.

As JT came around the truck to open her cantankerous door, she saw a children's pumpkin carving table just to the right of them. Several small children were busy digging orange guts out of the pumpkins, readying them for the adults to carve in the face of their choice. She tried to control her laughter when she saw little Kimberly Ann, age three, making a disgusted face as she squished the orange goo between her chubby little fingers. She

was obviously not pleased that someone had tricked her into this messy activity.

JT stood beside her and closed the door to the Jeep. "What's so funny?"

"Look at her face!" Sofia said quietly and pointed discreetly to the little girl, still trying to hold in a belly laugh and ending up snorting instead.

He followed her finger and saw the girl, now with her hands held above her head, imploring her exasperated mother to clean her chubby royal fingers. JT's mouth broke into his signature smile that she hadn't seen in months. It was like the sun coming out after weeks and weeks of storms. She forgot all about Kimberly Ann and soaked it up.

"She looks like someone gave her a dead squirrel to play with instead of a pumpkin," JT said laughingly watching Kimberly Ann's mother acquiescing to her princess' silent request, probably just thankful it was silent and not a screaming meltdown. "Megan surely has her hands full with that one. She's a pistol for sure!"

Still watching the little girl being tended to and her seven-year-old brother, Brice, next to her giving a big brother eye roll worthy of an award, JT casually rested his arm across Sofia's shoulders. She didn't think he even realized he did it, it came so naturally to him. When he continued to scan the other kids' antics, she slowly tucked herself up under his shoulder and slipped her arm around his waist, resting her thumb in the belt loop of his Wranglers. *See Sofia, nobody exploded. No sirens went off. This is good.*

Resting his other hand on hers at his waist, JT looked down at her, the grin still on his face. His chocolate brown eyes were somehow lighter than she had seen them in months. He looked like the carefree JT she had come to know and care for over the last five years. The five years *before the incident*. He raised his nose to the air and hummed in satisfaction. "Mmmmm...Smell

that?" he asked. "Bubba's been working overtime with that brisket. I keep trying to get him to give me the recipe. Hell, I even offered to buy it off him, but no go. I think a taste test is in order. You hungry?"

She nodded, happy to bask in the warmth of his smile. "And, on the way by we have to stop at the Methodist Ladies booth for Miss Etta's chocolate cake before it's all gone."

He shook his head with mock sorrow. "There's another secret recipe I'm never going to get. I keep trying to replicate it but it's never quite the same. Maybe you can charm it out of her."

Arms still around each other, they took off across the square to secure their lunch before touring the other booths and checking out the winners of the pie and homemade canned goods contests. Sofia thought she could happily get used to this pretend boyfriend thing.

Chapter Eight

Meet & Greet

A SHORT WHILE LATER, heaping plates in hand, they sat at tables set under the few trees that littered the open square. Sofia looked around for familiar faces as they tucked into their meal. When she didn't immediately see anyone, she returned her attention to JT and their lunch. She tried to relax and just enjoy the day and the company. And, the view across the table wasn't bad either. Suddenly a shadow appeared from over her shoulder.

"Sofia?" she turned slowly at the voice behind her and pasted on a smile. *Here goes nothing.*

"Hey, Selena," she greeted her sister.

"Hi, Selena. Where's Andreas?" JT added.

She waved a hand in the general direction of the hay bale forts. "He took the boys over to play in the hay." She refocused her attention on JT and Sofia. "What are you two up to?"

"Just having some lunch before we check out the booths," JT said smoothly and easily took Sofia's hand on top of the table to make sure Selena didn't miss the gesture.

Sofia saw exactly when her sister noticed the touch. Her eyes widened,

then immediately narrowed. Sofia held her breath for the questions to start but, to her amazement, Selena didn't comment. "I'd better go help Andreas before the boys get away from him. See you later."

As she walked off, Sofia stared at JT, mouth agape. "What just happened? She didn't say anything about you holding my hand."

JT grinned at her and pointed with his chin in Selena's direction. "Oh, she noticed alright. I don't think your mama is going to be as subtle about it though."

Sofia followed his gaze. Sure enough, Selena was in a huddle with their mother who was in line to buy cider. She saw them both stare in their direction. "Oh, great," Sofia muttered.

JT squeezed her hand tighter. "This is good. Might as well start getting 'us' out there with the most important people," he said, encouragingly.

"You're right, I just..." Sofia was interrupted by another familiar voice.

"Mija! What is this?" Sofia's mother asked, coming up to the table.

"Hello, Mrs. Benevides! How are you enjoying the festival?" JT jumped in to save her. "We got really lucky with the weather today, didn't we?"

Sofia sat like a deer in the headlights, staring at her mother until JT swiped a finger back and forth over her knuckles. The motion somehow settled her and let her brain connect with her mouth again. "JT and I were just having lunch," she said, striving to sound casual.

Before Mrs. Benevides could respond, JT was on his feet. "Can I get you a plate, ma'am, before Bubba runs out of the brisket?"

"Uh, well, yes. Gracias, JT, " she stuttered.

Then JT flashed her one of his wide smiles and offered her his seat. "I'll be back in just a minute, babe. Do you need anything else?"

Sofia shook her head silently and then it happened. JT placed a soft kiss on

her mouth and another on her temple before he turned to get her mother a plate. It happened so quickly, she barely had time to register that his lips had actually been on hers before he was walking away. She brought a finger to touch her mouth where JT's had been before she realized her mother was speaking to her in rapid Spanish.

“¿De cuando acá? ¿Porqué no me habías contado que estaban saliendo? ¿Desde cuando? Esto no me gusta. Él tiene su reputación, ¿sabes?” (*“When did this happen? Why didn't you tell me you were seeing each other? How long has it been going on? I'm not sure I like this. He has a reputation, you know.”*)

Sofia tried to focus. "Uh, just in the last week, Mamá. And you shouldn't listen to rumors. JT is a good man. He's kind and smart and has his own business. Aren't those all things you tell me to look for in a man?" Sofia said, feeling the need to protect JT from the town busybodies.

"Phsst...You know what I mean, Sofia," her mother continued. She leaned toward Sofia and whispered, "He likes the ladies a little too much. You don't want to be just another girl on his list!"

Sofia's cheeks reddened. "Mamá! How could you think that of me?"

"I'm not thinking that of you, miija, I'm thinking it of him." She gestured with her chin to JT who was talking to a pretty blonde girl in the line for barbeque. "See already he's flirting with another girl."

Sofia followed her mother's gaze. She saw JT at the stand talking to a girl. For a minute, a stab of pain caught her in the gut but then she recognized the long blonde braid. She turned back to her mother and rolled her eyes. "Mamá, that's just Jenny. She's our new waitress. She's only 19. JT is just being friendly. Why do you have to think the worst of him? And why can't you trust my judgement? I'm thirty years old!"

"No te enojas, Sofía!" she protested. ("*Don't get upset, Sofia*") I'm only looking out for you, and you know what I say is true. How many girls has he been out with in the last year?"

Not nearly as many as you think. "I don't know, Mamá, I haven't kept a list. It doesn't matter anyway. He's with me now and it's not some fling. We care about each other."

Mrs. Benevides scoffed. "A week only...You..."

Sofia cut her off. "Five years, Mamá! We've been friends for five years before we started seeing each other."

"You weren't *friends*. He is your *boss*. Why..." Her next comment was lost as JT came ambling back up to the table.

"Here you go, ma'am," JT said, placing a full plate of barbeque and hushpuppies in front of her. He moved around to the other side of the table and sat close to Sofia. He casually slipped his hand in her hair and slid the silky waves behind her shoulder. Heat licked up her shoulder and neck following the path of his fingers.

"So, what were you ladies talking about?" JT asked, taking a sip of the drink he had left on the table.

"Oh, just how nice the festival is this year, yes?" Sofia's mother said quickly. "I miss the café's booth, though."

"Ah, well. With all the events we're doing and Maggie fixing to burst with the twins, we decided we would sit it out this year," JT explained. "And I'm glad to have the day off to spend with Sofia out of work."

He rubbed a comforting hand up and down her back as he spoke. Sofia had to hold back a sigh of pleasure at the casual touch. Her mother didn't respond but tucked into the lunch JT had brought her. As they talked of inconsequential things, JT never stopped touching her. He squeezed her hand,

laid his palm on her spine, ran a finger up a thigh, all without seemingly being conscious of doing it. Meanwhile, Sofia thought she would burst into flames before her mother finished her lunch. She fought the urge to snuggle up to him and rub herself up and down his hard body like a cat. *Dios mio, Mamá! Finish already!*

Finally, the last piece of brisket went in her mother's mouth. Sofia jumped up. "Here, Mamá. Let me take that for you. Oh, look! I think I see Selena waving for you." Sofia pointed in the direction of the hay bale forts where she knew her sister had gone, though she didn't have any idea if she was there now. She knew her sister needing help with her boys would stir up her mother's *abuela* genes and move her along.

"Really? Oh, I'd better go. She can't handle those boys for an hour without me," her mother crowed proudly.

JT stood as well as Mrs. Benevides rose from her seat. "Nice to see you, ma'am. Hope you have a good time the rest of the day."

Mrs. Benevides gave him a once over before speaking. "Thank you for the lunch, JT. Recuerda lo que dije, Sofia."

Sofia simply glared at her as she made her way across the square in search of Selena. "What was that about?" JT asked, having not understood the rapid phrase.

"Mama was warning me about you," she said without thinking.

"Warning you about what?" JT asked, taking off his ball cap and smoothing back his hair that had been due a trim over a month ago.

Sofia looked at him briefly then looked at the ground, embarrassed that she had said anything. "She says you have a reputation, and she doesn't want me to...well...be just another notch on your bedpost, so to speak."

Now it was JT's turn to look embarrassed. He'd definitely played the field,

but he hadn't left a trail of broken hearts behind. At least, he didn't think he had. Most of the women he dated were into casual just like he was. That's why he dated them. And he'd rarely gone out with anyone from Gladewater since high school. Too much history there. He hadn't realized he'd developed a reputation in town and become the kind of guy that mothers warned their daughters against.

"Let's take a walk," he said and put out his hand for her to take. She took it readily enough and they started to stroll across the square toward the bandstand. Tonight, live music and dancing would happen here, but at this point in the day, the area was the closest thing they could get to privacy.

JT straddled one of the benches and pulled her down to sit facing him. Sofia watched him her forehead wrinkling with worry.

"Don't be upset about what my mamá said. I shouldn't have even told you about it. I know she's only worried about me but sometimes she just makes me so mad!" Sofia couldn't bear the sad expression in his deep brown eyes. His hands found hers again, slowly stroking the back of her knuckles and, just like before, the rhythmic movement started to soothe her. She wasn't sure how he managed that. One touch set her on fire, the other was like calming waters.

He blew out a large breath before he finally looked up at her. She saw the sorrow and guilt back in them. It made her chest hurt with pain for him. "I'm really sorry, Sofia. This was supposed to be helping you, not giving you more grief. We can just forget the whole thing. I don't want to be a burden to you."

It took her a minute to drag her eyes from his and process what he had said. "No, JT!" she said a little too loudly. She tried to curb the sudden panic she felt over possibly losing just this small amount of attention from him. "No," she said again more softly. "Really! I'm sorry I said anything. She'll

eventually get over herself once she realizes you aren't dating other women behind my back."

JT gave a derisive snort and let go of her hands to scrub his own up and down his face. "Not any chance of that happening. I can guarantee you that," he said.

She wrapped a lock of hair around her finger as she tried to puzzle out his expression. "I know what your reasons are for going along with this pretend relationship, but, someday, JT, someday a perfect woman will come along for you." She paused when he shook his head. She put a hand to his sculpted cheek and traced it with her thumb. She almost lost her breath when he leaned into her touch and placed his hand over hers as if to keep it there. She made him meet her eyes before she continued. "And if she comes along while we're doing this thing, I want you to feel free to call it off and go after her. You deserve every bit of love and happiness. I want you to promise me you won't let me be an excuse for you not to find your happiness."

JT closed his chocolate brown eyes in a slow blink, as if he was in pain, then turned his head to brush a soft kiss against her palm. "Only if you promise me the same."

Sofia could only nod.

Chapter Nine

No More Shiny Barbies

BEFORE THE LUNCH RUSH, JT motioned to Sofia to follow him into the back hallway toward the offices. Sofia met him wiping her hands on her apron. "Everything okay?" she asked. "Is Jenny getting the orders backwards again?"

"No, she's fine," JT said. "I wanted to check on you."

"Me?" Sofia looked at him questioningly. "I'm fine. Why?"

"I saw you and Maggie in a huddle this morning. I just wondered if you were telling her about us?"

"Us? No! Um, not that I don't want her to know but..."

"Here she comes," JT said quickly. "Follow my lead." Then he cut off her explanation with his mouth on hers. He planted his hands against the wall, surrounding her head with his muscular arms, pressing his hard body against curves, pinning her to the wall. The initial shock of his lips hitting hers quickly wore off and her hands moved of their own accord to tangle in the hair curling at the back of his neck. All rational thought left her head as she melted into him, her body begging his to mold her into any shape it liked.

"Ahh, hmmm..." A voice cleared in the hall next to them. Sofia didn't even

try to move her head toward the sound as JT slowly removed his lips from hers and took a step back. Her body immediately cried out at the loss of his heat. She grabbed onto one of his arms to keep herself from sliding to the floor. She blinked, trying to get herself back under control.

"Hey, sister mine," JT said casually, throwing her a grin. He threw an arm around Sofia's shoulders, and she grabbed onto his hand like a lifeline. "Sorry about that. Couldn't help myself."

Maggie eyed them back and forth then rubbed her belly thoughtfully. "So, when did this happen?" she asked, motioning to the two of them.

Sofia could feel the heat rising in her face, and she glanced at the floor. "It just kind of snuck up on us about the time you and Loverboy got hitched," JT drawled. He saw his sister roll her eyes at the name he still periodically called her husband though he could *almost* call them friends these days. He drew Sofia in for a kiss to the temple. "We were going to tell you about it but hadn't gotten around to it yet. Kinda wanted to keep it for ourselves for a while, ya know?"

Maggie gave her brother a shrewd glance before giving the couple a smile. "Well, congratulations, I guess," Maggie said, "but don't we have customers?"

Sofia straightened up and smoothed back her hair. "Of course. I'm on it," Sofia said and started to turn from JT.

"One minute, angel," JT said, catching her hand and pulling her in for another soft kiss on her lips.

She sighed involuntarily as he drew away again, gave herself a little internal shake, and forced a smile. "See you later."

As Sofia rounded the corner to the dining room, Maggie pointed at her brother. "You and I need to have a talk. Right. Now."

JT shrugged and followed her into her office, shutting the door behind them. Maggie rounded her desk and pointed to a seat in front. When her brother continued to stand, she scowled at him and continued to stand as well.

"Just what in blue blazes do you think you're doing, JT?" Maggie asked, glaring at him, hands on hips.

JT met her stare and slid his hands casually into his back pockets. He shrugged. "Doing about what?"

Maggie pointed a perfectly manicured pink nail at him. "You know good and well what. You and Sofia. What are you thinking?"

He started to answer but she threw up a hand to forestall him. "Never mind. I know the answer. You're not thinking at all."

JT crossed his arms across his chest defensively. "I don't know what your problem is but it's really none of your business."

"Not my business?" Maggie asked incredulously. "Not only is she my friend but she's an employee. A very valued employee, I might add, and integral to *our business* at this point."

"I'm well aware," JT answered in a low voice. "I'm not an idiot."

"Could have fooled me!" Maggie countered. "What happens in a few weeks when you get tired of her and break it off? What am I supposed to do with that? What if she quits because you moved on to the next shiny Barbie?"

JT clenched his jaw hard and bit back the multitude of smartass comments he wanted to make. He knew Maggie was going to be upset about this pretend relationship, but he hadn't imagined her taking a hunk out of his hide to this degree. The worst part was everything she said was true.

"What makes you think it won't work out?" he finally said when he could relax his jaw enough to speak.

Maggie rolled her eyes at him. "Have you met you? The longest

relationship you've had that I can remember lasted eight weeks, which is fine for some girl you met in a club in Dallas, but this is Sofia we're talking about! She's not like the girls you normally date and you know it." Maggie blew out a frustrated breath. "After all these months of you avoiding even getting near a woman, what possessed you to pick Sofia to get you out of your slump?"

JT's brown eyes narrowed on his sister's matching ones. *How dare she think I'd use Sofia that way!* They glared at each other for several long moments, neither wanting to give. JT's mind raced. He wanted to tell Maggie the truth but he'd promised Sofia. It gutted him that his sister thought so little of him, but he guessed he shouldn't be surprised. He'd nearly gotten her killed with one of his 'shiny Barbies' after all. He knew in his heart he'd never deserve Sofia if this was actually a real relationship anyway.

Finally, JT broke their stare and looked at the floor. His arms dropped to his side in defeat, and he blew out a long breath. "Good to know how you really feel about me," he muttered.

Maggie's posture immediately lost its tension when she heard him. She'd let her temper get away from her and gone too far. "Oh, JT, no," she said, rounding the desk to stand in front of him. She huffed out a breath and took his hand. "C'mere. Let's sit," she said, rubbing her belly. "These two make me tired and crabby. I didn't mean it."

JT let himself be tugged down onto the small loveseat against the far wall. Ironically, he'd never really given much thought to his dating habits before entering into this fake relationship with Sofia. He enjoyed women, and he dated women who were into having fun, just like him. He didn't have a trail of broken hearts left behind him like some men he knew. Now, however, he realized how people were seeing him. His reputation had been thrown in his face twice in the last few days and he didn't like the way it made him feel.

Maggie took his scruffy face in her small hands and brought his eyes back to hers. This time they were full of compassion and affection. "You, brother mine, are a good man. You are kind and protective, smart and funny, all the things women love. I just worry about you. Since I got hurt, I know you haven't let yourself date at all and now, suddenly, you're with Sofia who's a 180 degrees from the women you usually go for." She sighed. "I want you to be happy, JT. More than anything, I want you to find a woman who deserves you and loves you to pieces and that you can love back just as much." She looked at him pointedly. "If that was what you wanted for yourself, then Sofia would be a perfect match. I just don't know if that's where you are and I'm afraid everyone is going to get hurt if it doesn't work out between you."

JT squirmed under her scrutiny. "I really like Sofia, Maggie, and I know she's different than the women I usually date. I promise I'll treat her with the utmost respect and, if it doesn't work out, I'll somehow make sure we don't lose her here. I'm going to be different. I swear."

Maggie gave him a wan smile and rubbed his arm affectionately. "I love you, you big lug. You know that, right? I just want you to be happy."

"I'm trying to be," JT murmured. "I really am."

Chapter Ten

The Taste of Chocolate

S OFIA WAITED IMPATIENTLY UNTIL Maggie left for the day. She'd been a nervous wreck all day waiting for her to say something about the kiss in the hallway with her brother. Maggie hadn't said a word, however, just went about her day as if nothing had happened. Sofia, on the other hand, couldn't focus. She messed up two orders and found herself wiping down tables multiple times lost in the memory of his lips on hers and how he his hair and skin had felt under her hands. When she finally pushed open the swinging door to the kitchen, she had to catch herself from gasping out loud.

He stood with his back to her in his usual uniform of black t-shirt and Wranglers. She'd always thought Wrangler was missing out by not having that fine ass in one of their commercials. He had his earbuds in and a large mixing bowl in his arms, whisking something that smelled divine. The motion pulled his shirt taut across his broad back and made the muscles in his shoulders and arms pop with the effort. They had several expensive stand mixers, but JT always said he liked to mix things by hand for the exercise. She could see why now. She tried to swallow but her mouth was suddenly dry as sandpaper. She had flashes of those arms surrounding her in the

hallway just a few hours ago and grabbing onto them to steady herself after the panty melting kiss he had planted on her. His skin had been so warm. She'd wanted to run her hands up under that shirt and... *Dios mio, I'm in deep trouble.*

As he did a little pivot to the music, he finally caught sight of her in his peripheral vision. Their eyes locked for a brief moment before Sofia looked away and nervously smoothed down her apron. JT dropped the big whisk in the bowl and took out one earbud. "Hey, Sof. You alright?"

"Yeah, fine. Um, what are you making?" she asked, searching for a safe topic.

JT's mouth quirked up on one side. "I'm trying to perfect Miss Etta's Texas Sheet Cake recipe. I think I might have figured out the secret ingredient last week after eating it at the festival. Cinnamon!"

Sofia grinned. "You ate enough of it for three people."

"All in the name of research," JT quipped, raising a rakish brown eyebrow in punctuation. "That's my story and I'm sticking to it, anyway."

She giggled at him but then quickly sobered. "Uh, I heard raised voices coming from the office earlier but couldn't make anything out. Is everything okay with Maggie? Was she mad about you kissing me?" Maggie hadn't mentioned anything to her nor seemed to act any differently to her after catching them making out in the hall, but Sofia was nervous. She loved this job, loved Maggie, and didn't want anything to come between them.

JT placed the bowl on a counter and shrugged. "She read me the riot act, at first," he admitted. "But I convinced her I wasn't going to get bored with you in a couple of weeks and break your heart, so she came around. And, of course, that's the truth since this isn't even real."

"Of course," Sofia agreed quickly. "No broken hearts here. Just a girl

escaping her family's expectations." She tried to give him a bright grin but was afraid she failed.

JT saw the tension in her face. "Here, taste this for me," he said, grabbing a spoon and dipping it into the dark chocolate batter. He held the spoon out to her to taste, hoping to distract her from her worry.

She took a couple of tentative steps forward until she could reach the utensil in his outstretched hand. Her fingers came up to rest on his as she closed her mouth around the proffered spoon covered in chocolatey batter. Her lids floated down and closed in pleasure as the taste exploded on her tongue. "Mmmmm," she moaned, swallowing the bite.

JT went still as a statue as he watched her plump, red lips close around the spoon and suck the batter into her mouth. When she moaned and swallowed, he almost lost it. He reached up to wipe a sheen of sweat off his brow as he pulled the spoon from her mouth. "What do you think? Did I get it right?" he asked, his voice suddenly husky.

Sofia's eyelids fluttered open and met his hooded gaze. Her pink tongue darted out and licked some stray chocolate from her lips before she answered. "I don't know if it's an exact match to Miss Etta's, but it's divine," she said in a breathy whisper.

"I'm glad you like it," he said slowly. He noticed a stray bit of chocolate at the corner of her mouth as his eyes refused to leave her face. "You've got a little chocolate just here..." he gestured but grabbed her hand before it reached her mouth to find the offending bit. "No, let me," he said and leaned forward, licking away the chocolate and letting his lips graze hers. Her mouth opened on a sigh and JT moved closer, his lips sipping at hers until their bodies were flush against one another. His hands met at her nape, his thumbs stroking the sides of her soft neck under the perfect shells of her ears. When

he slanted his head to deepen the kiss, her long fingers came up to encircle his wrists, but instead of trying to pull him away, she hung on as if his hands on her were the only things holding her up.

A groan from deep in his chest escaped him as his tongue explored and he tasted the chocolate she had just eaten. He'd forever associate that taste with her and her sweet mouth. He dropped one hand to the small of her back and pulled her closer, cupping the back of her head with the other. Forced to relinquish her hold on his wrists, her hands found the dirty blonde locks at the base of his neck and threaded their way in, locking him in place to her.

For a minute, or maybe an hour, they stood absorbed in each other until a perky voice pierced the bubble they had been sequestered in. "Sofia? Are you back here? I was just going to head..." They jumped apart as they registered Jenny's voice, but it was too late. The young waitress' eyes seemed to find the oven and the pots hanging from the ceiling incredibly interesting as she sputtered. "Uh, s-s-sorry. I just wanted to make sure it was okay that I headed out for the day."

Sofia took a step away from JT toward the girl. "Of course!" Sofia said, a little too enthusiastically. "Let me come lock the door behind you."

She didn't look at JT as she ushered Jenny from the kitchen toward the front door. JT watched them go then scrubbed his hands up and down his face. *Jesus, man, what are you doing? It's not real.* He knew he shouldn't be kissing her, touching her at all unless they were doing it to make others believe in their relationship. Even then, it didn't need to be so, so consuming. But since he'd had a taste of her, he couldn't seem to help himself when those gorgeous full lips presented themselves. She always smelled of summer honeysuckle warmed in the sun. and her skin was so soft, even her hands that did hard, honest work every day. And today, when her curvy body melted

into his, he thought he'd die a happy man right there. She overwhelmed all of his senses whenever she came near. *Man, you are in deep trouble.*

Chapter Eleven

It's All Pretend...

SOFIA SAT ON THE end of her bed on Friday night wrapped in a towel, trying to get her nerves under control. JT was due to pick her up for an official 'date' in half an hour and she was in panic mode. Ever since their scorching kiss in the kitchen, they had been trying to give each other a wide berth at work. It was nothing anyone would notice but Sofia could feel the tension whenever they came into close contact, which they had to do frequently throughout the day. When he had suggested dinner out and a movie for tonight, she had agreed that being seen out together was the right thing to do but now she was freaking out.

You can do this, Sofia. It's only dinner and a movie. It's not even a real date.

She walked to her closet just as her phone started ringing. She decided to ignore it. She had important decisions to make. What do you wear to a fake dinner and a movie date? She stood in her closet and stared. She wanted to look cute, but not too cute. Definitely nothing sexy. Casual but flirty. No. Scratch that. Not flirty. But they had to make everything seem real, right? Wouldn't she do flirty if it was a real date? She growled to herself in

frustration. Finally, she picked up her phone that wouldn't quit ringing. Didn't they know how to leave a voicemail? A glance at the screen showed her mother's number. She huffed a huge sigh. She did not have time for this but knew if she didn't pick up, the woman would keep calling her non-stop until she did.

Reluctantly, she answered. "Hola, Mamá. What's up?"

"Sofia, I need you to come by the house this evening," her mother announced.

"I kind of have plans tonight. Can't it wait until Sunday?" Sofia asked hopefully.

"No. Magda and her daughter, Marguerita, are here. You need to come say hello and I'm sure she'd like to apologize to you. They are leaving in the morning."

Sofia stifled a groan. Magda and Marguerita were two of the last people she wanted to see. If possible, the daughter was almost more interfering than her mother. "Mamá, I have a dinner date. I wish you would have let me know earlier."

She could almost hear her mother's ears perk up. "A date? With who? JT?" she asked, her worry clear in her tone.

Sofia squeezed her eyes shut and prayed for patience. "Yes, with JT. You know we're dating."

"Phsst! Bring him with you if you have to, but come by," Mrs. Benevides commanded. "Be here by six."

She sighed. Trying to thwart her mother's plans was futile when she took that tone. "Fine. We'll be by, but it will only be for a minute. I'm sure JT has reservations."

As her mother took a breath to respond, Sofia's mind searched for a way

out. "Mamá, I have to go. JT is here," she fibbed. "We'll be by in a little while."

"Be sure you're here by six, Sofia," her mother said before disconnecting. Great. Now she had to subject JT to Tia Magda after everything she'd done. A fake date with a side of family drama. Just what she needed. She sighed again and went to finish dressing. JT would be here any minute.

JT rang Sofia's doorbell then shoved his hands in the front pockets of his best jeans. After discarding three other ones, he had finally decided on a hunter green flannel shirt topped by an Orvis down vest instead of a jacket. His nicest cowboy boots and a tooled leather belt Maggie had given him as a gift completed the ensemble. He blew out a nervous breath. He couldn't remember having been nervous for a date since his first one in high school. He didn't understand it and didn't like the jumpy feeling in his belly. *Get your shit together, man. We're simply two friends going out for a bite, even though it's supposed to look like more. It's pretend!* Before he could ruminate further, Sofia opened the door.

The breath caught in his lungs when his eyes caught sight of her in the doorway. She was gorgeous. Her normal high ponytail had been exchanged for a soft bun at the top of her head with a few of the shiny black locks already escaping their confinement to fall down to frame her face. She had on more make-up than he saw her in at work. It accentuated the slight tilt of her eyes. Like a cat, he thought. And her lips! Those full, rosebud lips were slicked with red. It was all he could do to not swoop down and taste them again. He suddenly desperately wanted to see that lipstick smeared across her face, her lips swollen from his kisses. JT blinked when he realized she had said something to him.

"JT?" she asked with concern. *Great, she clearly thinks I've gone mental.*

His voice cracked when he started to speak, and he had to clear his throat before he could get the simple words out. "Uh, yeah, hi! Ready to go?"

"Let me grab my jacket," Sofia answered, flashing him a shy smile.

JT could only nod, giving himself a mental facepalm. *Get your shit together, man. You're acting like an idiot.*

A moment later, she was locking her front door and turned to him. He held out an elbow for her to take. "Your chariot awaits, milady," he said in a mocking tone, recovering just a bit of his old swagger.

She took his arm and giggled. The sound shot straight to his groin. *What the fuck?* "Thank you, kind sir," Sofia replied, playing along.

When they had gotten settled in his Jeep, she turned serious. "I'm afraid I have some bad news," Sofia said.

JT stiffened at the sudden change in her demeanor. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Sofia lips tightening into a straight line, and she rolled her eyes. "My mother called right before you got here. We have to make a command performance at my parents' house at six." Sofia looked at him with regret. "Tia Magda, and her daughter are visiting, and I'm required to go say hello. I'm really sorry, JT. I told her I had plans but she wouldn't take no for an answer. We can just pop in, say hi and leave. I promise."

JT's shoulders visibly relaxed. Parents loved him. He was confident he could win Mrs. Benevides over. "No worries. We don't have to be at the restaurant until 7:30. Plenty of time to stop by and do your duty. We'll have to forgo the pre-dinner stroll I had planned but we can do that another time."

She gave him a rueful smile. "Thank you. I'm so sorry to have to make you change your plans, but Mama is impossible when she sets her mind to

something. I'd much rather have been on a walk with you than having to see Magda and Marguerita."

"It's okay, really," JT assured her. "It's another opportunity to convince everyone we're a couple. Especially Magda. Maybe she'll put her magical database of available men away. That's what this is all for, right?"

Even as he said it, the words felt hollow in his throat. Why did that feel so wrong?

"Exactly," Sofia answered with forced brightness. "That's the goal."

Consensus reached, JT pulled away from the curb and headed to Sofia's parents' house.

Chapter Twelve

Red Lipstick

FIVE MINUTES LATER, THEY were walking up the sidewalk to Sofia's parents' brick ranch on the edge of town. Sofia looked up at him in concern when he reached for her hand. He didn't have time to question the look before she was reaching for the doorknob and calling into the house.

"Hello! We're here," Sofia called, pulling JT behind her into the small, tiled foyer.

"In the kitchen!" she heard her mother call out.

JT followed along with her glancing around as he was towed through the house in Sofia's wake. Family pictures lined the walls and every available surface in the living room. Sofia, her sister, Selena, and her brother, Tomas in all stages of their childhoods. He wanted to take more time to study the ones of Sofia, but she was unrelenting in her coverage across the house heading for the kitchen. As they got closer, the heard female voices whisper-yelling to each other.

He could only make out a few words. "I told you....", "No, you need to...", "...doesn't matter."

Sofia squeezed his hand and dropped it before they entered the kitchen.

Her mamá, Tia Magda and her daughter were in the small space between the island and the sink. She could tell her mamá was upset.

"Hi, Tia. Mar," Sofia started. "Are we interrupting something?"

"Magda was just saying how she wanted to apologize to you, mija," her mamá said in a tight voice.

Magda cleared her throat and gave her a tight smile. "Yes, Sofia. I'm sorry you were upset by my matchmaking efforts, but, you know, desperate times call for desperate measures."

"Magda!" Mrs. Benevides cried. "What is wrong with you?"

Sofia turned a color of red JT had never seen before. He waited for the steam to come pouring out of her nose as he was sure that pressure had to go somewhere. JT squeezed her hand. He started to lean down to whisper to her that it was okay but before he could say a word, she had his face in her hands and was kissing him stupid. Without thought, he immediately pulled her into his body and returned the consuming kiss. He completely forgot where they were and lost himself in the feel of those red lips on his and her soft curves melting into him. After several long moments, Sofia broke the kiss. JT blinked and tried to catch his breath. He couldn't believe the sight of her. It was better than his imagination earlier—lips swollen, red lipstick just a stain, and fire in her eyes.

She gave him a short nod before she turned back to her aunt and announced, "Tia Magda, this is JT, my *boyfriend*." JT gave a little wave at the women's stunned faces around the kitchen. Sofia continued, "Sorry we can't stay to visit but we have reservations and weren't told about this little gathering until about fifteen minutes ago. See you next time you're in town!"

Sofia glared at her aunt and, grabbing JT's hand again, turned to go. "Sofia!" her mother called after her, clearly upset by the little show she had

just witnessed. "¿Qué estás haciendo?" ("What are you doing?")

Sofia threw up a hand to forestall any more of her mother's questions. She didn't want to see the worry in her eyes. "Nos vamos, Mamá!" ("We're leaving, Mama!")

JT threw up his own hand to wave goodbye to the ladies, a smile dancing on his lips. He'd rarely seen this fiery side of his normally sweet-natured Sofia. He had to admit he liked it. He still didn't get to look at any of the pictures as Sofia hurried him back through the house to the front door. She didn't stop marching until she reached his Jeep down the block. When they were back in the vehicle, the fight seemed to rush out of her all at once.

She bent over and put her face in her hands, her elbows resting on her knees. "I'm so sorry about that, JT," she said, still covering her face. "I couldn't believe she said that to me! After everything else she's put me through and she's calling me desperate? I just lost it."

When he didn't respond, she peeled her hands away from her face and stole a glance at him. JT was grinning widely at her. "Why are you smiling like that?" she asked, frowning at him.

"Well, darlin'," JT said, turning on the charm he hadn't used in months. "That had to be one of the best introduction meet ups ever! At least for me. Had I known you needed an audience to kiss me like that, I would have gathered a crowd weeks ago!"

He chuckled as she dropped her head back to her hands and groaned in embarrassment. He reached out a hand and cupped the back of her head, encouraging her to look at him again. "It's fine," he assured her when she gave him a sideways glance. "At least I don't think Magda is going to have any doubts that we are really together after that performance."

She blinked slowly at him, feeling the warmth of his palm on her head.

Why did that feel so good? She took a deep breath to regain her control and, finally, her lips twitched. "I guess not. Oh, she drives me crazy! I didn't even think about what I was going to do, I just reacted. Mamá is going to kill me!" She groaned. "At least Papá and Tomás were in the backyard grilling. I would have really been in for it if they'd seen that performance."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. And any time I can be of that kind of assistance, you say the word," JT told her. His hand dropped from her head, and he drew a thumb across her bottom lip. *So damn soft.* "I'm afraid you may need to do some damage control with your lipstick though," he continued softly. "We made quite a mess."

It took a moment for the words to penetrate the haze that had formed over Sofia's mind with that brush over her lip. "Oh, damn! I didn't even think of that."

She pulled down the mirror in the visor and looked at herself. Sure enough, her lipstick was smeared all around her mouth. It was practically a big red sign announcing 'Been making out' on her face. He watched her dig around in her purse for tissues and lipstick to repair the damage. A small smile still lingered on his face. She was such an enigma. He found himself increasingly fascinated as they spent more time together. He'd seen more sides of her in the last couple of weeks since they started 'dating' than he had seen working with her day in and day out for the last five years. He wondered how he could have missed really noticing all her wonderful qualities all these years. He frowned a little to himself. He had to remember this whole relationship was fake. It wouldn't do to be catching feelings for her. Unfortunately, he worried that it might be too late.

Chapter Thirteen

A Mountain in a Suit

SOFIA LOOKED AROUND THE lovely restaurant as they were led to their table. Romano's was all romantic candlelight, tables for two covered in white tablecloths and classical music playing softly over it all. She was glad she had worn a skirt. She'd had no idea JT was bringing them to such a fancy place. She'd known they were having Italian in Tyler, but she had thought it might be the new Chicago-style pizza place that had opened, not Romano's. She smiled nervously at the waiter as he pulled out her seat for her and gave her a slight bow.

"Good evening! My name is Fabio and I'll be your server tonight," the waiter intoned with a slight Italian accent. Sofia had no idea if it was real or put on, but it made her want to giggle a little.

"Madame," Fabio said as he handed her a menu and a wine list. Sofia could only bob her head.

"Signore," he said as he repeated the gesture with JT. "Would you like water as well this evening?"

JT glanced at Sofia and she nodded. "Yes, thanks," JT answered. The waiter nodded and disappeared to secure a carafe of water.

"JT! This place is so nice!" Sofia whispered once the waiter was out of earshot. "It's got to be really expensive. You shouldn't be spending so much money on me."

"Don't be ridiculous," he countered. "What else do I have to spend money on? I wanted to take you someplace nice. Someplace out of Gladewater. I know the chef here. I've been wanting to check it out anyway."

Sofia was about to speak when their waiter showed back up. "Here we go," he said smoothly, presenting the water carafe and filling their glasses. "Have you decided on wine or an appetizer? Some antipasti, perhaps?"

JT glanced at Sofia in question. "I'll trust whatever you order," she told him.

"Let's start with the antipasti platter and the Lambrusco," JT ordered.

"Very good, signore," Fabio responded. "I'll bring your wine and the food will be out shortly."

Sofia's eyes widened. "I had no idea you knew anything about wine, and Italian food."

JT shrugged and gave her a grin that made the dimple on his right cheek flash. She'd missed that dimple. "I learned a few things in culinary school. I don't know a lot about wines except what generally goes with specific dishes. For some reason I remember that Lambrusco goes with antipasti. Couldn't tell you why, though."

"That's more than I know," Sofia said, picking a piece of bread out of the wicker basket that Fabio had left with the water. She smiled thoughtfully at him. "I thought I knew almost everything about you, but you keep surprising me."

"I could say the same," JT said. "For example, that kiss tonight..."

The rest of his thought was cut off by a huge, masculine hand coming to

rest on Sofia's shoulder. "Sofia? Is that really you?"

JT frowned. The man was tall and dark headed. He had shoulders like a linebacker that seemed to barely fit in the suit jacket he wore even though JT was sure it had to be custom made to fit his extra broad frame so well. JT narrowed his eyes. He looked vaguely familiar.

"Oh my God! Jesse? I can't believe it!" Sofia cried and before JT could blink, she was up and in the stranger's arms.

JT stood and dropped his napkin on the table. He fought the urge to cross his arms over his chest. *Who the fuck is this guy?* "Who's this, Sofia?" he asked, his voice dropping an octave from his usual happy-go-lucky tones.

Sofia spun back to him, a wide smile on her face. "Oh, JT! This is Jesse Conners, my...uh...friend, from high school. You must remember him. Number 24 on the football team. All State in 2010," Sofia gushed.

JT rubbed his chin in thought. That's where he knew the guy. Football dude. JT had been two years ahead of Sofia in school, but this guy was a mountain even back then. He forced a hand toward the giant to shake. "Oh, yeah, man. Now I remember. You were impressive even back when I graduated. How ya doing?" JT asked as the mountain's giant paw engulfed his not insubstantial one.

JT clenched his molars as the guy kept his arm around Sofia even after they'd been introduced. Sure, this was a fake date, but All State didn't know that. "So, what are you doing now?" JT asked, trying his best not to reach out and grab Sofia and tuck her into his side.

"Stockbroker," Jesse said. "In town for my baby cousin's engagement party." He rolled his eyes. "Folks are trying to impress the in-laws, so here we are. Good food, anyway, though I'd rather be in jeans eating pizza at Tony's," he said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Sofia laughed. "I can't believe little Amy is getting married!" she said. "I can remember babysitting her."

"Yep, all grown up. Or so she thinks," he chuckled. "Oh, and it's Amarylis now, not Amy. She thinks her full name is more serious now that she's going to be a lawyer and all."

"A lawyer and a stockbroker," Sofia repeated. "Wow, your family must be so proud."

Jesse shrugged off the compliment, but she could tell he was pleased by it. He'd always put so much stock in appearances.

"So, what about you, Sof? What are you up to these days?"

"I manage JT's restaurant and events for his catering company," Sofia reported. "He and his sister, Maggie, own Common Grounds Café in Gladewater."

"You always were good at organizing things," Jesse said. "Good for you! I'll have to come check it out next time I go through there."

"Please do!" Sofia said. She started to ask something else when Fabio reappeared. He looked slightly stricken.

"Do I need to add another chair for your friend?" he asked, eyeing the newcomer.

Jesse held up his hands. "No, I'm going. My family probably wonders where I am," he said to Fabio. He turned Sofia to face him, planting a quick kiss on her cheek. "So good to see you, Sofia. We should get together sometime."

"Sure," Sofia answered. He hugged her again and slipped something into her hand. He gave JT a little wave. "Have a good night."

JT's arms were now crossed tightly across his chest. His raised chin was his only acknowledgement. Fabio glanced between the two large men and

quietly placed the antipasti tray on the table. He looked to JT and raised the bottle of wine in his hand. "Signore, can I pour you a glass?"

JT tore his gaze away from Jesse's retreating back and nodded to the waiter. "Sure, thanks," he said, taking his seat again.

Sofia practically floated back down to her chair, a smile still lingering on her face. JT didn't like that smile. Not. One. Bit.

After Fabio had finished pouring their wine and they had ordered their entrées, JT sipped his wine and gave Sofia a pointed look. "So, you and Jesse. You were friends, huh?"

Sofia glanced up at his tone. "Well, we dated for a while, before he left for college," she admitted. JT thought her voice developed a sad note. "But that was a long time ago."

"Huh..." JT grunted. "So, what did he hand you?"

"Hand me?" Sofia asked, suddenly finding the dessert and wine menu very interesting.

"The card," JT growled. "The one you put in your jacket pocket when you sat down."

Sofia twirled a piece of hair around her finger and glanced up at him. His eyes were dark as espresso in the candlelight and focused like a laser on her face. "Oh, that," she said, trying to laugh it off. "Only his business card. I think he was trying to show off a little."

JT's mouth flattened into a straight line. He took another gulp of his wine and fought the urge to demand she tear it up. He crumbled his napkin into a tight ball in his fist under the table. He couldn't remember ever wanting to take a guy out so badly – other than possibly Zane a couple of times but that was on his sister's account, not because he was jealous. Damn! That's what this was. He *was* jealous. *Well, fuck me.*

"Really, JT, it's nothing," Sofia went on. "He's always been kind of a show-off. I'm sure he thought his title would impress me."

"Yeah, I'm sure that's it," JT responded in a hard voice. He cleared his throat trying to gain control of his tone. *Get your shit together, man!*

Sofia watched him carefully as she started to select meats and cheeses from the antipasti plate. She didn't think she'd ever seen that expression on his face or heard that tone. What was that about? Did he and Jesse have some kind of history she wasn't aware of? Part of her wanted to ask but she decided she'd better try to move the conversation away from her ex.

"This looks really good," she said brightly. "And this wine is wonderful! I'm going to have to get a bottle to keep at home."

JT gave himself a little shake. "Yeah, looks good," he answered, now sounding more like his regular self. He helped himself to the platter after Sofia was done. He wasn't sure what was going on with him, but he knew he'd better get over it. He could tell he was making Sofia uncomfortable and that upset him even worse. He forced a smile.

"I'm glad you like the wine," he said, refilling his own glass and topping off Sofia's. "It's one of my favorites as well."

Sofia smiled and sighed to herself. JT seemed to be relaxing back to his normal self. She didn't know what was going on, but she'd heard that growl that gave her flutters in her belly again when he'd asked about Jesse's card. He couldn't be jealous. Could he?

Chapter Fourteen

Obsession

S OFIA WAS WORRIED. IT had been a little over two weeks since their dinner at Romano's and things with her and JT had been weird. Well, weirder than they had been since they had started pretending to date. Unlike before, JT seemed to be going out of his way not to touch her. And, there had definitely not been any repeats of the searing kisses they'd had in the hall and the kitchen. Granted, they had been crazy busy the last few weeks. They had been slammed at the café every day and had multiple catering events every weekend, but even the one time they had managed a movie date, he'd only held her hand from the car to the theatre. They hadn't even shared a popcorn with JT saying he was starving and ordering both of them their own. He'd not even walked her to her door that night, only dropped her off with a smile and a 'see you tomorrow'. She knew they weren't really dating but the sudden change made her worried all the same. She didn't know what to feel any more.

"Order up!" she heard JT call from the server's window. She sighed and went to get the plates.



JT was obsessed. He knew it. He watched Sofia all the time praying she didn't catch him at it. He felt like a creeper but couldn't seem to help himself. They were together all the time between the café and catering events but that was nothing new. What was new was the way he felt when she was close to him. He'd been doing his best to stay away from her, to fight the urge to reach out and feel her soft skin whenever she was anywhere near him. Simply the sight of her spun him up so badly at this point, he knew he didn't dare let himself touch her. It was all he thought about, though. He wanted to run his hands through that silky black cascade of hair and drag her full red lips to his. He knew he couldn't indulge himself, however. After his reaction to her old boyfriend that night at Romano's, he knew he had to pull back. He obviously couldn't handle the casual touches he was used to giving the women he dated. He couldn't keep it light with Sofia. Every touch stoked a fire in his belly, one he knew he couldn't act on. It wasn't real for Sofia. Their dating was only a means to get her family off her back. And, deep down, he knew he'd never deserve to have a woman like her for real.

"Order up!" he called from the window, then quickly turned away so Sofia wouldn't see the yearning in his eyes.



"Come on, JT! Shake a leg! We have to get this done today. I have to get the truck back by seven o'clock," Maggie bellowed at him from the doorway.

"I'm coming! Keep your shirt on!" JT bellowed back. He was trying to hide and take a quick break behind the never-ending tower of boxes he was supposed to be moving. He rotated his shoulders then leaned against the wall, taking a swig of his water. "Lord, she's worse than a drill sergeant," he muttered under his breath.

"Man, just keep your head down and do what she says," Zane whispered dramatically as he passed his brother-in-law carrying a huge box. "We all may live through it that way." He shot JT a pained smile. "Hormones. It's better not to fight them."

JT's lips quirked up and he shook his head. "You poor delusional bastard. You think she's like this due to the hormones? Have you learned nothing, yet?"

"I heard that!" Maggie yelled.

JT laughed. "Hey, merely trying to be a good brother-in-law and warn your poor husband about what he has to look forward to!"

He heard a "Hrrrump" from the doorway as he turned to pick up another box. He'd definitely miss getting to devil his sister on the regular. Though they worked together every day, this would be the first time in a long time they had lived separately. Today was a day he had been looking forward to and dreading at the same time. They were moving Maggie into her and Zane's new home. By tonight, he'd be on his own. He looked back into Maggie's empty bedroom. A thousand pink pillows overflowing a box was the only thing left of her in the room. His chest was suddenly tight.

A hand lightly touched his shoulder and he jumped. "Sorry," Sofia said, flinching herself. "I called your name, but you didn't seem to hear me."

"No, I'm sorry," JT said turning to her, a wan smile on his face. "In my head a bit."

Sofia took a chance and threaded her fingers through his, leaning into his side. She knew he had very mixed feelings about today. "You'll miss her, I'm sure," she said quietly to him. "But you'll still see each other every day, and, hey, you'll have your own place to walk around naked in if you want," she added jokingly.

JT's eyes flew to hers and she wasn't so sure the joke was a good idea. His dark orbs seemed to burn right through her. His hand suddenly clutched hers more tightly and he brought it up to his chest. "Sofia, I..." he started, his voice sounding almost strangled.

"Joshua Trent Wade! Really, come on! Zane can't move all this by himself, and Dani and Levi are late!" Maggie yelled, breaking through the haze he had been swirled up in with Sofia's innocent touch.

He dropped her hand and quickly looked away. He escaped by grabbing the nearest box that felt like it was heavy enough to hold enough bricks to build the whole damn house, he yelled back, "Okay, you slave driver! I'm coming!"

He didn't look back to see Sofia watching him and holding the hand that had been warmed by his touch to her heart. She wondered exactly what he had been going to say. And what was that look? He seemed to be staring straight into her soul. But no, she was reading too much into it. She was seeing what she wanted to see, not what was there. Wasn't she?

Chapter Fifteen

Like a Popsicle

FINALLY, THEY WERE DONE. Now it would be up to Maggie and Zane to put everything away. If he never saw a moving box again, it would be too soon. He sat in the oversized swing on his sister's new porch, drinking a beer and watching the stars wink into view. Sofia had left a couple of hours ago needing to organize some things for a catering event tomorrow. Maggie was relying more and more on her these days as her belly got bigger and bigger.

"Bye! See y'all later!" Dani called as she and Levi came out the front door. Levi pulled the door shut behind them with a snick, but Dani didn't go down the front porch steps as he expected. She came to sit by him on the swing while Levi folded his long legs down on the steps a few paces away and leaned back on his hands.

Dani handed him an Amber Bock and clinked their bottles in a toast. "To the happy couple. May they have a zillion gorgeous babies and live happily ever after!" Dani said and grinned.

JT's lips twisted. "Let's get them through the first two before we start wishing for more," JT said wryly. "Of course, if they keep popping them out,

it'll keep Mama off my back."

Levi laughed and shook his head. "We've only been married a few months and my mom is already dropping hints," Levi confessed. "I keep telling her we're practicing real hard, but that doesn't seem to cut it."

"Oh, you're impossible!" Dani said to Levi. "Your poor mama. You've probably scandalized her with talk like that."

"Ahh, I don't think anything I do shocks her anymore," Levi drawled, raising a brow. "Especially after the chicken incident."

Dani gave him one of her famous eye rolls. "I don't even want to think about that day, Levi Cooper," she admonished him. "And that's not why we're sitting here anyway, is it?"

"Nope," he agreed, glancing over at JT who had been sitting silently watching their by-play. He gave JT a look that said, 'I'm sorry man' before Dani started speaking again.

"So, how's the whole pretend boyfriend thing treatin' ya?" Dani asked quietly.

JT's eyes glanced quickly from Dani to Levi and back again. "Oh, he knows about it all," Dani told him. "You know I couldn't keep a secret like that from him. Could I, baby?"

"Nope," Levi repeated. He was going to let his little spitfire of a wife handle this interrogation all on her own.

"It's fine," JT said. "We've shown up for a family party, been out on a few dates, been seen around town. No random men have showed up recently in the café asking for Sofia and they took her profile down off the dating site, so I guess it's going fine."

Dani graced him with another eye roll. "You know good and well that's not what I mean. I've seen the way you've been looking at her. You like her for

real."

"Look at her what way?" JT sputtered. "I do not. We're friends doing each other a favor, that's all."

"Uh, huh," Dani answered, the disbelief clear in her voice. "They're just friends. Hear that, baby?"

"Yep," Levi answered, fighting the grin that wanted to take over his mouth. "Just friends. Exactly."

JT glared at him. "I have no idea what you're talking about. You know what the arrangement is. Hell, Dani, it was your idea."

"Oh, so you haven't looked at her like it's 100 degrees in the shade and she's a popsicle you'd like to lick?"

JT narrowed his eyes. He couldn't have been so apparent. "You're crazy. I haven't looked at her any way at all."

"Uh, huh. Okay. I totally believe you. I believe you even though I've caught you making calf eyes over her more than once through the server's window at Common Grounds."

JT rubbed the back of his neck. "You're making all this up to razz me, right? Tell me I haven't been that obvious."

"I knew it! I knew you really liked her! Yay, me!" Dani smiled and did a little seated happy dance in victory. Levi shook his head and chuckled at her antics. The woman did love it when she was right.

"So why are you sitting here like a sad sack instead of christening your new bachelor pad with Sofia?" Dani asked, smirking.

"Jesus, Dani! You really had to go there? Now I'll have that image stuck in my head wherever I look," JT grumbled. "And I'm here instead of there because *we are just friends.*"

"My question is why?" Dani asked, taking a sip of her beer. "Why are y'all

still playing the pretend game?"

"Because she doesn't think of me like that, okay?" JT said gruffly. "She needs a friend so that's what I am. I'm nothing more to her and I'm not going to ruin our friendship and our business relationship by trying to make it more. It's simply not possible. End of."

Dani put a hand on his arm. "JT, I think..." she started softly, but he cut her off.

"No, that's the end of the conversation. It's not happening. It can't be anything other than what it is, so leave it alone."

"Levi, say something to him," Dani insisted.

"Babe, he's made his decision. If he changes his mind, I'm sure you'll be one of the first to hear about it. Now leave it be," Levi said in his calm but firm tone. He'd been on the other end of that determination more than once. He knew she wouldn't really drop it for good, but maybe she'd let JT escape for now.

She huffed out a breath. "Fine, I'm not going to say anything at all about how she looks at you as googly-eyed as you do her when you're not looking. Not a thing."

"Babe," Levi said warningly.

Dani threw up her hands. "I'm done. Really. It's fine." She turned to JT again. "If you do ever decide you want to hear more about that, you let me know." She threw an arm around his neck and gave him a smacking kiss on the cheek. "Go and enjoy your new abode before Maggie comes out here searching for you and gives you another project."

She grabbed Levi's hand and pulled him from the porch. "See ya, man," Levi said, tossing him a wave as he followed Dani to their truck.

JT sat quietly swinging on the porch thinking about what Dani had said.

He heard a giggle and a squeal from inside the house and decided that was his cue to leave. He huffed and made his way to his Jeep. Dani couldn't be right about Sofia looking at him like that. He would have noticed as closely as he was watching her these days. Wouldn't he?

Chapter Sixteen

We Really Need a Lock

J T HAD SPENT THE next two weeks watching for any signs that Sofia might feel something other than friendship for him like Dani had said. So far, he hadn't seen a thing. She was as friendly as ever and the previous weeks' tension seemed to have eased a bit, but he didn't see any overt signs that she wanted him to change their relationship. *Damn Dani and her matchmaking.*

He huffed out a deep breath and went out to the café to see Sofia before he left for the day. What he saw made him feel like he had been sucker punched. It was Sofia giggling over Jesse, the mountain. She had a hand on his shoulder and the man's arm was around her waist. Any second now, she'd take a seat right on his giant boulder of a lap. He willed his legs to move across the room, but he felt like they were filled with concrete. He must have made some noise as Sofia turned toward him before he reached the table.

"Oh, JT. You remember Jesse, right?" she said, smiling widely toward the completely unwelcome visitor.

Jesse stood and held out a hand. "Good to see you again, man." JT let the man pump his hand up and down a few times. "Had to run over to Tyler for

yet another wedding thing for Amy, excuse me-Amarylis, so thought I'd drop in and see Sofia."

"We're so glad you stopped by, aren't we JT?" Sofia asked, raising a black brow in his direction. She didn't understand why he was acting so weird.

"Yeah, of course," JT responded, internally shaking himself out of his stupor. "Too bad you missed lunch, though. We were just closing up."

The mountain brushed a giant paw across the top of his closely cropped black hair, patting imaginary strays back in place. "That is too bad," Jesse said, glancing back at Sofia. *That haircut probably cost as much as my Jeep. You'd better take it easy there, sport.* JT crossed his arms over his chest and tightened his fists making his biceps pop. The guy might be bigger than him, but he'd bet money he didn't keep himself in as good a shape.

"Oh, I bet JT could rustle you up something. Couldn't you, JT?" When he didn't immediately answer, she continued, "If you've got plans, though, I'm sure I can throw something together. I think we have some of that good ham left and a couple of Betsy's baguettes from today's order."

"Don't go to any trouble on my account," Jesse said, but his smile told JT he definitely wanted Sofia to go to the trouble for him. She'd probably invite him into the kitchen-his kitchen-so he could keep her company. *You'd like that, wouldn't you, sport?* He'd be damned if that man was going to be in his kitchen with his girl. Wait. His girl? *Sofia isn't yours, dumbass, and never will be. Pull it together.*

He worked his jaw loose to speak. "I'll see what I can find," JT agreed and turned to stomp back to the kitchen.

Sofia narrowed her eyes at JT's back. She turned back to Jesse and plastered a pleasant smile on her face. "Would you like tea or coke?" she asked.

"Dr. Pepper would be great if you have it. Thanks, Sofia." He watched her watching JT slam the swinging kitchen doors open. "I hope it's not a problem. We can always meet up another time. Amy's got something for this wedding every week it seems like."

Sofia fought the scowl that wanted to take over her face. "No, everything is fine. Don't worry about it. Now is a great time," Sofia assured him. "I'll get your drink and be right back."

She tried to maintain a casual stride across the room but couldn't help slamming into the swinging doors a little herself. "What exactly is your problem?" she hissed in a whisper to JT once the doors swung closed again.

He didn't turn to face her but took some ham he had pre-sliced earlier today from the fridge. "Not a thing. Why do you ask?" he said, his irritation clear in his voice.

"I told you I'd do it," Sofia whisper-yelled at him, hands planted firmly on her hips. "You don't have to stay."

"It's fine. I'll handle it," JT ground out, still not looking at her.

"What is your problem with Jesse? Did y'all have some, some *thing* in high school that you're still mad about?" Sofia asked. "You were weird when he showed up the other night, too."

"I told you, it's fine. No problem," JT responded curtly, slicing baguettes lengthwise for sandwiches. She needed to go now and leave him to get the damn mountain his sandwich.

Sofia grabbed his arm and pulled. "JT, look at me!"

He hissed and swore. "Shit!" The sharp knife had sliced the hand that was holding the bread in place when Sofia jerked his arm.

"Oh, God, JT, I'm sorry!" She grabbed a clean towel off the counter and pressed it to his palm. "Here, we need to put pressure on it. I hope it's not

going to need stitches. I'm so sorry," she repeated as she squeezed the towel to his hand before hers.

He studied the top of her head as she bent over his hand. Her hair was so black and shiny. He thought again it looked like a raven's wing or black silk. He took a breath. And there was the honeysuckle. "I'm okay, Sofia. I've cut myself a thousand times. You don't need to fuss," he said quietly, the anger suddenly drained out of him.

She looked up at him, a quizzical expression on her face at his suddenly softened tone. "I, I'll get the first aid kit," she stuttered and dug under one of the counters for the red box.

When she removed the towel, there was only a thin red line across the middle of his palm. "It doesn't look like it needs stitches, thank goodness," she said as she carefully placed the gauze on the cut and taped it down. Her eyes were shiny with tears when she looked back up at him. "I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have grabbed you like that. I was just..." before she could finish her thought, JT took her face in her hands and kissed her. And kept kissing her. Her hands reached up, grasped the fabric of his t-shirt over his chest, and held on tight.

Without letting go of her mouth, he dropped his hands to her waist and lifted her to sit on the counter. He stepped between her legs and continued the sensual assault on her mouth, driving every other thought out of her brain. When he slipped the tie from her hair and tangled his fingers through the silky strands, she heard a moan. She wasn't sure if it came from her mouth or his. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but his lips on hers, demanding she respond. He slid a hand down her back and his warm fingers snaked under her t-shirt, pulling her tighter against his chest. Sofia wrapped her legs around his waist, desperate to get closer. Her hands traveled up to his head and threw

off his ballcap. She grasped the curly hair at the back of his neck and tried to pull him closer still. It wasn't enough. She needed more. She needed...

Someone cleared their throat. "Uh, sorry. I thought something might be wrong when you didn't come back. I heard noises and, uh..." Jesse sputtered, standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

We really need a lock for that damn door. JT cupped the back of Sofia's head and held her to his chest so Jesse wouldn't see the red heat he could feel crawling up her face. He slowly turned to look at the mountain standing in his kitchen and tried to catch his own breath.

"I cut myself while I was making your sandwich. Sofia was helping me doctor it," JT said casually, with only a little smirk.

"Oh, um. Sorry about that man." Jesse rubbed the back of his neck looking decidedly uncomfortable. "Well, hey, uh, I can see y'all are, uh, busy, Don't worry about the sandwich, man. I'll try to catch up with you next time, Sofia."

She nodded without removing her face from JT's chest. Her mind was spinning. She was embarrassed that Jesse had walked in on them, of course, but holy hell, what had that kiss been about? She thought her heart might beat out of her chest and she couldn't seem to get enough air. *Dios mio!*

When she heard the bell over the front door tinkle, she pushed herself up and forced herself to look at JT. He was watching her with an enigmatic smile on his lips. It wasn't an expression she recognized. She couldn't get any words to form in her mouth.

"I think we need to talk," JT said with a new sultry note to his voice. Sofia could only nod.

Chapter Seventeen

That's a Yes

AFTER LOCKING UP THE café, JT took Sofia's hand and led her to his Jeep. She followed wordlessly, furiously thinking about what to say. This was supposed to be pretend, but there was no way that kiss was fake. Was it? There was no one there initially to see them. It was only when Jesse came to find her that they were caught. And he'd started it. She was only bandaging his hand. Why would he do that if he didn't have some kind of feelings for her? But they'd known each other for five years and he'd never even hinted he was interested in her in the least. Her head swam.

She soon realized they were headed to JT's house. The house where he now lived alone, she realized. He smiled almost shyly at her when they parked in the driveway. "Uh, I haven't really gotten around to replacing some of the furniture and stuff since Maggie moved out but there's still places to sit," he said, looking as if he wanted her approval; nervous about her seeing his place not perfectly put together as it had always been when his sister lived there.

"That's okay," Sofia managed as she released her seatbelt and started to open the creaky passenger door.

"Here, wait! Let me," JT said quickly as he jumped out of the Jeep and rounded to her side to open her door.

She could feel the heat rising in her face. Why was she blushing because he was opening her door for her? *En serio, Sofia? Por Dios! (Really, Sofia? Good grief!)*

"Thanks," she said softly and tried to give him a smile.

"I could use some help figuring out what I should get," he confessed, leading the way up the walk to the front door. "Maggie did all the decorating, of course, so I've never really thought about it." He grinned at her over his shoulder as he fit the key into the lock. "Last time I lived alone was in a ratty little studio apartment when I was in culinary school." He laughed deprecatingly. "Starving student chic is probably not the look I need to be going for at this point."

Sofia felt herself relaxing a little with his humor. This was more like the JT she had come to know and- dare she even think it? come to love. "Yeah, you're kinda old to rock the starving student bachelor pad look," she agreed.

JT pulled an offended face as he opened the door and invited her in. "I am not old. I'm only two years older than you, remember?"

Sofia giggled. "Got me there. But seriously, I'm no Maggie but I'll see what I can do."

Walking into the living room, she noted that it was empty except for a TV tray and the shabby chic-looking sofa. JT rubbed the back of his neck looking at the thing uncertainly. "Maggie gave in and let Zane have his big leather couch so she left this one. I tried to talk them into trading me, but Zane wasn't having it."

"I like this one," Sofia said, slipping off her shoes while sitting down on one end and tucking her feet under her. "It's comfy."

He gave her a dubious look. "It's girly is what it is," he replied, but then shrugged. "Maybe you can help me pick out a new one."

"Um, sure, if you like," she answered, pushing her hair behind her ears. She'd forgotten to pull it back up after JT had released it in the kitchen.

"What would you like to drink?" JT asked, trying to play the host. "I've got Coke, beer, or I bought some of that Lambrusco you liked at Romano's."

He bought the wine I liked? It was a little early in the day for wine for her, but she figured she could use the liquid courage right about now. "Oh, that was really good. The Lambrusco would be great. Thanks."

Sofia fidgeted while JT went to the kitchen for their drinks. She dug in her pocket and found a hair tie. She was in the middle of pulling it back up on top of her head when JT returned to the room. "Don't," he said softly. "It looks really pretty down."

Sofia dropped her hands and let her hair fall back around her shoulders. He smiled at her. "Yeah, like that. It's like a waterfall of dark chocolate," he said, handing her the glass of wine and sitting next to her. He reached up one hand and ran his fingers through the strands before tucking it behind her ear again. He searched her face. What was he looking for?

She shivered and bit her lip looking down into her wine glass not able to maintain his intense gaze. She could feel the blush suffusing her whole body. Had she ever blushed like this around any other man? She didn't think so. The silence stretched out over several long moments as they sipped. Finally, Sofia couldn't stand the anticipation anymore. "You said we needed to talk?" she asked, hesitantly.

JT put his now empty wine glass down on the little table. He'd finished it in several long gulps. He rubbed at the dimple in his chin making a scratching noise over the stubble that started taking over by this time of day. She

recognized the gesture. He was thinking, and he was nervous. She didn't know if that was good or bad. He rested his elbows on his knees before he spoke.

"Yeah, so," he started, then cleared his throat. "Um, remember when we started this thing, we agreed to call it off if one of us found someone else – someone we wanted to have a real relationship with?"

Sofia's heart fell to her stomach. Had he met someone? Then what was that kiss? "I remember," she replied, quietly. A lump formed in her chest.

"Well, I want you to release me from my pretend boyfriend status," JT said evenly.

She looked down into her wine glass. Her hands twirling it nervously for something else to focus on. "Oh," she replied, trying valiantly to make her voice steady. "So, you've met someone?"

She saw JT's hand remove the wine glass from hers and place it on the TV tray next to his own. He turned toward her and took both of her now empty hands in his. They were so warm and hers had turned to ice. He rubbed his thumbs against her knuckles in that soothing gesture of his. She sighed despite herself.

"I have," he said huskily. "I want you to release me from my pretend boyfriend status, Sofia, because I want *this* to be real." He gathered her hands in his and held them tightly. "I know for sure that I don't deserve you, and I'll probably fuck it up royally, but I really want *us* to be real."

Sofia could feel her heart speed up in her chest. Did he really just say what she thought he did? He wanted them to be real? She forced her eyes up to meet his gaze. The brown orbs betrayed his anxiety as well as his longing.

When she continued to remain silent, he hurried on. "If that's what you want, too. Only if you want it. If not, we can continue to carry on like we've

been doing. I mean..."

"Shut up, and come here," Sofia suddenly demanded, pulling her hands from his to bring his face to hers. "Please," she added, before kissing him senseless.

When they at last came up for air, JT's grin stretched across his whole face. It was his the full on 1.000 watt smile she hadn't seen in months. She hadn't realized how much she had missed it. And she'd put it there.

"That's a yes, then?" he asked, cheekily.

Sofia smiled brightly and nodded. "That's a yes."

"Good. Wanted to make sure before I did this," he said, his eyes gleaming with mischief as he lifted her and sat her astride his lap. "Now, where were we?"

Chapter Eighteen

Don't You Dare Stop

ONCE HE HAD HER on his lap, JT slowed. He wanted to savor her like a man, not rush like a boy. He ran his hands up and down her back and let his eyes roam across her features. How had he gone so long, working with her every day, but never really *seeing* her? God, he really was an asshole. He knew she was too good for him. Too sweet. Too smart. Too everything, but he couldn't resist her any longer. He'd never felt this longing to know everything about a woman before. He wasn't even sure everything would be enough.

Sofia's eyes danced as she settled her arms around his neck. Could this really be real? After all these years of pining for him, could she really be in JT's arms? And not in a pretend girlfriend situation? She was a little confused when she caught the look in his eyes. She'd expected more panty-melting kisses once he'd pulled her onto his lap, but he kept staring at her.

"Is everything okay?" she asked hesitantly.

"Everything's perfect," he replied, reaching up and stroking a thumb across one high cheek bone. He studied her face. "Perfect," he repeated.

Sofia squirmed. No man had ever looked at her like this. Like he wanted to

devour her, but slowly, enjoying every morsel. She tried to slow her breathing, but it got more and more difficult the longer he looked at her. She was starting to burn from the inside out and he had barely touched her.

"I think I'm a little obsessed with your hair," JT murmured, reaching up to run the strands through his fingers again letting it cascade like water across her shoulders. "I never imagined how silky it would feel." He inhaled deeply. "And you smell like honeysuckle." He buried his nose in the crook of her neck then started placing small kisses behind her ear. Her eyelids dropped closed, soaking in the sensation of his mouth on the sensitive skin. She whimpered.

"Hmmm?" JT hummed, sitting up to watch her again. "You like that, baby?"

"Uh, huh," Sofia managed.

He smiled against her neck then sat up to watch her face again. He ran his thumb across her full bottom lip and her lips parted.

"So beautiful," he murmured, leaving her lips and tracing a finger up the side of her face. He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear again.

Sofia thought her heart would beat out of her chest and her fingers shook as she reached out to study him with her hands as he had her. She traced the hard angles of his cheeks and the stubble along his strong jaw. Without his smile, there was nothing soft about his face. He was all masculine beauty. When she ran a finger over his lips, he took her finger into his mouth and sucked hard.

Sofia gasped at the contact. Butterflies erupted low in her belly as she drew the digit out of the wet heat. "*Santo Padre*," she whispered breathlessly. ("Holy Father")

JT's hand played at the hem of her t-shirt. His fingers skimmed the tan skin

of her belly and around to her back. Her shirt rose as his hands explored her. He started to raise the fabric over her breasts but then stopped. "Okay if we get rid of this?" he asked her, his lids hooded.

Sofia had a brief moment of regret that she had on a boring white cotton bra. She'd dressed for work this morning having no idea a seduction would be happening. Finally, she nodded. "Please," she agreed.

His mouth quirked up at the word, then he quickly peeled the garment from her body. He traced a finger across the tops of her breasts above the white material. He cupped her in his hands, his thumbs brushing across her nipples, before his lips followed the trail his finger had followed. Sofia tangled her fingers in his hair, suddenly glad he hadn't been keeping it short the last few months as he normally did. She let her head tip back and fell into the heat he was causing to rage through her. Without conscious thought, her hips started to grind against the hard length of him she could feel trapped behind the denim of his jeans. A moan escaped him.

She nearly came undone at that sound. "Jesus, more," she said on a groan. "Please."

Her breathy exclamation seemed to spur something in JT. His head lifted from his adoration of her breasts, and he wrapped one hand in her hair, fisting it to pull her closer into his body. His lips slammed down on hers. The tender touches evaporated in the heat of his mouth thoroughly claiming hers. Her nails dug into his shoulders and simply tried to hang on.

After a minute, or an eternity, she wasn't quite sure, JT tore his mouth away from hers. She cried out at the loss of contact. When her eyes popped open to look at him, she was rewarded with a look of such hunger that she sucked in a breath of surprise. JT's eyes were black with desire. For her.

"I want you, Sofia," he growled. "Tell me you want me. This. Now."

Her eyes widened and her lips parted. "I've never wanted anything more in my life," she said on a heaving breath.

"Don't let go," he commanded, and she locked her legs around his waist in response. In one fluid movement, JT stood with her in his arms and headed to his bedroom.

He kicked his bedroom door closed with a foot out of habit as he carried Sofia into the room. In an instant, he had her backed up against the wall to hold her up while his hands explored her body desperately. He found the clasp to her bra and jerked it from her arms, throwing it behind him. His mouth found one of her nipples and she cried out at the ecstasy of it.

She tried to pull his shirt off to get to those muscles she had been fantasizing about for years, but it proved impossible. "JT, too many clothes," she huffed in his ear.

His hands grabbed her ass as he spun her toward the bed. She laughed when he all but threw her onto the king-sized bed and reached behind his head to tug his shirt off. He swore trying to get his boots off while standing. Finally, he gave up and sat on the bed to quickly pull them off along with his jeans. In an instant, he was in nothing, straddling her thighs, his cock standing proud and at attention.

Her heartbeat thundered at the sight of him. She tried her best not to groan. Her eyes drank in his body. She didn't know where to look first. His cock was impressive but so were the bulging muscles of his shoulders and chest. Then there were the beautiful tattoos covering his right pec with the design carried almost down to his elbow on the right. She wanted to explore every inch of them, but JT had other ideas.

"Now who has too many clothes on?" he rumbled, this dimple showing as he smiled devilishly at her.

She simply smiled as he unzipped her pants and drew them down her legs slowly, admiring the view as he went. The intensity of his gaze made Sofia's hands reach to cover herself, but he caught them in one of his own. "Never hide from me again, baby," he growled at her. "You're more beautiful than I ever imagined."

He crawled back up her naked body before she could respond, leaving her clothes in a heap on the floor. Sofia squirmed and whimpered in pleasure as he began the sensual assault on her skin again. Her hands found his hair as his tongue licked up her breastbone before it swirled around one of her nipples that had already tightened into a hard peak. When he bit down on one, she cried out in pleasure. He grinned around the nipple still caught in his teeth before letting it go.

"Like it a little rough, huh? Good to know," he rumbled as he moved to give her other breast equal attention.

Sofia arched under him, wanting him even closer though she wasn't sure how that would be possible. One hand clutched at his blonde, tousled hair while the other took a tight grip on the quilt beneath her. She wasn't very experienced, but she knew now that all of her partners to date had been boys, not men. This man was proving he knew exactly how to work a woman's body. Her body. She wasn't sure how much more she could take.

When she felt his tongue circle her belly button, she knew she'd reached her limit. "JT, please, I need you inside me. Now!"

He looked up at her cry watching her from under the messy blonde strands covering his forehead. He grinned wickedly at her. "Your wish is my command, darlin'," he said as he pushed himself up and reached for the bedside table. In the space of two breaths, he was sheathed in a condom and back between her thighs.

She reached up for him as his mouth slammed down on hers again. Their tongues tangled as JT's clever fingers moved into the folds covering her throbbing bundle of nerves with her own wetness. She tore her lips away from his and commanded "Now!" directly in his ear.

JT obeyed, pushing into her one slow inch at a time, then backing out again, creating a rhythm that she caught with her own hips. Her heels pushed at his tight ass, demanding he quit teasing her. Finally, he drove all the way in, hard, and she gasped.

His head jerked up to meet her eyes, silently questioning. "Don't you dare stop," Sofia panted.

Without breaking contact between their eyes, JT pounded into her, and she did her best to meet him thrust for thrust. He wrapped an arm around her back and pulled her tight to his chest getting even deeper into her, creating an angle that had her core throbbing and weeping for him. She held on, her nails digging into the solid muscles of his back, her teeth finding his shoulder and biting down wildly in her pleasure.

"God, yes," he ground out through gritted teeth. "Come for me, baby. Now!"

Her thighs quivered at his command, and she lost the ability to keep up with the punishing rhythm he had set. Her orgasm exploded through her, and she screamed out his name as her core locked down even tighter around his shaft. Two more thrusts and his animalistic cry joined hers.

Chapter Nineteen

Tweety and Sylvester

JT RESTED ON HIS forearms trying not to crush her as he panted hard. He hadn't let himself imagine what it would be like to make love to Sofia. Hell, he didn't think he'd ever made love to a woman at all. He'd fucked plenty, but that's not what this was. It had been so much more.

He felt a vibration in his chest coming from Sofia. When he dragged his head up to look at her, he realized she was laughing. He raised an eyebrow at her. "Exactly what part of that was funny for you?" he asked.

She took her face in her hands and kissed his lips before she answered. "None of it is funny. I'm just so happy."

His expression relaxed at her admission, and he leaned down to sip at her lips again. "I aim to please," he murmured to her as his lips left her mouth and traveled to nip at her neck again. "Whatever makes you happy, Sofia, that's what I want to do," he whispered in her ear. "Anything."

He caught her mouth up in another tender kiss before he pushed up to go to the bathroom. Sofia admired the muscles of his ass flex as he walked across the room. The man obviously had no embarrassment about walking around

naked. As well he shouldn't. "I think you should stop wearing pants to work," she joked. "That would make me really happy."

He chuckled as he returned from the bathroom with a warm rag to help clean her up. "I don't think Mr. Jones, the health inspector, would appreciate that as much as you," he laughed as he pulled back the covers and motioned her in. "And there are lots of hot things in a kitchen. I'll do it," he said, "but we both might be facing consequences we don't like over it."

She slapped him playfully on the arm as he climbed in the bed and pulled her to him. "Okay, I can see your point," she admitted as she lay her head on his chest. "I'll have to use my memories instead."

They lay there quiet for a while, exploring each other. Sofia was surprised at the darkness of the hair on his chest when his head was so blonde. She traced the swirls and designs of his tattoos with one finger as she admired them. "Is this one big tattoo or several worked together? I can't tell."

JT kissed her on top of the head and stroked her arm before he answered. "There are several," he answered. "This one," he said, pointing to a large Celtic knot circle on his chest, "I got when I turned 18. Pretty much wanted to look cool and drive my mom crazy but when I looked it up later, I liked the idea of oneness of spirit and unity."

"Knowing your mom, I'm sure it did," Sofia giggled. "I really like it." She traced a small one next to the circle but was surrounded by a swirled design that encompassed both. "This is an infinity symbol. And what is that on the bottom of it? A paw print?"

"Yeah," he admitted, chagrined. "I got that when Woody died. You remember that big old black lab we had." She nodded. "I loved that stupid ole dog. He was my best friend. I wanted to remember him."

He blew out a deep breath before continuing. "The rest of them are tribals I

liked that brought together some of the others. They mostly represent things like strength and wisdom. Things I aspire to," he said, taking her roaming hand and placing a kiss to her palm.

"What about you?" he asked. "I didn't see any ink in my quick search. Do I need to be more thorough?" he asked as he raised the covers and ran his eyes up and down her body.

Sofia snatched the covers back down and blushed. "I have one, but it's tiny and you weren't in a position to see it," she admitted.

"Oh, yeah?" JT asked enthusiastically. "Now I have to see. Where is it?"

"It's nothing," Sofia insisted. "It was dumb. We got drunk at an end of year party in high school and got them."

"Who? Do they match? Now you have to show me," he said, trying to tickle her to get her to roll over. He knew it had to be on her hip or back. Maybe she got a tramp stamp and was embarrassed. They weren't usually his favorite but, suddenly, the thought of one on Sofia was hot.

Sofia bit her lip. She didn't want to ruin this moment and, based on his previous reaction, she was scared her answer would. Maybe if she showed it to him without making a big deal about it, he'd forget that she got it with someone else.

JT caught the look on her face. Something was definitely wrong. "I'm sure it's fine, baby. See this one?" He pointed to a thick band on the back of his shoulder. That's covering up a lapse in judgment," he said with a grin. "You show me yours and I'll tell you what I've got hidden under there. It'll be our secret."

Sofia let go of her lip and looked up at him in defeat. "Fine," she said, rolling over to her side. There on her right hip was Tweety Bird swinging in his cage.

He grinned and traced a finger over the yellow canary. "It's cute," he laughed. "Did your friend get the same thing?"

Damn! Now he'd find out who the 'friend' was. "Um, no," she admitted. "He got Sylvester the cat."

JT's finger froze on her hip. "He? He who?" he asked, all humor quickly leaving his voice.

Sofia hid her face in the pillow. "Jesse. He got Sylvester," she mumbled. "Like I said, it was stupid. We broke up the next week. It meant nothing."

He didn't speak but she felt his finger start tracing the lines of the cartoon again. Then she felt his lips on her hip. Her breath caught. "I've learned ink should always mean something, Sofia. Someday, we'll have to get this one fixed, so it means something, to *us*."

She looked over her shoulder in shock. She'd expected a blow up, or at least a really snarky comment but, nothing even close. When his mouth left her tattoo, he turned her over on her belly and his lips moved to the small of her back. Her gaze locked with his over her shoulder. His eyes more intense than she'd ever seen them. She wasn't sure how to react. All she knew was that he was leaving a trail of fire with licks, nips and slow kisses up her spine. His body loomed over hers until he reached her shoulders. Her breath started coming in pants when he drew her hair to the side and sucked the spot where her neck and shoulder met. She didn't know where the oxygen had suddenly gone.

He raised up on his knees behind her and fisted her hair in his hand. "I think I'm going to have to do something to remove all traces of that man from your mind. What do you think, Sofia?" he growled in her ear.

Sofia swallowed hard. "Yes, please," she whispered.

An almost feral smile grew across JT's face. His hand smacked one round

globe of her ass. She jumped. "On your knees, darlin'," he commanded, that new, seductive smile never leaving his lips as he caressed the red print already showing on her skin. Sofia's lips twitched up and she did as he demanded.

Chapter Twenty

Delicioso

SOFIA WOKE EARLY THE next morning with thin grey light peeking through the venetian blinds. She blinked and stretched, her deliciously sore muscles quickly bringing back memories of last night's activities. She smiled and reached across the bed to find...nothing. The sheets were cold and there was no sign of JT. Then, she used her nose. Bacon. He was in the kitchen. She should have known. He was used to getting up before the crack of dawn to get to the café for work. She padded to the bathroom and quickly brushed her hair and scrubbed her teeth with a finger and borrowed toothpaste. It wasn't ideal but would have to do. She found JT's t-shirt from the night before and slid it over her head. He was so much bigger than her that it fell to the middle of her thighs. She followed her nose to the kitchen.

Once she got to the doorway of the kitchen, she leaned on the door frame and thanked the universe for whoever had invented grey sweatpants. JT was standing at the stove with his back to her cooking. He wasn't naked as she'd teasingly wished for the night before, but he was close. His impressive back muscles that narrowed into a slim waist were on display over the thin sweatpants. She watched his hands as they turned bacon and flipped

pancakes. Such benign domestic chores had now become a sensual temptation as she remembered what those same hands did to her body last night. She bit her lip and let out a shuddering sigh as she watched him. She must have been louder than she thought as he looked over his shoulder at the sound and met her eyes. His lips pulled into that wicked grin that she was coming to crave.

"Good mornin', darlin'," JT drawled when he saw her. "You hungry?"

"Uh, huh. Definitely," Sofia answered, looking him up and down.

He chuckled at her perusal. "I have to admit, I like that look you're giving me there, Sofia, but I think we should fuel up a little first."

Sofia tore her gaze away and laughed nervously. This man made her brazen. She was almost embarrassed at herself. Almost. "Probably a good idea," she agreed, taking a seat at the kitchen table, tucking the t-shirt under her thighs.

JT sat a plate of pancakes and bacon in front of her and nudged the maple syrup and butter her way. "At least Maggie left me a table and dishes," he said, putting his own plate in front of himself and taking the seat across from her. Sofia avoided his steady gaze and concentrated on putting butter and syrup on her pancakes. When she brought the first bite of the sweet dough to her lips, she looked up to find JT still staring at her. She tried to smile and chew at the same time.

"What?" she asked around the fluffy goodness.

"You're always so messy," he said, his lips curling up in a delectably seductive grin. His thumb reached out to swipe maple syrup off her full bottom lip. He brought his thumb to his mouth and his tongue swept the sweet liquid away. Sofia tried to swallow the pancake in her mouth. She

reached blindly for her juice to help it down. She couldn't take her eyes off of him. *Dios Mio. El es delicioso!*

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"No," JT responded, his eyes flashing. "I like it. I'd like to eat all my meals off of you."

Sofia suppressed the urge to fan herself and took another sip of juice. She somehow managed to pull her eyes away from his and took a bite of bacon. When she picked up her fork again and looked back up, JT still hadn't eaten any of his food.

"I thought you needed food for fuel," she said, motioning to his full plate.

"I did say that," he said, his voice suddenly gravely. "But maybe I was wrong. Maybe you're the only fuel I need."

Sofia's face heated and she put down her fork. She wiped her mouth slowly and revealed a grin beneath the napkin. "Let's test that theory then." She slowly pushed back her chair and stood up. "If you can catch me, it's true!" She laughed and took off down the hallway, JT following close behind. He chased her once around the almost empty living room, both of them laughing, before he grabbed her and threw her over his shoulder.

She smacked him on the ass as he carried her back to the bedroom. "Put me down you caveman!" She tried to sound stern but the giggles escaping took all heat out of her words.

The t-shirt she was wearing had rucked up when he picked her up, and now her tempting bare behind was lying next to his cheek. He couldn't resist giving it a bite in retaliation. She squealed. "I think my theory is correct. You're much tastier than pancakes, and I think I've recovered completely."

"Oh, really," she joked. "Prove it."

A predatory grin spread across JT's face. "Your wish is my command," he

growled as he carried her back to the bedroom.

Sofia grabbed the waistband of his pants and pulled as he unceremoniously dropped her to the bed. The grey sweatpants she had been admiring only a short time ago were soon just a memory as he pressed her back down into the mattress.

"You have recovered," she murmured into his ear as she felt the hard length of him pressing into her belly.

She sucked in a sharp breath as he nipped her earlobe before his teeth, tongue and hands started a downward exploration of her body. "All I need to eat is you, baby."

"Dios mio," she gasped, her body writhing under his mouth.

The pancakes were quickly forgotten.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dreams and Opportunities

THE NEXT COUPLE OF months felt like a dream to Sofia. She and JT took every opportunity to sneak touches and kisses throughout the day at work. Her concentration was suffering a bit, she knew, but being in a real relationship with JT was so much better than she had ever imagined. She'd known what a good man he was and had frequently seen his playful side that was quintessentially JT, but this sweet, thoughtful side was a pleasing surprise. And he was a definite Alpha in the bedroom, though he never failed to make sure he fulfilled her in every way imaginable. She couldn't imagine how her life could get much better right now. Even her family had backed off and she was no longer worried about random men showing up at the café looking for dates! She could tell her mother was still not on Team JT but she had been showing restraint in her criticisms of him which Sofia appreciated, especially since he was no longer her 'fake boyfriend' but a real one.

And when they weren't at work, they were together doing other things. Taking a walk in the nearby botanical gardens turned into a make-out session behind some weeping willows. They'd been to three or four movies, but she couldn't remember anything about them between JT's clever hands tracing

over her arms and legs, and stolen kisses in the balcony. She'd finally moved some clothes and her necessities to his house and spent most nights there in his king-sized bed. He'd even bought new soft-as-silk sheets for it as he told her he didn't want anything but the best for her.

She dropped her chin to her hand and released a contented sigh. "Everything going well with my brother, I see," Maggie said as she waddled into the office and sat down on the loveseat propping her swollen ankles on the coffee table. "I recognize that look."

Sofia straightened up and grinned at her boss and friend. "That obvious, am I?"

Maggie gave her a grin over her ever-expanding belly. "I've known for years you had a thing for him," Maggie admitted, "but I was always concerned about it. We all work so well together. I didn't want anything to ruin our working relationship. I wanted to make sure you knew that, Sofia. My worries about y'all's relationship were never about you as a person but only about what might happen if you didn't work out." She let out a happy woosh of air. "You don't know how glad I am to see him so happy, though. You've given me my brother back, Sofia, and I can't thank you enough for that!"

Sofia moved from the chair to the loveseat and wrapped her arms around her friend. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice suddenly caught in her throat. "All I want is for him to be himself again." The women hugged and wiped away a few tears that had escaped with the current of emotion.

"Now," Maggie announced. "Let's get to work and finalize the plans for this last-minute wedding reception! I love that you brought them in, but we've got lots of work to do and not a lot of time to do it! I understand the bride has lots of specifics."

Sofia grimaced a bit. She had been thrilled when Jesse had called her in a panic as his cousin's caterer backed out at the last minute due to Covid and he had talked Amy into hiring Common Grounds for the job. It was going to be a big event and would be a wonderful way to get their name out to a wider audience, but she also knew Amy. She had heard the girl had become somewhat of a bridezilla and Sofia wasn't at all surprised.

"Amy has always had very strong opinions on style and what she wants," Sofia told her boss. "I hope I haven't gotten us in over our heads, but it seemed too good of an opportunity to pass up."

"I have faith we can get it done. JT is always wanting to do all that fancy stuff and rarely gets a chance around here. I'm sure he'll be thrilled about it!" Sofia knew that was true but wasn't sure what his reaction would be when he found out it was for Jesse's cousin. Though she and JT were obviously together now, she knew he didn't want her around her old boyfriend. This was business, though, and he would surely understand that.

"Do we have a meeting set up with the bride to pick out all the linens and place settings and things?" Maggie asked, opening her calendar.

"Tuesday afternoon," Sofia confirmed. "We're supposed to meet them at the venue. You good with Tuesday?"

Maggie nodded, writing in her planner. "You need to get with JT and see when he needs to meet with the couple about the menu. He needs to do it by the end of the week, if possible. I don't want to take any chances on us being unable to get the things in that she wants with the difficulties in the supply chain recently."

"Got it. I'll meet with him after the lunch rush today, get him to give me some times, then I'll call Amy and see what we can set up."

"Perfect!" Maggie exclaimed, shutting her planner. Sofia helped her to her

feet. "I'm going to head home, put my cankles up and try to get us some rest. Call me if you need anything."

Maggie made a face as she righted herself. "These two make me feel like I'm dragging around the Titanic," she groaned, rubbing circles on her belly. "I know I've put a lot on you really quickly these last couple of months, Sofia, but you've done a fantastic job with it all."

She hugged Maggie again. "Anything I can do. You know that," Sofia said. "You're still working too hard. Don't you worry about me. I've got it handled. You just go grow those little humans."

"I don't have much of a choice, now do I?" Maggie laughed. "But I hate missing out on anything! You keep me in the loop!"

"Yes, boss!" Sofia said, giving her a little salute.

And with that, Maggie headed home and Sofia got to planning wedding reception ideas.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Stolen Kisses

JT SPENT HIS DAYS trying to catch glimpses of Sofia through the passthrough window and trying to catch her in the back hallways and in the office so he could taste her just one more time. He'd never felt so compelled to be with someone all the time. They worked together, they practically lived together, and it still wasn't enough. She was all he could think about and the burns and cuts on his hands showed his distractions, but he didn't care.

It was coming up on their three month 'real relationship' anniversary and he had been wracking his brain trying to come up with something extra special for her. Finally, he had found it. A 14-karat gold necklace of an infinity symbol with a tiny ruby on one side – her birthstone, and a tiny onyx chip on the opposite side – his birthstone. He knew the gold would be luminous against the tan skin of her throat. He wanted to put together a romantic meal for them at the corner booth of the café so he could get it all together without her catching on. Once they got a break in their weekend catering schedule, he'd find an excuse to stay longer than her one day and then go pick her up as a surprise. He was so lost in his plans that he didn't hear her come up behind

him. Luckily, he was stirring up some potato salad and didn't have anything sharp in his hand.

He jumped as Sofia's arms came around his waist. He dropped a spoon but then quickly twisted to put them chest to chest. "Mmmm, hey baby. This is a nice surprise," he said, cupping her face and giving her a tender kiss. "Everything slowing down out there, huh?"

"Yep, Jenny is just finishing up with the last customers," she confirmed. "I was going to see if you had a couple of minutes for me to go over your schedule. We need to get a meeting on the books with the bride for that last minute wedding I just booked."

He let his hands roam to the small of her back and pulled her closer. "Whenever and wherever you want me, darlin'," he growled in her ear.

"Mmmmm," she moaned. "Um, in the office in five minutes?"

"I'll be there," he agreed, raining kisses from her neck to her jawline and finally to her mouth.

Sofia fell into the kiss, thoughts of brides and menus and decorations completely forgotten until a voice came from behind them.

"Ahem," a high-pitched voice said.

JT rested his forehead on Sofia's for a moment before standing up. "Yes, Jenny?"

"Wanted to let you know that was the last table. I've already done the prep work for the morning so I'm going to take off, if that's okay."

Sofia turned to the girl and JT dropped an arm across her shoulder casually. "Sure, Jenny. That's great. Thanks for all your hard work today," Sofia managed with a smile.

The girl gave a little wave and left, the doors swinging behind her.

"Again, we really need to get a damn lock for that door," JT groaned. "That

girl is killing my mojo."

Sofia giggled. "I think your mojo is working just fine, Mr. Wade. Now get done and meet me in the office in five."

"Yes, ma'am," JT said with a little salute and watched her leave the kitchen. He never passed up an opportunity to watch that fine backside leave a room.



Four and a half minutes later, JT was entering the office and sitting down in front of the desk with Sofia. He eyed the loveseat but figured they'd never get work done if they landed there. Having Maggie's big wooden desk between them was probably a good idea.

"So, here's the deal," Sofia announced as he took his seat. "This bride's caterer got Covid and had to cancel on her at the last minute. The wedding is in two weeks."

"Wow! That doesn't leave us much time," JT agreed. "Do you know what they are looking for?"

"That's one of the reasons I decided to take the job," Sofia explained. "It's going to be a high-end wedding with some traditional Mexican touches. You'll get an opportunity to show what you can really do. I think it can bring in a whole new line of business for us, if we can do it right."

"Sounds like the best kind of challenge. Do they already have a menu they want?"

"No, I figured you'd want to have a say in that so I need you to give me some dates and times you're going to be available this week so I can schedule something with you and the couple," Sofia explained.

"Well, when I'm not here, I'm somewhere with you." JT grinned at her. "So, you just put me down for whenever we're not working, and I'll be there."

"Great. Maggie and I are meeting with the bride on Tuesday afternoon... Maybe the groom could meet us there and we could get it all done at once," Sofia thought out loud. She smiled widely at him. "Bring all your fanciest ideas to the table, JT. I have to warn you, I know this girl. She's going to be a bit of a bridezilla."

JT scoffed. "Brides love me! Are you kidding? I'll have her eating out of my hand as soon as I describe all the mouthwatering food I'm going to be making."

"Oh, one other thing you should know with the Mexican tradition thing. There will be tamales. Have you ever made tamales?" Sofia quirked a brow at him.

JT rubbed the back of his neck, his bravado suddenly fading a bit. "Uh, well no. How hard can it be though? It's masa and meat, right?"

"Mi pobre gringo," Sofia crooned to him. "Tamales are an art. They take hours, sometimes days. Mamá takes forever to make hers. That's why we only get them for special occasions, no matter how much we beg."

"Do you think she'd teach me, Sofia? How to make tamales?" JT asked hopefully. "Maybe I could gain some points with her as well as learning to make something new?"

Sofia bit her lip. "Hmmm, I don't know. You could ask her, I suppose. She is pretty proud of them."

"That's what I'll do then. I'll call her tonight. Anything else on the agenda?"

"No, I think that's it."

"Good, then I call this meeting concluded," he said, banging the stapler on the desk like a gavel.

"Now, come here woman," he told her as he rounded the desk and twirled her chair to face him. "I've been waiting for this all day."

"Wha..." but she didn't get to finish her question before JT had her in his arms and was carrying her to the loveseat.

"Locked door?" she asked before he could sit them down.

"Better. The doors to the whole place are locked and it's just you and me left." He dropped down on the couch and immediately pulled her work polo shirt off her head. His eyes locked on her breasts behind her coral lace bra like a starving man eyeing a feast set down before him. He traced a finger along the top lace, then went to work showing her just how much he needed her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A Secret Not Shared

ON TUESDAY, SOFIA, JT and Maggie set off to Tyler to meet with their bride, Amarylis, and her groom, Gage. Sofia sat in the front seat with JT, while Maggie sat across the backseat with her feet propped up on pillows.

"I thought Dr. McKinney wanted you resting more," JT chastised his sister lightly. He'd told her he and Sofia could handle this consultation and that she should go home and rest, but she was having none of it.

"I'm sitting with my feet up, aren't I?" Maggie answered testily. "And there was no way I was going to miss this consult. It's too important." She met her brother's eye in the rearview mirror. "You did get those boxes I put out for you with the place settings and everything, didn't you?"

JT huffed out an exasperated breath. "Of course, I did. You only reminded me fifteen times before we got in the truck."

"Well, you know how you are," Maggie said.

"I know how *you* are," JT retorted.

Sofia tried to cover her smile with her hand. She always thought their bickering was funny. It was like a hummingbird challenging a mountain lion.

The siblings might push each other's buttons, but they were as tight as twins. She wished her relationship with her sister was half as close.

"Okay, you two. Knock it off," Sofia said, trying to rein in the bickering before it could really get ramped up. "We need to be a united front with this couple. It's going to be a challenge."

"You're right, darlin'," JT said, taking her hand and planting a kiss on the back. When he was done, he didn't let go but twined his fingers through hers and held on.

Maggie gave them an eye roll but couldn't stop the grin that quirked up her lips. She was pleased as punch that JT was starting to act like himself again. She'd missed her happy-go-lucky brother these past few months and worried he'd never let go of his misplaced guilt. Sofia seemed to be bringing him back to life. "Sorry, Sofia. You're right. I'm really excited about this though! It's going to be amazing! And kudos to you for bringing it to us!"

Sofia smiled and dipped her head at Maggie's praise. "Just the right place at the right time," she offered.

"I'd forgotten to ask about that," JT said, glancing at Sofia. "How did they hear about us? Surely there are bigger caterers and event planners in Tyler they could've chosen from."

Sofia's mouth went suddenly dry. She'd meant to tell him about Jesse calling her. She really had, but she'd kept putting it off as they had been so happy. She bit her lip in trepidation. "Um, well, Amy, I mean, Amarylis, is Jesse's cousin. They're really close – practically like brother and sister. When she called freaking out about her person getting Covid, he mentioned us," she confessed.

JT's head whipped to Sofia before cutting back toward the road. "Jesse. As in your ex-boyfriend, Jesse?" JT asked, his tone going low.

"Yeah, remember he said that was why he was going through Gladewater when he came by the café that time? Because of his cousin's wedding?" Sofia answered, trying to sound casual.

"Were you going to mention this to me or just let me find out at the reception?" JT let go of her hand and gripped the steering wheel hard.

"I was," Sofia answered him. "I'd just forgotten about it. I didn't think it was important." With that lie, she couldn't stop herself bringing her fingers to her mouth and chewing on a nail. "It was such a great opportunity, I didn't think it mattered."

Maggie leaned forward at the sudden chill in the cab of the truck that had nothing to do with the weather. "So, is this going to be a problem for you, brother mine?" she asked, using her nickname for him to try to ease the tension. "Because Sofia is right. This is a great opportunity, and I don't need you going off half-cocked and messing it up for us."

JT took a breath and flashed a tight smile at his sister in the backseat. "It's fine," he answered. "I was just surprised. That's all."

Maggie eyed him carefully. "Okaaaay," she drew the word out, not really believing his answer. "Good, because you're going to have all these people knocking down our doors once they taste your food if you do it right."

"And Jesse won't even be here," Sofia interjected. "It's just going to be Amy, Gage and probably Amy's mom and sister. He'll be at the wedding, of course, but we'll be so busy we won't even notice him, I'm sure."

"Yeah, okay," JT grumbled.

Sofia reached out and pried his hand from the steering wheel to wrap in her own again. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I should have."

She finally saw him take a deep breath and his shoulders relax. He glanced her way and gave her a small smile. "It's okay. Really, baby. I'm sorry I got

stupid about it for a minute."

When he brought her hand to his lips again, she almost sagged with relief. She didn't normally shy away from confrontation, but she didn't want to fight with JT. She'd waited so long to be in this place with him. She didn't want to spoil it. If he found out she and Jesse had been engaged, she didn't know what he would do.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Man Mountain Cometh

JT HAD TO ADMIT he was impressed with the venue as he, Maggie and Sofia finished their tour. It was billed as a farm, but it was fancier than any farm he had ever seen. The 'barn' was a great white and green structure that he was sure had never housed any animals. It had floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides and sliding doors on the two ends to open it up to the outside if the bride wanted an open-air affair. Of course, it was fully air conditioned being that it was in East Texas. The floors were a beautiful light grey oak and there was plenty of room for a sit-down dinner for up to 200 without having to move any dining tables to make a dance floor.

"It's really impressive," JT told Stephanie Milam, the owner. "Any bride would be lucky to get this space."

Stephanie beamed at him. "It's been a labor of love. Chuck, that's my husband, wasn't convinced when I said I wanted to create a wedding venue on his old homestead," she admitted, "but even he has to admit, it's all been worth it. We've been able to retire from our corporate jobs and do this full time." She clasped her hands in front of her chest. "It's like living in a fairytale."

JT rubbed a knuckle over his lip in amusement. Bet it wasn't such a fairytale when she had to deal with a bridezilla, or worse, mom of bridezilla. "It's a great thing to love what you do," he told the enthusiastic woman and gave Sofia and Maggie a wink.

By the time they had completed the tour, Amarylis, her mother, the groom, and his mother had arrived for the consultation. She was a pretty girl with dark brown hair cut in a shoulder-length bob and startling hazel eyes. She clung to Gage, her fiancé, like he might disappear into thin air if she wasn't careful. Sofia had been right, however. Amarylis was very exacting in what she wanted. Luckily, she was also reasonable and didn't have any requests that JT was worried about. Well, except for the tamales and menudo she was insisting on. Those two requests made him sweat just a little. He'd never made either one, and hadn't even ever eaten menudo. He'd have to find someone to give him a crash course as soon as possible.

Two hours later, JT was just finishing up the final checklists with them when he heard a familiar, and completely unwelcome, voice. "I heard the prettiest bride in all of Texas was in here," the booming voice said, echoing across the mostly empty space. JT's head swiveled to the doors. Sure enough, it was the man mountain, Jesse.

Amarylis popped up out of her seat, running to her cousin with a squeal. Jesse grabbed her by the waist and swung her around in a circle like a rag doll. "What are you doing here? It's a Tuesday in the middle of the afternoon!" Amarylis asked.

JT thought he'd really like to know that as well. Wasn't this guy some hotshot stockbroker in Dallas? He seemed to have a lot of time to run around the backwoods lately.

"Boss had me come out to bring some papers to a big client," Jesse told his

sister. "The man hardly ever leaves his ranch. Figured I'd come check out this place and make sure everything was going okay while I was out here."

JT looked at Sofia ready to give her a 'can you believe this guy?' look, but she was busy looking at Jesse. Looking extremely happy to see him again. JT's face hardened. Jesse's smile turned up another notch when he saw Sofia. He immediately went to her and placed his giant hands on her shoulders and squeezed. "Good to see you, Sof."

Sofia's smile got even brighter, if that was possible. She covered one of his hands with her own as she looked up happily at the man standing over her. The touch seemed way too comfortable, almost intimate, to JT. His chest felt suddenly tight, and he tried to rub the knot out of it with one hand. He desperately wanted to slip Sofia out from under the man and pull her next to him instead. Hold her close and tell the man mountain to back the hell off. Maggie was giving him a death stare, however, and he knew he couldn't do anything to fuck up this meeting no matter how hard it was to maintain his professionally pleasant mask.

"Well, I think we've got everything," Maggie interjected quickly, taking in her brother's expression. "Don't we JT?" She raised an imperious eyebrow at him daring him to say otherwise.

"Yeah, I think that's everything," JT answered, his voice rough. "Um, I'll just need the final head count by next week."

Amarylis nodded in agreement. "I'm so thankful you could jump in at the last minute for us," she said to the trio. "I didn't know what I was going to do before Jesse recommended you!"

"We're so glad we could do it," Maggie assured her as she started to heave herself to her feet. "Thank you for letting us be a part of your special day. We won't let you down."

Jesse backed up a couple of steps when Sofia stood. JT managed to suck in a couple of breaths of oxygen into his lungs, but then the man moved in again, hugging Sofia tight to him, before kissing her on the head and letting her go. Before his head could explode, Jesse was reaching out a hand to him. "Thanks again, man. Amy was in a state. You're really saving the day."

JT reluctantly took the proffered hand. The men stared at each other, both their faces perfectly polite, but their hands trying to crush the other.

The bride's voice broke the stare down. "My name is Amarylis!" his sister corrected him as her fiancé pulled out her chair for her.

"You'll always be Amy to me, cuz, so get used to it!" Jesse teased her good naturedly, dropping JT's hand.

JT wanted to shake the thing out and rub some feeling back into it but wouldn't dare while the man was still standing there. He settled for taking two steps and draping an arm over Sofia's shoulders. She wrapped an arm around his waist and squeezed. He found another breath. And another, settling himself with the contact. They started toward the door when Jesse spoke again. "I may have another event for you," he said. The trio from Common Grounds turned to face him. "Give me a call when you get a minute next week, Sof, and I'll run it by you. You've got my number."

Sofia gave him a brief smile. "Sure, Jesse, sounds good."

It was all JT could do not to throw her over his shoulder and hightail it out of the building before the man could speak again. When they finally made it back to his truck, he let out a long breath.

"You okay?" Sofia asked.

"Fine. Everything's fine," JT answered tightly, beeping open the locks and opening the passenger doors for his sister and Sofia.

He reached deep for calm as he started the engine and drove out of the

parking lot. He had lots of questions for Sofia but knew it wouldn't do to get into anything with his sister in the backseat. He searched for something neutral to say to hide his discomfort.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Doubts and Decisions

JT TURNED TO SOFIA as they all settled back in the car. "So, menudo." She looked at him in confusion. She knew he couldn't be happy that Jesse showed up, but he hadn't said anything yet. She was trying to wrap her head around his non sequitur. "Yeesss?" she drew out the word, her eyebrows raised.

"I've heard of it, but that's the sole extent of my knowledge." He huffed out a breath and rubbed the back of his neck. Food was neutral, right? And he did need to figure out this part of the menu. "Think your mom has a recipe for that as well as the tamales?" JT asked. Amarylis was adamant it be available, so he was going to have to figure the dish out. She swore it was a hangover cure for everyone that would be partying and drinking long into the night and would be expected. She'd told him she'd never live it down if they didn't have menudo.

Sofia broke out in a wide smile. "Of course, she does. Menudo is a staple at any party," she informed him. "But it takes a long time to cook."

"Do you think your mom would school me in tamales *and* menudo?"

Sofia bit her lip in thought. Her mother still wasn't thrilled she was dating

JT, but she was also a very generous person. Surely if he asked politely, her mother would agree to share her knowledge with him. "I'm pretty sure she would," she replied. "We'll call her tonight and ask, okay?"

JT tried to flash her his regular 1,000-watt grin, but it probably only made it to 500. He would have to do better. Sofia deserved better than him going all caveman on her over the man mountain. She was with him now, and it was real. Right? "Sounds great. Thanks."

"You're welcome." she said leaning over the console to kiss him quickly. She then pried one of his hands from the steering wheel where his knuckles were turning white and gave it a squeeze. He squeezed back grateful for the contact while they continued to gaze at each other. He wasn't sure what he was looking for. Something to quell his doubts? Something that told him she was all in with him and Jesse meant nothing to her? That her smile for him was different? Meant more than the one she had flashed at Jesse a few minutes ago?

"Oh, for heaven's sake. Quit staring at each other like a couple of lovesick cows," Maggie complained from the backseat. "I need to get home and get my cankles up!"

JT rolled his eyes at his sister, breaking his and Sofia's searching gaze. He reluctantly took back his hand and started the truck. "Don't even go there, sister mine," he shot back. He could razz his sister on autopilot and it was as good a distraction as any. A distraction was exactly what he needed right now. "How many hours of cow eyes did I have to live through with you and Zane over the last year? And that's not even counting all the half-naked breakfasts I walked in on!"

"Joshua Trent! That is such a lie! There were never any half-naked breakfasts in our house!" Maggie replied indignantly.

"Might as well have been," JT teased. "I got scared to cook anything in there before I bleached down all the surfaces and my eyeballs!"

Maggie smacked him in the back of the head. "That is so not true! Don't listen to him, Sofia!"

Sofia giggled. Thank God for Maggie. She didn't know exactly what that look JT had been giving her was. Honestly, she wasn't sure she wanted to know. It was almost sad. She tried to put away her concerns as she listened to the siblings good natured ribbing on the way back to Gladewater. She told herself to soak up the love and relish being with two of her favorite people. She was determined to let herself forget all about Jesse and their past and focus on JT and her future.



That evening, JT paced while Sofia got her mother on the phone. Now, more than ever, he wanted to impress Mrs. Benevides. And he really needed her to help him. After what felt like an hour of rapid-fire Spanish, Sofia finally held the phone out to him.

JT swallowed. "Hi, Mrs. Benevides," he said.

"Hello, JT. Sofia said you want to ask me something," the woman addressed him sharply. *So much for pleasantries.*

"Yes, ma'am," he started. "Sofia says you make the best tamales and menudo around and, well, I really need to learn to make both of those things." JT rubbed the back of his neck. "I was hoping you'd agree to teach me. I believe in learning from the best."

There was silence for several long beats. "Why do you need to learn these things?" *Hadn't Sofia told her what was up in all that conversation before?*

"Well, ma'am, I'm catering for a big Mexican-American wedding here in a couple of weeks and those were specialties requested by the bride. She's very adamant she wants them. I could look up recipes myself and make do, I suppose," JT continued, "but they wouldn't be near as good as they would be if I could learn from you, I'm sure. I want the bride and her family to be happy."

More long silences. *Shit, was that not the right answer? If she won't teach me, maybe I can check with Tomás and see if he can give me a few hours to...*

"Okay. You can come this weekend. Noon Saturday. We start the menudo and let it cook overnight then we start the tamales on Sunday after church," Mrs. Benevides instructed. "Don't be late, sí?"

"Sí, I mean, yes. Yes, ma'am," JT said with relief. "I won't be late. Thank you so much."

The woman sniffed. "Let me talk to Sofia."

Sofia spent another couple of minutes on the phone with her mother, then turned back to JT with a grin. "Congratulations."

JT gave her a wry smile. "I'm not sure congratulations are in order yet. Let's hope I don't do something that has her kicking me out of her kitchen before we're done."

"Just don't touch the red skillet," Sofia warned, but he saw the glint in her eye. "Nobody gets to use that skillet but Mama."

"Red skillet, got it," he said, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her in close. Now that she was warm and willing in his arms again, his uneasiness over seeing her with Jesse this afternoon seemed less important. Surely, he was overreacting. He was glad he hadn't said anything to Sofia about it after all.

"That mama of yours is scary as hell," he admitted. He kissed the side of her neck lightly. "Now, I know where all your fire comes from."

Sofia ran her hands up his back then started to pull his t-shirt from his jeans. Her nails scraped down the dips and edges where sinew and muscle met. She heard him do that growly thing in his chest that always ratcheted up her desire tenfold. "No more talk about my mama, right now," Sofia whispered in his ear, then took him by the hand to lead him to the bedroom.

"Yes, ma'am," JT agreed huskily and gladly followed where she led. All thoughts of the man mountain pushed out of his mind.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Menudo and Lies

JT SNUCK OUT OF the café a bit early on Saturday not wanting to be even a minute late to his appointment with Sofia's mom. "Now, I've got everything for the croque monsieur sandwiches ready for you. You just have to put them in the panini press like I showed you," he had told Sofia as he was heading out the door. "There's plenty of the tomato soup still."

"We'll be fine. Don't worry," Sofia assured him. "You've got it so organized I can't possibly screw it up. Now go!"

He grabbed one last kiss and ran out the back door to his Jeep. He'd thought about walking but with one thing and another, he'd run out of time. Two minutes later he was pulling up to the Benevides house. He sat in the driveway a minute and took a deep breath, preparing himself. *Don't know why I'm so damn nervous. Mothers love me.* He hadn't cared about impressing any of those other mothers, though. This one was important to win over.

One more centering breath and he climbed out of the Jeep, going around to pick up the box of supplies from the back. Mrs. Benevides had sent an extensive list of supplies through Sofia and he felt like he'd been in every

little tienda within fifty miles to get exactly the brands and ingredients she wanted. If he could learn these two dishes and do them well, it would all be worth it. He prayed he hadn't missed anything.

He made his way up the walk to the door giving himself a pep talk all the way. He rang the door with his elbow as his hands were full with the box of supplies and waited. And waited. Just as he was about to ring again, the door opened, and he grinned down at Sofia's mom over the box in his arms. "Hi, Mrs. Benevides. Thanks again for helping me. I think I have everything," JT offered as the tiny woman looked him up and down. She wore a slight frown.

"We'll see. Come on," she said and quickly turned and headed to the back of the house.

JT followed and kicked the door closed behind him. He headed for the kitchen but couldn't help slowing down and studying the family pictures on the fireplace mantle he hadn't had time to look at the last time he was here. A picture of Selena holding a baby in a pink blanket that had to be Sofia caught his eye and he grinned. And there was Sofia in pigtails, wearing roller skates and smiling with a big gap in her smile where her front teeth should be. His smile grew wider. Finally, there she was with Selena in high school, Sofia in her drill team uniform and Selena in her cheerleader uniform. How had he not noticed her back then? She was beautiful. That smile still lit up a room.

"Hey, you coming?" Mrs. Benevides yelled at him from the kitchen.

Shit! "Yes, ma'am," JT called and scrambled to the kitchen.



The next couple of hours were spent soaking the tripe in lemon water, chopping garlic and onions and grinding spices. Like many wonderful home

cooks, Mrs. Benevides did not have a written recipe to follow. She simply made everything the way she was taught. JT did his best to make notes of amounts and the order of when everything was added. When all the ingredients were in the pot simmering and the kitchen had been cleaned, Sofia's mom motioned him to a kitchen chair. She then went to the refrigerator and brought back a green glass pitcher full of a white drink and matching glasses.

"Here, drink this," she instructed.

"What is it?" JT asked as he took the heavy pitcher from her and poured the white fluid into their glasses. He smelled cinnamon and vanilla wafting up as it hit the glasses.

"Horchata," the woman pronounced. "Agua fresca with rice and cinnamon. It's good."

JT nodded as he lifted the glass to his mouth. He'd heard of Horchata before but had never tried it. It was light, creamy, and sweet, with hints of cinnamon and vanilla. He licked his lips appreciatively. "This really is good," he said, taking another sip. "Did you make this too?"

"Sí, it's very easy. I bet even you can make it." JT glanced up at the perceived slight but saw a hint of a smile playing on the woman's lips.

"I'd love to make it for the café," he told her. "I bet it would be really popular. Especially in the summer."

Mrs. Benevides nodded in satisfaction. "Agua frescas are popular always. You should have them."

They sipped in silence for a few more moments and JT had a chance to look around. There was a small, built-in desk in the corner of the kitchen that looked like a place to pay bills and store recipe books. He saw another picture of Sofia there. This time, it was Sofia and a boy with exceptionally broad

shoulders that JT recognized. They were dressed up like they were going to church. He was in a sports coat and tie and Sofia was in a beautiful blue sundress. Sofia's mother saw him looking at it.

"That's Jesse and Sofia the night they got engaged," she said, a note of wistfulness in her voice.

JT's head snapped back to the small woman. His throat was suddenly tight. He swallowed hard. "Engaged?" he croaked.

"Sí, right before Jesse left for college." Mrs. Benevides went to the picture and picked it up. JT could see longing and sadness on her face. "We were so happy," she said. "He is a good boy. And very successful now." The woman nodded her head, seemingly agreeing with her own conclusions. "Ah, but Sofia didn't want to leave Gladewater and Jesse only wanted to be in the city. He had many big dreams."

JT simply stared. Sofia and Jesse had been engaged. And she hadn't told him. And now the man mountain was back sniffing around Sofia. *His* Sofia. He rubbed his chest where a dull ache had taken up residence. Why hadn't she told him?

"Uh, thanks, Mrs. Benevides for all this. I look forward to tasting the menudo tomorrow and starting the tamales," JT managed to say politely but his head was swimming. He had to get out of there.

"Twelve-thirty tomorrow," the woman instructed, and JT nodded his consent. "See you then."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

A Tale of Two Boys

HE HAD NO MEMORY of getting back to his house, but he found himself sitting on the side of his bed in the dark. His thoughts were swirling out of control. One taking up most of the real estate – she had kept their engagement a secret. She'd had plenty of opportunities to mention it. It wasn't like they were kids. They were aware they'd both had other relationships. But she'd stayed silent about such a major thing. Why?

Was she scared to tell him? He knew he had a temper, but he'd never even had an argument with Sofia. He'd worked hard to keep his jealous streak where it came to her under control. And damn, it had been hard sometimes. He'd like to lock her in his bedroom and keep her there. Protect her from anything that would hurt her. But she was a strong, independent woman and he wanted her to be that, so he fought these new instincts to try and keep her only for himself. Had she felt it anyway? No, he couldn't believe that Sofia would ever think he would hurt her or try to control her. They'd known each other too long for that to be the case.

Maybe she did really want to be with Jesse and didn't want to hurt him? They'd had an agreement to let each other go if they found someone they

wanted to be with...But that had been when they'd been pretending. Did she want Jesse and didn't know how to let him down now that they had declared themselves a 'real' relationship? They had more of a history than he'd been led to believe, and the man was obviously still interested in her. Could that be it? She wanted him still?

He opened the side table drawer and fished under papers and detritus until he found the black velvet jewelry box hidden there. He opened it and looked at the infinity necklace. Had it only been a few days ago that he had been planning a special night for Sofia to give her this? It now seemed so juvenile and wholly inadequate.

His chest ached to think about it, but should he let her go? Let her have Jesse and the life they had planned so long ago? If he was honest with himself, he knew she deserved a man like that. Asshole was successful, handsome and her family obviously loved him. They were fucking perfect for each other really. What did she have with him? Someone who'd never had a long-term relationship in his life. Someone who wasn't ever going to be anything but a cook in a small town. Yeah, technically he owned the business, but he had never really seen himself as a business owner, that was Maggie. He'd been fine with that, until now. He was just a small-town guy who got lucky and had the woman of his dreams for a little while. Now his dream was about to go up in smoke.



Sofia glanced at her watch. She was surprised she hadn't heard from JT yet about the afternoon cooking with her mom. Hopefully, that was a good sign and they were still working. She looked around her small apartment. The

bistro table in the window was set. Salad was made and waiting to be dressed. The chicken breasts were stuffed with cheese and spinach and ready to go in the oven. She gave herself a little mental pat on the back. She had decided to make dinner for JT tonight as a surprise. He was always cooking for her and since he'd been cooking all day, she wanted to do this for him tonight. She was no chef but she had a few good recipes under her belt.

She had just put the stuffed chicken breasts in the oven when the doorbell rang. *Talk about good timing!* Her smile grew as she went to answer the door. "Boy, you can really time..." she started, opening the door, but it wasn't JT, it was Jesse.

"Oh, it's you," she said, surprised to see him.

"Yep, it's me," Jesse answered, a smug smile on his face. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No, of course not, come on in," Sofia motioned him into the apartment. She had no idea what he could be doing there. "How did you know where I live?"

"Stopped by your parents' place," Jesse said, sitting on her sofa and crossing an ankle over his knee casually. Tonight, he was all in black – black leather jacket, black Henly that showed he was definitely still working out, black jeans and black boots. Somehow, he made jeans and a t-shirt look dressy.

"When?" Sofia asked. She hoped JT hadn't been there.

"Oh, about an hour ago," Jesse replied. "They invited me to dinner, but I declined. Selena was there with the kids, and I didn't need rugrats crawling all over me while I tried to eat. Selena's expecting another one, huh?"

Sofia frowned. JT had been finished for over an hour and hadn't called her yet? Had it gone badly? She should probably call Mamá and check before she

called JT.

"Earth to Sofia." Jesse waved a hand in front of her face. She realized he'd still been talking, and she hadn't heard a thing.

"Sorry," she said on a breath. "A lot on my mind. What did you say?"

"I was talking about your sister's kids. How many is she up to now?" He said it in a joking tone, but Sofia bristled. Having kids had been one of their major roadblocks. She wanted them. He didn't. At all.

"She's got two boys and is expecting a girl in another few months. She's thrilled to get some more estrogen in the house," Sofia told him. She wanted to be polite, but she really needed to get him out of here before JT showed up.

"Actually, Jesse, I'm in the middle of fixing dinner. What can I do for you?"

"I thought I smelled something good cooking." He rose to his feet and headed toward her small galley kitchen. She followed, irritated that he was roaming around her space uninvited.

He opened the oven and glanced in. "That looks really good, Sof, and smells even better!" He grinned at her over his shoulder.

Sofia stood with her hands on her hips. Now she was getting angry. He was just making himself at home.

"Jesse, seriously, why are you here? As you can see, I'm in the middle of things."

Jesse walked around and backed her up against the bar separating the kitchen and dining space. He placed his hands on the bar on either side of her and leaned in. "I missed you, Sof. Wanted to see you," he said huskily. "It's been a long time." He picked up a strand of her hair and twirled it between his fingers. "You get more and more beautiful. How do you do that?"

Sofia stood frozen in shock as Jesse moved in farther, closing in on her mouth. Before he could make contact, she turned her head away and pushed hard at his chest. "Jesse! Stop! What in the world are you doing?"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Burning

J T GLANCED AT THE warm light coming through Sofia's apartment window. He'd warned her about leaving her blinds open now that it was getting dark out. Too many creepers out there ready to see what they could see. He ran a hand through his hair and across his stubbled jaw. *Damn. I could have at least shaved before coming over.* He guessed it really didn't matter.

He got out of his Jeep and blew out a deep breath. He had to remember, he was doing this *for* her, not *to* her. She deserved all the good things, and, if one of those good things was Jesse, then he had to let her have him. He raised his head when he was almost to the door, and his feet stuttered to a stop on the pavement.

He saw her pretty, little bistro table set for two, and behind that, Sofia in Jesse's arms. He was playing with her hair. That beautiful, raven black hair he couldn't get enough of. His vision narrowed and went red. Everything went silent. He saw Jesse lean toward Sofia for a kiss. All the oxygen seemed to leave the world around him. Jesse kissing Sofia. Dinner for two. She was already seeing Jesse behind his back?

The red hot anger was quickly doused by a flood of inadequacy. He should have expected this. He couldn't blame her really. He'd always known he wasn't good enough for her, but he'd let himself believe he could have her if only for a little while. He spun on his heel and blindly found his way back to his Jeep. He wrenched open the door and threw himself inside. In a corner of his mind, he had been hoping Sofia would convince him she wasn't interested in Jesse. Tell him she loved him and only wanted to be with him. Now that small quiet hope had been destroyed, along with his heart.



Sofia heard a car door slam outside as she pushed on Jesse again. Realistically, she knew she'd never be able to move him if he didn't want to be moved but Jesse had never been a bully. Confident, too smart by half and even arrogant at times, but not a bully. "Jesse! I said cut it out!"

"Okay, okay," he said, throwing his hands up and taking a step back. "Thought you were into it."

"Thought I was into what exactly?" Sofia asked. She could feel the heat climbing up her face in her temper. "You walking into my home and kissing me without permission? Dios mío, Jesse! We've barely spoken in the last twelve years, and you come in here thinking, thinking...What?"

He had the audacity to give her a cocky grin. "Well, you've obviously been glad to see me the last couple of times we've run into each other. I figured I'd stop by and try to catch you alone and see where we went." His expression softened. "Seeing you has brought back a lot of memories. I've missed you, Sof. I've missed us. We were good together, right?"

Sofia blew out an exasperated breath. "Yes, it's been good to see you, Jesse, but like it's good to see an old friend. Did you forget about the kiss you walked in on? The fact that I obviously have a boyfriend?"

He looked nonplussed. "That redneck? The cook, right? C'mon, Sof, we both know he can't be more than a temporary distraction. He's so beneath you."

"Santo Padre! I can't believe your head is even bigger than it was when we were in school! How dare you talk about JT like that! You don't know him at all!"

"Sofia," he said, condescendingly. "That was always your biggest problem – you never dreamed big enough. You're so much better than this little hick town. We could have been having an amazing life in Dallas for all these years. In fact, we could still have one. It's not too late. Think bigger for yourself!"

She narrowed her eyes at him. Her hands flew between them punctuating the anger in her voice. "This 'little hick town', as you call it, happens to be a wonderful place to live. We are a community. Everyone takes care of each other. I know everyone by name. I have a job I love that I'm good at. I have fabulous friends. I have a man I love who loves me just the way I am. There's nothing, *nothing at all* in Dallas that I want. All my dreams are coming true here."

She threw up a hand to silence him when he tried to cut in. "That's what you could never get, Jesse," she said, her voice now raw but soft. "I don't need a McMansion, a fancy car, designer clothes to be happy. People, *my people*, make me happy. It may seem like a little life to you, but it's mine and, someday, I hope to raise my kids here and teach them to appreciate the

simple things, not the flashy ones." She searched out his eyes. "How happy do all your things make you, Jesse? Hmmm?"

Jesse's mouth tightened into a thin line. "I see nothing has really changed in all these years," he said, picking up his leather jacket off the back of the armchair where he had so casually dropped it earlier. "I thought you would've finally grown up and come to your senses, but you still think small." He shook his head lamentably. "All that beauty, wasted. You think about what I said, baby," he said and walked out her door.

Sofia dropped onto the sofa and held her head in her hands. She felt like she'd just relived the most emotional day of her life. Come to think of it, she really had. It was almost the exact same argument she and Jesse had when she had broken off their engagement all those years ago. And he still didn't get it. She couldn't see that he'd changed at all other than making more money and having the flashy things he'd always dreamed of having. She supposed they both were well on their way to achieving all their dreams.

A piercing siren broke into her silent contemplation. The smoke alarm! Mierda! The chicken! Black smoke billowed from the oven as she opened it and pulled the roasting pan out to throw it on the stove. She turned on the vent fan and fanned at the smoke with a dish towel trying to get the alarm to stop. She heard banging on the door and shook her head. Probably her neighbors coming to check on her. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson treated her like their own daughter even though her parents lived only a few minutes away. She gave a rueful grin as she went to open the door. This was the kind of thing Jesse could never appreciate. Neighbors taking care of each other.

Once she'd assured the Johnsons that she had only burned her dinner and Mr. Johnson had taken the offending chicken out to the dumpster for her, she

realized it was almost ten o'clock. And she still hadn't heard from JT. She looked at her phone and saw a text there that she had missed.

JT: <I'm beat after today. Hitting the hay early. Talk later. Have a good night.>

What kind of message was that? Something was going on with him and she didn't like it.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Déjà Vu

B UZZ. BUZZ. HE FOLDED the pillow over his head. More buzzing. He cracked an eye open and was immediately assaulted by a shaft of light escaping through his blinds to stab him in his brain. "Aaarrgh," he grunted and rolled away from the light. He tried to pull the covers over his head and realized he was on top of the quilt. Still in his clothes. Boots on. The buzzing started again. Phone. His phone was vibrating on the bedside table. He groped for it and brought the offending technology to his one open eye and tried to focus. Two calls and multiple texts. All from Sofia. The last one got his attention.

Sofia: <If I don't hear from you in 10 min, I'm coming over there. You're worrying me.>

Shit. What time was it? He searched his phone. 11 o'clock. Fuck, he was supposed to be over at Mrs. Benevides' in an hour. He groaned again. He didn't want Sofia over here seeing him like this. He couldn't figure out how he was going to handle this shit. And he wasn't going to figure it out today, that was for sure.

JT:<Sorry. Up late working on the menu. Gotta grab a shower and get

over to your mom's place. Talk later>

Crisis averted. For now. He hoped. He dragged himself up to a sitting position on the side of the bed and massaged his hands through his hair trying to rub the pain away. Nope. Not even close. Jose Cuervo was never a friend to him the next morning. He knew that well enough, but last night, he had seemed like just the buddy JT had needed to hang out with after leaving Sofia's place. After seeing that fucker put his hands on Sofia. After seeing that intimate little dinner set up.

"Fuck!" he cursed aloud, then winced. Too loud. His head pounded and his stomach lurched. He grabbed the edge of the bed and held on, breathing through his nose. His stomach slowly settled back into place. His phone buzzed again.

Sofia: <OK. Hope everything went alright with mama yesterday. Call me when you get finished today. Dying to hear how it went.>

JT: <Learned a lot. Better run.>

Shower. He had to make it to the shower, wash the funk off himself, and try to get presentable for Sofia's mom. Not that it really mattered anymore what she thought of him. Impressing her was no longer something he had to do, was it? He still needed to learn to make tamales. He did have a job to do even if being in that kitchen with Sofia and Jesse's picture staring at him was the last place he wanted to be today. *Suck it up, buttercup. You don't have a choice. You can't let everyone down because your life is a shitshow right now.*

He carefully stood up and made his way to the bathroom, praying the hot spray would revive him and help him get through the day.



Sofia studied the text messages from JT. Something was wrong. She could feel it. He was barely responding to her. That wasn't at all like him. Normally, he would go ahead and call her back to avoid texting altogether. Had something happened yesterday with her mom? Was he mad at her for some reason? She couldn't think of why that would be. They were fine when they parted yesterday. Better than fine. She thought they were in a great place. No, something was definitely off. She'd let him get what he needed to get done today and go see him tonight. She did still owe him a dinner, even if he hadn't known about the one she'd had planned last night.

She decided to call her mom before JT got there. "Hola, Mamá. How was church?"

"Good, but you'd know that if you came." Her mom seemed never to miss an opportunity to needle her about something. She rolled her eyes, thankful the call was audio and not video.

Sofia pushed ahead. "So, Mamá, how was the lesson with JT yesterday?"

Her mother was quiet for a moment. "Bien. He is a good cook, I think."

Sofia blew out a breath. Thank God for small favors. "He is an excellent chef," Sofia agreed. "He was very excited to learn. Are you doing tamales today?"

"Sí. With the pork," her mother confirmed. "I will send some for you."

"Gracias, Mamá," Sofia said. She was always happy to have tamales. "I'll let you go. I know JT will be there soon."

"Adiós, mija."

"Adiós, Mamá."

Well, that was both good news and bad news. Sofia was glad that her mother had actually given JT a compliment, so it had gone well, but she was no closer to figuring out what was going on with him. She'd have to wait until he was finished and find out at dinner. She didn't want to end up with a ruined dinner like last night, so she decided she was going to have to invite him instead of trying to surprise him this time.

Sofia: <Hey, I know you're going to be working all day with my mom. How about I cook you dinner tonight?>

She waited and watched for the bubbles that would show her he was answering. Nothing. She loaded the dishwasher then looked again. Still nothing. Maybe he was driving? On the way to her mom's house and hadn't looked at her text yet? She'd give it a few more minutes. She made her bed and straightened the pillows on her couch trying to distract herself. Finally, she couldn't take it any longer and looked at her phone again. He had seen the message. Her phone told her in no uncertain terms – Read: 11:56 am. No response. What the hell was going on?



JT sat in his truck in Mrs. Benevides' driveway with a sense of déjà vu. He'd sat here exactly like this only yesterday. But yesterday, he'd been nervous about impressing Sofia's mom. Today, he was overcome by a feeling of impending doom. Sofia had texted him again, wanting to cook for him. Before yesterday, he would have thought the gesture incredibly sweet. Now, he didn't want to be anywhere near that apartment. The place where he had seen Jesse and Sofia together. What was she planning anyway? Would this be the night she tried to let him down easy? Tell him she still had feelings for

Jesse and their little 'fling' was over? But it wasn't a fling for him, and before last night, he would have said it wasn't for her either.

He scrubbed his hands up and down his face in frustration. He had to get in there and learn to make the best damn tamales in the county no matter what chaos was going on in his personal life. He couldn't let down his sister and the business. He rested his forehead on the steering wheel, promising himself just one more calming breath, when a loud knock came at his window. He jumped so high he almost hit his head on the roof of the Jeep. There stood Mrs. Benevides, hands on hips, looking at him like...he wasn't sure like what. The woman was so damn inscrutable! She tapped an imaginary watch on her wrist then turned and marched herself back into the house.

Fuck me! The general had spoken. He'd better get to it. His personal life was going to have to wait.

Chapter Thirty

Impending Doom

J T FOLLOWED HIS NOSE back to the Benevides' kitchen. It smelled amazing. Even with his pounding head, his stomach thought it might get over the flipflopping it was doing for a taste of whatever was cooking in the pot on the stove.

Sofia's mom pointed to the small kitchen table. "Sit."

JT quickly complied. He was rewarded a few moments later with a steaming bowl of menudo. The pot on the stove was the stew they had made yesterday and had simmered overnight. He took in a deep breath of the spicy smoke and licked his lips. "Smells great," he complimented Mrs. Benevides.

The small woman looked him up and down with a knowing eye. "Good for a hangover."

JT studied his bowl, chagrined. He thought he had cleaned up pretty well, but the woman had an eagle eye. He should have known he wouldn't be able to pull anything over on her. He clanked his spoon against his bowl, stirring the menudo but not bringing the spoon to his lips.

"Eat. Eat," Sofia's mom commanded him and sat in the chair across from him with a cup of coffee.

He dug in and almost groaned as the spices hit his tongue and opened his sinuses. Before long, the bowl was empty, and JT thought he might feel almost human. Amarylis had been right. The stew even stood up against Jose Cuervo. Today might not be as horrible as he expected. Even the pounding in his head was down to a small ache behind his eyes.

"Ready now?" the woman asked him. He thought he saw a small smile playing at her lips behind her coffee cup. That certainly wasn't the look he was expecting.

"Yes, ma'am," JT agreed with a grin. "That stuff is magic. I understand now why Amarylis said she had to have it at the wedding."

Mrs. Benevides nodded. She motioned him out of his seat. "Come. There's much work to do."



Hours later, JT was exhausted but had a feeling of accomplishment. He'd gotten the recipe for the tamale filling and after much trial and error, had twelve dozen tamales ready to cook that passed Mrs. Benevides' exacting standards. Though tired, he felt better than he had when he had arrived. Between the menudo and the sweating over the tamale prep, he figured he had sweated most of the leftover tequila out of his system.

Sofia's mom presented him with six packages of foil wrapped tamales and a large Tupperware container of menudo to take with him. She patted his arm almost affectionately. "You did a good job. The wedding will be very good."

"I can't thank you enough, ma'am," JT told her honestly. "I would never have been able to do this without you."

"Pssht. No worry. You are a very good cook. I know." She patted the bag full of tamales. "You give Sofia half, okay?"

The woman actually gave him a smile, patted him again and walked him to the front door. He waved at her and gave a honk of his horn once he had his delicacies loaded into his Jeep. He drove to the corner and sat there, not sure where to go next. The unanswered text from Sofia practically yelling at him from his phone. Not answering her at all had been a dick move but he still didn't know what to say. An old Chevy finally came up behind him, so a decision had to be made. He turned right towards home. He'd take a shower and decide what to say to Sofia. He owed her a response of some sort and he did promise her mom he'd deliver her portion of the tamales to her.

He exhaled loudly as he drove into his garage. *Okay, dude, quit being a pussy. If she's gonna dump your sorry ass, get it over with.* He scrubbed his hands over his face and texted.

JT: <If dinner is still on, I have tamales from your mom.>

He sat staring at his phone waiting on the three little dots that would tell him she was responding. He thought it felt like a long time but was probably only a couple of seconds.

Sofia: <Sure. I can throw something together to go with them. 7:30?>

JT: <Sounds good. Gonna hop in the shower. Be there soon.>

Sofia: <xoxo>

JT let out a breath and headed into the house with his booty from today's cooking lesson. Only a few days ago, he would have been rushing to get to Sofia. Now, he felt like his boots were filled with concrete. And there was that feeling of impending doom again. *Shit.* He glanced at what was left in the Cuervo bottle but then shook his head. While he now had the best hangover cure in the world in his fridge, he needed to save his buddy Jose.

He might very well need him later. He grabbed a Dr. Pepper for a little pick-me-up and headed to the shower.



Sofia put down her phone with a frown. He was acting so weird. Her stomach had been in knots all day when he didn't text her back or call about dinner. At least he was going to come over now and she was going to get to the bottom of whatever was going on. As she put together ingredients for dinner, she thought about how she should handle things. She knew the best way to get JT to shut down completely was to push him, but she deserved to know what was going on.

She froze with a skillet in her hand as a thought caught her by surprise. Could he have met someone else? Was he wanting to break up with her? They'd had that agreement... but that was when they were pretending, right? They were together almost all the time. When would he have met someone? He had been staying late at the café working on the wedding menu. She lay the pan on the stove and fought down the ball of dread that had suddenly taken up residence in her belly. Was he going to break up with her? She didn't think she could take losing him after having her dream come true for so short a time. *Relájate, respira profundo, Sofia. (Relax, take a deep breath, Sofia.)* She was determined not to borrow trouble tonight.

Chapter Thirty-One

Get Out!

JT PULLED UP IN front of Sofia's apartment a little before 7:30. He sat there, looking at the light from her front window. Again. He rubbed at the tightness in his chest. *Let's get it over with.* He hauled himself and the tamales out of the car and headed to the door. Sofia met him there before he could ring the bell. She gave him a smile, but it wasn't one of her usual ones. He thought it looked forced. *Jesus! I was right. She's gonna dump my ass.*

Sofia opened the door and tried to give him a smile. He could barely give her a quirk up of his lips. He looked pained. *Dios mio. He is going to call it off.* "Come in," she said, trying her best to sound cheerful. "I've missed you."

He leaned down and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Me, too," he responded flatly. "I brought tamales. Your mom made me promise to bring you half."

"Are these some you made?" Sofia asked, taking the bag from his hand.

He nodded. "Yeah, some of the last ones that are fit for human consumption." He chuckled at himself despite his anxiety. "Your mama is a hard taskmaster. They had to be perfect, or she threw them out! I told her I'd still eat them, but she wouldn't have it!"

Her mouth quirked up. "She's definitely got strong opinions about things that are important to her," Sofia agreed. "Have a seat. Do you want a beer?"

"Sure, thanks," JT answered, taking a seat at the bistro table. The table was set prettily and whatever she was cooking smelled amazing, but he kept having flashbacks of seeing this table set similarly last night and Sasquatch – yeah, that was going to be his new name – with Sofia in his arms just a few steps away. His gut started churning again. He was equal parts angry at Sofia for cheating on him and afraid that she was going to kick him to the curb. *I should have had that shot before I left the house.*

Sofia brought him his Amber Bock and set it on the table. She stood in front of him for several beats then cupped his face softly before running her hand through his hair like she was trying to memorize the feel of him. His eyes closed at the pleasure of her simple touch. When she drew her hand away, his eyes popped open. She gave him an enigmatic smile and returned to the kitchen.

His mouth suddenly felt like it was full of cotton balls. He took a large gulp of his beer. What had that look been about? Damn, he was like a thirteen-year-old girl here-full of insecurity and confusion. JT had never had issues with confidence before or any concern that a woman might not like him. He'd admit to being slightly cocky as far as women went but Sofia had him tied up in knots. He took another swig of his beer as he watched her move around in the kitchen behind the breakfast bar separating the two rooms. He tried to take another gulp and realized he'd already finished the bottle.

"Can I help with anything?" he asked, belatedly realizing they really hadn't said anything to each other and that was weird.

"No, I've got it," Sofia answered, bringing a casserole dish to the table full

of some kind of smothered chicken with chilis and tomatoes, and what looked like Mexican rice.

"Smells delicious," he said as she set the dish down in the middle of the small table.

Sofia preened. "Thanks. It's chicken with chili sauce. I figured it would go with the tamales. Mamá said she was going to send me some." She glanced at his empty beer bottle, a line forming between her brows. "Do you want another beer?"

JT glanced at the empty bottle he'd been nervously playing with. "Uh, yeah. Thanks."

In a moment, she returned to the table with a plate of tamales in one hand and his beer in the other. She forked a couple of the cornhusk wrapped delicacies onto each of their plates. "The table is too small for all these plates but if you want more, I'm going to put the rest of them on the bar."

JT nodded and put his napkin in his lap. He served them both the chicken and some rice from the casserole dish. As soon as she took the first bite, he dug in, glad for the need to chew and not talk for a little bit. Eventually, however, Sofia started to speak.

"So, were your cooking classes successful? If the menudo came out as good as these tamales, I'd have to say they were," Sofia offered.

"Your mom is a magician in the kitchen," JT answered. "This morning, she gave me a bowl of the menudo we made yesterday, and I thought I'd died and gone to heaven." He didn't tell her it also saved him from the miserable hangover he had been sporting as well. "I think I got everything down. You know she doesn't have any actual written recipes."

Sofia sighed. "Yes. I keep trying to get her to write some of her recipes down for me so I'll always have them, but she says she can't. She says I have

to come watch her. I guess that's what you had to do?"

JT chuckled a bit. "I was writing as fast as I could and trying to guess how much of each of the spices she was using. I'm pretty sure I got close. Close enough to make everyone at the wedding happy anyway." JT's lips turned down at that when he remembered who this wedding was for. He tried not to be resentful. After all, Amarylis couldn't help it that her cousin was a douche and Sasquatch *had* gotten them this gig. *Shit!* He shoveled more rice into his mouth.

"I really missed..." Sofia's comment was cut off by the doorbell ringing. She frowned. "Who could that be?" She placed her napkin on the table and went to the door. JT turned in his seat to watch her. God, it had only been about twenty-four hours, and he'd already missed watching her, just being in her presence. His eyes followed her walk toward the door and had him fantasizing about everything he wanted to do to that luscious ass.

His ruminations were interrupted by a low rumble in the doorway. No fucking way! Sasquatch.

"These are for you," Jesse said, smoothly presenting Sofia with a bouquet of blood red roses.

Sofia's brow furrowed but she reached out and took the flowers. "Why are you bringing me flowers?"

JT stood from the table and listened for the answer. He needed to hear this.

"For last night, of course," JT heard Sasquatch reply. He scowled at the smug smile on the other man's face. His eyes scanned over to JT as if he was just realizing she wasn't alone. "Oh, I didn't know you had company."

That was it. JT was in between Sofia and Jesse with two long strides. "What the actual fuck, Sofia?" He growled. "Were you ever going to tell me

you were seeing this, this *guy*? Is that what tonight's dinner was about? Trying to let me down easy?"

"JT, I don't know what you're..."

"I saw you with him, Sofia. Last night. I saw you kissing him through that window," JT accused, pointing toward the picture window next to the table where their dinner still sat, growing cold. "I would have thought you'd at least have enough respect not to cheat on me. I thought we had something good going, but obviously *this*," JT spit out the word and played his hand up and down in front of Jesse's suited form, "is more to your liking."

Sofia's hands went to her hips. "Now you listen to me JT Wade! I don't know what you think you saw but..."

"I don't think I saw anything. I saw him playing with your hair and kissing you right behind that table there. The table set for a nice little cozy dinner for you and, and Sasquatch here. You never close your blinds. Everyone could see it. You weren't even trying to hide." JT wanted to hit a wall or throw a chair across the room. He could feel his face reddening as his blood pressure skyrocketed. He had to get out of there.

"Now, JT, I don't think you should speak to Sofia like that," Jesse said in an infuriatingly placid tone. JT thought he actually saw a twinkle in the man's eye. He was enjoying this.

"I'm outta here!" JT said, pushing past Jesse in the doorway.

Sofia grabbed the sleeve of his shirt. "JT, wait! It's not what you think."

JT turned and removed her hand from his arm. He noticed for a second it was ice cold. Or maybe it only felt that way because he was burning up. He met her eyes for a moment before dropping her hand. "Good-bye, Sofia."

Sofia gasped at the pain she saw in his eyes. It shocked her so much she stood frozen with her hand in mid-air where he had left it. Without another

word, he was gone, down the sidewalk and was climbing in his Jeep, burning rubber against the asphalt.

"Well, that was unpleasant," Jesse commented sardonically.

Sofia's eyes blazed. She poked him hard in the middle of his chest. "Shut up, Jesse. You did this on purpose. You could see us through the window. You knew he was here. How dare you? Get out!"

"I only wanted to apologize for being an ass last night. How was I to know your little farm boy would get so upset about me visiting you?" Jesse said, derogatorily.

Sofia pushed him. "Get out, I said!" she yelled again. "I will call the police if you don't leave right now. And don't come back!"

Jesse threw his hands up in surrender and took a step out the door. "Fine. I'll go. No need to be so dramatic, baby."

An animalistic sound left Sofia's lips as she hurled the roses at him. She was so furious she had no more words to spare for him. She slammed the door in his face. Her chest heaved with her angry breathing until she felt she was going to pass out. She dropped into an armchair. Her hands balled into fists on her lap. Santo Padre! She couldn't decide who she was more infuriated with – Jesse for showing up uninvited and giving JT the impression that they had been seeing each other, or JT for not listening to her explanation of what he had actually seen last night. At least now she knew why he had been avoiding her. She had to figure out a way to make him listen and believe that she didn't want Jesse. She only wanted him.

Chapter Thirty-Two

A Tsunami of Tension

J T HADN'T BEEN ABLE to sleep after the confrontation at Sofia's. He had friends coming to help him start prepping for the wedding the next morning so he figured he and Jose Cuervo shouldn't buddy up that night either but man, he had missed him. He'd worked out in his home gym until his arms and legs were shaking but still couldn't relax enough to sleep. Instead, he decided to go in extra early and try some cleaning therapy instead.

JT's mind was whirling as he scrubbed the flat top in the kitchen for the third time. The kitchen sparkled like it was brand new, but still his mind wouldn't settle. He'd thought he and Sofia had something special going on. He hadn't been worried so much about his crazy meter being off as they'd known each other and been friends for years. He would have never believed in a million years that she would cheat on him. She'd even had an out but didn't take it. Instead, she'd been seeing the giant mountain fucker behind his back.

This was exactly why he'd sworn off women. He'd been right all along. Being alone was better than this gut-wrenching anger and sadness he was feeling. There wasn't enough bleach in the world to scrub these feelings

away, but he kept trying. He had this wedding to get through. *More happy fucking people to deal with.* Once it was done, he was taking some time off. He'd find someone to fill in for him for a while and go somewhere to get his head sorted out. Get out of this little town and lose himself somewhere for a while. Yeah, that was a good plan. But first he had to get through the next week with Sofia in front of him all the time. He'd just have to keep his head down and concentrate on the café and this wedding and try to keep his sister from getting wind of what had gone down with him and Sofia. That may actually be the hardest part.

He was about to clean out the walk in again when Julio and Ramon Garza came knocking on the back door. They were twins and friends he'd made in culinary school. They had been trying to find a permanent place in Dallas or Tyler but had been moving around working as sous chefs for the last year. Luckily, they'd had some time to come help him get this crazy wedding together.

"Hey, Jefe! Nice place!" Julio said, shaking JT's hand and pulling him in for a bro hug.

"You got the inspector from hell coming or what, man?" Ramon said, giving him a fist bump as he looked around the sparkling kitchen.

JT rubbed his jaw. "Naw, couldn't sleep so thought I'd come down to clean a while."

The brothers looked at each other knowingly then back at JT. "Woman trouble," they said in unison.

JT scowled. "Can't a guy just want a clean place? I'm an insomniac. I needed something to do."

"Whatever you say, bro," Julio said, smirking at him. "But only time I've ever seen a dude not sleeping and doing shit like this is when he's got woman

trouble." He raised an eyebrow at JT. "But, if you say that's not it, then okay."

"I say," JT announced. "And have y'all heard from Cassie?"

"Yeah, she'll be here any time," Ramon answered. "She's staying with her grandma in Kerens while she's working here so she's just up the road."

"Good. Now let's get to work. We've got a million things to do before I have to open for breakfast," JT told them.

The brothers washed their hands and threw on aprons ready to slice and dice. They nodded at each other, each knowing what the other was thinking. Cassie would get whatever was eating their buddy out of him once she got there. Girls were good at that kind of shit, and she was a master. They couldn't hide anything from her when they were in school. Julio and Ramon merely had to sit back and wait for Cassie to pry the answers out of him.

JT looked at the brothers with a frown. He hated that weird twin communication shit. He could always tell when they were doing it and it freaked him out a little. They did it all the time when they were in school. Super handy in the kitchen, but he was sure this one was about him. Damn. And they'd let Cassie know something was up as soon as she got here, and he'd never get a bit of peace over the next week. Having his friends come help out had seemed like such a good idea at the time. He sighed and pulled out the recipes they were going to start with.



Sofia made it a point to get to work early that morning, hoping to catch JT alone. She had to make him listen to her and explain what had really gone on. Much to her chagrin, she found three other people in the kitchen with him that she didn't recognize. She stood in the doorway watching all the activity

until one of the guys, with his long, black hair pulled back in a manbun, elbowed JT. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Sofia in the doorway.

His eyes slid from hers almost immediately and he practically turned his back to her before he spoke. He motioned back and forth with his knife. "Hey, Sofia. Meet Julio, Cassie, and Ramon. They're going to be helping me in the kitchen and prepping for the wedding. Everybody, this is Sofia. She's our front of house manager and does sales for the event side."

Cassie and the Garza brothers looked back and forth between Sofia in the doorway and JT who had gone back to dicing up onions. "Hey, nice to meet you Sofia," they chorused as they felt the tension jack up to tsunami levels in the room.

Sofia tried to smile at the newcomers. "Nice to meet y'all. Please let me know if you need anything," she managed before returning to the dining room to get ready for the breakfast crowd. It seemed she wouldn't be able to get JT to talk to her any time soon.

A sly smile grew on Cassie's lips. She looked at JT who still had his back to them. She could see the tension in his back and shoulders. "So, what's that all about?" she asked. JT didn't answer. "Hey, Mr. Nothing to See Here, I'm talking to you!" Cassie threw a biscuit at his head.

JT dropped his knife and spun around. "Hey! What the fuck?"

"That's what I was asking you," Cassie said cheekily as the brothers chuckled. "Or is that the problem? No fucking going on?"

A flush grew across JT's face. "It's nothing. We were seeing each other, now we're not. End of."

"Somehow I don't think it's end of," Cassie shot back. "Or you wouldn't look like a bull who wanted to charge me."

"We just broke up last night. It's new. It'll pass," JT answered. "I don't want

or need to discuss it. Let's get back to work."

Unfortunately, he knew it was only a matter of time before he'd have to face it. He knew from the way his chest continued to ache whenever he saw her and his gut churned, it wasn't really 'end of' with him and Sofia despite his words, but he didn't know how he could get past it.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Pushing Buttons

S OFIA WAS GETTING MORE and more frustrated. It had been a week and she still had not been able to catch JT alone to talk. At the café, the kitchen was full with his friends that had come to help him prep for Amarylis' wedding. He seemed to make it a point not to come anywhere near the back hall or the office there. She wasn't sure he was even taking bathroom breaks just so he could avoid her. She had tried driving by his house but discovered the Garza brothers were staying with him while they were in town. She'd given up trying to call or text him. He never answered. He seemed to be working very hard to avoid her. And doing a pretty damn good job of it.

One afternoon after the lunch rush, she was sitting in the office, chin in hand, trying to put together a contract, but failing miserably due to her inability to concentrate, when Maggie waddled in. That was truly the only word for it. Her belly had expanded at an exponential rate the last couple of weeks.

"I swear, these babies have got to go!" Maggie said in a huff, dropping into the seat in front of the desk. "I feel like I'm going to explode!"

Sofia gave her friend a wry smile. "There's not too long to go now," she

assured her. "A few more weeks and those munchkins will be here."

Maggie rubbed her belly and smiled. "I know but it feels like it's going to be forever. You've got to come over and see the nursery. Zane got the cribs and changing table put together this week and we've got all the painting done. It's so pretty!"

"I can't wait to see it," Sofia said. "Maybe I could come by in a little bit after work and check it out. Those babies are going to be so lucky."

"That would be great! Zane is going to be stuck at the clinic late tonight for some in-service," Maggie said. "You could come over and we can have dinner and oooh and ahhh over baby stuff."

Sofia grinned. She thought it might be the first true smile she'd been able to come up with since the blow up with JT. "Sounds like a plan. About six sound okay?"

"Perfect! Oh, is there anything you need my help with before I go?" she asked, motioning to the papers in front of Sofia.

Sofia hesitated. "No, I've got it. You get on home, and I'll see you in a bit."

Maggie started to leave but turned back. She cocked her head and looked at Sofia again. "Are you sure there's nothing you need my help with?" she asked again.

Sofia tried not to squirm under Maggie's scrutiny. "Nope," she said, dialing up the 'everything is perfectly fine' smile another notch. "Everything's good. I'll get done here and see you at the house."

"Oookaaay," Maggie said, not quite believing her but not able to put her finger on exactly what was going on. "See you then."

A burst of air left Sofia's lips once Maggie left. That woman was too perceptive by far. She wondered if she'd caught on that something was going on with her brother as well. Maggie had only been to Common Grounds a

couple of times in the last week and a half, so maybe she'd missed it. She did have enough on her own plate as it was with cooking two tiny humans. Maybe she'd get lucky, and Sofia could distract her over all the baby stuff tonight. Maybe...



Sofia stood on her tip toes and glanced into the small windows set in the kitchen doors before she left, hoping against hope that she might catch JT alone, but no, everyone was still here. She knew it was going to be a cocktail hour followed by a large sit-down dinner, but the wedding was in only a couple of days. Surely, they were almost done with the wedding prep. She stood for a few moments simply watching him move around the kitchen, completely in his element. It was like watching a professional dancer dancing. Perfection.

The brothers looked like they were having a good time, joking around with each other, but she noticed JT wasn't joining in. He looked tired. The black circles were back under his eyes and his expression was drawn. But, Santo Padre, did he not know any women that weren't drop dead gorgeous? This Cassie was tall and blonde and looked like she should be walking down a catwalk in New York, not chopping vegetables in a small-town restaurant kitchen. Sofia also noticed the woman frequently cutting glances toward JT before she moved toward him and put a hand on his shoulder. She hadn't told JT about Jesse at first. Could he have had a thing with this Valkyrie when they were in school?

Sofia's fists clenched at her sides involuntarily. If looks could kill, the tall blonde would be a dead woman. She wanted to push open the door and drag

her out of there, away from *her* man. As soon as the thought finished running through her mind, however, her shoulders slumped, and a trembling breath escaped her. But he wasn't hers anymore, was he? How could they have been so happy such a short while ago and have it all fall apart so quickly? Could he possibly be moving on already? Surely, he had to be as miserable as she was, didn't he? He didn't look happy, but maybe that was just because he was overworked and not resting enough? Her nerves were shot with the back and forth of her emotions. She determined to go have fun at Maggie's, immerse herself in cute toys and tiny booties and shove JT's stubbornness to the back of her mind.



"That's what she said," Ramon cracked at his brother, who howled with laughter.

"You guys will never grow up, will y'all? " Cassie remarked, rolling her eyes at the brothers and fighting the smile that was trying to escape from her lips.

They were exactly the same as they'd been in school, albeit even more muscular and handsome. Their haircuts and dress were the only way to tell them apart. Julio had an undercut with the top of his long hair gathered in a manbun at the back of his head. Ramon's was buzzed down almost to the scalp. He'd always been the twin more concerned with function over fashion while Julio was the one sporting the latest trends. She wondered if they even had matching tattoos and underwear under those black t-shirts and jeans they were wearing.

JT, now, he was a different kettle of fish. He'd always been good looking in an All-American boy kind of way but in the ten plus years since they'd hung around in culinary school, he'd filled out in all kinds of nice ways. She might prefer women in her bed, but she could appreciate a fine-looking man. He used to be the guy always up for a good time. Another party. Another girl. Now, he seemed intense and focused. She wondered if owning the business had done that to him or if it was the woman, Sofia, who had made him this way. The woman who he definitely *wasn't* having issues with according to him. Julio had told her he was hitting the Cuervo pretty hard in the evenings when they got back to the house. She worried for her friend and though she still hadn't been able to break through that stubborn shell of his and find out what exactly was going on, she knew a broken heart when she saw one.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw dark eyes and a ponytail peeking through small windows in the doors to the kitchen. Ah, the ex-girlfriend who he was not obsessing over and who was definitely not breaking his heart and causing those dark circles under his eyes. Time to stir the pot a little and see what floated up. Sometimes a little push was in order to get people past their stubbornness.

She walked over to JT and put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. She leaned in a little. "Hey, JT, is that Sofia girl going to be helping us at the wedding? She's just a waitress, right? It's probably not necessary?" Cassie asked, looking like she was whispering in his ear.

JT didn't raise his head from his work, but his shoulders inched up toward his ears and she could see his jaw tighten. "Yeah, one of us will need to go over it with her, and Sofia isn't a waitress," he answered, his voice sharp. "She's a manager and is a big part of the event planning side of the business. She won't have any problems learning it all quickly. Since Maggie won't be

able to be on her feet all day, Sofia will be helping to expedite and coordinate everything, including the food."

'One of us'. That was interesting. She massaged his shoulders a bit, moving them down to their normal position. "Um, shouldn't *you* do it? You're the boss and everything," Cassie said, trying to push his buttons a bit. She glanced over her shoulder. The eyes were gone from the window. *Damn!*

Cassie had hoped her little show would have had the woman coming in the kitchen to establish her *territory*, but apparently not. And now, she wasn't even getting a rise out of JT. She'd learned in the past that getting his temper to show itself was often the only way to find out what was really going on with him. He was very good at pushing all his feelings down and working himself almost to death to avoid pulling shit out and looking at it.

She, the twins, and JT had all bonded over pastry class, which all of them but Julio had loathed, and had been fast friends since. Being the 'girl' in the group, however, somehow gave her an in to get JT to open up about things that were bugging him while the brothers stayed in the 'bro zone'. Getting him angry made that shell crack faster than any talking or tequila ever could.

JT glanced over at her, his eyes narrowing but only said, "We'll see."

Cassie huffed and chewed at her lip in thought as she returned to her station. It's down that deep, huh? She met Ramon and Julio's eyes. They shrugged in unison. She'd just have to keep at it. Somehow, she needed to find out exactly what happened because, obviously, JT and that little firecracker needed to be together. Cassie could feel it.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Tres Leches and Baby Booties

SOFIA MARCHED FROM COMMON Grounds and out to her car. She got in, slamming the door fiercely behind her. She turned over the engine and waited for the heat to kick in as the afternoon had turned chilly. Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the steering wheel in frustration. She didn't know whether she wanted to cry or go start throwing pans across JT's precious kitchen. She took several deep breaths. It had taken all of her willpower not to march in that kitchen and rip the supermodel's hand's off of JT's shoulders. She was supposed to be in there cooking, not touching her man. Sofia sat fuming.

If he'd only listen to her for five minutes! Just five minutes and she could clear the whole thing up. That he believed the worst in her and wouldn't even hear her explanation hurt her worst of all. She'd thought he might even love her. But could you love someone then totally turn your back on them like he was doing to her? No matter how much she loved *him*, it didn't matter if he didn't reciprocate. And now there was this gorgeous Cassie woman sharing his kitchen. She straightened her shoulders and sniffed defiantly, wiping the tears from her traitorous eyes with the back of her hand. They were not over.

They couldn't be. She wasn't giving up yet, however, there was no use in ruminating over it now. She determined to go have fun at Maggie's, immerse herself in cute toys and tiny booties and shove JT's stubbornness to the back of her mind.

Maggie was too attuned to her friend's feelings, however, and she didn't want Maggie worrying about her. She needed a distraction. Glancing at her watch, she realized Betsy's Bakery would still be open. She'd take something sweet to Maggie's house. Since she'd been pregnant, she couldn't seem to get enough cake. That should help keep Maggie's attention off her swirling emotions. Then they could look at all the baby goodies and Sofia could forget about her problems with JT for a little while. Yes, that's what she'd do. Feeling slightly better to have a modicum of a plan in place, she put the car in gear and headed to the bakery.

Twenty minutes later, Sofia stood at Maggie and Zane's house with a pink bakery box in hand. Betsy had luckily had several pieces of tres leches cake left and Sofia knew that was one of Maggie's favorites as well as her own. She heard a 'Come in!' from inside when she rang the bell. She entered and found Maggie sitting in what she had deemed the parlor in a brown leather club chair with her feet on a matching ottoman. A pile of romance novels sat at her side on a dark brown, mission-style table. The chair and table sat in sharp contrast to the rest of the furnishings in the room which tended toward calming greys, whites and blues. Sofia stifled a giggle at the sight. If Maggie allowed the man to have his chair, as it was obviously Zane's, in her perfectly coordinated room, it must be true love.

Maggie smiled at the sight of Sofia and the pink box, resting a book called *Collide* with a hot, shirtless cowboy on the cover, on top of her belly. "You brought goodies!" she said, licking her lips. "What is it?"

Sofia waggled the box a little and grinned. "Tres leches cake. I got lucky and it wasn't all gone yet."

"Mmmmmm, you know I love her tres leches," Maggie said, putting down the book and starting to haul herself to her feet.

Sofia put the box down on a side table to help her friend up. As they clasped hands, Maggie looked up into her eyes and immediately frowned. As soon as she was upright, she asked, "What's wrong? And don't tell me nothing. Your eyes are red. You've been crying." She put her hands on her hips. "Has my idiot brother done something?"

"Let's have some cake, okay?" Sofia asked, shaking her head slowly. Best laid plans...She should have known she couldn't get anything past Maggie. "It's a long story."

"Shoot! I miss wine!" Maggie groused, as she wrapped her arm around Sofia's, and they walked to the kitchen for cake.



"So that's what happened." Sofia blew out a long breath and took a sip of the wine that Maggie had insisted Sofia have though she couldn't join her. The four pieces of cake had been demolished into nothing but crumbs on their plates. "And now he's got this, this Cassie in his kitchen all day long. She may even be staying at his house! I know Julio and Ramon are."

Maggie wiped her mouth and sat back. "What you're telling me then," she said slowly, "is that my brother is being a jealous jackass."

Sofia's eyebrows rose with the use of the word jackass. Maggie *never* swore. Maggie's lips twitched when she saw her friend's expression. "That is

not a swear word," she insisted. "It's an animal and completely descriptive in this case."

She took Sofia's hand across the table and squeezed. "I know he's crazy about you, Sof. He just has to get over his own stupid insecurities after the Shawna debacle. And I wouldn't worry about Cassie. I don't know the whole story there, but I know they were never together. He never talked about her other than as one of the gang. I'll talk to him."

"No! Please don't!" Sofia begged. "I don't want you in the middle. We'll work it out one way or the other. You concentrate on those two in there." She patted Maggie's belly affectionately.

Maggie pursed her lips. "Okay, I'll butt out, but only until after we get this wedding done. And, if it affects his work, all bets are off. Deal?"

Sofia shrugged. "Deal. Now, let's look at stupidly cute baby stuff! I can't wait to see what you've done to the nursery!"

"It's so stinking cute, I can barely stand it!" She laughed. "You should have seen Zane trying to follow the directions to get the cribs put together. The man is brilliant but putting together furniture is way out of his comfort zone."

As they walked slowly up the stairs to the nursery, Sofia snaked her arm around Maggie's and squeezed. No matter what happened with her and JT, she was happy that she had Maggie as a friend. She couldn't imagine having a better one.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Audacity

TWO DAYS BEFORE THE wedding, Sofia was in her office when Jenny tapped quietly on the doorframe. Sofia looked up and smiled, grateful for the distraction. The numbers were starting to swim in front of her eyes. She hadn't been sleeping well, and it was affecting her concentration. "Hey, Jenny. What can I do for you?"

Jenny chewed on her cheek before she spoke. "Um, that really big guy is back and asking for you?"

Sofia's eyebrows met in confusion. "Really big guy?"

"Yeah. He was here before. I don't think JT was too glad to see him that time," Jenny reported. "I wasn't eavesdropping, honest, but well, they're both pretty hard to miss. He said his name is Jesse."

Sofia groaned. *Dios mio!* She did not need this shit today. And she sure didn't want JT to see him there. She tried for calm. "Can you please show him back to the office, Jenny? I'd rather JT not notice him. They don't really get along."

"Um, sure, Sofia," Jenny agreed. "I'll bring him right back."

Sofia straightened her spine and took a cleansing breath. She couldn't

figure out what Jesse's deal was. She thought she'd made it perfectly clear that she had no interest in dating him or even being friends at this point after the way he had acted. She wished she could throw him out but if JT saw him, he was sure to get the wrong idea.

Her head popped up when Jenny stuck her head in again. "Here he is."

"Thanks, Jenny," Sofia said, standing up behind the desk.

Jesse maneuvered his bulk into the room and shut the door behind him. The room seemed to become half its size. Sofia scowled. She didn't like being closed in with him like this. "What do you need, Jesse? I thought I made it pretty clear I didn't want to see you anymore the other night."

"Now, baby, don't be that way," Jesse said smoothly. "I'm sorry I upset you. I really did come to apologize. It's not my fault your little man got his panties in a wad."

Her hands hit her hips. "Listen to me good, Jesse," she said, pointing at his chest. "*We are done. Finished. Do you understand?*" Her voice was low and hard. "I love JT and I'm going to do everything I can do to get him back. You need to leave me alone. I can't even look at you anymore."

Jesse smirked and took two steps around the desk, backing her up to the wall. "Ah, baby, you're always so sexy when that temper flares up." He placed one meaty palm against the wall next to her head and reached out to run a finger down her cheek. He was so close she could feel the heat radiating off his body. She flinched at his touch but wouldn't break eye contact with him.

"Get off me," Sofia growled. "Don't make me scream. Everyone will come running and know what you are. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

She pushed hard on his chest, but it was like trying to push a wall away from her. He leaned into her, pinning her to the wall, his body engulfing hers

from chest to knees. His lips grazed her jaw when she turned her head away from his attempted kiss. She pushed again and wriggled under him trying to get free enough to knee him in his precious cojones, but it was no use. He was too big. Panic built in her and her breathing came faster.

"Ah, Sofia, why don't you give in and admit it?" Jesse said, the breath from his words falling hot on her cheek. "I can feel your body trembling. Your heart is pounding. You want me. You know it's true, baby."

As his hand came up to fist in her hair, Sofia gathered a breath to scream when a knock came at the door.

"Sofia?" Jenny called.

"Come in," Sofia called back loudly, pushing at Jesse again. With deliberate slowness, he stood and turned from Sofia as Jenny opened the door. The girl's eyes widened as she took in the large man looming over Sofia and her boss' face flushed with what she interpreted as anger and fear. She'd never seen such an expression on her face before.

"What do you need, Jenny?" Sofia asked, squeezing past the man and coming to the door.

"Um, there's a vendor that needs to talk to you. There's a problem with, um, an invoice or count or something?" Jenny stammered.

"Thanks, Jenny. Tell him I'll be right out. Thanks for letting me know." She gave her young waitress a pointed look and nodded.

When Jenny left, Sofia placed a hand on the open door. "You need to leave. Now," she told Jesse, her voice shaking with anger. "If you ever come back here, I'll call the law and have you trespassed. The same for my house. You're not welcome anymore, Jesse."

Jesse calmly ran a hand over his hair and straightened an imagined wrinkle from his dress shirt. A slow smile grew across his face as he regarded her.

"Okay, bebé. I'll leave. I can see I've caught you at a bad time." He stopped in the doorway and ran a finger slowly down her arm. Her skin was instantly covered in gooseflesh. "You should really think about getting a new job. This one makes you so tense."

Her mouth opened and closed like a fish at his audacity, but before she could respond, he was back down the hall. A few moments later she heard the tinkling of the bell over the front door. She let herself fall into one of the chairs in front of her desk, all the bravado rushing out of her. She'd tried hard not to show it in front of Jesse, but he'd scared her. Badly. What had happened to him? Who had he become? He'd always been cocky but now he was...predatory. She didn't want to think about what might have happened if Jenny hadn't interrupted. *Jenny! The vendor! Mierda!* Taking a final steadying breath, she got up to go deal with whatever normal crisis was happening.

Chapter Thirty-Six

A Green Sauce

THE DAY OF THE wedding finally arrived. All hands were on deck early that morning to start packing up the vehicles to take to the venue. JT couldn't help but notice Sofia's sluggishness and pallor, nothing like her normal self. Despite himself, he had not been able to give up trying to catch glances of her throughout the day as she worked, even after what she had done to him. His eyes were inexorably drawn to her whenever she was close. He'd never seen her like this. His brows knit together in worry. He sidled up to his sister where she sat at the breakfast bar supervising everyone.

"Is something wrong with Sofia? Is she sick?" he asked her.

Maggie gave him a narrowed look. "I would think you'd know better than me."

Well, fuck. She knew about the break up. JT scrubbed his hands down his face. "Fine, you know about us. But really, she looks bad. It can't just be that."

"You're right," Maggie conceded, softening a bit toward her brother with his concern. "She was just at the house a couple of days ago. She was upset about you but looked fine. I'm not sure what's happened." She poked him in

the chest. "You need to get over yourself and talk to her, brother mine. I mean it. You don't have the whole picture."

JT huffed out a frustrated breath. "Yeah, I know. After we get through today, I'll talk to her," JT conceded. He locked eyes with hers. "You, however, need to stay out of it."

Maggie scowled at him and crossed her arms over her chest. "I mean it, Mags. And, today, you sit and supervise. You shouldn't even be going. Dr. McIntyre is going to have a fit when she finds out."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Yes, Warden. Don't worry. Zane will be there monitoring me," she said on an exasperated sigh. "He'd only let me go if he goes with us to make sure I don't overdo it. Really, y'all treat me like a child. It's embarrassing and annoying."

JT kissed the top of her head. "We just know you too well. I'm glad he's going to be there," he admitted. "Y'all watch out for Sofia today, okay? I'm going to be stuck back in the kitchen all day and something is off."

"Of course," Maggie replied, making a shooing motion with her hands. "Now get back to work. We need to be on the road in fifteen minutes."



Sofia chose to drive herself to the venue. She couldn't bear being in anyone's company. If she rode with Maggie and Zane, she knew she'd be questioned unceasingly, and she refused to allow Maggie to worry about her. She needed to keep her blood pressure down for the babies. And she couldn't face riding with JT and the kitchen crew. Their happy faces and good-natured ribbing would be like salt in her wounds knowing she didn't belong in their group.

She knew she looked haggard. Since the confrontation in her office, Jesse had been calling and texting her non-stop, alternating between compliments and begging to see her, and calling her names, and sending veiled threats. She'd blocked his number, but he'd simply started contacting her from others. He was obsessed, and she was scared. She hadn't physically seen him anywhere, but she made sure her doors and windows were locked and was always hyper aware of her surroundings. Even her car doors remained locked at all times. The stress was about to eat her alive.

As she drove up and parked near the back door to the venue kitchen, she was glad to see lots of people around. It was controlled chaos for an event this size and she was happy to dive in and try to forget her troubles for a while. She unloaded the few things she had brought in her car then went to find Maggie so they could begin setting up tables. An inadvertent giggle escaped her lips when she found her. Zane had her sitting in a wing backed chair with an ottoman under her feet in the middle of the dining space. She had no idea where he had gotten it, but it looked like nothing less than Maggie sitting on her throne directing her minions. She heard Maggie arguing as she walked up to them.

"I cannot sit in this ridiculous chair all day," Maggie exclaimed, while Zane hovered over her trying to put pillows behind her back. "I have to organize everyone."

Zane simply handed her an electronic device and flashed the smile he used on recalcitrant patients. Furrows appeared on Maggie's brow as she recognized it. "You can see everything from here and with this," he said, motioning to the headset he'd just handed his annoyed wife, "You can coordinate with Sofia and JT." He turned his smile on Sofia and handed her a matching headset before turning back to Maggie. "And, my darling," he

continued, "if you refuse to sit in this chair and coordinate from here, I will simply pick you and the girls up and take you home." He flashed her his brilliant smile with his threat and rubbed her belly affectionately.

"Fine. I'll sit in the stupid chair," Maggie huffed at him, rolling her eyes. He knew she could never resist that smile. "Sofia, let's make sure these silly things work. Mama loved them when she catered big parties, but I've never used them."

They spent a couple of minutes making sure the headsets were working and going over the seating plans before Sofia hopped up to find Jenny and the rest of their staff for the day to get started dressing the tables. She reviewed the flower placements with the florist and made sure everyone understood the place setting and seating arrangements before confirming the gift table was where it was supposed to be. Sofia glanced at her watch. Two hours to go. She knew she needed to go check with the kitchen and make sure everything was running on time, but she was putting it off. As soon as the thought went through her head, her headset squawked, and she jumped.

"Hey, Sofia. Can you go check on the kitchen? I've been trying to get JT but he's either not got his headset on or has it turned off," Maggie said. Sofia could hear the exasperation in her voice. "I want to make sure they are going to be ready to go with the first of the hors d'oeuvres as soon as the people start arriving."

Sofia tried to put all the positivity in her voice she could manage. "Sure thing. I'll go right now. The tables should be completed in the next few minutes." She turned to smile at Maggie and give her a little wave where she sat on her 'throne' across the room. *C'mon, Sofia. You can do this.*

She squared her shoulders as she pushed through the kitchen doors and ran straight into Julio carrying a large pan with something very green in it. The

fragrant sauce splashed Sofia all down her white Common Grounds polo shirt and pants.

"Qué diablos?" Sofia exclaimed, wiping at the warm green sauce on her shirt.

"Ah, shit, Sofia, I'm sorry!" Julio blurted. He quickly placed the pan on a counter and started swiping at her with a kitchen towel. As the green goo was all over her chest, Sofia took the towel from him and tried to wipe the mess off herself.

"It's okay," she assured him as she wiped. "I should have come in more carefully. I know how crazy the kitchen gets at events." She brought a finger to her lips to taste some of the sauce. "Basil?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah," Julio confirmed. "Enchiladas with basil cream sauce. They're one of the vegetarian options along with portobello 'steaks'."

Sofia licked her finger again. "It's really good, anyway. Doesn't do anything for my shirt though."

Julio looked pained. She gave him a smile and patted his shoulder. "It's okay, really. I have a change of clothes. Maggie insists we always bring extras for just such an accident."

As she dropped her hand from Julio's shoulder, she looked up to find JT scrutinizing her from across the kitchen. He looked like he had frozen mid-chop on something on the board in front of him. She tried to read his expression but wasn't sure what to make of it.

Since she had his attention at the moment, she cleared her throat and addressed him, trying desperately to make her voice sound confident. She pointed to her own head and then to JT's noting the lack of headset. "You don't have your headset on. Maggie's been trying to reach you to make sure

everything is going to be ready to go out as soon as the first guests start arriving."

JT blinked then seemed to realize he needed to answer her. "I can't work in that stupid thing. Tell my sister if I think something is running behind, I'll send someone to let her know," he grumbled to her. "Otherwise, she should assume I can do my job."

Their eyes stayed locked on each other's for a long beat before JT's ran up and down the length of her. Sofia swallowed. She'd really missed him looking at her like that, then she remembered she was covered in green sauce. That was probably what he was looking at. She suppressed a disappointed sigh. "Okay then, I'll let her know everything is running to plan," Sofia offered. "I'm going to go change."

JT watched her swing around and push back through the doors. No one should be able to make uniform pants look so good. Fingers snapped in front of his face. "You're going to lop off a finger if you don't watch what you're doing," Cassie admonished him and he realized he was still doing the chiffonade of cilantro without paying attention. He stopped abruptly.

"Well, shit! Thanks, Cassie. Don't know what I was thinking," JT said, chagrined.

Cassie shot him a grin. "Oh, I can guess what you were thinking. When are you going to talk to the woman? You're obviously miserable without her."

JT lay down his knife and rubbed his hands over his face. He huffed out a breath. "Yeah, I know. Let me get through today, alright?"

"Sure thing, boss, whatever you say," Cassie responded, placing a tray of dumplings in the warming rack.

JT shook his head, picked up his knife and started again. His eyes were paying attention to his task this time, but his thoughts were all about the

conversation he needed to have with Sofia.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

A Posh Nightmare

SOFIA PRESENTED HERSELF IN front of Maggie who gasped. "Goodness gracious! What happened to you?"

"I lost a fight with a pan of enchiladas with basil and cream sauce," Sofia deadpanned. Maggie laughed. "On a positive note," Sofia continued, "the sauce is really yummy!"

"Oh, dear," Maggie snickered. "You have your extra clothes, right?"

"Of course," Sofia confirmed. "I was trained by the best."

Maggie smiled at the compliment. "Well, you have plenty of time to change. Everything is under control at the moment." She paused. "My brother has everything handled in the kitchen?"

Sofia nodded. "Yep, they are on schedule."

"Good then. The wedding party won't be here for another couple of hours though somehow guests always seem to arrive before they were told to be at the party. I've never understood that," she offered contemplatively.

"The Cruzes offered Mama and Selena a room at the Park Hotel in their block of rooms since Selena is a bridesmaid," Sofia offered. "I'll just pop over there and make sure Mama is doing okay and change. I'll be back in a jiff."

Maggie fluttered a hand. "Take your time. Tell your Mama I said 'hey'."

"I will. She's.." Sofia stopped as she looked towards the doors. "...here."

Sofia moved toward her mother who was standing in the doorway looking at all the goings on. Her brow crinkled in confusion. "Mamá, qué haces aquí? ¿Está todo bien?" (*Mama, what are you doing here? Is everything okay?*)

"Sí, Sí. No te preocupes, hija," Mrs. Benevides assured her. ("Yes, yes, don't worry, little one.") "Your JT wanted me to taste some things. He says I'm the expert. Tiene razón, claro." (*He's right, of course.*)" Sofia's mother looked very pleased with herself. "Ahora ¿Dónde está y por qué estás tan sucia?" (*Now, where is he and why are you so dirty?*)

Sofia squirmed under her mother's scrutiny. Of course, she would show up the minute Sofia looked a mess. "Julio accidentally spilled some enchilada sauce on me. I was about to leave for your room to change," Sofia informed her mother. "I'll take you back to the kitchen if I can get your room key so I can go over there and put on my other clothes."

"Bien, bien," Mrs. Benevides answered, handing Sofia a key card from her purse. ("Fine, fine,")

Sofia led her to the kitchen, and, this time, carefully peeked her head through the doorway. "Is it safe to come in?" she called.

Everyone seemed to be across the room. "Sure, come on in, Sofia," Cassie called. "Julio promises not to douse you with sauce this time."

"Mierda! I said I was sorry," Julio groused. "You fuck..." His voice cut off abruptly as Sofia opened the door wider and her mother walked into the kitchen.

"Uh, sorry, ma'am," Julio said, apologizing for his language.

Mrs. Benevides gave him a once over then nodded. JT rubbed his forearm over his mouth, trying to hide his smile. Let the rest of them get a taste of

Sofia's intimidating mother. She was a small woman but that didn't make her any less fierce.

JT walked over to her. "Thanks for coming, Mrs. Benevides. I really appreciate it."

The woman actually gave JT a full-on smile and patted him affectionately on his big bicep. "No hay problema. Ahora, what do you want me to taste?"

Sofia had to give JT a smile over her mother's head. He couldn't know how happy this must be making her mama. Since she, Selena and Tomas had left the house, she knew her mother struggled to feel needed and useful. She tried to remember that when she was blowing up her phone at all hours driving her insane.

"Okay, Mamá, I'll see you in a little while." Mrs. Benevides waved at her absently, her mouth already around a spoon she had dipped into a pot. Sofia laughed and headed for the hotel.



Sofia had never been in the Park Hotel, a boutique hotel right across the street from the venue. She thought again how smart Stephanie had been in how she had set up the venue and picked the location. She tried to hold her hanging bag with her change of clothes in front of her chest to hide the stains. The Park was extremely posh, especially for a smaller city like Tyler. She hoped no one tried to throw her out before she could get to her mother's room to change.

She got lucky and rode the elevator to the fourth floor alone. She was walking down the thickly carpeted hallway trying to figure out which way the room numbers went when she felt, rather than heard, a presence behind her.

The tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She picked up her pace trying not to appear panicked. As she reached her mother's door, a weighty hand landed on her shoulder. Sofia jumped and spun, dropping her clothes and the key card she had ready to use in her hand.

"Jesse! You scared me to death!" Sofia exclaimed. She clutched her chest where her heart felt like it was going to pound right through her ribs. She tried to compose herself and bent over to pick up everything she had dropped. "What are you doing here? Aren't you in the wedding?"

"I got replaced at the last minute when some college buddy of Gage's ended up being able to come," Jesse explained. "I snuck out after the vows." He rolled his eyes and gave her a conspiratorial grin. "You know how long a Catholic ceremony is."

"Well, I don't have time to chat," Sofia said tightly, trying to gain a little personal space. She really wanted to get away from him but didn't want to make him angry after the way he'd been acting. "I have to change and get back to the venue. So, if you'll excuse me."

Sofia turned and pushed the card into the electronic lock. As soon as the little green light appeared, Sofia felt Jesse's hands on her shoulders as he shoved her inside. She tripped on the bottom of her garment bag and nearly fell with the force of his push. She caught herself on the edge of the dresser, her clothes falling to the floor. As she tried to right herself and turn, Jesse closed the insignificant space between them. He dragged her up tightly against his body. She could feel his arousal hard against her belly.

"Stop it, Jesse!" she protested loudly, beating her hands against her chest. "You have to stop! This is wrong!"

He didn't relax his grip on her but leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Ah, Sofia, baby, if you'd relax a minute, you'd remember how good we were

together. I remember very well. There's been no one like you since. I know we can be great again. You don't have to pretend anymore. It's just us."

Her breaths came hard and short. Her eyes flew around the room looking for something that would help her as his lips nibbled along her neck. Nothing. She fought the tears that threatened to leak from her eyes in her panic. "Please, Jesse. Don't do this. If you let me go, I won't say anything to anybody. I swear," she promised. Her voice sounded strained and breathy to her ears.

When she felt his lips curve into a smile against her skin, she knew there was no way he was going to let her go. He kissed her one more time, then brought a hand up to softly tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. She tried to wiggle out of his grasp but even using one arm, he was too strong for her to overcome.

"Of course, you won't say anything." His look turned to one you would give a child that you were disappointed in for making bad choices. "I was afraid this would take more time," he said with a sigh. "But I planned for that. Here's what is going to happen, mi amor. We're going down the hall to my room and I'm going to remind you how much you loved me. If you'll give it a chance, I know it won't take long for all those memories to come flooding back."

Sofia swallowed hard. "You can't mean this, Jesse. People will notice I'm being taken against my will. You can't get away with kidnapping me. Think about what you're doing."

"No one will notice because you are going to go with me willingly," Jesse told her, a hard glint coming into his black eyes. "If you don't, I have the key to this room, don't I? You wouldn't want anything to happen to your precious Mamá and your princess of a sister, would you?"

Sofia gasped at the threat. He had truly gone insane. Tears sprung to her eyes.

"So, you're going to play nice, aren't you, Sofia?" Jesse threatened, the cajoling tone completely gone from his voice now.

She nodded and he grabbed her arm to drag her toward the door. She saw him pocket the room card as he moved his arm to surround her shoulders and smiled as he led her down the hallway, the plush carpet masking their footsteps.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Flashback

MAGGIE STRETCHED AND RUBBED her back, exceedingly happy to finally be allowed out of her chair to go take a final look at everything before guests started arriving. They also needed to move her throne, as everyone was calling it, from the middle of the room now that it was almost time for the party to start.

"No more than twenty minutes, sweetheart," Zane reminded her, giving her a kiss then kissing the top of her belly. "I will come find you and drag you home if you take longer."

"Yes, dear," she responded sarcastically, rolling her eyes at her overprotective husband. If these babies didn't come soon, she was going to lose her mind with all the coddling.

He ignored her grouchiness and gave her another kiss. "Stephanie said I could use her office for a few minutes so I'm going to go return a few calls while you're checking things out," he told her. "And no lifting anything."

"Yes, yes," she said, making shooing motions toward him with her hands. "Go do doctory stuff and let me be for a few minutes. I promise to be good."

Zane gave her a long look and pointed to his watch before leaving her to

make her rounds. Maggie stifled another eye roll. At this rate, she was going to be as good as Dani at them and her best friend was an Olympic level eye roller. As she walked around the venue, she smiled broadly, pleased at how everything looked. Sofia was really coming into her own. Maggie had to admit she'd handled most of this on her own with only minor reminders. She suddenly realized she hadn't seen Sofia since she'd left to change her clothes and that had been over an hour ago.

She pressed a button on her headset. "Sofia, where are you, hon?" No response. This is why Maggie hated these things – half the time they didn't work, or people turned them off accidentally. She pulled her cell from her pocket and dialed Sofia's number. Straight to voicemail. That was so odd. Maybe her battery had died. She continued her tour, asking as she went if anyone had seen Sofia. The answers were always in the negative. No one had seen her since she left to get out of her stained clothes.

Making it to the kitchen, Maggie carefully pushed open the swinging doors not wanting a repeat of Sofia's fate with the basil sauce. Her brother and the other chefs looked like they were taking a break, leaning against the counters, drinking water, and laughing.

"You look like you have everything under control," Maggie said to her brother. When he glanced over to her, he looked tired, but in a good way. A way that said he had been working hard and was satisfied with that work. It was a look that made her heart happy to see.

JT swiped a cool bottle of water across his forehead, and a smile lit his face. "Yep, everything's good. Just went over the menu with the wait staff so all we have to do is wait for the first partygoers to arrive."

"Excellent." Maggie gave an appreciative sniff. "Everything smells wonderful. Save us some samples," she said, patting her belly to include the

twins.

"I'll make sure we make plates for you, Sofia, and Jenny," Cassie agreed when JT just rolled his eyes at her.

"Thank you, Cassie," Maggie intoned in an excessively polite voice while giving her brother a side-eye. "By the way, has anyone seen Sofia since she went to change clothes?"

Tension immediately filled JT's body. "What do you mean? She's not back yet?"

"I haven't seen her, and she's not answering on her headset or picking up her phone," Maggie confirmed. "I've made a tour of the whole place, and no one has seen her."

Cassie glanced at the clock on the back wall. "Mrs. B left about thirty minutes ago. If Sofia went to her room to change, maybe she got caught up with her or something."

A deep frown pulled down JT's mouth. He knew Sofia would never have taken more time than absolutely necessary to change and get back so close to service. His gut started rolling with a feeling that was all too familiar. He flashed back to Zane's crazed expression when they couldn't find Maggie at their friend's rehearsal dinner last year. And his own panic. And to how they had found his sister. In a walk-in cooler. Not breathing.

His chest suddenly got tight, and he had to concentrate on each breath. "Jefe, you okay?" Julio asked, grabbing JT's arm when he saw all the color bleed from his face.

"No, we need to find her. Now!" JT blurted, the alarm evident in his voice.

"Now, don't panic," Maggie said soothingly. She placed a hand on his chest to stop him from running out. "Let's think. There must be a logical explanation."

JT looked at her, his eyes wild. "That's exactly what everyone was saying about you, Maggie, when we couldn't find you at the party after..." The words died on his lips. He drew in a large breath to clear the tremor from his voice before continuing. "I let you down because I didn't act quickly enough. I won't fail Sofia."

He removed her hand from him and squeezed it before letting go and turning to his crew. "Cassie, stay here and expedite if I'm not back by the time the hors d'oeuvres need to go out. Guys, come with me."

As they moved as one unit toward the doors, Maggie yelled, "Joshua Trent! You are not going without me!"

JT skidded to a stop and returned to his sister. "Maggie, you have to stay here and stay safe. We have no idea what's going on. I won't have you being placed in any danger. Think of the babies."

A heavy sigh escaped her. She hated it when he was right. "Okay, but take this. Maybe she's out of range and you can reach her at some point," she said, removing her headset and handing it to her brother. "It's already on the right channel. And have someone call me as soon as you find her."

"I will. I promise," JT said, bending to kiss her head before he ran through the swinging kitchen doors and headed for the hotel. He had never been a religious man but found himself praying with every step that Sofia was alright. She had to be. His heart wouldn't be able to stand the blow if she wasn't.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Rage and Rescue

THEY HIT THE HOTEL doors at a dead run and skidded to a stop on the marble floors of the lobby. JT scanned the area with frenzied eyes and found Mrs. Benevides at a back corner desk, her hands gesticulating wildly to a young woman in a Park Hotel uniform. He pointed her out to Julio and Ramon, and they made their way to the woman who was clearly upset.

"I'm telling you something is wrong!" Sofia's mom was telling the girl, shaking a garment bag in her face. "Dios mio! Something is wrong!"

"I'm very sorry, ma'am," the girl said, her voice shaky. "I don't understand. Is it a guest? Are they missing clothes?"

"¿Qué pasa, Sra. B? (*What's wrong, Mrs. B?*)" Julio asked, coming to stand between the girl and the distraught woman.

A look of relief spread across Sofia's mother's face when she saw JT and the brothers. "Aye, Julio! Las buenas ropas de mi Sofía estaba en el suelo y la puerta de mi habitación estaba abierta cuando llegué allí. ¡No puedo encontrarla en ninguna parte!(My Sofia's good clothes were on the floor and the door to my room was open when I got there. I can't find her anywhere!)"

Julio translated for JT and the hotel employee. JT ran his hands through his

hair in agitation. "Don't worry, Mrs. Benevides. We're going to find her." He started to ask a question when he suddenly heard a soft voice in his ear. He froze. It was coming from the headset he had slipped on at his sister's request. The voice was muffled but he could tell it was Sofia.

"Shhhh! It's her!" he told the group, motioning to his headset. He tried to turn the volume up, but the voice didn't get any louder. Everyone stood silent as he listened.

"Jesse, you don't want to do this. Please!" Sofia pleaded.

"I said strip, baby," Jesse commanded before his voice took on a softer but more menacing tone. "Or do you want me to do it for you?"

JT heard a sob escape Sofia's lips and he thought his knees would buckle right then and there. He remained standing by sheer force of will. He turned to Sofia's mother. "Do you have any idea where Jesse's room is?"

Mrs. Benevides looked confused but then realization seemed to dawn in her eyes. English seemed to have escaped her in her panic, so Julio took precious seconds to translate her answer to the assembled crowd. "She says 'he bragged about paying extra so he could have a suite. He always wants the best of everything. Does he have her? Does he have my Sofia?'"

JT nodded. "It sounds like it. I can hear them in the headset. Sofia must have found a way to turn it on without him knowing." He turned on the wide-eyed desk clerk. "Jesse Connors, what room?" he demanded.

"I, I can't give out guest's room numbers without their permission, sir. Maybe I should get my manager," she stuttered.

"You do that and call the police as well, but first give me the goddamn room number! There's a woman in danger! I'm listening to them right now!" JT loomed over her and all but screamed in the girl's face.

She clicked keys frantically on her computer keyboard. "325 – The

Presidential Suite."

The men turned to run to the elevator. "I meant it about the police," he called over his shoulder. "Call them now!"

The girl nodded and picked up the phone as Julio, Ramon, and JT piled into the elevator headed for the third floor.



The short elevator ride only gave them enough time to put together a basic plan. "I want to take him by surprise. I'll kick the door and get Jesse. You two grab Sofia and get her out of there." He gave them a pointed look. "I don't want her to see what I'm going to do to that motherfucking mountain."

"You got it, Jefe," Julio said as the brothers nodded in unison, their expressions hard and serious.

JT thought he was going to jump out of his skin before the elevator finally dinged on the third floor. He'd have taken the time to find the stairs if he'd known this hotel had the slowest elevator on the planet. He heard voices in his ear again as they spilled out onto the thickly carpeted hallway. They were louder than they had been in the lobby.

"Mmmm hmmm," the deep voice hummed. "How is it possible you're even more perfect now?"

"Jesse, please..."

"Uh, uh. I said no more whining. Now turn for me like a good girl."

There was a long pause. JT ground his molars together so hard he was sure they would shatter. The man was a disgusting waste of oxygen, and he couldn't wait to take the asshole down. Jesse would pay for treating his Sofia like this.

A low rumble of a laugh vibrated in his ear. "Ahhh! Look at that! Tweety is still as sweet as ever and so is that ass."

JT's nostrils flared as he tried to gather air into his lungs and not scream in rage. If he was seeing the tattoo, he had Sofia at least partially naked. The motherfucker was so going to hurt bad, and soon.

The men finally came upon the door to the suite and listened. JT was going to count down the break in but then heard an animalistic shriek and a crash from inside. "Sofia!" he shouted as he kicked the door as hard as he could right above the lock.

As JT and the Garza brothers invaded the room, Jesse turned in surprise. His face was contorted with rage, and blood was streaming through his fingers where he held a hand to his head. All JT saw was red as he threw his shoulder into the mountain's middle. They fell into a large, round table which collapsed under them with a crash of splintered wood. JT's fists flew to Jesse's face as he straddled his chest. Rage like he'd never felt consumed him as he pounded the bigger man.

"JT!" Sofia screamed in fear as Julio swept her up in his arms and carried her to avoid her stepping on the broken glass and thorny rose stems littering the floor around her from the crystal vase she had used to hit Jesse with.

"Get her out!" JT hollered to the brothers as he drew his fist back for another punch.

Just as they had gotten Sofia into the hallway and Ramon had whipped off his t-shirt to cover her, four policemen came running down the hallway. "Freeze! Hands in the air!"

All three complied, but Sofia cried out, "He's in there! The man who took me is in there! These are friends!"

Two of the officers grabbed Julio and Ramon and efficiently placed them

in cuffs while the other two carefully entered the suite with guns drawn. Sofia tried to get to the door. She couldn't let them mistake JT for the guy they were looking for, but she was blocked by another officer. "You don't understand," she screamed at them, tears streaking her face. "It's the guy in the suit. The one in the suit! He's the bad guy. Don't hurt JT!"

JT took a second to get one more punch in after he heard loud voices yelling "Freeze!" behind him before raising his hands high. "This is the asshole who kidnapped her," he said to the officer that pulled him off of Jesse's body, now lying limp on the floor.

"Just hold on, and do what you're told," the officer answered as he placed JT's arms behind his back and cuffed him.

"We have an 11-47," the other officer said into the radio mounted on his shoulder. "Send a bus." A squawking voice responded. The officer looked toward the rest of the crowd in the hallway. "Anyone else injured?" Everyone shook their heads. "Negative. Just one." He turned back to Jesse lying on the floor and began to pat the unconscious man down as best he could.

Sofia launched herself at JT as the officer walked him into the hallway. Her arms locked around his neck before another officer tried to pry her off. "Now, come over here, miss. We need a statement."

JT's eyes flashed and roamed up and down her form searching for injuries. Ramon's shirt covered her down to her knees, though. "Baby, did he hurt you anywhere? Are you okay?" he called as they dragged her away from him.

"I'm fine," she called back sniffing. "Are you okay?" She struggled in the officer's grasp. "Let him go! He saved me!" she yelled at the other policeman marching JT down the hall.

"I'm fine, darlin'. We'll get it all sorted here in a minute. Don't worry," he called over his shoulder as he, Ramon, and Julio were escorted down the hall

in the opposite direction.

Chapter Forty

Redeemed

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, SOFIA sat in the police department's 'family waiting room', her head resting in her mother's lap. The walls were a sickening light green, and the couches looked like they had been rescued from an abandoned house, but at least she wasn't in one of the cramped interrogation rooms anymore. They'd finally let Mamá see her and bring her clothes a little while ago. Now they sat waiting. She rubbed her eyes and forehead trying to will away the headache she'd been fighting. She thought they believed her story about what had happened with Jesse, but they still wouldn't tell her anything about JT and the Garza brothers. She needed to see them and know they were okay after rescuing her. *Dios mio!* She'd had to be rescued from someone she'd thought she'd loved at one time. Jesse treating her like he did was still surreal to her. Suddenly, there was a commotion outside the door.

"I'm not waiting any longer. You are going to let us see her. She's not a criminal, for heaven's sake! I'm going to report you to the papers! She's the victim, and I'm taking her home," Maggie's voice held her most imperious tone. Sofia felt a small grin creep across her lips despite herself. These

officers didn't have any idea of what wrath they were going to be facing if they didn't obey her when she used that tone.

"Now, sweetheart, let's not threaten the officers," Zane's cool voice came behind Maggie's. "We're friends of Miss Benevides," he told the officers. "Surely, you are done questioning her for the day. We'd really like to get her back to Gladewater. She's been through quite the ordeal."

Sofia heard a bit of mumbling, and suddenly the door banged open. Maggie came flying across the room toward her. "Sofia!" she cried, engulfing the woman in a hug as she sat up. "Oh, my goodness! I've been worried sick about you!" She held her at arms' length and looked at her with concern. "Are you okay? What can I get you?"

"I'm fine, honestly," she assured her friend. "Mamá's been here. I'm just really tired. And worried about JT. Have you heard anything?"

Maggie shot a death glare at the officer who was standing in the doorway. "Not much other than they are supposed to be released shortly. But with these people, I have no idea what their definition of 'shortly' might be. We've been here for hours!"

"That's all they would tell us, too," Mrs. Benevides said, standing to stretch now that Sofia was up. "I hope those boys are alright. There's no reason to keep them."

Zane came up and gave the woman a side hug. "We're awfully glad you're okay," he said to Sofia. "I heard JT put Jesse in the hospital."

Mrs. Benevides crossed her arms tightly over her chest. "It's less than he deserves," she said. "I don't want to think about what he would have done to my Sofia if JT, Julio, and Ramon hadn't shown up." She quickly made the sign of the cross. "I can't believe I was so wrong about him for all these years."

Sofia shuddered. "I didn't have any idea he could do something like that either, Mamá. I don't think anyone did."

Maggie pulled her close again. "You don't even think about it, honey. It's all over and you're safe. I doubt seriously you'll ever have to worry about that man again."

As they settled on one of the ugly couches, Maggie tried to distract her with the happenings at the wedding dinner which had gone off without a hitch despite Cassie being the only one left in the kitchen and Maggie worrying herself to death about what was happening with Sofia and JT. She'd even got a little laugh out of her telling her about the four-year-old flower girl attacking the three-year-old ring bearer when he tried to give her a kiss.

"And no one had any idea anything was wrong," Maggie assured her. "That is, until the police came to tell the Connors and Cruzes about Jesse being arrested and being taken to the hospital."

"Poor Amarylis," Sofia said, shaking her head. "At least they got through the wedding and part of the dinner. I feel bad for the family. They are such nice people and were always so good to me. I can't imagine what they're going through now, knowing their golden boy could do something like this."

"Sometimes there are just bad seeds," Maggie told her. "You can do everything right and still have a child turn out wrong."

Maggie's forehead creased and she frowned at her own pronouncement. Zane sat beside her, put an arm around her shoulder and caressed her belly. "But most of the time, love and care turns out lovely humans," he assured her and kissed her temple.

The sight of them made Sofia's heart clench. She needed to know what was going on with JT more than ever. They'd told Maggie and Zane they were releasing him but what was taking so damn long? She got up to pace again

when she heard voices in the hallway. The door was opened by an older man in a suit she didn't recognize but right behind him were JT, Julio, Ramon, and her mother.

Her hands flew to her mouth as JT crossed the distance between them in two large strides. He crushed her to his chest and lifted her off the ground before she could say a word. She wrapped her hands around his neck and held on tight. They held each other for what could have been seconds or hours, Sofia didn't know or care, when suddenly the murmuring in her ear finally coalesced into words. "I'm sorry, baby. So sorry. Thank God you're alright. You're safe."

"What are you sorry for? You saved me," Sofia whispered in his ear, placing her forehead to his. "If you hadn't found me, I don't want to think about what might have happened."

"I should have believed you. I shouldn't have acted like such an ass. He never should have thought he stood a chance," JT said, his face a mask of regret.

"No, no, no," Sofia said taking his face in her hands. "This was not your fault. There was something wrong with him. He was crazy in the end. You saved me," she whispered again. "You saved me."

He took her in his arms again and rocked her, holding her tight against his body. He didn't know how he was ever going to let her get more than a few inches away from him again. He needed to get her alone and prove to her how much he loved her. He needed...His thoughts were interrupted by small hands patting his shoulder. Mrs. Benevides had tears in her eyes as he turned his attention to the small woman.

"JT, I want to apologize. I was wrong for not wanting Sofia to date you. You are a good boy," she pronounced, tears in her eyes. "You saved my

Sofia." She took a shuddering breath and raised a hand to cup JT's cheek. "Estoy muy, muy agradecido. Ahora eres familia."

"She says she's grateful, man, and that you're family now," Ramon said softly behind him, translating her final words.

She thought she saw a sheen of tears in JT's eyes when he responded. "I'm honored, and I'm going to do everything in my power to keep her safe and happy from now on, Mrs. Benevides. I promise." Sofia beamed at her mother's declarations. Finally, she understood what Sofia had known all along. She was lucky to have found such a fine man. Their relationship may have started out as fake, but now it was something very, very real.

"Let's go home," JT said, keeping Sofia tucked tightly into his side. She wrapped her arms around him and smiled. "Yes, please."

Chapter Forty-One

Epilogue

AFTER THEY HAD SHARED a dinner of leftover wedding food in JT's kitchen, Sofia climbed into his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. She kissed him sweetly.

"I've missed you so much," she confessed. "When Jesse took me, I was afraid I'd never get to tell you how much I loved you, again."

"Aw, baby, you can't even imagine how awful these last few weeks have been without you," JT admitted. "I could have lost you because of my stubborn damn pride. I'm not ever letting you doubt how I feel about you again. And I'm not wasting another second with you."

"C'mon, I need to take care of you," he said and swept her up in his arms. She squealed happily as he carried her into the bathroom and sat her down on the vanity stool.

As the water heated and filled the tub that he'd thought was ridiculously large when Maggie had it installed, JT went to his nightstand drawer and pulled out the small jewelry case he had been hiding there. He'd technically missed their anniversary but felt like this was the perfect time to give her the

gift he had gotten for her. He held it behind his back as he returned to the bathroom.

"What are you doing?" Sofia asked, the smile growing on her lips to mimic his.

"I was going to give you this on our three-month anniversary but as I was being an asshole then so..."

"Stop! Don't say that," Sofia admonished him.

"No, it's the truth. But here. I wanted you to know that I want you in my life always, Sofia, for infinity," he told her as he presented her with the long, black box.

Her eyes filled with tears as she opened it and saw the beautiful gold infinity symbol. "Oh, JT, it's gorgeous!" she exclaimed.

"Here, let me put it on you." She handed him the box, and he carefully took out the necklace and fastened it around her neck. The gold stood out against her glowing skin just as he'd imagined.

"I love it!" Sofia said, looking at herself in the mirror. "And, I love you."

"I love you more and always," JT declared, bending down to take her mouth in an excruciatingly sweet kiss. "Now I want to see you in nothing but this gold."

He slowly peeled away Sofia's clothes piece by piece kissing each new area of skin that was uncovered. She moaned at the feel of his lips moving over her skin causing frissons of desire everywhere they traveled. Before she knew it, she was naked and being lifted into the tub of warm, bubbly water. She watched with hooded eyes as JT quickly stripped and climbed in behind her. He settled her onto his chest and kissed the top of her head.

She brought his hand to her mouth and gently kissed the cuts and scrapes on his knuckles. "Your poor hands," she murmured between kisses.

"Totally worth it," he said, bringing her other hand to his mouth and placing a kiss on the palm.

They stayed in the bath stroking and kissing and caressing each other until the water cooled. After drying themselves with towels warm from the towel warmer- another Maggie idea that he was coming to appreciate- JT tucked her into his bed and crawled in behind her, surrounding her with his heat. She tucked his hand against her heart and held it tight "Sleep, baby. I've got you," he told her kissing her shoulder.

"I know," she whispered before sleep claimed her completely.



JT frowned before he cracked open an eye to try to figure out what the noise was that had awoken him. The first thing he saw was Sofia, her head resting on his chest with her beautiful hair covering him like a silky, black sheet. He reached out a hand and ran his fingers through a few of the strands before focusing on the noise again. His phone was vibrating on the nightstand. Who the hell was calling him in the middle of the night? He didn't care. He wasn't moving and disturbing Sofia's sleep for anything.

Decision made, he had closed his eyes again and was enjoying the sensation of her breath against his chest when "Let's Get It Started" by The Black-Eyed Peas came blaring from Sofia's jeans on the floor. She popped up and whipped her head around. "Whaa...."

JT ran a hand down his face as his phone started buzzing again, too. "Shit! It's the middle of the damn night. What's going on?"

He rolled onto an elbow and grabbed his phone from the nightstand. "What?" JT barked. "Wait. When? How long ago? Okay, we're on our way!"

Sofia pushed her hair out of her face as she listened to JT's side of the conversation. "What's happening?" she whisper-yelled.

"Maggie's having the babies!" he exclaimed, jumping up and searching for his clothes.

"Really? It's too soon, isn't it?" she asked as she pulled on her own clothes.

"A bit, but Zane says they expect twins to come a little early. They're already at the hospital. You ready?" Sofia nodded and they were on their way to meet his highly anticipated nieces.

The waiting room was full of family when they arrived. His mother, Tricia, greeted them with hugs. She was virtually vibrating with worry and excitement. "Your sister's blood pressure spiked, and they took her in for a C-section about twenty minutes ago," she informed him. "She'll be fine. I'm sure of it."

Dani greeted him with a slap to the chest for him before hugging him, "I've been calling you for half an hour, you big dumbass! Why don't you answer your phone?"

"We had a kinda eventful day," he chuckled. "We were both passed out hard. But we made it, so it's all good."

She pulled Sofia into a hug. "We're all so glad you're okay! And that y'all are back together where you belong." Sofia could only hug her back and nod.

Hugs and handshakes were given and received all round by the rest of the friends and family. Levi was there, of course, as were Dani's Uncle Eustace and Aunt Lu, as well as Levi's mother, Wanda. It felt like forever before Zane came into the room to see them, a wide smile overtaking his face.

"Maggie's fine and the babies are perfect," he announced to the group. "If you'll keep it down, I'll sneak you all into the room for just a minute. Maggie's worn out, but she wants to see everyone."

The group found Maggie sitting up in the bed with two small bundles propped up in her arms. Tricia made it to the bed first, followed closely behind by JT and Sofia. "Oh, baby doll, they are beautiful! You did a wonderful job!" Tricia gushed as she smoothed back Maggie's hair and placed kisses on each baby's head.

"They're perfect, Mama, aren't they?" Maggie asked in wonder. Tricia nodded as happy tears flowed from her eyes.

Zane motioned to JT and Sofia to come closer before picking up one of the bundles. "May I introduce you to Riley Sofia Savage," Zane said, placing the little bundle in Sofia's arms.

Sofia's eyes went wide and immediately filled. "You're naming her after me?" she squeaked, almost unable to force words from her shocked throat.

Zane and Maggie simply nodded as Maggie held the other bundle out to her brother. "And this is River Joshua Savage."

JT's head snapped up. "Aw naw, y'all. You can't hang a boy's name on a little girl. That's just cruel. I appreciate the gesture but..."

Zane laughed. "Seems RJ here was kind of shy on the ultrasounds. He is most definitely a boy. I double checked," he said, winking at JT's astonished face.

"A boy," JT whispered almost reverently as he looked down into his sleeping nephew's face. He continued to stare as the rest of the group quickly gave their congratulations to the new parents and peeked at the babies before leaving the family to get to know one another.

Finally, JT looked up at Sofia, still holding her namesake. She was so beautiful with that baby in her arms and a sweet smile on her lips as she cooed to Riley. He had no doubt at all that he wanted to see her holding their son or daughter one day, just like this. He realized she was wrong in what she

told him earlier. He hadn't saved her, she had saved him. When she glanced up at him and smiled with happy tears in her eyes, he saw his future there – light, love, family, and his redemption.

THE END

Chapter Forty-Two

More From Gladewater...

WANT MORE FROM **GLADEWATER**? Stay tuned and Join Me for ongoing updates! Sign up for my newsletter (Promise I won't fill your inbox!) <https://landing.mailerlite.com/webforms/landing/p2l1y1> or join me on FB at www.facebook.com/The-Gladewater-Series-101896935653764

And if you missed them, check out -

Book One:

COLLIDE – Dani and Levi’s story

They were high school sweethearts but a dark secret tore them apart. Now more than ten years later, can they overcome their history and rekindle their love?

Released March 1, 2022. Available now on Kindle, KU and Amazon.

Book Two:

UNBROKEN – Maggie and Zane’s story. They seem like the perfect couple, but does Zane have a past they can’t recover from?

Release date June 30, 2022/ Available now on Kindle, KU and Amazon.

Book Three

REDEEMED - JT and Sofia's story

JT has sworn off women after a trauma he can't get past. Will Maggie's over-protective brother find a love of his own?

Release date October 20, 2022

A Gladewater Christmas

When Tricia Wade, the Martha Stewart of the South, and Canadian Cowboy, Walker James, find themselves stranded together in a freak snowstorm in Gladewater, Texas, they'll either kill each other or never want to be apart again.

Coming November 2022

Chapter Forty-Three

BONUS! From the Common Grounds Kitchen...

THANK YOU FOR READING the most recent story from Gladewater! Obviously, food played a big part in the Chef JT and Sophia's story so, by popular demand, I want to gift you with a recipe from the soon to be released *From the Common Grounds Kitchen*. I hope you enjoy them as much as my family has over the years.

Miss Etta's Texas Chocolate Sheet Cake (He was wrong y'all. There's no cinnamon! lol)

You will need:

For Cake:

2 C Sugar 1/2 C buttermilk

2 C Flour 2 Well beaten eggs

2 Sticks Butter (real butter y'all!) 1 TSP baking soda

4 TBSP cocoa powder 1 TSP vanilla (preferably Mexican)

1 C water

For icing:

1 Stick butter

4 TBSP cocoa powder

6 TBSP milk

1 Box Powdered Sugar

Cake:

Sift together the sugar and flour in a large bowl. Mix butter, cocoa powder and water in a saucepan. Bring to a rapid boil mixing constantly then pour over flour mixture. Stir until well blended. Add buttermilk, eggs, baking soda and vanilla. Stir until completely combined then pour into a well-greased sheet pan (a rectangle baking dish). Bake at 400 for 20 minutes.

Icing:

Make icing 5 minutes before cake is done. Melt together and boil the butter, cocoa powder and milk. Remove from heat and add the box of powdered sugar and vanilla. Beat well. Pour on cake while the cake is still hot. Makes 1 large sheet cake. Enjoy!! (And try to share. I know it will be tough!:))

Chapter Forty-Four

Thank yous!

THIS IS THE PART where I need to give a big shout out to all the people that helped me finish yet another book! Just FYI, it never gets easier and I'm always afraid I'll forget someone important, but here goes!

Thanks to my kickass Beta reading group: Alyssa, Amy, Dawn, Jac, Jan, Julie, Kelly, Kimberly Ann, Madison, Michelle, and Terra. Thanks for all your reading of my not quite ready for prime-time chapters, your critiques and your encouragement along the way. This book would never have made it without you! xoxoxoxo

Thanks to my Girls Gone Wild tribe (Pat, Carol, Chele, Mary, Kitty, Lori, Laura, and Paulette) who have read all my books, encouraged me, and made me feel like a real author. They also don't say anything about me day drinking for 'inspiration' on our yearly beach trip and only look at me slightly askew when I ask questions like 'Does anyone know how long it takes to freeze to death in a walk-in freezer?'. I have no fear that they would simply bring the wine and the shovel without questions if I asked, and those are true friends!

For Amarylis, Sandra and Laura for sharing your time and your invaluable insights in sensitivity reading my work and helping me with the edits I

needed to make sure I portrayed Sofia's culture in the way I wanted to.

Thank you to Christine and Shana for help with my edits and catching all my little mistakes and any weirdness I missed in the 1,000 times I read it myself! Thank God for professional editors!

To Amy at Romance Me with Books for kicking my ass into gear more than once and creating an amazing book tour for Redeemed. I know it will reach so many more people now. I can't wait for more people to join us in Gladewater!

To my fur babies, Gracie, Dixie, Daisy and Whisky (and now adding Dolly and Petal, though they are not much help as they are babies and into EVERYTHING!) for being my companions and keeping me company in the often solitary pursuit of writing a book. And making me take breaks to provide them with treats! :)

Love to my family for allowing me the room to pursue this crazy dream of mine even though not a one of them has read one of my books yet! (Oh well, on second thought, that may be a good thing!)

And finally, last but definitely not least, thank you to you, my readers without whom I would have simply written some words and given up, Your support and encouragement on this journey never fails to humble me. I appreciate you more than you can know and hope you will stick with me for my next adventure! (It may happen in Savannah. Maybe.)

Love you all, Dallas

Chapter Forty-Five

Meet the Author

DALLAS IS A NURSE by trade who always dreamed of being a novelist...and now that dream has come true! She is a Texan transplant who now lives on a Virginia lake with her husband, kids and a herd of spoiled canines. When she's not dreaming up new characters, she likes to create yarn colors and drink Margaritas - sometimes at the same time.

Dallas loves to hear from her book fans! Drop her a line at dallasryanwrites@gmail.com.