

THE  
FORBIDDEN

*Man*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**KARINA HALLE**

# THE FORBIDDEN MAN

*A Novel*

KARINA HALLE

Metal Blonde Books

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**ALBARADO**

**28**

*For my (six months) older man*

I've got a lover, a love like religion

I'm such a fool for sacrifice

- Halsey, "Coming Down"

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## FOREWORD

While this is a complete work of fiction, and I have taken a few fictional liberties with the game, I have tried to keep facts regarding Real Madrid and Valdebebas as accurate as possible (short of calling up Zidane and having a chat). I have also had a reader from Madrid (thank you, Belinda) correct my Spanish so that it is accurate for the region, but any errors in this book (including ones pertinent to the game of *fútbol*) are mine alone.

One more thing: Thalia's name is pronounced with a silent "H." Alejo's name is pronounced Al-eh-ho.

And....*Hala Madrid* (or "Let's go Madrid!")



PROLOGUE



*Nine Years Ago*

*Valencia, Spain*

“**H**e’s coming home! Grab your little brother and hide,” my mother hisses at me. She puts her frail hands at my back and pushes me toward Armando who is sitting on the couch and squinting at the fuzzy screen on the television.

Armando doesn’t pay me much attention. Even at age seven, he’s used to this nightly chaos.

On the best nights, Father doesn’t come home at all.

My mother has been spending most of the evening staring outside the window and watching down the street for my father. Normally he’d be out very late, until we’re in bed — though not asleep. We always hear him come in, the sound of thuds on the wall and his slurring, things breaking when there is nothing left in this house to break. Then the yelling. My mother yells at him, then he yells at her, and if things get really bad, he might come in our room and yell at us, his outline looking monstrous in my doorway.

Other times we don't see him for days.

And every once in a while, he comes home for dinner smelling like alcohol but acting happy enough. I think those are the days he wins something from his gambling.

In a perfect world, he would win every day, so I could have the father that I really want.

"Come on, Armando," I say to my brother, holding out my hand. "Let's go in my room."

"No," my mother says hurriedly. "No, it's best that you leave the house. Go out the back."

I stare at her for a moment. There is no official way to get out the back. I sneak out the kitchen window sometimes to meet a girl or my friends and I always get in trouble for it. She's highly superstitious and keeps a potted cactus on the back windowsill to ward off evil spirits, so she hates the idea of me accidentally knocking it off. If she's telling us to leave, to go out the back, maybe this is more serious than I thought.

"Alejo," my mother says to me, lowering her voice and staring me right in the eye with the kind of intensity you can't turn away from. "Your father lost his job today."

I blink. "What?"

"He lost his job. Felix called me earlier. Your father is not going to be in a good mood, do you understand me? Now please, take Armando to the park and stay there for an hour."

Only my mother would send her thirteen and seven-year-old children out at nine o'clock at night in one of the worst neighborhoods in Valencia.

"Come on," I say again to Armando, and this time he abandons the couch and comes into the kitchen with me.

I push a chair to the window and open it, the hot night air smelling putrid, and I climb out, careful not to knock over the cactus, and into the alley behind the house. My feet step in something sticky, and I wince, trying to pull Armando out without him getting hurt.

Once he's on the ground beside me, I glance through the window. I only see fear and sorrow in my mother's eyes before she turns and heads out of the kitchen.

"Where are we going?" Armando asks me as I grab his hand and pull him down the dark street, the only light coming from a few windows of the neighboring houses. "Why couldn't we have stayed in our rooms?"

"You heard Mama. Father lost his job. He's going to be angry."

"When isn't he angry?" Armando mumbles. Then he looks at me with big eyes. "Can we go to the beach? Mama didn't say we couldn't."

The beach was slightly safer than the park and the same distance, so we head down one of the busier streets where there are more people. They say Valencia doesn't have a lot of crime, but even so, you never know in this neighborhood. I've seen tourists get robbed who've wandered too far from the beach. We have no money but there can be bad characters here.

We pass by Miguel, a homeless man who lives in a cardboard box complete with a curtain. Tonight, his curtain is closed. Normally if it's open, he'll give Armando a piece of candy even though my family can barely afford it, let alone him.

The thought makes my pulse quicken. My mother is always talking about how little money we have, how we are behind rent, how we can barely afford the tiny place we live in with no hot water. If my father really got fired, I don't know how we're going to survive. He works hard as a dockhand but he gambles too, and that's where so much of the money already goes. My mother paints little bulls to sell to tourists when she can but that doesn't bring in much. What doesn't go to food, goes to my football equipment.

As if he can sense it, Armando squeezes my hand as we wait at a stop light and says, "I'm scared."

I look around. "We're okay. We go to the beach all the time."

"Not at night. And I'm still scared. Of what will happen at home."

"Nothing will happen. We will be fine."

But I don't believe that at all.

The beach is deserted at night except for some people in the middle of it having a bonfire. I don't know if it's the local homeless population (who aren't as scary as they seem) or tourists, so we give them a wide berth.

Armando runs down across the sand to the crashing waves and I have to run after him, yelling at him to stay away from the water. He doesn't know how to swim very well and he's even more impulsive than I am.

I sit down on the sand a few feet away and watch him chase the surf, the faint light from the city bouncing off the crests of the dark waves. I wish I had brought my football with me but we had left in such a hurry. These days, it's the only relief I get. I play for the school team, of course, but when I'm

not doing that I'm trying to sneak in sessions in the park or wherever I can. When I was younger, maybe a bit older than Armando, my father wanted me to be a great football player so he put in the time with lessons and training. He said that I had a natural gift.

Maybe he's right. It does come easy to me. It feels more natural than breathing. But back then I don't remember being poor. I remember there being enough food and my parents were happy and football meant everything to all of us.

Now, I think it just means something to me.

A way out of this life. If only I could get seen playing by the right person, I might have a shot at playing professionally, even at my age.

If only life worked that way.

My brother and I stay on the beach for an hour or so. I don't have a phone and I lost my watch in a bet (on whether Isabella Santos would slap me if I kissed her — she didn't), so I can't be sure. But when Armando gets bored and tired of chasing the dark water, I suggest we go back. Surely any arguments my parents might be having would be over by now, and my father has either passed out drunk or gone off to do more drinking.

"Let's go," I tell Armando, holding my hand out for him. He takes it, and as we walk back to our home, I'm filled with a sense of unease and dread with every single step we take, like we're walking through tar.

This isn't good.

I don't know why but I can tell that something is off.

It's the purple shade of the night sky.

It's the faint bird cry in the dark.

It's the way people seem to stare, the way that horror seems to wait around every street corner, waiting to jump out and scare us.

"Why are we rushing?" Armando asks.

"I don't know," I tell him. "But we must."

Something is so wrong.

My heart seems to heave with it.

We hurry through the streets until we're a block away and we see lights flashing.

Oh no.

*Oh no.*

"What is it?" Armando asks.

"I don't..." I try to say but I can't because I know, I know, I know.

I hold his hand so tight he tells me that I'm hurting him, but I can't help it.

We run to the main street and see people gathered, their faces etched with concern.

I see the police and an ambulance and firefighters.

All gathered outside our place.

I don't see my father.

I don't see my mother.

"Hey, what's going on here?" I ask, trying to get past the people.

“It’s Alejo and Armando,” our neighbor Maria says, tears in her eyes. She tries to reach for us but only manages to grab Armando.

“What’s happening?” I cry out, trying to push past the police officers. “I live here. Where is my mother and father?”

“You need to relax,” an officer tells me. “We need to speak with you.”

He attempts to pull me away, but I don’t want to go away.

I need to go inside.

I tear out of his grip and start running.

I’m fast. Faster than anyone. Faster than the adults who are giving chase after me.

I run and turn on a dime to peel around the corner to the alley at the back of the house.

I leap up onto the kitchen window, swinging my legs over.

I knock the cactus off the sill and the pot shatters on the ground below.

I stare at it for a moment, thinking about how mad my mother will be.

But when I step into the kitchen, that thought isn’t in my head anymore.

There are hushed voices in the house.

My mother’s hysterical sobbing.

I creep forward on the linoleum floors, some substance sticking to my feet, maybe liquor, and see her sitting on the couch in the living room. There’s a blanket around her and she’s crying into her hands. People are all around her.

Consoling her.

For what?

Movement catches my eye, and I see someone go into my parents' bedroom down the hall, just as an officer standing beside my mother looks at me.

"Hey," he cries out. "You can't be here."

But I am here.

And I'm fast.

I run down the hall and into my parents' room.

I come to a stop.

As everything inside me stops.

My father is hanging from the ceiling fan in the middle of the room.

A belt around his neck.

His face frozen in blue and purple pain.

A stack of books spilled over at his feet.

His shoes dangling.

A sliver of his socks showing.

Ratty, thin socks.

I know those socks.

I stare up at my father and the nightmare becomes real.

I scream.

I scream and I scream.



## CHAPTER 1

THALIA

MANCHESTER, ENGLAND



I spent my fortieth birthday signing divorce papers.

In all of my forty years on earth, it's probably the worst birthday I've ever had, and that says *a lot*, considering on my seventh birthday I fell off a pony (during a riding lesson that I had begged my parents for all year), split my lip, and broke my nose. There was also my thirteenth birthday party that my *then* best friend Susan Hawthorne threw

for me, in which I wore white jeans and happened to get my period and bled all over her parents' white couch in front of all my friends and my then crush, Timothy.

It was even worse than my twenty-fourth birthday which I spent all alone in a hotel room in Des Moines, and my thirtieth birthday where I not only had food poisoning and spent it on the bathroom floor, but no one in my family even bothered to call me.

So, yeah, this birthday took the cake.

As if turning the big 4-0 couldn't get any worse, I was brutally reminded that my marriage to someone I had thought was the love of my life collapsed in a very big and *very* messy way. If it wasn't obvious before, it was obvious now that Stewart had never truly been the love of my life since he had the gall to send me the papers on my damn birthday.

Dick.

Thankfully, I signed them without shedding a single tear and got them out of the way before my friends and I all went out for dinner, which is a godsend because it meant I was able to knock back a few cocktails to lessen the pain.

I'm currently finishing my third dirty martini and I have to say I'm feeling pretty good, though I know that if I drink any more I'm going to start simultaneously throwing up in the bathroom and crying angrily over what a shitbag Stewart is. It's been six months since he told me he wanted a divorce, and while the crying fits have subsided, they still crop up from time to time, usually at the worst moments, usually brought on by alcohol.

My best friend Helen can tell because when the waiter comes over to our boisterous table and asks if we want

anything more to drink, Helen gives me a discerning look, which means I've had enough.

I take note.

"Just some Pellegrino, please," I tell the waiter reluctantly.

"Oh, you're no fun!" Kазzy exclaims from across the table, looking horrifically offended. "It's your birthday, Thalia. Your fortieth!"

"You don't need to remind me."

"And you were served divorce papers today," Liz points out. She gives the waiter a big smile. "On the plus side, that means she's single."

While the waiter is handsome in a James Franco kind of way and has been teetering the line between charming and sleazy (in that James Franco way), he's got to be twenty years old. A damn baby.

"Again, you don't need to remind me," I tell Liz, and then give the waiter an apologetic look. "You'll have to ignore my friend," I tell him.

His smile widens. "I would have never guessed that you're forty." He pauses. "Are you sure you're fine with sparkling water?"

"She's fine, now stop flirting with a customer and get on with it," Helen says, flapping her hands at him to go, her bracelets clinking.

The waiter doesn't seem to take any offense. I think he deals with a lot of women here, hence the permanent cocky expression on his face.

Nothing turns me off more than outright arrogance. Stewart had enough of that in spades.

“Thalia,” Kizzy whines, pouting over her purple gin concoction, “you need to let loose and have fun tonight. For a million different reasons.”

“No,” Helen says firmly. “The last thing Thalia needs is to wake up feeling like a complete arse when she’s forty and one day.”

“I guess *you’re* no fun then,” Kizzy says.

I shrug. “Helen has a point. I told myself that when I turned forty I would turn over a new leaf since the old leaf didn’t work so well. I’m going to try and be respectable.” Liz snorts into her drink. “Besides, I have some champagne back at the flat. I was saving it, but...”

“Saving it for what? What could be better than your birthday?” Kizzy asks.

I don’t say anything and rub my lips together, wondering if I need to reapply another coat of lipstick. I chose bright magenta, which isn’t like my usual brown and nudes. Another “turning forty” thing and all that, though I still feel twenty-nine in my head.

“She doesn’t want to jinx it,” Helen finally explains.

“Jinx what?” says Liz.

“I have an interview tomorrow,” I tell them, keeping my voice low and looking around. Even though the restaurant is fairly loud on this Friday night, I don’t want the wrong people to hear.

“For a job?” Kizzy asks.

I give her a tepid look. “Yes, for a job. I’ve been out of work for four months, Kizzy. I need a job. And I’ve been applying to teams this whole time. Apparently, being only one

of two female sports therapists in the entire European league isn't the greatest selling point, no matter my credentials."

"So who is the interview for?" Liz asks. "What team? Arsenal? Chelsea? Manchester City?"

"Well, technically it's the third interview. I've already done two over the phone, one with the general manager, one with the manager. Tomorrow the manager, you know, the coach, is coming out to meet with me. Honestly, I'm shocked I got this far."

"Stop selling yourself short," Helen chides me.

"What team?" Liz repeats.

Even thinking of the name makes my mouth twist into a smile. "Real Madrid."

Liz blinks at me while Kазzy exclaims, "You're moving to Madrid!?"

"Shhh. And no, well, maybe. Who knows. If I get the job, then yes."

"Real Madrid? Are you serious? This is a huge deal!" Liz says. Then her eyes narrow. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Because I don't want to jinx it," I explain truthfully. "Because it *is* a huge deal."

"Huge," Helen repeats. "Another reason to take it easy tonight. You don't want to show up for your interview all hung over, especially since he's come all this bloody way to see you."

"Gee, no pressure," I tell her dryly.

She shrugs. "Someone has to watch out for you."

Sometimes I get annoyed at the way Helen bosses me around, but most of the time I'm grateful. I've been a complete hot mess these last six months and she's been there every step of the way to hold my hand and keep me in line. I have to say, the only reason I'm a bit hesitant about working for Real Madrid — *if* it happens — is not having her so close. I didn't realize how alone I would feel, how much I relied on my friends, until my marriage collapsed.

"This is just so bloody exciting," Kizzy says, clapping her hands together. "I'm going to have to visit you every weekend, you know that. Oh, I hope your flat has an extra bedroom but you know I can make do on the floor." Kizzy is the youngest of our crew at thirty-two. She's happily married and the mother to toddler twins, and yet she still manages to live life her way. It helps that her husband works from home and is a total doll.

At one point that would have bothered me, that I wasn't able to have that kind of life with Stew, but right now I'm so focused on the interview and the future that I feel nothing over it.

That's progress.

"Again, nothing is final," I remind them. "I mean, it's Real Madrid."

"And will you be the head of the physio team like you were here?" Kizzy asks.

"Pretty much," I say, feeling more uneasy about my chances.

"You'll get the job, Thalia," Liz says. "You were the unsung hero of Manchester United."

"No, that was Stewart," I remind her.

“Stewart does shit,” she says.

“Shhh,” Helen hisses, glancing around her. “Do you want to start a riot in here?”

It’s no secret that Man U fans are crazy. I used to be a sports therapist for LA Galaxy and I had no idea what the soccer (sorry, football) fandom was *really* like over here. No one in the US seemed to care too much about the game (compared to the NFL, NBA, etc.) but here it’s a religion. When I got hired by Man United, they didn’t prepare me for the flack I would get for being not only a new member of the team but a female one as well, nor did they warn me that fans were nutty to begin with.

Stewart was the assistant coach at the time. I’ve been in this business since college and my number one rule was to never ever get personally involved with a member of the team.

I broke that rule with Stew.

And then he broke me.

Maybe we broke each other.

Anyway, Stewart is the head coach now and everyone either loves him or hates him depending on how the team is doing. Right now it’s July and there are only “friendly” non-competitive matches being played, so the fans have calmed down a bit. Still, I get paranoid that someone is going to recognize me every time I go out and it won’t help if I’m badmouthing the team, or Stewart. I was already dragged through public hell with the divorce and the scandal.

“Sorry, Helen,” Liz says with a look that means she’s not quite sorry. “I forget sometimes you’re still friends with Stewart.”

“We’re not *friends*,” Helen says, avoiding my eyes. “We’re just friendly.”

Hmmm. Even though Helen just had Stewart and his new lady whore over for dinner last weekend. I don’t bring that up though. Helen’s husband is Stewart’s best friend, which is how we met in the first place, and as much as I hate the fact that she still sees him, at least she never brings him up around me.

The waiter comes back with my sparkling water and Kizzy raises her glass to me.

“Well, I don’t care if I’m jinxing it or not. Here’s to you, Thalia. Happy birthday, happy freedom day, happy getting the job you want and the life you deserve.”

If I was on my fifth martini, I probably would have started crying over that. But I manage to hold it all together.

“Thank you,” I tell her warmly, and we all lean in and clink glasses. “Here’s to what’s next.”



DESPITE MY BEST INTENTIONS, THE NEXT MORNING I STILL wake up with a bit of a hangover.

“Is this what forty is like?” I groan out loud, reaching over to silence the alarm on my phone.

I lie back in bed for a moment and assess the damage. I have a headache, but painkillers and a vat of coffee should take care of that. It could be worse.

I slowly sit up so I don’t get nauseous and take stock of my room. It’s small and dark, reminding me of a cave or a tomb, with only a small window that looks right out onto a willow tree that blocks what little sun this area gets. When I first moved out of the house, I didn’t really care where I lived, I



just knew I couldn't be with Stew. Plus, I was out of a job. This place was cheap and as dark as my soul, the perfect place to curl up and drown in my depression.

Now, well, I have to say I'm looking forward to saying goodbye to this place. Even if I don't get the job with Real Madrid, the settlement from the divorce will happen soon and I can take that money and move anywhere I want.

The thought brings a smile to my lips as I head to the washroom to get ready. For the longest time it scared me, shamed me, to go from being part of a couple, a partnership, to being on my own. I had been so independent before I met Stewart that I think I kind of lost myself when I was with him. Now, I have no choice but to find myself again, on my own, and I'm starting to be less anxious about the whole thing and more excited for whatever happens next.

Okay, well today I'm completely anxious. I'm a nervous wreck. The coffee does wonders for my headache but makes my anxiety surge through the roof.

I need this job.

More than that, I *want* this job.

Badly.

Real Madrid is arguably the best club in Europe, if not the most famous. Being the main sports therapist for the team would mean a cushy salary, a long career, a change of pace, and best of all, living a new life in sunny Spain. It would mean a second chance for me to keep doing what I love and to let this chapter of my life in Manchester finally come to a close.

The worst part is that it's kind of my last resort. Any available positions for teams around the world have been rare, and the ones I applied for, I didn't get very far along in the

interview process. I hate to bring up the woman card, but a lot of the time it's definitely because I'm a woman. Sometimes the teams and this sport can be mighty archaic.

That's why getting the job at Manchester United to begin with was such a big win for me. It gave me purpose and brought me joy and made me feel like I'd finally made it. In this highly competitive industry, once you find a good job with a club, you need to hang on to that job for as long as you can. Turnover is very, very low.

Which is why it still hurts that I ended up quitting my position with Man United. Lord knows Stewart wasn't going to leave the team and I couldn't stand to work alongside him anymore, let alone look at him. It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do and I don't know when I'll stop feeling bitter over it. I'd spent so much of my life working up to that job and to have it gone because of a man, because I personally couldn't handle working with him, because of something *he* did, sits deep within me like a festering wound.

*Don't get carried away. Stay positive,* I tell myself, and mindfully push the cup of coffee away from me. It isn't helping.

My interview is at a café around the corner from my place. It's low-key and people seem to mind their own business there which is why I suggested it. It doesn't take me long to get ready and head out. I'm a bit early, but since it's such a gorgeous summer day, I'm hoping to get a good table outside before he gets there.

The "he" in question is Mateo Casalles, head coach of Real Madrid. Once upon a time he was the centre back for Atlético, the other Madrid team, before becoming their coach and taking the team to new heights. He was then poached by Real

Madrid about two years ago. I'd already talked to him during the phone interview, and he seems pretty easygoing in that charming, ex-player way — far easier to talk to than Jose, the general manager, who was very curt and gave me nothing. In fact, I thought I bombed that first interview with Jose since he didn't seem to warm up to me at all, but I still managed to get that second interview with Mateo.

And maybe, if luck is on my side, this will be the last one.

Steps away from the café, my hands begin to sweat. I need to uncover some of that confidence that's been buried lately, find that badass, assured, skilled woman that I used to be, that I know I am deep down.

*You got this*, I tell myself as I quickly look around to see if he's here. Being involved in the sport for so many years, I know what all the coaches and players look like, but luckily I don't spot him yet.

I order myself a decaf latte and a scone and then score a table in the back patio beside flowering wisteria that tumbles over the brick wall. I close my eyes and take a moment to breathe, to try and find my center and stay there.

“Miss Blackwood?”

A familiar voice breaks through my mini-meditation and I open my eyes to see Mateo Casalles pausing at the foot of the table.

“Hi!” I say and smile, perhaps a little too enthusiastically, and get to my feet to shake his hand.

“Nice to finally meet you, Mr. Casalles,” I tell him, trying to give the firmest grip I can muster without trying to wring his hand. It's amazing how many first impressions in this business are based on a handshake.

“Por favor, please, it’s Mateo,” he says, slipping from Spanish to English with ease.

“Then it’s just Thalia to you,” I tell him lightly, sitting back down.

He pulls out the chair across from me and immediately sits back in it, striking a relaxed pose, as if he’s known me for a long time. “Beautiful day, is it not? Every time I’ve come here, it’s been pissing, as the locals say. With rain, of course. Not actual piss.”

His English is fluent but his accent and delivery is charming. Then again, he’s a charming man. He’s in his mid-forties with thick black hair that’s greying at the sides and tanned skin that stands out against a light grey suit. He has an easy smile. He’s wearing aviator glasses, but I know his eyes underneath are kind and dark.

Except when he’s on the field, of course. Real Madrid has played Manchester United enough times to see the real Mateo come out, especially when they’re losing or there have been some unfair calls. He becomes hot-tempered and explosive, much like Stewart does in the same situation. Only difference is, Mateo seems to recover. Stewart never really did.

“Yes, it’s normally pissing,” I tell him. “We don’t quite get the summers up here like you do in Spain.”

“That’s unfortunate,” he says as the waitress comes by to bring me my latte and scone as well as his coffee, which he starts to pour sugar packet after sugar packet into. I stare as he stirs it methodically with a spoon. “You were born in Seattle, yes?”

I nod. “I should be used to the rain but when I got the chance to move to LA to work with the Galaxy, I was more

than happy to leave the Pacific Northwest.”

“So I’m guessing you’ll be more than happy to leave this weather behind,” he says idly, raising the cup to his mouth and having a sip. He frowns at his drink and then shrugs. “The coffee, it’s not quite like it is at home, but it will do.” He smiles at me. “Forgive me, I can’t remember if we discussed this over the phone or not, but you’ve been to Spain, yes?”

“Many times, but only briefly. Barcelona, Seville, and Madrid for the matches. I didn’t see any of the cities. The real Spain.”

“That’s a shame. But I understand. This is perhaps the most of Manchester I’ve seen.” He pauses and I want to tell him he’s not missing much. “So without knowing the city, you have no problems uprooting your life here and moving there?”

I give him a tepid smile. “You know I don’t.”

In this industry, nothing is a secret. Even if Stewart’s affairs hadn’t been splashed all over the tabloids, news travels fast. When it comes to the leagues, everyone knows everything about each other’s business. Call it strategy, call it gossip, call it what you will.

He shrugs with one shoulder. “Some people are sentimental.”

“Not me.”

Not anymore.

He nods at that with an agreeable sound and then finishes the rest of his coffee in one go. “You know I’ve already made up my mind about you.”

“In what way?”

“Well, if you’re going to get the job, of course.”

I still. This surprises me.

“When?”

“Just now,” he says with a bit of a smirk. “Of course I already had a good idea or I would have not come all this way.”

Oh jeez. Am I going to have to pry it out of him?

“It’s not up to Jose?” I ask.

“Jose gave me the final word.”

“I got the impression he didn’t like me.”

“To be fair, he doesn’t like anyone. Including me. And yet he still gave me the final word, which means he at least trusts me. Would you like to hear it?”

I breathe in deeply through my nose and then flutter my fingers along the table. “Lay it on me.”

“Lay it on you?” he repeats, frowning.

Right. I forget English isn’t his first language.

“I want to hear it,” I clarify.

He smiles. “Of course you have the job.”

My heart thuds against my ribs. “Are you serious?”

“Almost always,” he says. “Though perhaps I should be more professional about it. Jose is always, how do you say, harping on me about that. That’s what I get for still feeling like a player sometimes and not a leader.” He clears his throat. “It would be a pleasure if you accept this role as the head physical therapist for Real Madrid. I think you would do an excellent job.”

He pauses and studies me. I’m in shock.

“So,” he says, brows raised. “Do you accept?”

“Yes,” I blurt out, and it feels like I’m accepting a marriage proposal. “Yes, yes, absolutely.”

“That was the answer I was hoping for,” he says, extending his hand again.

I reach across the table and shake on it, completely stunned at what just happened and unable to stop smiling.

After that, Mateo doesn’t stay long. We talk about a few logistics, like if I need help finding a flat (which I do), signing paperwork, when I’ll start (in a month). Right now is the team’s off season so there are a few friendly matches that Real Madrid is doing and then the official season starts at the end of August. Until then, there’s a hell of a lot of catching up to do.

I watch as he leaves, grabbing a cab on the street to take him to the airport.

I decide to stay in the café and order a mimosa to celebrate before I call everyone I know and share the good news.

Maybe, just maybe, this decade won’t be so bad after all.

## CHAPTER 2

THALIA

MADRID SPAIN

“Excuse me?” I say to a twenty-something couple who is strolling hand in hand outside the botanical gardens. “Which way to Plaza Mayor?”

They both shrug and give an apologetic smile and keep walking. Either they’re tourists or they don’t speak any English. Or both.

I sigh and look for the next victim to flag down.

I’ve been living in Madrid for five days and to say the city has me confused is an understatement. I’ve been trying to run the same route every day and yet keep finding myself in different parts of the city. Normally I at least have my phone to guide me once I realize I’m lost, but this time it died mid-run because I was taking too many pictures.

It’s Madrid’s fault. The city is ridiculously pretty.

The times I’ve been here before with the team, I never saw any of it. I was either on the field or sleeping in a hotel outside of the city, near the stadium. That was it. You’re in and out with that kind of travel.

Now, I’m finally exploring it. They say there is no better way to get to know a place than to get lost in it, but *they*



probably didn't have to be at work at a certain time.

I spot a little old lady teetering past the entrance to the gardens and practically accost her. Even though she doesn't seem to speak English, she still knows what I'm referring to and I'm pretty sure she's giving me the right directions back to my new place.

Note to self: learn Spanish.

You're never too old to learn a new language, right?

I thank her profusely then start a slow jog up the street. Once I make it to Plaza Mayor, I know how to get to my flat in La Latina, or the Latin quarter.

To be honest, I've been running around since six am. It's the best time to beat the heat here in the throes of August and I need to keep in top physical condition these days. But really, it's because I have a shitload of nerves I need to burn off before my first official day.

The nerves I had before my final interview with Mateo? Yeah, they weren't anything like the literal pins and needles that are spiking up and down my body, and it's not because I'm slightly dehydrated. I am *nervous*.

The Real Madrid squad has taken on almost a mythical quality these last few years. They don't win every game but even when they lose, it seems like they decided to lose for shits and giggles. Nothing seems like an accident or luck with them. They recently acquired a new player from Barcelona, which is causing huge controversy, but even so the team has moved like a skilled, single unit, effortlessly possessing the ball in every game, defeating team after team, rising up and up and up, year after year, winning cup after cup.

I've never been intimidated by a team before. The LA Galaxy were sweet and I learned so much from them, and Manchester was rough around the edges, but I never felt like I was out of my league. But Real Madrid? The kings of Europe? Even with Mateo's faith in me, I still don't know if I'm cut out for this, and that's not even considering how the team will accept me.

Hence why I'm working up such a sweat this morning, hoping that my endorphins will kick in and bolster me with the confidence I know I have deep in me.

But, hey, I guess having jitters about the first day on the job isn't too unique, is it?

The old lady's directions were correct, and it's not long before I end up at the expanse of Plaza Mayor, the sun shining down on the square, slowly populating with tourists taking pictures and shops setting up outdoor tables for the breakfast crowd. From there I'm able to recognize shops and make my way down narrow cobblestone streets, still asleep with the morning, until I find my flat.

It's not much bigger than my place in Manchester was, but it feels miles apart and not just because it's in another country. Where my flat in Manchester was dark and damp and tucked away in a quiet neighborhood, this flat is in a cheerful yellow building above *Esteban*, a lively tapas bar. It's on the third floor and though it just looks out onto the building across the narrow street, it has a small balcony where I can sit in the mornings with my first cup of coffee and get used to the vibrant sights, smells, and sounds of La Latina.

This morning, though, there's no time for that. I shower off the sweat and grime from the run and then quickly get ready.

Mateo arranged for a car to pick me up at eight fifteen and time is slipping away as it does in the mornings.

I don't have a uniform yet since I'm the first female member of the squad ever (no pressure or anything), so I just wear a fitted black t-shirt and black yoga pants. Helen and I went shopping in London for a weekend before I moved, hitting up every Lululemon and Sweaty Betty apparel store and making sure I had a whole new athletic wardrobe for a whole new career. Even if I end up in uniform half the time, the purchases were symbolic.

As if she could sense that I was thinking about her, she texts me just as I'm putting on a light dusting of makeup.

**Are you nervous?**

I let out an anxious laugh in exchange.

**What do you think?** I text back. **I feel like it's the first day of school.**

**You're going to do great, love,** she says. **Just don't look too sexy.**

I stare at the text for a moment. Too sexy? I look back at myself in the mirror. I've pulled my light brown, highlighted hair back into a high ponytail; the t-shirt is high cut and doesn't show any cleavage. I probably shouldn't wear makeup at all, but my skin could use a little help this morning, and I've always figured there's something professional about looking like you put in some effort, anyway.

**Believe me, I'm not sexy.**

She doesn't text back for a few moments, long enough to continue applying my mascara, then she says, **Good luck!**

Hmmphf.

I shouldn't be surprised. Even though Helen rarely speaks ill of Stewart (which, as petty as it sounds, kind of annoys me), she often says that it was my fault that we got together in the first place. She has some pretty old-fashioned views when it comes to women in the workplace, and I guess I was just too irresistible to Stewart or some bullshit, as if we weren't two adults who approached our coupling with a lot of thought and trepidation.

*She's probably just worried that you're going to come across as someone they won't take seriously, I tell myself.*

That, or she's afraid that what happened with Stewart is going to happen again.

*Not on my watch.*

Speaking of watch, I glance at the time and realize I have to go. I grab my messenger bag and glance out the window to see a car waiting in the sliver of a street below, another car behind it honking for it to move.

I slip on my sunglasses and head back out.

The driver, Manuel, holds the door open for me, and as he zooms through the winding streets, tries to tell me all about his morning in broken English. I haven't even met this man before but he seems to think I'm an old friend. Not that I mind since it's nice to have so much friendliness in such a big city.

Maybe making friends here won't be so hard, I think, watching the grandiose buildings along Gran Via zip by, including the famous Tio Pepe sign. It's kind of weird being older and knowing you have to go through the process of making friends again. When you're young it just seems so much easier. You're not set in your ways yet. The world is open to you, as are the people in it. Even though I know forty

isn't old at all, it's old enough that little things like friendship are harder to come by.

Where would I even start? Where do people meet people? Are there expat groups in the city? Will I make friends with the football players' wives? When I moved to Manchester it felt easier somehow, maybe because I was more open and hadn't been hurt yet, or maybe because there was no language barrier. It was luck that I met Liz. I met Helen through Stewart and I met Kазzy through Helen.

Here, I don't know how it's going to happen but I do know I'm going to have to get out of my shell a little bit.

And just like that, even the thought of putting myself out there makes my body suddenly seize up, my chest feeling heavy and suffocating, like it's filling with poured concrete.

I close my eyes and drown out Manuel and concentrate on my breathing. Though I'm still on antidepressants, I've been weaning myself off of my anxiety medication, so panic attacks like to raise their ugly head at the worst possible times. It's not just a mental thing either; it's a full-blown physical attack that makes me feel like I'm spinning out of control, and my body is turning against me. It feels like I'm dying, and no matter how hard I try to convince myself that it's all in my head and not real, I don't believe it.

This time, the breathing works, and I win. Control comes back to my body and my heart slows. I've been on antidepressants for the last four years, but the panic attacks only started once I suspected Stewart of cheating. I like to think, in time, I can kick them to the curb just as I kicked him. I know they do me good and I'm not ashamed to take them, but they just remind me of why I'm on them.

Manuel heads through the manned gates of the Ciudad Real Madrid, the massive training and administration complex for the team, which is just north of the city. The car goes around the circular fountain and comes to a stop outside a sleek glass building. I look to see Mateo come out. He spots me, waves, and strolls over.

He opens the door. “*Buenos días*,” Mateo says as he smiles down at me. “Welcome to your first day.”

I tell Manuel thank you and get out of the car, pulling up my messenger bag.

“You nervous?” Mateo asks as I shut the door and the car pulls away.

“Do I look nervous?”

The corner of his mouth quirks up and he moves his head from side to side. “More or less.”

“I’ve never been very good at first days,” I admit to him, slinging my bag over my shoulder. “The first job I ever had was when I was fourteen and working weekends at the video store. First day, I ended up outing my high school math teacher who had rented a whole bunch of porn from the adult section.”

Mateo is staring at me with a bemused expression, brows raised. “I know you’ll do just fine.”

He starts walking off toward the doors and I quickly follow, my face going a bit hot. Why did I have to mention that? Not exactly professional.

I take in a deep breath and remind myself to relax. If Mateo thinks I’m nervous, I certainly don’t want to give that impression to the team, nor do I want to open my mouth and let verbal diarrhea flow out.

“So, what do you think of Valdebebas?” Mateo asks as we step through the automatic glass doors.

“Well,” I say, as I look around, taking it all in. “All I’ve seen so far of the famous Valdebebas is the massive fountain and a hedge that’s been clipped and trimmed to spell out Real Madrid, so I’m pretty impressed so far.”

His dark eyes twinkle. “I know it doesn’t have the level of security you had at Carrington, which personally makes me think the English are paranoid, but I do think ours is better.”

Everything is always a competition.

But we do have to pass through two security checkpoints within the building, with Mateo flashing an ID that he then places around my neck. It says I’m a guest. I’m assuming that will change.

As he leads me down a reflective hallway with glossy white walls, he explains that this section is for the young academy players, since the complex isn’t just for the main team but for the youth as well. There’s residency for players who live outside of Madrid and all their training facilities. The entire compound is set-up in the shape of a T, surrounded by many soccer pitches. Mateo explains that it works in a psychological way, so that the players are supposed to work up to being part of the team at the very top, which is where we are headed.

“And here we are,” Mateo says as he takes me into the last building, the top of the T, and already this one has just a little more flash than the other. We take a left down the hall. Inside, the glossy white walls are interspersed with walnut doors, a little warmth to tone down the ultra-sleek look, the Real Madrid logos embossed in silver.

“This will be your office,” he says, opening one of the doors. Inside is a sparse but streamlined room. It looks so clean that it’s hard to imagine anyone was using it before. “But we’ll come back to this after and give you time to settle in properly.”

We walk back down the hall and he points out the offices of the three doctors who work for the team (one, Dr. Costa, who is always here, the others being on call), as well as the eight other physical therapists. It seems like a lot to have nine of us here each day, but believe me, with a team at this caliber, it’s needed. Every single player needs to be assessed and treated every single day before practice, which is probably what’s happening right now as I’m getting the tour.

I’m starting to feel even more anxious at that. Even though I’m with the coach, who is pretty much my boss, I feel like I’m late for work already.

As if Mateo can read it on my face, he says, “We won’t be much longer.” He takes me to the end of the T where the giant physical therapy room is. With the floor-to-ceiling frosted glass windows, it’s bright and airy and modern. The doors open out onto a pitch, and I can see the vague shapes of the players just outside.

“And this is where the real work is,” he says to me. He reaches over and takes my messenger bag, putting it down on a shelf and letting me take in the room.

It’s state of the art, that’s for sure. Not that Man United was anything to sneeze at (we had our own hospital, after all) but maybe because the equipment looks newer or flashier, it just seems so much more...expensive.

“Next door is the gym and training room — beyond that the pool,” Mateo goes on.



“The hydrotherapy pools and steam rooms that you’ll be using are downstairs in the basement. Upstairs are the players’ rooms when they’re here before a game, the movie theatre, the game room, and the dining room and kitchen. But I don’t want to overwhelm you right now with all of that.”

Too late. I’m already overwhelmed.

“Are you ready to meet your new team?” Mateo asks.

I can only nod and give him a stiff smile.

He opens the glass doors and we step out onto the field. I immediately shield my eyes, the sun blinding me.

The team is before me, over twenty of them running back and forth doing drills while what I assume is the assistant coaches and the rest of the therapists look on.

“*Hola a todos,*” Mateo says, and his voice suddenly goes from smooth to booming. It’s loud enough to make everyone stop mid-stride and look over at us.

I straighten up, raise my chin, trying to look approachable and serious all at once. Only a bit of a smile. It’s all about balance in this world.

“*Esta es Thalia,*” he announces, gesturing to me, and then clears his throat, giving me a sheepish look. “*Perdona.* Until your Spanish improves, I will speak in English around you.”

I’m about to tell him that he doesn’t have to make any exceptions for me, even though my Spanish is fairly nonexistent but he goes on with a wave of his hand. “Everyone here speaks English, *más o menos*. Perhaps I am the worst, but it is good practice.”

And just like that, I’m introduced to the team.

No longer Thalia from Manchester United, I'm on their side now and meeting them up close for the first time. At least I already know who they are, so I won't have trouble remembering their names.

I mean, you can't forget the team captain, the handsome and charming, Portuguese Luciano Ribeiro. Nor their striker, Marcos Hermosa, who has the biggest smile you'll ever see and is a total menace on the pitch. There's the Brazilian Marcelo, who has been with the team the longest and is one of their greatest assets.

So far, everyone seems really nice and welcoming. Well, aside from the Slovenian goalie, Victor Oblak, who is still staring at me like I've got two heads. I prepared for this, especially since I heard there was a lot of male bravado in Spain, but I know I can definitely deal with a guy who seems to be living in the stone age. There's always a few.

“¡*Lo siento!*” a voice calls out from behind us, and we turn to see a player running out of the doors, slipping his jersey over his head. All I see are an insane amount of tanned abs, until the shirt is pulled down and then I'm staring at the most captivating eyes I've ever seen.

“Alejo,” Mateo grumbles, but the attempt to sound annoyed is half-hearted. “You're late.”

I blink and try to look away from Alejo's blue eyes, but it's not working. Coupled with his mess of black hair, his olive skin tone, and full lips, his face is holding me hostage.

So this is Alejo Albarado.

Number 28.

A forward and sometime striker who started off with the academy when he was fifteen.

And though I've seen him play on the field and seen his face on many a magazine cover, I guess I didn't expect him to look like he does.

And by that, I mean, fucking *gorgeous*.

"I know, I know," Alejo says in English. "I overslept. My alarm didn't go off."

One of his teammates snorts, not buying it.

Alejo looks at me. "I'm sorry I missed the official introduction. My name is Alejo."

He extends his hand and gives me a smile that could melt even the coldest of hearts, including mine.

*These thoughts aren't professional in the slightest. You need to get a grip.*

I swallow and smile right back.

"I'm Thalia. Pleased to meet you."

"Ah, the new physical therapist," he says, giving my hand a squeeze. "You used to work for one of our biggest rivals."

"Who beat us the last two times we played them," Luciano interjects from behind us.

"I did," I tell Alejo. "But I'm here now."

"Then perhaps you'll be a good luck charm."

"Perhaps."

*I'm still shaking his hand.*

*I need to drop his hand.*

I do so quickly and give him a quick smile.

He looks amused, pursing his lips slightly. "Well hopefully you'll find us a lot more fun. Cris told us that the weather up

there makes everyone pretty miserable and we've got nothing but sun here."

By *Cris*, I assume he means Cristiano Ronaldo, who used to be with Man U, as well as Real Madrid.

"Your English is very good," I can't help but say.

"Don't look so surprised," he says with a wag of his dark brows. "I watch a lot of YouTube."

And at that he runs past me to go join the rest of the team in their drills, Luciano slapping him on the back in a greeting.

Mateo yells something at the team and then at Felipe, the assistant coach, and then looks to me. He nods back to the building. "Now that you've met the team, let's continue the tour and get you settled in."

I follow Mateo, looking back over my shoulder at the team again before we disappear into the physio room.

Settled?

I don't think I've ever felt so unsettled.

## CHAPTER 3



I have to admit, one of the best parts of my job is the fact that I go to work in the world's comfiest clothes. My uniform for Real Madrid is a cozy black Adidas tracksuit with the CR badge on the front and a sponsor's logo on the back, and, paired with my new Adidas trainers, it's like working in your pajamas.

Which is a creature comfort sorely needed, considering my first week on the job was a lot tougher than I anticipated.

Not that everyone hasn't been lovely. The players have been especially nice (aside from the goalie, but that might just be his personality), and the other therapists have been welcoming and helpful. If there's been any weirdness or resentment that there's a woman on the team in a very hands-on position, I haven't noticed. Plus, Mateo has been such a doll with me, going above and beyond to make me feel more at home, even though I can tell he's ruffled the primary physician's feathers a little.

Dr. Julio Costa is a bit of a dick. When I first met him, he seemed fine, if not dismissive, but since I've shown up for work every morning this week at 9:15 (actually, I've been here at eight-thirty, just to put in the extra effort), he's been watching me like a hawk. Granted, I haven't been attending

that many players yet, just assessing them and strapping up some ankles before practice, but the doctor is always there watching everything I do. It's not only annoying, but it's gotten under my skin a little, like he doesn't trust me.

Mateo quickly took note of it and a few times I caught the two of them arguing out of earshot (not that I could understand them anyway). I can't help but think Dr. Costa doesn't think I belong here, and from the way the other therapists act around him, it seems he gets in everyone's business.

But it wasn't just hostility or doubt from Dr. Costa that made it difficult. It's the fact that the team has their first real game of the season in a week's time and as the head physical therapist, a lot of that pressure falls on me. I don't have a feel for the players yet, what their strengths are, how their training is, what their past injuries have been. I've been staying in my office late every single night pouring over the medical records and training files of each player, and I feel like it's going to take me forever to catch up.

So, yeah. There's a lot to take in and I feel like I'm running out of time. I'm quite sure the team can go on to their first La Liga match and win without me even being here at all, but still. I have a lot to prove. Maybe too much.

Now, it's Saturday night and I'm this close to getting in bed, even though it's only seven o' clock. We have a rest day tomorrow, which I think everyone sorely needs. I wanted to stay in the office late again, but Mateo practically forced me to go home.

Instead, I take a long, hot shower from the creaking pipes and then attempt to do some yoga in the middle of the apartment. I actually have my own private room at Valdebebas, the same kind as the players, though my balcony

overlooks the players' cars instead of the field. It's like a five-star quality hotel with its own jacuzzi, sitting area, and a bed made from heaven (with all the million-thread count bedding done up with the Real Madrid logo), all accessed by fingerprint door controls. It's all very high-tech and tempting, but since I foresee many nights in my future where I'll be sleeping there, I figure I might as well use my apartment while I can.

Besides, it's good to just put some distance between me and work. I've been so busy this week that I haven't really had a moment to myself, just to take in the new situation, hell, even to appreciate being in Madrid.

And as my phone beeps mid downward dog, I realize I've been neglecting my friends too. Helen, Kазzy, and Liz have all been texting and messaging me, but I've barely had the time to respond and only with quick one sentence answers. Even my mother called me, but I wasn't able to take it. Tomorrow I really ought to take the time to fill everyone in on my new life.

But when I glance at my phone, I see the Whatsapp message is from Mateo.

I groan inwardly. *What could he want now? He's the one who sent me home.*

I sit down on my mat and access the message.

**Buenas noches, Thalia. I was wondering if you wanted to grab a drink with me and my wife tonight? You can say no, you won't be fired.**

I let out a laugh and really hope firing was never on the agenda. The truth is, I don't even think I could have got through all my yoga moves. I'm that tired. And yet I know I shouldn't pass up this opportunity. It would be good to talk to

Mateo without being in a work environment, plus I know I need to meet other people, like his wife. I'll admit, I don't know that much about him off the field, just that he went through a bitter divorce maybe five years ago and remarried, but it would be nice to have friends.

I message him back and ask where and when.

**9pm (ish?) at Bar Cock.**

I hesitate for a moment, so close to texting him: *Is it hard to get in?*

But I manage to keep my giggles away and professionalism intact and tell him I'll be there.

I pour myself a glass of Tempranillo that I've had sitting on the table all week and haven't had a chance to dip into yet, and proceed to get ready. I've been living in the tracksuit uniform, so I decide to put on something more sexy. Not that I have anyone to impress (certainly not Mateo or his wife) but I know from personal experience that with this job taking over my life, my femininity will get buried if I don't make an effort.

I put on skinny jeans and a simple silky white tank top and silver jewelry, blow drying my highlighted hair straight. I go heavy on the eyeshadow and light on the lip, and when I'm done, I don't look half bad. A lot of women often ask me what my secrets are for looking young but honestly it's just a good diet, lots of exercise, and I wear sunscreen every single day (and yes, a hit of Botox every four months, but that's par for the course at this point).

Then I'm grabbing my purse and heading out the door and into the hot and humid Madrid air.

I can already feel my hair starting to frizz and poof out. Oh well.



Since I'm running a little late (not sure how much leeway I have with "nine pm-ish"), I opt to get an Uber instead of the metro, which is just as well since the last time I attempted to take it I got lost and flustered. I honestly can't learn Spanish fast enough.

Bar Cock is actually styled more like a swanky English pub with wood beams and tables and at 9:20 p.m. (ish) the place isn't all that busy. I spot Mateo tucked away at the back at a four-person table.

"Thalia," he says to me, walking over. "*Como esta?* You look *hermosa*."

"Gracias," I tell him.

Like me, he seems to be relishing being out of his coach's uniform, dressed in a sharp grey suit and black shirt. Suddenly I feel underdressed.

He leans in and kisses me on both cheeks, the standard greeting here between friends, and then grabs my arm, bringing me over to the table.

"Thalia, this is my wife Vera," he says proudly.

A girl (and I mean, she has to be in her mid-to-late twenties) stands up and gives me a big smile before pulling me into a light embrace. She kisses me on both cheeks, my nose filling with the scent of some sweet, heady perfume.

"So happy I finally got to meet you," she says. She's not even Spanish — she's American or Canadian according to her accent.

But that's not the only surprise. She's curvy plus-size, with boobs and hips perfectly displayed in an off-the-shoulder purple dress, her wavy, shiny hair down to her ass and dyed blonde with rose-gold ombre. On her feet, she has Golden

Goose high-top sneakers in black sequins, and every single inch of her seems to be covered in tattoos.

This is totally not who I saw being married to Mateo. That said, it makes me admire Mateo a little more because his wife already seems like a lot of fun.

“Nice to meet you too,” I tell her, taking a seat beside them.

“What do you want to drink?” Mateo asks me.

“A glass of red wine would be fine,” I tell him, thinking it best to just stick to one thing tonight.

“And you, Estrella?” he asks Vera.

“Surprise me,” she says, beaming at him.

He walks off and I look at her. “Estrella?” I question. “Doesn’t that mean star?”

She raises her arm and shows off a constellation tattooed there. “Astronomy is a hobby of mine. Mateo gave me that nickname pretty early on.”

I have a lot of questions for her. I want to know how on earth they met and how long have they been married. But it seems too personal for now so I just look around the bar. “Nice place. Would you believe this is my first night out in Madrid? Though honestly I thought I would see more people on a Saturday night.”

Vera lets out a musical laugh. “They have a saying here, nobody goes to bed until they’ve killed the night. Actually, I think it was Hemingway who said that. I don’t know, he said a lot of things. Anyway, people have a late start and they don’t go home until morning. Hope those heels of yours are comfortable. I’m always prepared.” She leans back slightly in

her chair and lifts out her leg, showing off her sneakers like a vaudeville dancer.

I glance down at my heels, which I admittedly chose because they made my short legs look miles long, not because I was planning on going dancing or bar-hopping with my boss and his wife.

“Though I suppose if anyone can wear heels like that all night and still live the next day, it would be someone like you,” Vera adds, giving me a coy smile. “I really admire you, you know.”

That takes me by surprise. “What?”

“Well, how can I not?” she says. “You’re like the only female sports therapist in the world.”

“That’s not true,” I quickly interject but Vera doesn’t seem to be listening.

“And you did such a good job at Man U. Believe me, I may not look like I follow the game, but I do. I mean, I have to. Ever since Mateo started coaching, I’ve been immersed like whoa, and I loved seeing you at the side of the field during the games.”

“Well, thank you,” I tell her. I know I shouldn’t feel uncomfortable at the praise, but I do. “But really, I’m not a trailblazer. Sue Falsone was the first in America — she was the physical therapist for the LA Dodgers. And Isa Lundquist was a therapist for the Swedish national team long before I came over here.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Vera says, waving her hands, her glittering nail polish catching the low light. “You’re the bomb, that’s all you need to know. So how are you liking Madrid so

far? Oh wait, don't answer that. You haven't had a chance to see it yet."

"But I do like what I've seen so far," I tell her. "La Latina, where I live, is really cute."

"And they have a ton of good bars, though I told Mateo we should meet here first. It's low-key and classy, and he never gets bugged by all the *Madridistas* angry about *Los Blancos*."

*Los Blancos* is a nickname for Real Madrid and I'm assuming *Madristas* is the term for the fans.

"I'm guessing that happens often?" I ask.

She shrugs and tosses her hair over her shoulder, the air filling with an intoxicating scent. "Almost always. He's the coach, you know, so he gets all the *mierda*."

"Do you speak Spanish?"

"*Sí*," she says. "But it took me forever. Chloe Ann didn't speak any English when I first met her so it was either learn the language fast or never bond with her." When Vera sees that I have no idea who Chloe Ann is, she explains. "Chloe Ann is my step-daughter. She's ten now but only five when I met her."

I'm about to ask her more when Mateo comes over with our drinks, carefully balancing three of them. He sets them down on the table for stability then hands me my wine.

"For the hardest working physical therapist the team has ever had," he says as he sits down beside Vera.

I laugh. "Oh, come on. All I've done this week is wrap a few ankles."

"You're doing more than enough," he says to me and then raises his glass of wine. Vera raises what looks to be a dirty

martini. “Here is to you, Thalia, for your first week at work.”

“And here’s to your proper introduction to the city of Madrid,” Vera says before she clinks her glass against mine and takes a hearty sip.

I do the same and immediately know that Mateo probably bought me the most expensive wine in the bar. It’s a big, bold, smoky red, and it’s divine. My eyes flutter closed momentarily, my taste buds dancing, my body immediately relaxing.

“Vera was just telling me that you get a lot of shit when you go out,” I tell him, starting to feel really good.

He gives me a lopsided smile. “I do. That comes with the territory. Real Madrid territory. Back when I coached Atlético — even when I played for Atlético — I wasn’t hassled often. Maybe for autographs. But the fans...the *Madridistas*? They’re...what was that saying you taught me?” He looks at Vera.

“As crazy as an outhouse rat,” she says.

“*Si*,” Mateo says with a grave expression. “Crazier than an outhouse rat.”

“Sounds a lot like Man U,” I tell him. “Stewart couldn’t go anywhere without someone yelling at him over something.” The moment Stewart’s name leaves my lips, I immediately feel awkward. Like it’s a word I should have erased from my vocabulary, like it means something more than just my ex-husband’s name. It’s a word that still hurts.

Mateo seems to pick up on whatever vibe I’m giving off because he nods slightly, a sympathetic look shining in his eyes. “Luckily, there are some spots where we’re given some

privacy,” he says. “And I don’t happen to go out all that often as it is.”

“Which means I often have to go out by myself,” Vera says.

Mateo smirks at her. “By going out, do you mean watching Netflix by yourself?”

“Well, maybe Thalia and I will paint the town red whenever you feel like staying in.”

Mateo glances at me, raising an eyebrow. “Please don’t let my wife talk you into anything. She knows how important you are to the team.” He sits back in his chair, taking a sip of his drink while resting his hand on Vera’s knee.

“I also know how important it is to rest,” Vera says adamantly. “You always talk about how rest is as important as the work. I mean, hello, the whole country is built around siesta.”

“Siesta and rest is one thing,” Mateo says. “Going out with you is something else entirely. I’m barely man enough to survive it myself.” He smiles at me. “But, since we are about to go into the new season, there’s nothing wrong with enjoying ourselves for tonight.”

“Are you this strict with the players?” I ask him. I hate to keep bringing Stewart into my mind but I can’t help with the comparisons. Stewart was pretty relaxed with the team, which may have been his downfall on more than one occasion. A few times players showed up either drunk or with hangovers and the whole team suffered.

“I have to be,” he says. “I’m involved in every aspect of their lives. Even if I didn’t need to be, the boss would make it so. Jose believes in control, even though the players are free to

do whatever they want. They aren't slaves. But if it were up to Jose..."

"So what exactly do you know about them?" I ask.

"Their sleeping patterns. They are supposed to log their sleep details into an app every morning, though half of them forget. Their diet. What they did in their spare time."

"Please don't tell me you're asking them about their sex lives," Vera says with a scowl.

"No," Mateo says hesitantly. "But they also know that, uh, if there has been...more...fucking than normal, it could aggravate an injury."

I'm trying not to laugh at the way he said "fucking," but yeah, this is way more intense than my last job was. I guess if it creates champions for the most part, then it works.

"Poor guys," Vera comments, munching on an olive from her drink. "They're all young and in the prime of their lives, with all this fame and money to burn, and my husband has to make them cut down on all the fucking."

"I didn't say that," Mateo says. "I just mean..."

"So what do the players do on a Saturday night, since we normally don't have matches on Sunday anyway?" I ask him.

"They're at home. Most of them live close to Valdebebas. They're with family. Wives, kids."

"I feel so silly," I admit. "I feel like I should know all of this by now. Like I should know every player and who they are, you know? Like, deeply."

"Oh. Cut yourself a slab," Mateo says.

"A slab?" Vera asks with her brows raised.

“Yes,” Mateo says testily. “Cut yourself a slab. Like a slab of ham. Give yourself a break. Eat the ham.”

Vera stares at him for a moment with wide eyes until she breaks into a grin. “I don’t know if it’s the dirty martini, but, baby, you just made a lot of sense.”

I can’t help but laugh at his version of *cut yourself some slack*. “Okay, yes. I will eat the ham.”

After that, I change the topic away from work and to how Vera and Mateo met. It turns out they met when Mateo went to learn English at a business camp of sorts and Vera was an instructor. I want to know even more but then Vera changes the subject and suggests we go to one of her favorite bars, which is actually around the corner from my place.

It’s only eleven and the night is young as far as Madrid is concerned. We take an Uber there, to this tiny little bar that’s covered in Marilyn Monroe photographs and memorabilia. It’s dark and crowded but no one pays us much attention and we’re able to stand near the bar and snack on bread and olives and aioli. I can tell Vera is in her element in this divey sort of place, though Mateo sticks out like a sore thumb.

I have to wonder about them a little. There’s a major age gap between them — she’s all wild and he’s refined — and yet they seem completely and totally in love, in that way that makes you just a tiny bit nauseous. It gives me hope, actually, that maybe there’s still a chance for me out there.

But looking around the bar, I don’t feel all that hopeful. Yeah, a lot of guys are smiling at me, giving me the eye. But they probably don’t know how old I am, and more than that, I know they’re just in it for a fling. Not that I’m not — lord knows I desperately need one — but I still feel this emptiness when I think about the prospect. I feel like a brand new being.



On shaky legs, unsure of where she stands in this world now. I never thought that Stewart could have done so much damage to my self-esteem and self-worth, but he did. He took all my pride and confidence and power, and he removed them from me, brick by brick, until I crumbled.

Now I'm here in Madrid, picking up the pieces, and I don't even have a blueprint. I don't know where to start. I just know I have to.

*This is the very start of your new beginning, I tell myself. Cut yourself a slab and eat the ham.*

We don't stay at the divey place for long. Vera is astute and suggests that Mateo pick the next establishment. I'm fully prepared for Mateo to tell her the night is over, but to my surprise he picks a place.

It's not too far away from where we are, so we walk through the narrow, winding alleyways of La Latina, all of us a bit tipsy, my gait unsteady as my heels try to negotiate the cobblestone. Vera takes my arm, propping me up so I don't eat shit, leaving Mateo to wander ahead of us.

The bar we eventually come to doesn't seem like much more than a dark wood door among shuttered businesses. But after Mateo rings a buzzer and a man in a suit answers, I realize there is so much more to this.

We go up a narrow staircase and then meet a bouncer on the second floor. He nods at Mateo and we pass through a red velvet curtain until we're in a surprisingly huge nightclub that seems to go on and on.

"What is this place?" I ask, looking around in awe. It's pretty dark, everything is either mahogany wood or red velvet, the waiters are wearing tuxedos, smoke billows out from

cigars and cigarettes, and funky house music plays from the speakers.

“This is the last resort,” Mateo says. “Literally, *Último Recurso*. We come here because it’s controlled and we know what we’re going to get.”

Now that I’ve had a moment to look around, I know what he means. Everyone seems to be somebody here. Whether actors or TV personalities or sports stars or models, this seems to be the place they can come and have fun and not be bothered. Kind of like the Soho House in LA, albeit with more music and a European flair.

Mateo leads us over to a roped off area at the back, where a man in a suit promptly lifts the rope for us. There are a few velvet couches, and before we can even say anything, a man comes by, giving us a bucket of three champagne bottles, saying a few quick words in Spanish to Mateo with a little bow, then giving me a quick wink.

“What was that about?” I ask. “He winked at me.”

“Everyone is winking at you,” Vera says, reaching for the bottle. “Have you seen you? Hell, I’m winking at you when you’re not looking.”

I wave that off while Mateo says, “That’s the owner. He wanted to wish us good luck next week and that you’re a welcome addition to the team.”

I’m pretty chuffed at that. “Thank you,” I tell him. “I mean, you can tell him that when he comes by.”

“Don’t look so surprised. When new people are brought in, we usually see it as a good thing. Especially with the therapists.”

“Yeah, especially after Doctor Dumbass did that shit,” Vera says as she pours us all a flute of champagne.

“You mean Doctor Costa?” I ask.

“Vera,” Mateo chides her.

“What?” she says. “I’m just repeating what I read in the papers. I keep the stuff you tell me in the vault.” She makes a motion of zipping her lips.

I look at Mateo. “What happened?”

Mateo sighs loudly. “I really don’t want to get into it here. Not tonight. This is supposed to be fun.”

“Oh, so *now* you know what fun is?” Vera asks with a smirk.

“*Hablando del rey de Roma!*” a familiar male voice yells from behind me. I watch Mateo’s face break into a grin and then I turn around to see who it is.

It takes me a moment to recognize them in this environment since I’ve only seen them in either shorts or training gear, but Alejo Albarado and Luciano Ribeiro are standing on the other side of the rope, dressed like a bunch of models. The men in Spain really do seem to have a leg up, style-wise, on the rest of the world, and these two are no exception.

“We were just talking about you, *patron*,” Luciano says and comes over to us after the rope is lifted. He looks exceptionally dapper in a black blazer and grey jeans, a white v-neck t-shirt underneath that gives a hint of chest hair, and a shiny gold watch on his wrist. His dark eyes are warm, his brow black and low set, and he’s clean shaven compared to the scruffy version I’ve seen all week. His hair is black and thick and wavy, and lightly peppered with grey.

The Portuguese player is not just the captain of the team; he's thirty-seven, the oldest guy on the team, and maybe even La Liga. People have been whispering for a long time about whether he's got what it takes to continue and that this might be his last year. I guess we'll just have to see. Having gone over his records, he seems to be in top shape, aside from a shoulder injury in the past.

My eyes then go to Alejo. Perhaps I've been avoiding looking at him. I haven't had much interaction with him this week, which is good because there's something about this beautiful boy that makes me feel like an old pervert when I'm in his vicinity.

And right now is no exception.

He's wearing a black t-shirt that fits his body perfectly, hugging his broad swimmer's shoulders and long, lean torso, plus black jeans and black Adidas Gazelles on his feet. But despite his professional athlete's body, it's his face that I want to keep gazing at.

His eyes are a crystalline blue, like a glacier meeting the sea with just a tinge of green, and the way they look at you, framed by black arched brows, just brims with a type of intensity that's hard to put your finger on. It's like he's made of pure energy and confidence that radiates from every pore. And even though there's often a smirk on his lips, there's something in the depths of his eyes that remind me of an old soul, despite the fact that he's just twenty-three.

*It's okay to just look, I tell myself. He's young, he's gorgeous. He knows it.*

As if he can hear my thoughts, Alejo grins at me. His smile is breathtaking, making him look older somehow, the contrast of his white teeth against his tanned skin and the crinkles near

his eyes. “I did not expect to see you here, Señora Blackwood,” Alejo says.

I clear my throat. “Please, it’s just Thalia.”

“And it’s Señorita, if you’re going to use *that* term,” Mateo says, gesturing to the couch. “Now the both of you sit down and stop hovering, but you need to get your own champagne.”

Luciano eyes the waiter and gives him a nod as he sits down beside me, Alejo on the couch beside Vera and Mateo.

“No Señora? You’re not married?” Alejo asks me in surprise. “I could have sworn you were.”

I paste a smile on my lips. “Divorced.”

The word feels like a stone sinking in my chest.

*Divorced.*

Will it ever stop sounding so ugly?

“*Lo siento*,” Alejo says gravely. “I am so sorry.”

To his credit, he really does seem sympathetic.

“Thank you, but it’s fine. It’s for the best.” I straighten up, trying to look like it has no effect on me.

“It’s absolutely for the best,” Mateo says. “Just look at me. Had I not gone through a divorce of my own, I would have never found the love of my life.” He grabs Vera’s hand and kisses the top of it passionately. “The right person for you is out there.”

I exchange a glance with Vera, who looks annoyed. “Well, perhaps Thalia isn’t looking right now,” she says. “She’s got bigger things to think about. Like dealing with the likes of you boys.”

“That’s right,” Luciano says. “You’ll be married to the whole team in no time. Sorry, but I snore.”

I laugh and grab a glass of champagne. “I look forward to it. To settling in a bit more, not the snoring part.”

“You’re doing great so far,” Luciano says. “Even with Costa, how you say, micro-managing you.”

“*See?*” Vera says.

“Vera,” Mateo warns her.

“What? It’s Luciano who said it. *El capitán!*”

I look at Mateo and raise my brows, hoping he’ll let us continue since I really want to hear this.

He sighs, running a hand down his face, and gestures to Luciano. “You explain it. I have no part of this. I’m not here.”

“Explain what? That the doctor obviously has a problem that you hired Thalia?” Luciano nudges my shoulder with his. “No offense, of course.”

“A problem? With me?” I ask, my stomach turning into knots. What did I do?

I glance at Mateo, but he’s staring into space, quite purposely. I then look at Luciano, urging him to go on. “What problem?”

“It’s a long story, but I’ll give you the short version,” Luciano says, lowering his voice as a waiter drops off a bucket of champagne for him.

“Can I just interrupt and tell you that there is no short version when it comes to this guy?” Alejo says.

Luciano gives him a steady look before twisting in his seat to face me. “Doctor Costa used to be in charge of hiring all the

therapists, though now he just does the medical team. Mateo hires the physios. This is because the man is a misguided egomaniac. Costa, not Mateo. Maybe a little.” He makes a back and forth motion with his hand and eyes Mateo devilishly.

Vera snorts at that.

Luciano goes on. “Anyway, he started to make calls that the physios disagreed with, the players too, and some got fired. He thought I needed shoulder surgery when I didn’t — thank god Mateo intervened. This was years ago of course. It got to the point that Cris, you know, Ronaldo, made a clause in his contract that he could hire his own physiotherapist since the ones we were left with were the ones that Costa approved. No one trusted them.”

“So why is Dr. Costa still with the team?”

“Because he’s best friends with the boss,” Alejo says knowingly.

“He signed a long contract that’s up next year,” Mateo speaks up, his voice calm. “And yes, we don’t see eye to eye, and he doesn’t like the fact that I make the hiring and firing decisions now. But it was the best I could do. If it were up to me, he would be out of here.”

“As much as we’re at the top of the team, we still have to answer to someone,” Luciano says.

“Yeah, someone who would rather you boys not be out drinking so late with a game next week,” Vera points out.

“Probably not,” Luciano agrees. “But this one dragged me out.” He points his champagne glass at Alejo.

Alejo sits back on the couch, his long legs splayed in front of him, and gives Luciano a charming smirk. “Admit it, I

make you feel young again.”

Luciano lets out a hearty laugh. “You make me feel old the next day, *capullo*.”

“How is this for a leader, huh?” Alejo says to me. “Using such language in front of the lady.”

I raise my hands. “Please. I was part of Manchester United for long enough, I’ve heard worse, believe me.”

“Okay, fine,” Alejo says smoothly. “Perhaps the language is worse. We are the romance language, are we not? But you must admit, we are much better looking.”

He’s got me there. Alejo, Luciano, Mateo, and half the guys on the team seem like they’ve walked out of some photoshoot for handsome Spanish manly men.

“Yes, you are much better looking,” I admit.

“Careful,” Mateo says. “You don’t want this going to their heads.”

“Oh, it’s far too late for that,” Vera says, and then takes a champagne bottle out of the ice bucket. “Okay everyone, it’s going to go flat and we’ve got two more bottles to get through. Drink up, drink up.”

A bottle pops and the cork goes flying.



## CHAPTER 4



**I** can't take my eyes off her.

I know I probably should.

I know from the way Luciano keeps frowning at me, that perhaps it's a little noticeable. Though, if we're being real here and we take my reputation into account, I suppose I might stare at a lot of women that way.

But Thalia Blackwood doesn't seem to be most women. At least, not the ones I've met.

The moment I ran out onto the field and saw her at the beginning of the week, I knew she was going to be trouble. I don't have any problems having a female therapist, but someone like her might make things a bit difficult.

Luckily, for my sake, I got over it. She didn't even have a chance to touch me, didn't even come near me all week, but I have been watching her. Watching her adjust to the job, watching how she takes everything in with those inquisitive dark eyes. Thirsty for information, to succeed, to prove herself. In some ways, she reminds me of me when I first started.

The way I still am.

I'm watching her now as she sips her champagne, not quite relaxed around us yet. She listens attentively to Luciano speak, because everyone listens to Luciano and that's what makes him a good captain. Maybe I'm a little jealous, for no reason at all. She's sitting beside him, leaning in, hanging onto his every word. But Luciano doesn't seem to react to her the same way I do.

She is quite stunning. Gorgeous seems like too plain of a term for her, so stunning it is. Her nose is cute enough to bite, her lips glossy and pouty, her skin smooth and clear. She shines with beauty and her eyes shine with sadness. When I asked if she was married, when she told me she was divorced, I could see the pain ripping through her. My mother always said I had a supernatural knack for looking in deep, to see the things people try to hide, and with Thalia it's no different.

Perhaps her sadness is what makes her beautiful. It's all about the balance.

Either way, she intrigues me. I want to know her story. How she became so sad. Is it more than her divorce? Is it something else? Where did she come from?

Mateo gets up and announces he's going to the bar to get something else to drink other than champagne.

"Alejo," he says to me, a command to follow.

I do as I'm told and follow Mateo past the velvet rope and to the bar.

He leans against it, looking as debonair as ever, waiting for the bartender's attention.

"What are you having?" he asks me.

"A beer would be fine."

He raises his brow. “Vodka soda. You know you need to stay away from beer.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Mateo can be a little bit meddling when it comes to our lives, though to be honest I don't mind it as much as I should. It keeps me in check, and if anyone knows what he's doing, it's Mateo. I trust him. I've trusted him as a coach and as a friend since he joined the team two years ago, and he has led us to victories ever since.

As he places the order with the bartender, I say to him, “I have to admit, right now I feel a bit like a kid who has snuck out of the house.”

“And got caught by his father, yes?” he says. “All I'll say is you and Luciano are free to do whatever you want, and as long as you're with him, I trust you.”

“You don't trust me on my own?”

He smiles and gives a slight shake of his head. “Definitely not. Especially if you're with Rene. Then who knows where you'll end up.”

Rene Alba is our striker, and at just a few years older than me, he's as much of a troublemaker as I am. The media likes to print me as the womanizing ladies' man, but the truth is, it usually just looks like I am. Rene is the one who goes around breaking hearts. I'm just along for the ride. But I guess there have been one or two occasions last year where we've gotten pretty damn drunk — in the off season, mind you — and made the news. Who knew there would be such a reaction to climbing on top of the lion statue outside the parliament building?

“Thankfully Rene isn't here. I'll go to bed when the sun comes up. Don't worry.”

“It’s my job to worry,” he says, handing me my very unappealing vodka soda. “That’s why I’m the coach.” He narrows his eyes, examining my face. “Are you ready for next week?”

“Of course,” I tell him. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“First real game of the season. It sets the tone for the rest of the year, and nothing comes easy in La Liga. When we step onto the field in UEFA and the other teams see our badge, they cower. Bayern. Paris. Chelsea. They lose. When we play here in Spain, we’re no better than the rest of them.”

“We *are* better, though,” I tell him. “That’s just the truth.”

He puts his hand on my shoulder and squeezes it. “I can always count on you for your blind optimism, Alejo.”

“It’s not blind,” I tell him. “You’re the coach. The manager. You know what we’re capable of.”

“I know, I know. But the truth is, other teams are capable too. The difference is, when we play Sevilla, when we play Barcelona, when we play Atlético, they don’t cower. They just think, it’s *Los Blancos*, we can beat them. I just want you to go into the game thinking there’s a chance we can lose and that we must do everything in our power to not let it happen. We can’t get cocky.”

This isn’t the first time that Mateo has had a talk with me over being too “cocky.” The press say it’s my downfall, that I’m magic on the pitch, that I can handle the ball like no one else, like it’s stuck to my foot, and I can get it into the goal like a magnet.

But then I let it go to my head. I relax. I lose my edge. I know this about myself, but there can’t be a downside to thinking you’re the greatest, can there?

“We will win on Saturday,” I assure him. “It’s Sevilla and they’re on our turf. We have all of Madrid backing us. We will win. I will score the winning goal, you’ll see.”

“You know, even when I was your age, I wasn’t this confident,” he says, amused.

My chest grows tight at that. “I’ve overcome a lot to be here,” I tell him, my tone serious.

He nods, giving me a sympathetic smile. “I know you have.”

I don’t want to get deep, not now when I’m drinking. I gesture over to where everyone else is sitting. His wife Vera is animated, telling some story, waving her hands around. “What do you think about the new girl?” I ask him.

He doesn’t look impressed as he eyes me. “Thalia? Don’t let her catch you calling her a girl. She won’t take it lightly. And I think she’ll do just fine, once she adapts to us and how we are.”

“Can I ask you something?”

He shrugs. “Sure, why not?”

“Why did you hire her?”

Mateo blinks at me. “You have a problem with her?”

“Not at all. I’m just curious. It was a bold move. Pissed off the good doctor, that much is for sure.”

“Perhaps I *wanted* to piss off the good doctor,” Mateo says with a smirk as he takes a sip of his whisky. “And Vera talked me into it. You know we needed someone after Pablo left. Vera said we could make history by hiring her, and she was more than qualified. So I did it.” He tilts his head, studying me. “I don’t have to tell you to leave her alone, do I?”

“Leave her alone? I’ve barely spoken to her. In fact, I was planning on rectifying that tonight.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t.”

I do.

“I know you think you have no control over your charms, but you do. Try not to use them on her. Do not try and rectify *anything*. She needs to focus on her job, not some young hotshot player who keeps giving her the eyes.”

“I have not given her the eyes.”

I have.

So what?

“Besides,” I go on, “why aren’t you warning Rene about her? Or Luciano? She seems pretty captivated by him right now, he’s the captain, they’re around the same age...it makes sense.”

“I have warned Rene about her already,” he says. “And I don’t need to talk to Luciano. He’s nearly as old as I am, and he knows to make the right choices. Don’t mistake his friendliness for something more. And don’t mistake her doing her job for something more either.”

“Mateo, I’m appalled you’d even think of me that way,” I say before sucking the juice out of the lime and finishing the rest of my drink.

“Yeah, yeah,” he says as he walks back to the group.

I follow.

“Thought you guys left,” Luciano says as I sit back down.

“No, but we’re leaving now,” Mateo says, hovering above Vera. He holds his hand out for her. “Sorry, Estrella, party is over.”

She’s not going to like this.

“What?!” Vera cries, mouth wide. “It’s only...it’s only...” She pulls out her phone and looks at it. “It’s only one a.m. We haven’t killed the night yet.”

“No, because the night will kill us first. Come now.”

Vera grumbles. “This is outrageous, I tell ya,” she says as she gets to her feet. She looks right at Thalia. “I’m so sorry we weren’t able to kill the night together.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take your place,” I tell Vera.

To which Mateo frowns at me, taps his finger beneath his eye, and says, “*Ojo, Alejo. Ojo.*”

He’s watching me.

Well, not if he’s going to bed like the old man that he is.

“You’re in good hands, Thalia,” Luciano tells her. “We’ll show you the real Madrid. Vera is Canadian. She would lead you astray.”

“Hey,” Vera scowls at him, though her annoyance quickly dissipates with a yawn. “You’re not Spanish either.”

“Yes, I know. I’m Portuguese. It’s much better.”

“*Que te folle un pez,*” I tell him.

Luciano turns to Thalia. “But I speak perfect Spanish. I’ll translate. He says he hopes I get fucked by a fish.”

“Goodnight, you guys,” Vera says loudly as they walk away. “I don’t have to tell you to behave, do I?”

“No, Mama,” I tell her sarcastically. She sticks her tongue out at me in response. I’ve always liked Vera. She keeps Mateo young.

I watch as the two of them disappear and then turn my focus back to Thalia. “Please don’t feel the need to leave just because they did.”

She gives me a quick smile, her lips shining like a piece of candy. “Usually when the boss goes home, it’s a sign for you to go home.”

“That’s not the way it works in Spain,” I tell her. “You follow your heart, your passion, not orders.”

Her brows raise. “I see. The passion for staying out late.”

“Passion for *anything*,” I say, my voice growing husky. “What you feel from your heart, what you feel from your soul, it always comes first.”

“Listen to yourself, Alejo,” Luciano chides me with a roll of his eyes. “You’re acting like a Spaniard straight out of a mail order catalogue.”

“Want me to tell you to go fuck a fish again?”

“No, but I am going to get something other than champagne,” he says, picking up an empty bottle and wincing at it. “What can I get you, Thalia?”

“I still have some left,” she says, waving her glass that’s half full. “And I should probably call it a night.”

I can tell she wants to stay though.

“What can I get you, *Thalia*?” Luciano repeats.

She stares up at him, and I can see the war in her head over wanting to do the fun thing or the right thing, not realizing



they are both the same thing. “Another glass of champagne, if you’re offering.”

“Champagne or Cava? You’re in Spain. You want to do things properly?”

She laughs. “Okay. Cava, *por favor*.”

“Ah, she knows Spanish,” Luciano cries out merrily, doing a little jig. “Watch her, Alejo, she’ll be fluent in no time. Maybe she’ll be telling you to go fuck the fish, huh?”

I watch as he leaves. “Again, I must apologize for his language. A captain should know better.” Then I get up and sit down right beside her on the couch, closer than Luciano was.

She stiffens at my approach, her hands on her thighs, ballet-pink nails digging slightly into her jeans. Nervous, perhaps.

“Is this too much?” I ask her, studying her face closely. “I figure we’ll be working so much more intimately than this.” I pause, licking my lips. “I can hear you better this way.”

I don’t think I’ve been this close to her yet. I can count the faint freckles across her nose, the glitter in her dark eyeshadow. Her eyes — brown with slashes of faint green, like buds trying to break their way through spring soil — are wary of me and afraid to meet mine, especially at this distance. But I don’t back off. I want to see how far I can push it with her.

Finally she tilts her head to meet my gaze, and I catch a whiff of her perfume. Something soft that brings to mind fresh sheets and morning sunshine. In my head I get a vision of tangled limbs, and my balls tighten in response.

“Would you sit this close to your other therapists?” she asks, dead-on. Determination flits on her brow, her chin raised slightly in defiance like she’s daring me to challenge her.

I smile. “If you haven’t noticed, we Spaniards are very, how do you say, touchy feely. It’s something you’ll have to get used to.”

She blinks at me and then nods, breaking our gaze. “Duly noted.”

She sips her champagne.

“May I ask you something?” I say, leaning in an inch, my voice dropping low.

Her delicate throat bobs as she swallows. “What?”

“Are you happy to be here?”

Surprise washes across her brow. “In Madrid? Of course.”

“*Claro,*” I repeat. “But I mean with the team.”

She clears her throat. “Yes, of course. Why do you ask? Do I look like I don’t want to be here?”

“Well, you do look like you don’t want to be here right now. But I’ll give you a pass on that. I can be intimidating.”

A gorgeous, full laugh escapes her and she looks at me, trying not to smile by pressing her lips together. I feel like I should be insulted. “You’re not intimidating,” she says. “You’re just a football player.”

“I’m one of the best football players in the world,” I tell her.

“Maybe on your team, and you’re *one* of them.”

I stare at her, surprised she doesn’t agree with me. “You’ve never watched me in a game, have you?”

“I have. You don’t think I watched a million Real Madrid matches before I came here? Besides, I’ve seen you train all week.”

“So you’ve been watching me, then.”

“It’s my job to watch you,” she says. “My *job*.”

“*Si*, it’s your job. But do you like your job here? Or was it better in Manchester?”

Something dark and troubled comes over her eyes, not quite sadness, but something more complicated. It only makes me want to dig deeper. She has to watch me, then I want to *know* her.

“It’s too early to decide,” she says, taking another sip of her drink.

“But you’ve been making the comparisons in your head all week.”

“Well, how can I not? You’d feel the same if you were playing for a team and got transferred over here.”

“I suppose,” I muse. “But you know I’ve been with Real Madrid since I was eighteen. I joined the academy at fifteen. This team, this place, it’s all I’ve known. All I want to know, to be honest with you.”

“You wouldn’t be traded elsewhere, even for all the money in the world?”

“Not for all the money in the world.” I am adamant. “Madrid is my home. This team is my home.”

She adjusts herself on the couch, tucking a leg under the other, her dangerous-looking high heel pointing outward like a weapon. It puts a little more distance between us, but she looks comfortable as she assesses me. “I was going over your records this week.”

“Oh really? Are my school grades in there, too? I was awful at math.”

“It says you were born in Valencia.”

“This is true. But when I left, I left. Madrid is my home.”

“And your parents? Do they live there still?”

My expression grows tight. “My father is dead. My mother and my brother live in my house, near Valdebebas. This is home now for them. It’s a...what is the saying...a fresh start.”

Her face crumples and she lowers her drink. “Oh, I’m so sorry about your father.”

“Don’t be sorry. Surprised it doesn’t say that in the records. What else did they say?”

“That you’re prone to injuries due to you doing stupid shit.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Does it really say that?”

She shoots me a small grin. “No. But I got the gist of it.”

I shrug. “What can I say, I like to make risky moves.”

She stares at me for a moment, her smile faltering into something else, something cautious. “I believe it,” she says as she lifts the glass to her lips.

My head tilts as I observe her, words dancing on my tongue, propelled by a boldness that never seems to cease. “You know. If you weren’t my therapist, if we didn’t know each other as we do and met each other tonight for the first time, at this bar, you would be going home with me. That’s a guarantee.”

She coughs, nearly spitting out her drink, and looks at me with wide, blinking eyes. She’s even more beautiful when she’s shocked. I think I want to keep shocking her.

“You don’t lack for confidence, do you?” she says when she composes herself, her voice incredulous.

I shrug one shoulder. “I don’t lack for a lot of things. Though it does seem quite unfair to me that you’re off-limits.”

She shakes her head in disbelief. At least the sadness in her eyes is gone. “Alejo,” she begins, rubbing her lips together. “You’re a sweet boy, but you’re going to have to stop talking to me like that.”

I feel a flash of annoyance at her choice of words. She chooses to see me as a boy. Not Alejo Albarado, number twenty-eight of Real Madrid. A boy, and a sweet boy at that.

I am anything but.

“You think of me as a boy, not a man. Would you call a soldier who has gone off to war a boy? Because there’s a war every single time I go out on that pitch. A war I aim to win.”

She raises a brow. “That’s a bit, what, sacrilegious, don’t you think? To compare a soldier and a war to a football game?”

“You don’t know Spain very well then, because it’s sacrilegious to compare football to anything less than holy. This sport *is* our religion. We go to church on Sunday to pray for the game next week.”

“Be that as it may,” she says slowly, “I meant what I said. You can’t talk to me like that. Luciano or Mateo would not approve.”

“They never approve of anything I do.”

“Maybe there’s a reason for that.”

I stare at her, trying to see if there is room to play. But there isn’t. She’s serious, and I like her enough as a person to

not fuck things up going forward.

“I’m sorry then,” I say to her, hoping she reads me as sincere. I display my palms as a show of surrender. “I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable. I just tell the truth when I probably shouldn’t, and it gets me in trouble. Forgive me. Please.”

“Forget about it. It’s nothing,” she says dismissively, giving me a quick, tight smile. Then her gaze sharpens on me. “You do know how old I am, right?”

“Well. No. What does it matter?”

She brushes her hair off her face, rolling her eyes. “It matters. I mean, what really matters is that I’m your therapist. I’m also seventeen years older than you.”

I stare at her for a moment, thinking my English comprehension has gone downhill suddenly. Then I try to count. “I’m sorry, I told you I was bad at math. That makes you what...forty?”

She gives me a pointed look. “Yeah. I’m forty, Alejo. And you’re twenty-three.”

I knew she was older. I thought maybe she was in her early thirties.

“See,” she says after I don’t say anything. “Now you know.”

“Sorry I took so long,” Luciano says, his voice breaking the thin silence that had fallen between us. “I ran into Adriano.” He hands Thalia her glass of Cava which she takes with a big smile.

“Thank you. Who is Adriano?” She’s staring up at Luciano in such a way that makes me realize she wants nothing more

than to put our little conversation behind us.

Luciano glances at me, back at Thalia, and then at the seat I had been occupying earlier. He cocks a brow at me and sits down where I was before.

“Adriano Afonso plays for Barcelona,” he says eventually.

“Oh, of course,” she says. Then she cranes her neck to look behind her. “He’s here?”

“Yes, he’s with his lady in the corner over there.”

“Things don’t get weird when you see your opposition out and about and you’re all drinking?”

“What, you think we would brawl?” Luciano says with a laugh. “We are a passionate bunch, yes, but not like that. I play with Adriano when we’re on the national team for Portugal. He’s a good guy. But when he’s on the field playing against me, we are no longer friends.” He points his glass at me. “If I had to play against Alejo one day, it would be the same. No longer brothers.”

“You’re not on the national team for Spain?” Thalia asks me.

“No, but I should be,” I tell her.

“He’s right. He should be. I hope they decide soon,” Luciano says. “Maybe you’ll step up your game a little.”

“*Capullo*,” I swear at him.

The rest of the night doesn’t go on for that long. After some more chatting about the teams in La Liga, we all decide to call it a night. I ask Thalia if she needs an escort home and she looks completely terrified at the idea, assuring me she called an Uber for her short ride back to her apartment.

A million things are going through my head as my private driver picks me up. I'm thinking about Thalia. I'm thinking about the game on Saturday. I'm thinking about Luciano saying I need to step it up in order to make the national team. I know he meant it in jest, but even so it's enough for me to tell the driver to take me to Valdebebas instead of home.

I'll sleep there this week. Time to lose myself to the game and become a slave to the season.



## CHAPTER 5

### THALIA

“So how are things? I mean, really?” Helen asks me over the phone as Manuel navigates the morning traffic. It’s early, really early, but the air is already thick with smog and humidity, and the day looks to be a scorcher.

“Good, good,” I tell her absently. I haven’t talked to her on the phone since I got here, so when I saw she was calling this morning and I had the time, I decided to pick up. I owed her that much. I feel like I’ve been a shitty friend, even though I’ve been so busy.

“Good but not great,” she points out.

I laugh. “I don’t know, it’s only my second week. There are growing pains. Our first game of the La Liga season is tomorrow so I’m heading to the office really early to get a head start. I’ll stay overnight there too.”

She sighs with an air of nostalgia. “I remember those days, when you first started at Man U. You put in all the extra hours, always with so much to prove. Did you ever end up proving it?”

I’m caught off-guard by the question. “What do you mean?”

“You know. You were always bristling about with a chip on your shoulder about it being a man’s game. I hope you’ve gotten over that notion.”

*That notion?*

My lips flap together for a moment while I gather my words. “It’s not something to get over, Helen. It’s a big deal to hold this position, for any team, whether you’re male or female. But yes, I have to work harder to prove myself. Not to me. I know I’m good and I hold my own. I know how to read the body, and I know what my hands are capable of. Maybe my intuition about people’s bodies is deeper than most, I don’t know. But that doesn’t mean I have to stop proving myself to everyone else. It’s a man’s game and a man’s world, and I’ll be damned if I become someone people dismiss because of my gender.”

“Okay, okay, calm down. Sheesh, Thalia. You’re going to have a heart attack first thing in the morning, *feminista*.”

I am breathing hard and my heart is pounding. I guess I get riled up about these things but it really rankles me when Helen starts pushing those buttons. She loves taking on the debate that women don’t deserve to be paid as much as men because we’re the ones that have children.

*But not all of us have children*, I think, and the sick, dark feeling that I’ve been avoiding these last few months comes back into my chest.

Shit. Not now.

“Thalia?”

“I’m here,” I manage to say, feeling weak and dizzy, and I bring up my workbag and search through the mess to find my pills. I didn’t think I’d need to take one, but here we are.

“I’m sorry, was I too harsh?” she says. “Look, I just don’t want you to stress so much. Just do your job, that’s all. Forget about proving anything. You know, I talked to Stew yesterday...”

Ah fuck, I’m definitely taking this pill now. I pop it into my mouth and swallow it dry. Hopefully the Ativan will go to work soon.

“And he said some nice things about you,” she goes on, as if my complete silence save for my heavy breathing wasn’t a hint enough to shut the fuck up.

“Uh huh,” I manage to say. He better say nice fucking things about me, I was still his wife up until six weeks ago.

“He said he misses you.”

Oh boy. Not what I need right now.

“That’s great, Helen. Why are you telling me this?”

“I don’t know,” she says slowly. “I’m just...looking out for you. I worry about you down there. I...maybe when you get this out of your system, you’ll come back up here.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh come on, we know that this is just something you need to do, but you belong up here with your people.”

“My people? Helen, I’m from Washington State. If you want to talk people, staying with LA Galaxy would have been my people.”

“Okay, well maybe I miss you.”

“You could have just said that instead of bringing Stew into it. Why did you see him anyway?”

“He was over for dinner.”

Lord, I'm going to hang up the phone.

"Thalia," she goes on, "you know we have dinner together often. I can't stop being friends with him because he...because you divorced."

"Because he cheated on me repeatedly. You can say it. It's the truth. There would be no divorce if he hadn't done that and publicly dragged my damn name through the mud."

Silence. Manuel eyes me in the rearview mirror and then quickly looks away. I like the man, but conversations like this are perhaps a good reason to get myself a car soon and drive myself to work.

"Okay. Sorry I brought it up," she says in a clipped voice. "I just haven't talked to you since you got there, and I know you like to get locked in your head and push people away. I didn't want you to do that with me. Good luck with your game tomorrow."

"Helen," I say, but she hangs up the phone.

I sigh and throw the phone into the bag and then wait for the drugs to kick in.

It's not ideal taking anti-anxiety medication right before work, right before a big game, but I need it this time.

And as Manuel drops me off and I make my way through the building, I have to say I'm grateful for it. I thought I would be the only one here this early, but everyone is here already and the tension is so thick you could cut it with a knife.

I pass a few players in the glowing white hallways, and their smiles are either tight or full of nerves as I greet them. I go straight to my office and start going over a plan for the day. Basically, me, Doctor Costa, and the rest of the therapists will have a meeting in a bit and go over every player's profile, the

types of training they've been doing, workload, and discomfort. Then we'll go to our assigned players and follow up, adjusting the workload and training with Mateo and the trainers to any discomfort they are having.

Despite the nerves and the fraught atmosphere, we head into the physio room to settle into roles that are slowly starting to feel like second nature. I work on Luciano's shoulder because he was complaining of pain again there, and I do the goalie's hamstring with a steel myofascial releaser. Pretty sure he still doesn't like me.

It isn't until I'm done with them that David, one of the therapists, waves me over.

Alejo is lying on the table beneath him on his stomach, shorts rolled up to his extremely firm ass, and his legs are slick with the coconut oil we use to rub and massage. Alejo turns his head to see me approach and I give him a tight smile, trying to ignore the butterflies in my stomach at the sight of him.

Of course they aren't butterflies. Just nerves. Nerves because of the match, nerves because of the players, because of Helen and, yes, because of the way he was around me last Saturday at the bar.

I wouldn't admit this to anyone, but he actually got under my skin.

Just a bit.

When he told me that had we met in the bar, as strangers, I would have gone home with him...my body reacted. Yes, I nearly choked on my drink out of disbelief because it was totally out of left field, but it was my body that grew increasingly warm, like I was internally salivating at the

thought. I don't think I've felt any sort of pleasurable, wanting sensation like that for a really, really long time, so I guess I should take it easy on myself and be grateful that my lady bits are up and running again but — and this is a big *but* — that was extremely inappropriate.

Despite what I said, he *was* intimidating, too. Not in a bad way per se. Just in a way that I wasn't sure which direction he was going to go or how I was going to handle him. I'm not used to men being that forward with me, and even though I have dealt with some minor, let's say, inappropriate comments from players, it was never like that.

Not that he said anything that wrong. In his defense, if you played back the tape, you could say he was being hypothetical. Honestly, I'm not even sure what he was getting at. All I know is that it made me avoid him for the entire week.

Which is kind of hard when you're the physical therapist, but I had been able to stick to a certain amount of players while someone else took him on.

Until now.

“What seems to be the problem?” I ask David, keeping my eyes off Alejo's muscular, oiled thighs.

“Day before, you said dry needling?” David asks in broken English.

Ah right, I had been talking to another therapist about using dry needling in some cases, which gets a bad rep as being acupuncture, even though it works differently and that can be proven with science.

“Yes, I did,” I tell him. “I have a kit here. I used it all the time in Manchester.”

“He's complaining. He's stiff.”

*I bet he is*, I think, and I can feel Alejo's gaze boring into me.

"Here," David says, running his hand up Alejo's thigh and onto his ass. "I can't seem to..." He makes the motion of breaking something.

Lord. Okay.

"Sure, I can give it a shot," I tell David, even though I'm not happy about this at all.

Look, I've been doing this for fifteen years and I've manhandled every single part of women and men's anatomies. Groin injuries are surprisingly common, and you really need to get into that area to fix someone. I'm mature. I don't get shy. I don't giggle. I'm pretty much a doctor, in mindset if nothing else.

But for whatever reason, the idea of touching Alejo this intimately ... well, it has me feeling a bit off my game. Or maybe that's the Ativan.

*Smarten up and do your job.*

I head to the shelves where I've stored the kit, and take it out.

"Can I watch?" David says.

"*Please*," I tell him, perhaps a little too relieved that I won't be alone.

"Is this going to hurt?" Alejo asks, trying to look over his shoulder at me and raising his head.

I put my hand on the very firm plane of his shoulder and push him back down. "Only if you move. Stay down."

He grows quiet while I start taking the needles out. He glances again and then says, “You know what, I think I’m fine.”

“It won’t hurt. Just relax.”

“Relax,” he says. “You do know what day it is, right?”

“I mean it. Relax and tell me about the pain.”

He turns his head around so his head is down through the hole in the table. “It’s not a pain. It’s just stiff.” His words come out muffled. “Like a knot. And it’s not really my ass, in case you’re wondering. It’s like right to the left of it.”

I put the needles down and then run my hand up over his thigh, all the way to the curve of his ass cheek. I’m professional, but I’m at least allowed to admire the strength in his muscles and the way they feel under my hand. “Here?” I ask, pressing in the heel of my palm.

“Ah, yes,” he says through a groan. “That’s it.”

Oh jeez, please don’t tell me he’s one of those guys who makes lewd sounds throughout, because I’ve had those before and they aren’t fun. And the real problem is, I’d probably like Alejo’s lewd sounds.

They would match with the way he was looking at me on Saturday night, the way he stared at my lips as I spoke, the intensity in his gaze.

*Stop. It.*

I swallow hard, clear my throat. “It’s your fasciae latae. You should get some relief from this.”

I ask David to get me a cloth so I can wipe off all the oil, then I have to practically tuck Alejo’s shorts into his ass crack



so that I can work on the upper thigh where it meets his buttocks.

“Perhaps it’s better if I’m naked,” Alejo says.

He’s right.

In some ways it would be much better.

In other ways, it would be much worse.

But I can make do.

“This is fine.” I swab him with antibacterial solution before I put on latex gloves and pick up a needle. “Hold still. You’ll feel a twinge when I put them in, but it won’t hurt. Your muscles will activate and then relax.”

I push my fingers into the area, palpating the trigger points, and close my eyes as I search. I work better this way, shutting out the world and just concentrating on the muscle beneath my fingers, finding any sort of knot or irregularity. Sometimes it’s the size of a marble, other times a pea or even a needle head.

With Alejo I find a small knot right away.

“Okay,” I tell him.

“The needle is how big?” David asks me.

Seriously? He had to ask that out loud?

“Big enough.”

“How far do you push? Uh, put the needle in?”

“Today, I’ll do an inch.”

“An inch!” Alejo exclaims, raising his head.

“I said don’t move,” I threaten him. “Or I’ll make it four inches, which isn’t uncommon. Right into your femur.”

Alejo stills.

I place the rod against the knot, and with a quick tap, in the needle goes.

Alejo doesn't make a sound but his thigh immediately starts twitching.

This is a good sign.

David looks impressed.

Because Alejo only complained of some stiffness and the trigger points weren't that acute, it doesn't take long for me to do the whole area and then we're done. David goes off to have lunch, so it's just me and Alejo.

"So, how do you feel?" I ask him as he slowly turns over on the table.

"I don't feel the stiffness," he says thoughtfully, sitting up. "Maybe a bit lightheaded."

"That's probably from being tense during the treatment and lying down," I tell him. "But I'll get you some water."

I grab a cup and fill it from the cooler, then hand it to him.

Our fingers brush against each other as he takes the cup from me, his gaze locked on mine as he drinks. I'd like to say I felt nothing, that it was like passing a cup to David or anyone else, but that isn't the case at all.

Even though my hands were all over his thigh, poking needles into him, this one deliberate action of our fingers brushing against each other sent actual sparks down my spine, and it takes everything in me to suppress the shiver.

I look away, tucking my hair behind my ear. "I took it easy on you. I didn't want to mess things up with tomorrow's game."

When we have more time, I'll do it deeper."

Even though I'm looking away, I can *feel* the air between us thicken, and when I steal a glance at him, the corner of his mouth is quirked up in a sly smile.

"You'll be okay," I tell him, then reach out and give him a pat on the shoulder.

Rather awkwardly.

Oh boy. Just walk away.

I turn, and he says, "Are you having lunch now?"

I stop to look at him as he slides off the table. He's one of the tallest players on the team, standing at 6'1", and he dwarfs me. I stare up at him as he adjusts his shorts, and please god, don't tell me he has a hard-on. It happens — a lot — not really the fault of anyone, but I don't think I could handle it right now.

I keep my eyes locked on his, which is somehow worse. They have a way of looking into me that makes me feel he'd be hard to keep secrets from.

"I am," I tell him. "As always at this time."

"No, that's not quite true," he says as he smoothly reaches over and rubs his thumb against my shoulder. "Oil on your shirt. That's going to stain."

For a moment, the medication ceases to work and it's like I can't breathe. For those long seconds where he's touching me, I'm frozen in place, my pulse hammering away in my throat.

Then he takes his hand away and gives me an easy smile. "You're always at your office, eating in there. I see you get your food and take off, like you're a squirrel or some other cute, tiny, mysterious animal."

I find my voice. “A rodent, you mean.”

“I mean what I said. Come on. Come have lunch with the team. Get to know me. Get to know us.” He brushes past me and heads toward the door, pushing it open and pausing to look at me expectantly.

He’s right. I have been squirreling away in my office. There’s a big dining room upstairs by the buffet table and the kitchen where the team eats every day for lunch, but I guess I feel like I’d be intruding on something private if I sat there with them. I’m just not there yet in terms of being comfortable.

Perhaps it’s time I start getting comfortable.

I square my shoulders and follow Alejo out the door and upstairs to the second level.

Because I took a bit longer with Alejo doing the dry needling, most of the team has already finished eating, so by the time I grab my plate and go through the buffet (cooked by chefs, designed by dieticians) and sit back down, it’s me, Alejo, and Rene, the striker.

“Ah, you’re here,” Rene says to me, Alejo sitting beside him.

Again, like the rest of them, Rene is a handsome guy. He’s twenty-six, in the prime of his career, and he acts accordingly. While Alejo has this innate confidence that comes from someplace complicated, Rene seems to know who he is deep down. And who he is, is definitely a ladies’ man.

“Here I am,” I tell him, spearing my fork into the steamed asparagus I piled onto the plate. “Surprised?”

“*Claro*,” Rene says, and then looks at Alejo who is sitting beside me. “What did you say to convince her?”

“He called me a rodent,” I interject.

“No,” Rene says in shock. “This beautiful woman?” He jerks his thumb at me and stares at Alejo.

“I said she was like a *squirrel*,” Alejo says. “Like how they store nuts for the winter? I’m convinced she has stacks of plates and food hidden away in her office.”

“Ha, ha,” I tell him, biting off the end of an asparagus. They both seem to wince at that. “So, how are you guys feeling?”

“You mean about the game tomorrow?” Rene asks. He then shrugs. “I’m excited.”

“We’ll win,” Alejo says.

I eye him. “You say that so sincerely.”

He eyes me right back, his chin dipping ever so subtly so that he’s staring up at me through long lashes. Shit. I’d never noticed how long and black his eyelashes were. Why are men always so lucky with that?

“I am always sincere, Thalia,” he says. Then a smirk flits across his lips. “Besides, if you don’t believe it, who will? No one.”

“Quotes by Alejo Albarado,” Rene jokes.

“I am serious,” Alejo says. I watch absently as he moves his quinoa around the plate, and I am taken by his hands. I’m not sure I ever really noticed them before — there are many other things about Alejo that vie for your attention — but his hands have the same kind of quality that his eyes do. They seem to belong to someone older, someone capable and in control. Because I work so much with my hands, I sometimes view them as windows to a soul, or at least the health of a

person. Alejo's don't seem to fit with his easy persona. They are working hands.

"And how are you feeling?" Rene asks me, making me look away from Alejo's hands and to his face. He cocks his head. "You nervous? First game of the season for us, but first game for you with Real Madrid."

"Rene, don't make her even more nervous," Alejo chides him.

"I'm not nervous," I tell them. "I have been nervous, of course. You know what it's like when you start somewhere new. But I have faith in you guys winning the game."

"See," Alejo says, pointing his fork at Rene. "My enthusiasm is contagious."

"It kind of is," I say with a smile.

And I mean it.

After lunch, it's siesta time. Between the hours of one and three, Valdebabas turns into a ghost town, with the staff and players taking siestas before the next round of training, from the academy teams all the way up to the first team.

Normally I just work in my office (as much as I love the idea of napping mid-day, I'm not quite there yet), but while I'm in the kitchen getting some Pellegrino, I hear some noise from the game room.

I saunter on over there and poke my head around the corner. I haven't been here since Mateo gave me the brief tour. There's a bunch of couches for lounging, as well as an air hockey table, ping pong, foosball, a pool table, darts, and a basketball arcade game (you know, the ones you do at the fair and win prizes).

And that's where I happen to find Alejo, standing far away from the game and putting in shot after shot after shot right into the net.

He doesn't seem to notice me, so I take the opportunity to be a total sneak and watch him.

I mean, I *have* to watch him.

To see how his muscles are working.

It's my job.

And his muscles are working fine. He's still in his shorts and blue Adidas training shirt, his muscles rippling with ease with each shot. It looks totally effortless, though I can see a determination in his eyes that says otherwise.

It doesn't matter whether you call it soccer or football, the men who are at the top of their league have the best bodies in the world. The sport is relentlessly demanding year-round, and their bodies have to rise to the occasion time and time again. It's admirable to see how they work, how they coax their bodies into giving all they can. Their body fat is often less than ten percent, their muscles taut and lean and stronger than you can imagine.

These men are built like warriors ready for a never-ending battle.

Their endurance is staggering.

And a warrior like Alejo, he's pretty much in his prime. I can already tell that from now until he hits thirty will be the best years of his career, a time when the physical strength and endurance of youth couples with the mental capacity to stay driven, determined, and emotionally mature.

*He would fuck you like a god.*

The thought shoots into my head without warning, like someone else put it there, and now my body reacts like the traitor it is, my thighs clenching together to quell the throbbing heat.

And as if he could fucking smell me, Alejo turns ever so slightly and looks at me over his shoulder with a cocky smile.

“Did you get a good look or are you waiting for me to screw?”

My eyes widen. “Screw?” I repeat.

Did he hear my thoughts?

“Screw up,” he clarifies, and then before I can react, he’s lobbing the tiny basketball at my head.

My hand shoots out automatically, and I catch the ball before it slams into my face, my fingers pressing into the rubber.

Alejo laughs. “Good reflexes. Perhaps you’re a natural?”

He moves aside and makes a grand gesture to the game. “Want to play?”

I shake my head. “With you? I don’t think so.” I throw the ball back.

He catches it and then throws it in the air so it lands on his shoulder and slides down his arm to his hand, like a magic trick. “You’re afraid I’ll win? Or you don’t like games?”

“I like games when I know I have a chance.”

His eyes glitter with intensity as he gazes at me. “And you don’t stand a chance with me.”

I know what he’s getting at. It’s impossible not to mistake those words and that look for anything else.



And yet...

Something in me wants to stay. I want to play with him. I want to prove myself.

“Fine,” I tell him, raising my chin. “Let’s play.”

He grins at me, the kind of smile that makes his eyes crinkle and unleashes those butterflies in my stomach again. “Okay,” he says, and throws the ball back at me. I catch it as he says, “You’re up first. Ten shots each.”

I walk over to him, conjuring up some confidence. I played softball and tennis as a girl, and despite my size, I was actually pretty good at basketball. I used to play horse against my three brothers and won more often than not.

“From here?” I ask him, stepping up to what I think is an appropriate place to shoot from.

“Pfft,” he says from behind me. “Anyone can make the shots from there. Back up.”

I move back a foot.

“No, no,” he says. “Come to me.”

“That’s not fair,” I tell him. “You’re so much taller than me.”

He laughs. “That only counts in real basketball, not this one. You’re actually closer to the height of the net than I am.”

That’s not exactly true. I sigh and move back another foot. The ball is tiny, but so is the hoop and I’m pretty sure you’re meant to be playing it right up against the machine.

“This okay?”

He responds by mumbling something in Spanish.

“What was that?” I ask.

“Fine. If you *must*.”

The thing is, if I do score from here, it’s just going to look like it was only because I was closer than he was.

I end up shuffling right back until I’m standing just in front of him.

“Better, *si?*” he asks me, and with him looming behind me like this, I can feel his body heat. It doesn’t help that his already deep voice has taken on a huskier tone.

I swallow hard, totally aware that his presence is affecting me in ways it shouldn’t.

*Don’t dwell on it, I tell myself. You just need to get laid, that’s all.*

It’s true. It just can’t be with him.

“Better,” I manage to say. I take in a deep breath, hoping he can’t hear how hard my heart is pounding. I raise my arms and the ball, trying to focus on the net.

I shoot.

It bounces off the rim and back to us. Alejo reaches out and intercepts it before it has a chance to roll away.

“Concentrate,” he says to me. “Don’t be nervous.”

I pluck the ball from him and shake my ponytail over my shoulder. “Who said I was nervous?”

“I thought perhaps I make you nervous, standing so close to you.”

I give him a quick smile as my pulse accelerates. “Not at all.”

I try to shoot again, but this time the ball doesn’t even come close.

“I swear I’m good at this,” I tell him as I walk over to pick up the ball. I can feel myself getting flustered, not just because of him but because I hate to lose. It’s one reason why I never made a career of sports. I’m too hard on myself and prone to losing my temper and quitting out of frustration.

“I believe you,” he says as I walk back over to him. “You’re just doing everything wrong.”

I stop and put my hand on my hip. “Wrong?”

The tip of his tongue pokes through his teeth as he smiles. “Let me show you.” He makes the motion for me to turn around.

A wave of nerves comes over me as I turn around and step back into my position to shoot.

He comes up behind me and puts his hands — those large, warm hands — on my upper arms, moving me in place. “Just relax,” he says in a low, gravelly voice that makes my hair stand on end. “Let your body be loose. Let it be easy.”

“Loose and easy, that’s how you like it, huh?” I say under my breath.

“Loose and easy, tight and hard, I’m not too picky,” he remarks, and though his tone is light, there is definitely an undercurrent of desire in his voice.

*What the hell are you doing?*

“Stop overthinking,” he says, sliding his hands down my biceps and over my forearms until they rest at my wrists. “That’s your vice.”

“Vice? I have other, better vices than overthinking,” I tell him.

“Such as?” he says. His thumbs glide over the top of my thumbs. “Let them be loose.”

I try to let my thumbs be loose. I mean, how loose can your thumbs be, really?

I inhale through my nose and try to relax.

He’s not making it easier.

“I like red wine too much,” I admit.

“Who doesn’t?”

“I swear too much.”

“I swear in two languages.”

“I can eat an entire bag of sour candies in one sitting.”

“I can eat a lot of things in one sitting,” he says, and fuck me if that’s not innuendo. “Now look at the net and shoot.”

I do as he says.

The ball goes soaring right into the net, then rolls down into a hole as the electronic scoreboard starts tallying up.

“I knew you could do it,” he says to me.

I burst into a grin and scamper over to the machine, picking the ball up. I throw it to him and he throws it right back to me.

“Don’t lose the momentum, keep going. You have nine more shots. This time I’ll let you do it on your own.”

“Oh you’re letting me, are you?” I tease him.

He shrugs and steps out of the way.

I take shot after shot and in the end, I end up scoring seven times out of ten.

“I’m starting to think perhaps you were, how you say, *hustling* me,” Alejo says, stroking his chin.

I throw him the ball. “You’re up next.”

Alejo gets nine out of ten shots, which was to be expected, but still I’m glad I held my own against him.

“You should be resting,” Mateo’s voice booms across the game room, and the both of us turn around to face him. “You too,” he says to me.

“This is resting,” Alejo says. “Helps me relax. Why put a game room here if it wasn’t for this purpose?”

“I didn’t put it here,” Mateo says. He looks strung-out and worried, not the unflappable coach I’m used to seeing. I guess everyone reacts differently before game day. “Meet in the warm-up room in twenty minutes.”

And with that he disappears down the hall.

I look at Alejo, questioning. “Is he okay?”

“Mateo? *Sí*. He’ll be fine tomorrow. It’s always the day before where he seems to lose it.” He pinches his thumb and finger together in demonstration. “*Un poco*.”

“Thank god you seem to have it together.”

“How can I not be fine playing games here with you?” he says. “Besides, I have my superstitions.”

Now I’m intrigued. “Like what?”

“That’s for another time,” he says and starts walking toward the door. He chucks the ball behind him like an afterthought and then kicks it back with his foot.

The ball somehow arcs up and goes right in the net, the scoreboard lighting up.

He gives me a cocky, knowing smile, because he knows how good he really is, and then leaves.

## CHAPTER 6



**G**ame day.

I wake up before my alarm, not sure if I even slept a wink all night. Rest is important to us, enough so that Mateo has us logging our sleep schedules into a silly app, but I certainly can't sleep the night before a big game. I've seen the greats like Marcelo or Luciano conk out and I'm sure it helps them, but my heart races and I get too nervous to sleep.

I used to hate the way my nerves played up before games but Mateo taught me about controlling those nerves and turning them into energy. If I have nerves plus focus, then I can do what I need to do during the game. I can attack, assist, score.

I could probably stand to sleep in since the game isn't until seven p.m. but instead I get up and go about my rituals. I wasn't kidding when I told Thalia I had a few superstitions. The first one is that I stand on the balcony and face the field, saying a prayer that the trials we have learned on the practice pitch will serve us well in the game.

After that, every room I enter that day must be with the left foot, otherwise I have to make the sign of the cross three times.

I use my lucky deodorant which is three years old and only used on game days (it still works, don't worry).

Then I text my brother Armando and my mother and say **Hala Madrid.**

They text back immediately, having been waiting for it.

**Hala Madrid!**

Training is light to nonexistent on game days, usually just a warm-up if that, but even so I like to hit the pitch as soon as I can with my noise-cancelling headphones on and just run through the motions and get my head in the zone.

I get changed in my room, slip on my headphones and then head out the door.

I don't hear her coming.

I run right into Thalia who is holding a big mug of coffee, having just come from the kitchen.

The scalding hot coffee spills onto her shirt and arm.

“Ahh!” she cries out as the mug falls to the ground.

“*¡Lo siento!*” I tell her. “I am so sorry, so sorry.”

I whirl around to press my thumb against the electronic reader and my door opens. I grab her hand and pull her inside my room.

“I'm so sorry,” I say once the door closes behind us. “Are you burned? Are you hurt?”

She's staring down at her shirt and then glances at her arm, which is red. “Ugh.”

“Take off your shirt,” I tell her.



She glances up at me hastily, her brows scrunched together. “What? *No.*”

“You’re just going to wear that all day?”

“I need to run water on this arm,” she says, going over to the bathroom and running the tap.

She’s being bashful and stubborn, which is kind of adorable. I go into my bedroom and rifle through the drawers until I bring out a white match jersey from my early years.

“How is it?” I ask, going to her side in the bathroom. I peer at her arm in the sink. It’s more pink than red, and it’s not blistering.

“It’s fine,” she says, avoiding my eyes. “It’ll be fine.”

“I’m sorry I ran into you. I didn’t hear you,” I apologize.

“It’s okay. I was walking fast anyway,” she says and then shoots me a shy smile. Her gaze drops to my hands. “What’s that?”

“Put it on.”

“I’m not taking my shirt off here.”

I can’t help but grin at how she’s acting. “I’ll turn around. Did you even bring a spare shirt for today?”

“I’ll go talk to Mateo about it,” she says. “They must have extras.”

“For the game, *sí*,” I place the shirt in her hands. “Until then, here you go.”

Then I close the door so she can have privacy.

She’s in there for a long time. I’m about to tell her that I’m going to go leave so I can practice when she comes out.

My shirt is absolutely swimming on her and I wish for nothing more than to see her in just this shirt. No pants. No underwear. Just this shirt as she climbs onto my bed. Then I'd slowly peel it off of her, taking my time to explore her body and make her see that I really am absolutely good at everything. Especially fucking.

And I'd be especially good at fucking her.

"It's too big," she says, seeming kind of awkward.

"No such thing."

Her bra and other shirt are bunched up in her hand.

"Was your bra *en peligro*?" I ask.

I wasn't sure if she understood what I was getting at but she does. Her bra was compromised. Her cheeks go pink, and naturally my eyes drift to her chest where her nipples are hard and poking through the material. For fuck's sake, now I'm getting hard too, and these track pants leave nothing to the imagination.

She swallows hard as her gaze momentarily goes south. She abruptly looks away, as if the rest of my room is suddenly interesting. "I'll give it back to you when I get a change of clothes."

"Keep it for as long as you like. Though I'm not sure if it's clean or not."

She brings the collar up to her nose and sniffs. "It smells good." She shrugs.

"That's just my lucky deodorant."

Her eyes go to mine in surprise. "You wear lucky deodorant?"

“I’m wearing it right now. One of those superstitions I told you about. Now, I bet you have a lot of work and planning to do today. So do I.”

I head toward the door, and I swear I hear a sigh of relief from her. I guess she thought I had more nefarious reasons for bringing her into my room.

We head out into the hallway, and before we part ways she says, “Take it easy out there. Don’t train too hard. You need all the energy you can get for tonight.”

“Believe me, I can go all day and all night. Just call me your Spanish Energizer bunny.”

It sounds cheesy coming out of my mouth, but it makes her smile, so it’s worth it.



THE REST OF THE DAY PASSES AS IF IT’S HAPPENING TO someone else.

The noise-cancelling headphones block out the world, allowing me to zero in, deeper and deeper, until everything that I am is a narrow world of focus, and everyone knows not to disturb me.

I do shooting drills on the pitch, getting as many balls into the goal as I can.

I eat.

I warm up.

I get changed into the sharp navy suits we normally wear to the away games, but since it’s our first game of the season, it feels appropriate. We pile into the infamous bus that takes us to Santiago Bernabéu Stadium in downtown Madrid. The motorcade leads the way through the sunset, as the blocked-off

streets are lined with throngs of passionate fans, running alongside the bus and cheering us on.

But I don't see much of it. It's too easy to get swept up in the fans' expectations of you.

I only have expectations from myself.

My game day playlist plays in my ears. I did my drills to Led Zeppelin, I ate to Paul Simon, did my warmup to Deftones, and now I've got "Insomnia" by Faithless going, the last song, its eight minute-length cued to end just as the bus pulls into the stadium.

I'm hyped up.

I'm a beast.

A soldier on the frontlines.

A warrior stepping into battle.

I've got so much energy I feel like I could kick a million goals, run around the pitch a hundred times, and scream while I absolutely slaughter the other team.

I'm right where I need to be.

We pile off the bus, giving quick smiles and stern looks to the photographers waiting outside, then make our way through the lower halls of the stadium to the locker room.

We get changed and it's only then that I take my headphones off.

The world roars around me.

I glance at my teammates. Luciano is serious too, but gives me a wink.

We get into our warm-up gear.

Head out onto the field.

The stadium is still filling up, the excitement and energy visible, palpable.

We're only out there for fifteen minutes, shooting a few goals, getting our muscles ready and our head in the game, and then we're coming back in.

We get changed into our game kit.

The white uniforms for *Los Blancos*.

I stare at the back for a moment, as I always do, seeing my name and my number. Knowing all that I've sacrificed and worked for to be here.

Luciano gives us all a few words of encouragement and then Mateo stands in the middle of the room, dressed to the nines in his suit, his black hair slicked back.

"I'll make this short but sweet," Mateo says, clasping his hands around his back as he starts to pace. "Last year was good. Almost our best year ever. It wasn't easy, though. It took a lot of trial and tribulation to get to where we got. As a team we all had to dig deeper than we've ever gone before, and it paid off. But also, it doesn't matter what happened last year. It doesn't exist. *Poof*." He snaps his fingers and looks at each of us. "Just like that. Football holds no memory. It moves forward for us all, and it moves quickly so all that we have is the here and now. This game is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. We have to treat it like it's the first game we have ever played and we have to go out there knowing we'll do whatever it takes to win."

He clears his throat, a grave expression coming over his face. "This team is the best of the best and we are all honored to be a part of it. It was founded by the King of Spain. The

name *Real* means royal. And each and every one of you are the kings and princes of Madrid, of Spain, of Europe, of the whole world. And we're going to go out there and rise to our titles. We are going to put on our crowns and we are going to win! *Hala Madrid!*"

"*Hala Madrid!*" we all bellow in unison, the adrenaline pumping so hard through me it's making me breathless. Goosebumps erupt all over, my hair standing on end.

This is the best part of the game to me.

The moments right before.

When we're all ready to prove ourselves to the world, to be worthy of the titles we hold.

The energy is electric, like lighting coming out of our souls, illuminating the way forward, the way to win.

Luciano comes over, and we do our funny handshake and end with a high five.

I slap Rene on the back.

We all cheer each other on and then we're going up the stairs and out onto the pitch as *Los Blancos*, the warriors in white, while Sevilla steps out beside us and we walk side by side to the battleground.

The sound around us is deafening. The stadium is packed with 81,000 people, all of them cheering, either for us or for Sevilla, it doesn't matter. Unless you've been on this pitch, looking up at the stands around you, hearing this impossible, almost supernatural sound, it's hard to imagine and even harder to explain.

All I know is that it gives me faith.

I belong here.

We run out to the middle of the field and take our places while the refs go to the center circle with the ball.

Luciano and the opposing team captain, Jesús Navas, pick their sides and then the coin is tossed.

It goes in favor of Sevilla, but that's okay. They choose the goal. We get first kick.

I keep my eyes bored into Felipe Gual, a defender who goes out of his way to try and stop men like me. I stare at him until he knows that I won't be fucked with, that whatever he's going to do to me isn't going to work.

The ref makes the signal; the ball is kicked.

I'm immediately running as the ball ends up with our midfielder Toni Kroos and then it's coming at me. I'm in no place to go at the moment with Gual right there, always there, so I dribble for a bit until I pass it to Rene just before Gual slams into my side. I'm nearly knocked down, but I manage to spin on a dime and keep running to see the ball get intercepted just before Rene has it on lockdown.

I'm trying to calculate the goal in my head as I run down the side, going as fast as I can to get ahead of the play. Turf is being ground up in my cleats, there's warm wind in my hair, and my shirt is already soaked from exertion, nerves, and humidity. I run like lightning and I feel like lightning.

I know Gual and the other defenders are on me or watching me, so I need to do something to gain freedom. They know I'm running for the goal, so they're marking me and setting up an offside trap.

I suddenly turn, narrowly eating shit on the turf, and make a run toward the ball which Rene now possesses.

I can see in his eyes that he knows what I'm doing, throwing them off.

I run left.

Spin off of Gual.

Then run towards the corner flag.

Rene makes his way to the goal, and just before it looks like he's about to take a shot, he's blocked and I'm running like mad to make it there in time for me to get hold of the ball.

It's under my foot for half a second before I take the shot at the goal.

I have no idea if it's going to go in. I often have no idea. You just have to take all the shots you can and score by any means necessary.

The speed of this shot means I'm barely on one leg and falling as it soars through the air. My shins slide along the grass and I can't take my eyes off the ball as their goalie makes a leap for it.

The ball just squeezes past him and tucks into the back of the net.

“Goooooooooooooooooal!”

“Goooal!”

“Gooooal!”

“Hala Madrid!”

The stadium explodes with cheers, and I'm getting to my feet as Rene comes over to me, giving me a rambunctious hug, jumping up and down.

I can't stop smiling.



I did it.

Every goal feels like a dream, like the best feeling in the world, but the first goal is something really special.

This is the moment I live for and will continue to live for.

My purpose and my calling.

I make the sign of the cross and kiss the RMCF badge on my shirt and then I'm back into the game, the goal pushed to the back of my mind while the adrenaline is still surging through me, looking for a place to go.

I'm running, watching the ball as it goes down to the other end.

I'm trying to catch up, to help get it away from their possession.

Luciano steals the ball but he's in a tough spot.

It comes toward me but I'm in a tough spot too.

I'm running for it but so is Gual.

I almost have it.

Almost there.

I block out the thundering sound of cleats and the heavy breathing and the roars of the crowd.

I only see the ball.

The world fades away.

I go for it.

Then I'm hit.

*Hard.*

Gual has gone into a sliding tackle a step too early so it's not his feet that knocks me off balance, it's his shoulder slamming into my shin at full force.

I feel my leg bend inward and hear an inner *pop* as pain wallops me from the side.

I'm down.

My leg is on fire and I can't move it.

I bite down on my tongue to keep from screaming.

## CHAPTER 7



**A**t first I thought I was hallucinating. I had been so overjoyed when Alejo scored the first goal that my head and heart were in another place entirely.

And then it happened so fast.

Felipe Gual went into a sliding tackle and his shoulder slammed right into Alejo's left knee just as he was running for the ball.

Alejo went down and immediately started trying to touch his knee.

I knew from the games that I had been watching on YouTube and the times I'd seen him play against Man United, in person, that he's not the type to throw dramatics and cry. This was real pain, and this was a real, serious injury.

I wait for a moment, watching Mateo stalk off across the field while yelling at the ref, then I see Dr. Costa going for it, so I follow along with my medical bag.

Even with my focus one hundred percent on Alejo, there's no feeling like walking out onto a football pitch in the middle of a game. I'd never had to do that here in this stadium, and the energy is quite indescribable, even if it's only a fraction of what the players experience.

I go to his side and our eyes meet, and I realize how much pain he is in and how hard he is trying to hold it together.

Thankfully it's easy to see the problem right away.

His left patella has been dislocated laterally, to the outside.

It's visible to an untrained eye, let alone me.

And he's in a tremendous amount of pain because until we get that kneecap back in place, his leg is locked.

Dr. Costa as well as another physician, Dr. Suez, are examining him, while I kneel beside Alejo's head, just to let him know I'm here, to hold him because I know what we have to do. We have to gradually reposition the leg and get the patella back in place, and we're going to have to do it now.

Dr. Costa gives the orders and Alejo grabs onto my hand.

He gazes up at me with such pain it nearly breaks my heart, but there's something else in his eyes that I don't expect to see. A humbleness. A gratefulness. For me.

I don't think I've ever been looked at like that, not in this job, not in my marriage.

I let him hold on tight as they slowly stretch his leg out, inch by agonizing inch, until the patella slides back in with a click.

Alejo groans in relief, closing his eyes as his head rests into the grass.

“*¿Necesitamos una camilla?*” Mateo asks as he hovers above, Luciano beside him, and I believe he's asking if he needs a stretcher.

“*No. Podemos ayudarlo a caminar,*” Dr. Costa says.  
“*¿Listo, Alejo? Uno, dos, tres.*”

Alejo nods and sits up, and they help him to his feet, Mateo under one arm, Dr. Costa under the other. Together they make their way across the field, Alejo limping but otherwise able to put pressure on his feet and move his legs with full mobility, which is a good sign.

“Take care of him, Thalia,” Luciano says with a nod.

“I will. You take care of the game. Make sure that wasn’t for nothing.”

“*Hala Madrid!*” he says and then turns around and jogs over to the ref.

I head down the stairs back under the stadium and over to the locker room. Alejo is sitting down and he already has ice on his knee. The doctors are talking about an MRI and getting him examined right away. Dr. Costa glances over his shoulder at me and practically sneers.

“What are you doing here? You should be ready to treat the other players. We can handle this.”

“I was just...” I start but Mateo gives me a nod.

“Come on,” Mateo says, putting his arm around my shoulder and leading me out of the locker room. “I need to get someone else in the game. Alejo will be fine.”

We go back up the stairs and onto the field and Mateo leans in close and says, “Sorry, it was easier if you weren’t there. I need the doctor to focus on Alejo, not his, how you say, pissing contest with you. It is a pissing contest, is it not?”

I sigh and run my hand over my brow. I can’t tell if I’m sweating out of worry or because it’s a hot night. “Yes, it’s a pissing contest.”

“Funny how pissing can be used in so many different ways,” he muses. Then he slaps me on the shoulder and heads over to the bench to bring a player out onto the field.

I go beside David, and we sit down and try to watch the rest of the game.

Even without Alejo, Real Madrid ends up winning 3-1.

It’s bittersweet.



THE NEXT DAY I’M AT WORK BRIGHT AND EARLY. ALEJO IS resting in his room upstairs while we (meaning the rest of the medical team, Mateo, and Jose, the club president), are gathered in the physiotherapy room.

Dr. Costa starts rattling something off in Spanish until Mateo clears his throat and shoots him a look. “Not everyone here speaks Spanish,” Mateo says.

Oh, if looks could fucking kill. The doctor glares at me like only a Spaniard can.

“The MRI results are promising,” Dr. Costa says bitterly, and I know that the bitterness in his voice is all because of me. “The depth of the groove, the way the patella scraped along the bone as it popped out, it’s something we can work with. That said, there are some things to consider, like the likelihood of it happening again now that there’s a groove. I might recommend surgery.”

“Surgery?” Both Mateo and I say at the same time. “Absolutely not,” Mateo adds. “That’s a worst-case scenario.”

“The boy is young and I’ve seen him play. He can be reckless. Who is to say this won’t keep happening? He doesn’t

care about himself out there. In the moment, he just wants the goals.”

“He’s in the prime years of his career. Right now. I’m not subjecting him to surgery,” Mateo says. “It will cost us the whole season.”

“Jose,” Dr. Costa says to the president imploringly. “I’m sorry to say but in my medical opinion, it’s a viable option. Operate on his knee now, when he is young and able to spring back, and you’ll have him for years down the road.”

“We need him *now*,” Mateo says to Jose. “And down the road. So why rush into something drastic?”

Jose is a short man, thin as a wisp, with gold-rimmed glasses, grey hair, and a black mustache. He doesn’t smile as far as I’ve seen, and he seems to take everything very seriously. Which I guess is a necessity if you’re the president of the richest football club in the world.

He nods, seeming to mull it over. Both Mateo and Dr. Costa are battling for dominance here, and honestly, I’m on Mateo’s side one hundred percent, and that’s got nothing to do with how I feel about Dr. Costa.

“How long is he expected to be out?” Jose asks eventually. “Let’s just play it by ear for now.”

Mateo exhales in relief.

Dr. Costa shrugs. “I don’t know. It will depend on his physical therapy. Normally I would say three weeks, but since he can’t wear a knee brace during the game, then I would double it. Don’t put him out until he’s one hundred percent. Six weeks. Maybe more.”

“Shit,” Mateo swears, making fists in his hair. “He might not be back for *El Clásico*.”

“Or he may be. Like I said, it depends on the therapy.” Doctor Costa looks over his shoulder at the team, completely avoiding me. “One of you will step up and take on Alejo, giving him specialized treatment.”

“Actually, I think Thalia will be the right person for the task,” Mateo speaks up.

My eyes widen but I don’t say anything. I just raise my chin and nod. “*Claro.*”

Jose peers at me. “Picking up some Spanish already?”

“Are you sure?” Dr. Costa asks Mateo, but Mateo gives him a smug smile.

“Absolutely. You can handle it, right, Thalia? You certainly handled the same with Wayne Rooney.”

Actually, it was me and another therapist in charge of him back at Man United, but I just nod. “It would be my pleasure.”

Now I’m not sure if Mateo is giving this to me because he believes I would be the best at it or because it pisses off Dr. Costa, but I’m not going to argue with him.

Even though, really, the idea of working so closely with Alejo for so long should have me a bit on edge. But, at the moment, none of that matters. In fact, it seems silly compared to the big picture. Alejo needs to get his body back into working order, so he can continue to help Real Madrid — and himself — succeed, and I’m going to go in to this with determination and resolve, doing whatever I can to help him achieve that.

“Okay, whoever,” Jose says with a wave of his hand. “Let’s just check in a few weeks from now and see how it’s going. If it’s slow or iffy, he’ll get the surgery.”



And I'm going to make damn sure that's not going to happen.

"She'll have to start right away," Dr. Costa says, as if I'm not here.

"Yes," Jose says, nodding at me. "Go upstairs to Alejo and get started on him."

"Uh," I say, and clear my throat. "With all due respect, sir, Alejo was just injured last night. He's been through a lot of trauma, mentally and physically. He needs to rest today. He definitely needs to keep sleeping. Otherwise we'll be starting with more work against us."

"Fine, fine," Jose says as he walks away and out the door.

The other therapists look at me. Not in an envious way — after all, they all have people they look after, and we're only going to get more injuries as the season goes on. But they're looking at me differently, that's for sure.

I'm remembering what my father told me once when I had been dumped by my boyfriend a week before my final exam for my Master of Science in Physical Therapy. He sat me down and let me cry and told me, "If you're going to do big things, you can't let the small things matter."

He's right. It doesn't matter what the therapists, or Dr. Costa, or anyone thinks of me. I know what I have to do. I have a goal.

To heal.

"Mateo," Dr. Costa growls. "Can I see you for a moment?" He then stalks off to his office.

Mateo runs his hand over his face in exasperation and then follows.



THE MOST IMPORTANT THING RIGHT AFTER AN INJURY LIKE THIS is to treat the inflammation at the spot. The doctors already have a knee brace on Alejo, and last night they treated it with plenty of ice and anti-inflammatories. He's been resting all day.

My job as the first step of treatment is to help get that inflammation down.

Alejo makes his way to the physio room without any support.

He looks awful. Dark circles under his eyes, hair greasy, his leg puffy on either side of the heavy-duty knee brace he has on.

"What are you doing?" I say to him, rushing over to his side and putting his arm around my shoulder for support.

"I'm fine," he says, smiling down at me, though he's trying not to wince.

"You're not fine. You should be using the crutches," I tell him, pressing my hand into his very warm, firm chest.

"You're my crutch then," he says as I lead him over to the table.

I lower it down so it's easy for him to get on and lie down, then I move down toward his leg, rolling his shorts up his thigh.

"Okay, I'm going to take off the brace," I warn him. "It might feel weird without that pressure around it."

I undo the brace and let it drop open.

I try not to gasp, but I want to because his knee looks like a mess. It's back in the right spot, thank god, but it's bruised and swollen and ugly.

“*Mierda*,” he swears, and I glance up at him. He's staring at his knee in horror. “It doesn't feel as bad as it looks.”

“Well, that's good,” I tell him. “This massage will help drain it, move that inflammation out of there where it's gathered. That's all we'll do for today. Start you off slow. You've been through a lot.”

I get a bit of coconut oil out of the jar and start to gently massage his upper thigh so that it will relax the muscles around the patella. “Does this feel okay?” I ask.

“*Sí, sí, sí*,” he says quickly, his eyes closed as he rests his head on the table.

A silence comes over us as I concentrate on his leg and eventually make my way to the knee, massaging up in a J-like motion.

Alejo hisses, his features contorted.

“Sorry,” I say, letting my hands fall away. “Too rough?”

“Normally I like it rough,” he says through gritted teeth. He opens his eyes to look at me and gives me a strained smile. “But right now, perhaps a gentle touch.”

I skirt over the innuendo, even though I'm secretly glad to hear it. Means that he's feeling well enough to joke.

I mean, these *are* just jokes, right?

“Tell me if the pressure is too much.”

I continue to work at it, my touch light.

“Did you see me score?” he asks after a few minutes go by.

“Of course. It was a beautiful goal.”

He laughs. “It was an ugly goal. A scrappy goal.”

“But a scrappy goal is still a goal.”

“*Sí, sí,*” he says. “And I know if I don’t make the scrappy goals, I won’t make any. You take the shots at all costs.”

“Kind of sounds like a life motto.”

“*Sí.* Absolutely. We’ve both taken all the shots at all the costs.”

I pause for a moment before I begin again. “You say that about me like you know it.”

“*Claro,*” he says, glancing at me briefly. “Of course you have. You are here. You don’t end up here without a lot of risk.”

I shrug lightly. “I guess so.”

“Then again, I don’t know anything about you. Perhaps you’d care to enlighten me.”

I give him a quick smile. “You want to know about the skeletons in my closet?”

He frowns and gives me a funny look. “You have skeletons in your closet? Are you serious?”

I let out a small laugh. “Not literally, silly.”

“*Bobo.*”

“What?”

“*Bobo* is Spanish for silly. It’s a silly word, no? So now you know more Spanish. You might even know a sentence.”

I’m already smiling because I can answer him back. “*Claro, bobo.*”

He grins at me, and the pain and fatigue on his tanned face seems to melt away.

It's a smile that has that same effect on me.

I'm melting inside.

Just a little.

Just enough.

"You've got it," he says. "So back to these ghosts. No ghosts. Just a saying?"

"It's *skeletons*," I tell him. My voice sounds tiny, maybe because my heart is going fast and my stomach is doing backflips. I need to get my body back under control ASAP. I clear my throat, focus on the massage. "It means that you have something to hide in your past."

"And do you? Have something to hide?"

Nothing that he would understand.

"No," I tell him. "That doesn't mean life has been easy."

"*Sí*, but that's the same for everyone. No one has it easy, even those that pretend or seem like they do." He tilts his head as he studies me. I can feel his intense gaze on my face, scrutinizing me.

"You have something, though," he says. "I would like to know more about it."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Something you keep close to your chest. Something that makes you sad."

I can feel my throat getting thick. "Well," I say, exhaling slowly. "I did just go through a painful divorce."

“And a public one,” he says.

I look at him sharply. “When we met, you didn’t know I was divorced.”

“No, but I do now, and I’ve been reading about you.”

Oh god. For some reason I don’t want Alejo knowing anything about that. It’s so embarrassing.

“Uh yeah?” I say uneasily. “What about?”

“What a *cabrón* your ex-husband was.”

I can’t stick up for Stew. At one point I would have tried to, just because that’s what marriage does to you. It makes you become a part of someone until you can’t recognize yourself anymore, until all you see is the other person. In good marriages, that’s a godsend. In bad marriages...it makes you realize you’ve lost yourself and you have no idea how to get your soul back.

For the longest time, I stood up for Stew, even with all his awful, *awful* wrongdoings, because he was still a part of me. He was a man I loved, and love doesn’t just disappear because someone decides not to love you back. It still survives and exists until you stop feeding it. But that can take time. For me, I don’t think it truly stopped until I signed those divorce papers.

That’s when I stopped feeding it.

“He is a *cabrón*,” I admit.

“I would never do that to you,” Alejo says, his voice impassioned. He’s gazing at me in such a way that I actually believe him.

“I think all men say that,” I say.

He looks a little ticked off. “I should be happy you’re referring to me as a man, not a boy.”

“Sorry,” I tell him. “I guess I’m still bitter.”

His brow relaxes. “I don’t blame you. When did you know?”

“That he was cheating on me?”

“*Si.*”

“Which time?” I ask with a sour laugh.

“I don’t know.”

I can see Alejo is just curious, and I’m sure he already read all about it, so there’s no use pretending it didn’t happen.

“He, uh, I guess started up an affair two years ago. She’s a social media star. You know, one of those influencer types. Much younger than me.”

“But not as beautiful,” he interjects.

I try not to feel flattered. “I suspected something, but I wasn’t sure what. It didn’t feel like he was away or sneaking around, but we were both so busy and you forget to check in with each other. Maybe it was my own fault too, you know? I was lazy about our marriage and we had been dealing with a lot of problems already that I had been trying so hard to bury...maybe I neglected him.”

“Don’t blame yourself.”

“I do. But it depends on the day of the week. I keep circulating the blame. Anyway, I should have caught on and I didn’t.”

“But the media did, yes?”

“*Si*,” I tell him. “The media did. A bit later. And then two of his affairs came out and that was...” I trail off, closing my eyes momentarily.

It was something I didn’t think I would survive.

Not just the fact that my beloved had cheated on me.

That made me feel small and insignificant.

Made me disposable and weak.

It broke my fucking heart.

No, it wasn’t just all of that.

It’s that the media, those wonderful tabloids that had left me alone for most of my career, suddenly decided I was to blame. They couldn’t blame Stew, they loved Stew. They couldn’t attack the man in charge of their beloved team, so they attacked me.

I was dragged through the fucking mud.

I exhale loudly. Taking my time to calm my heart. Then I glance at Alejo shyly.

“I guess the silver lining is he’s back with the woman from the first affair. So I suppose it wasn’t for nothing. He broke my heart but...”

Alejo purses his lips and thinks for a moment. “Fixed your vision.”

I consider that and nod at the awfully poetic phrase. “Yes. He broke my heart and fixed my vision.”

“And yet,” Alejo says thoughtfully, “that’s not where all your sadness comes from.”

“Maybe the sadness is from realizing I never really got the life I wanted,” I tell him. The words surprise me, and I wish I



could take them back, but it's the truth. The cold, hard truth I've never wanted to admit to anyone, not even myself.

I start wrapping his knee back up in the brace and shrug. "Anyway, fun time is over. We'll continue another, better conversation next time." I finish it up and step back, hands on my hips. "Need assistance going to your room?" I jerk my head to the crutches stacked in the corner.

He slowly sits up and carefully swings his legs over the side, frowning at me.

"This has upset you. For that, I am sorry."

"It hasn't upset me," I tell him. "I'm just tired. I'm sure you are too. Did Dr. Costa give you your orders for the rest of the evening?"

He's still watching me. His gaze is alive and probing, and I want nothing more than for him to drop this and let me go, to be free. Let me breathe. I never meant to confess so much to him and I feel like our relationship is now lopsided.

Then he nods. "*Sí*. He did."

He cautiously gets off the table and then walks slowly across the room.

"You sure you don't want support?" I ask him.

"Are you offering yourself or is it a crutch?" he asks, stopping by the door.

*Offer yourself.*

*Offer yourself!*

"A crutch," I say meekly.

"Then I can manage by myself." He pauses. "*Que tengas una buena noche, Thalia.*"

## CHAPTER 8



at the flan, Alejo," my mother says to me, her face stern but I know it's two seconds from crumbling if I don't in fact eat the flan.

“E “Mama,” I tell her. “You know I have to watch what I eat.”  
“Well, you don’t have to watch now. You’re a cripple!”

This is how dinner has been every night this week.

Even though I spend a lot of time at Valdebebas, since the injury happened I’ve been at home more often than not.

To be honest, I missed my family. They are everything to me. And when you’re feeling not your best and you’re hurt and injured, you need to be around the ones you love and the ones that love you.

So I’ve been at home, having homecooked meals every night, meals I’m sure Mateo would be appalled at, full of meat and sugar and fat. My house is huge and sprawling and worth millions, located not too far from Valdebebas, so naturally I invited my mother and brother to live with me when I bought it a few years ago. They had been living in Valencia still, though I had gotten them a nice house as soon as I was able to.

But I needed them here.

When you lose a father, you realize how important the rest of your family is.

How you have to keep them near you, always in your sight.

Although you can’t be *that* close.

My mother lives in a guest suite with her own entrance, and my brother lives in the guest house, which is separated between the main house by a pool and a small football pitch, so we all have as much privacy as we need, which is good

when I've brought women by in the past, or had Luciano or Rene over for the odd drink.

My mother slides the flan toward me. "Eat it."

Armando giggles. "Yeah, eat it."

I roll my eyes at him. "You stay out of this. You're supposed to be on my side."

Armando shrugs and spoons his own flan into his mouth. He's a good kid, though he does have some troubled tendencies. He's not been doing well at school, and my mother is trying to figure that out, which results in a lot of fighting. I think perhaps he needs to be on some sort of regulating medication for his mind but my mother is old-fashioned and doesn't believe that men need that sort of help.

Not that she would go for that for herself either.

After my father died, things drastically changed for all of us, and we all did our best to bring ourselves out of it. I became the father figure of the house, which made things more difficult when I went off to the Real Madrid Academy. I swore to myself I would make it worth it, that I would become the best so that we could have the best life. I could make things right even without our father.

And yet, none of us have really talked about our father since his death.

I know it's not normal.

I know it's not healthy.

It's just been swept under the rug, like he never existed and it never happened, and I fear for the day that the dam breaks and it all comes out, as necessary as it is.

For me, it's already coming. Not a raging river, but in trickles. I suffer from nightmares from time to time, of seeing his body hanging there, the way his ankles looked so weak, the thin, ratty socks he was wearing.

If I think about it too long and too hard, I start to die a little inside.

But I've got bigger things to worry about than what happened in the past.

I sigh and take a spoon to the flan. I have a sweet tooth that I don't like to let loose, and I know one bite will ruin me.

Shit. It's good.

"Well?" my mother asks as she stands there, leaning on the kitchen table like a cop in the middle of an interrogation, eyeing me suspiciously. "Do you like it?"

"I *love* it," I tell her, and proceed to eat the rest up. I swear the sugar does something to my brain.

"You're going to get fat now," Armando says smugly.

"You wouldn't want that," I tell him. "Who is going to pay for this house if I get fat and can't run and score goals?"

"I think you have enough money to last forever," Armando says.

He's not wrong. I'm already worth twenty-five million dollars. Luciano is close to a billion. There's a lot of money to be made here, while you still have a chance to make it.

It's also something I try not to think about.

"I won't be injured forever," I tell him. "Each week I'll be doing more training, enough so I can eat all of Mama's food."

“Good,” she says, sitting down with her own flan and a cup of coffee. “You sure you don’t want coffee?”

I wave the offer away. “A good night’s sleep is all I need.”

For now, I’ve been taking it fairly easy. During siesta, when the players are resting in between the training sessions, I go over to Valdebebas and Thalia works on me.

I have to admit, it’s the best part of the day.

Just seeing her face.

That smile.

Having her healing hands on me.

Slowly peeling away her layers and discovering who she really is.

I still don’t know the source of her sadness. I know the source of her anger and bitterness, that’s no surprise. But I want to know the parts she keeps hidden from me.

I want her to know that I’m someone she can invest in. Someone she can trust.

A friend if nothing more.

But I would be completely lying if I say I don’t want something more.

She’s made it clear on more than one occasion that she’s not interested in me, and I know for a fact it’s against the rules of the club.

She’s off-limits.

The forbidden fruit.

And I’m terrible at pretending I don’t want a taste.

“I think I’ll put on a record,” I tell my mother and brother.  
“Maybe some jazz for the evening.”

“Ugh,” Armando makes a noise of disgust.

That’s exactly why I’m putting on the jazz.

I get up, try to slide my chair back with my leg, and —  
FUCK.

The pain hits me like a sledgehammer.

“Shit!” I cry out, immediately clutching my knee. “Shit, shit, shit!”

“What is it?” my mother asks, getting up so fast she spills coffee on the table. She comes around to me while Armando grabs a cloth and wipes it up.

“My knee,” I say, breathless. “I must have twisted it wrong or something.”

“Did you dislocate it again?” my brother asks, coming to my side and putting my arm around his shoulder to help support me.

“No. I don’t know. Maybe. Is that possible?”

“I don’t like this, Alejo,” my mother says. “Maybe you will need surgery.”

“No,” I tell her, jaw clenched. “I’ll be fine.” I take in a deep breath, trying to stifle the pain. Slowly, I stick my leg out and move it from the knee in a kicking motion. “See. I would not be able to do that if it were dislocated.”

“You need ice. You need to lie down. Armando, take your brother to the couch,” my mother commands.

Armando leads me over to the couch in the living room, and I lie down. He takes a giant pillow and carefully tries to

prop it up. I grit my teeth at the discomfort.

Eventually my mother comes back out of the kitchen with a bag of frozen peas and hands it to me. I apply it to the top of my brace, not about to undo it. I'll have to wait until tomorrow to get Thalia to take a look at it. I just hope I haven't done any major damage.

"Alejo," my mother chides me, sitting on the corner of the couch. "You should be more careful."

"With getting up from dinner?"

"Yes. Please. You're all we have."

I swallow hard and glance at her. My mother has never looked young for her age. Taking care of us when we didn't have much money, dealing with my father, before his death and after, worrying about us boys constantly, it took a toll on her from day one. I've only seen color on her face and joy in her eyes in the last year or so, and I would do anything to keep that growing brighter.

I don't want her to worry about me.

"I'm going to be fine," I assure her. "I promise you. This is just part of the game."

She grumbles something and looks away.

I'm lying there on the couch with the frozen peas on my knee, Armando sifting through the vinyl collection by the record player, when headlights flash outside the door.

"Who the hell is that?" I ask. We have gates that are operated by code and not that many people know it.

"It's Mateo," my mother says, her chin raised in defiance.

"*You called him?*"



“I texted him,” she says. “I had to. How are you going to get to the facility tomorrow? You can’t drive. He said he would be right over.”

I press my hand over my eyes. I can’t believe she called my coach like he’s got nothing better to do than to drag my sorry ass around. “That is so unprofessional,” I mutter.

“Well, I don’t care. He’s your coach. He’s practically a father to you. And you call someone like that when you’re in trouble.”

There’s a knock at the door and my mother goes over to it while Armando watches curiously. He’s always been a bit intimidated by Mateo.

She opens it and I hear her say, “Who the hell are you?”

I raise my head and see Thalia on the other side of the door, dressed in her uniform, hair pulled back in a low bun.

“I’m here for Alejo,” Thalia says in English, which of course my mother doesn’t understand.

I sit up and say in Spanish, “It’s okay, Mama, it’s my therapist. Let her in.”

But my mother does no such thing. “She is not your therapist. She is some crazy fan of yours.”

“She is not a crazy fan. She is my physical therapist.”

“Is she a hooker? Did Mateo send you a hooker? Is this his idea of making you feel better?” She reaches out and actually tugs at her Adidas jacket collar. “Are you naked under there?”

“¡Mamá!” I yell, trying to get up. “Please.”

Meanwhile, Thalia is staring at my mother with wide eyes, obviously with no idea what she’s saying, which is for the

best.

“Should I go?” Thalia asks me. “Mateo called and said you needed to be taken to Valdebebas.”

“Come in,” I tell her.

Thalia eyes my mother and shakes her head. “I don’t want to disrespect your mother.”

“Oh, her bark is worse than her bite.”

“Is this your girlfriend?” Armando asks me, in Spanish thankfully, as he comes over to pull me up to my feet.

“No,” I tell him quickly, wincing at the pressure on my leg. “She is my therapist. Seriously. You want to see her credentials?”

“If they’re underneath that jacket, then yes.”

I reach out and smack my brother across the head. “Show some respect, you idiot.”

“Do you need any help?” A deep male voice asks in Spanish.

I look over to see a tall, somewhat familiar man standing behind Thalia, peering inside.

“And let me guess, you are the pimp?” my mother asks him, hand on her hip. But at least she steps aside so the man can step inside.

“I’m the driver, Manuel,” Manuel says, giving my mother an odd look. He then turns his attention to me. “Do you need help?”

I shake my head, swallowing my pride, and try to walk, but I stop in pain after one step.

“Easy, Alejo,” Thalia calls out as Manuel comes over and puts my arm over his shoulder. He’s a stocky man, so he supports me with ease.

My mother gives us a wide berth as we head outside.

“I’m going to call Mateo and make sure you’re not being kidnapped by a hooker and her pimp!” she cries out.

“Mama, please,” I tell her. “It’s fine. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“You better. *Al mal tiempo, buena cara*,” she says.

“*Sí, sí*,” I tell her as Manuel leads me to the back of the town car and opens the door for me. I get in and put my leg up across the other seat while Thalia gets into the front seat beside Manuel.

We drive off through the gates.

“*Al mal tiempo, buena cara*,” Thalia repeats, twisting in her seat to face me, her lovely face in the shadows. “Why have I heard that before? What does it mean?”

“If there is bad weather, put on a good face,” Manuel says. “A popular saying.”

I nod. “I believe the English equivalent would be, suck it up buttercup.”

Thalia laughs. “Then I think I like your mom already.”

“Yes, sorry about her. She’s old-fashioned in her views, and she also hates every woman I bring home.”

I can see the shadow of her mouth as it quirks up into a smile. “I see.”

“Not that I have a lot of women over,” I say quickly.

“Sure, sure. You know, you’re not the only one the tabloids like to talk about.”

“Whatever you read is a lie.”

“Uh huh.”

True, I’ve had a lot of women. Maybe not as many as the press likes to make out, but enough to write about, I suppose. But that was back when I first joined the team and I was drunk on money and fame and adoration. I would like to think I’ve calmed down since then. I’d like to think I’ve grown up.

And I don’t want Thalia to see me like that. I’m not the manwhore they make me out to be.

It’s not long before we’re pulling through the gates and security checkpoints, and I’m getting out of the car. Manuel helps me out while Thalia uses her badge to gain access to our building.

We go up the lift and down the hall to my room, where Manuel brings me over to the bed.

“I’ll be waiting outside,” he says to Thalia. “Whenever you’re ready.”

I thank him for his help and then he leaves.

It’s just us in my bedroom, the lights dim.

Thalia’s face is grave, her brows knitting together as she makes me comfortable, propping up a pillow under my knee and slowly undoing the brace. “I suppose I should have brought you to the examination room but we can do the work up here. I didn’t want to tire Manuel out, hauling you all over the place.”

She opens the brace and then switches on the bedside light to get a better look.

“It seems okay,” she says. “I can see if they’ll run an MRI in the morning.”

“Honestly I think I just bent it the wrong way. I was just trying to get up after dinner.”

“Ate too much?”

I laugh. “Definitely. My mother tries to overfeed me, like a pig being fattened for the slaughter. Now that I’m injured, I’m powerless against her.”

She gives me a gentle smile. She’s so fucking sweet.

“My mother used to do the same when I was a kid. All my brothers pretended they never needed to be babied, but since I was her only daughter, when I was sick, she was at my side twenty-four seven. Shoving chicken soup in my mouth and giving me cough syrup that made me feel all drowsy, rubbing Vicks VapoRub on my feet.”

“On your feet?”

“I can’t remember if it worked or not, but that’s what she did.” She stares at my knee and then gently touches it.

It hurts, but not as much as earlier.

“I think you just have to be more careful,” she says after she pokes and prods some more. “The brace will protect you as much as it can, but you still have to take it easy.” She pauses and straightens up. The sight of her at the end of the bed does something to me, like she’s slowly pulling at whatever strings I have inside holding me together, making me unravel.

I don’t mind being unraveled by her. I only wish I could do the same.

“What?” she asks, her voice soft as I stare at her.

“Are you leaving?”

She swallows and folds her arms across her chest, almost as if she’s cold. “Yeah.”

“You won’t stay the night?”

“Here?”

“You have your own room...”

She rubs her lips together in thought before she slowly saunters over to me, arms still crossed. “You’re a football player at the top of his game. You’ve dealt with injuries before. Your knee is going to be fine. Don’t tell me you’re afraid to be here alone.”

I feel something hot flash inside me. Without thinking, I reach out and grab her hand. “I’m not afraid to be alone,” I tell her. My voice is rough but my touch is soft. “I just want you to be with me.”

Something comes over her face, maybe desire, maybe disappointment. I can’t tell. “*Alejo*,” she says gently in the kind of tone that no good can come from. “I can’t be with you.”

“You can just stay the night.”

“I can’t. I’m going to go home. Manuel is waiting for me.”

I narrow my eyes as I study her.

I see her truth.

She wants to stay.

That is what she desires most.

And she’ll fight it to the bitter end.

“You thought I was afraid to be alone, but I think you’re the one who’s afraid,” I tell her.

“I’m not afraid to be alone,” she says defiantly, her eyes flashing. “At all. I prefer it.”

“No, you’re afraid of me. You’re afraid of what would happen if you stayed here overnight. Even if you went to your room and slept there, you’re afraid that you’d end up back here in this room. You’re afraid you’re going to end up giving in to me. Giving in to what you really want.”

I watch as she blinks at me and tries to take her hand away.

I tighten my grip.

She stops fighting.

“Why can’t you just admit it?” Still holding on to her wrist, I sit up, swinging my legs over the side, ignoring the pain while pulling her up to me, my thighs on either side of her. My erection pokes up through the thin fabric of my shorts. This isn’t the first time I’ve gotten hard around her, and she’s always pretended not to notice. I suppose it’s her job, but I don’t want to be part of her job right now.

“Why are you afraid of me?” I whisper, sliding my hand up her arm to her elbow, staring up at her for a sign that she’s giving in.

“I *can’t*,” she says stiffly.

“Are you afraid you’ll like it? That you’ll need more? Are you ashamed of having those wants and needs?”

Her mouth opens and closes, and I just need the slightest hint, and I’ll be kissing those lips, pulling her onto my bed and pinning her down.

“Just for a night,” I go on. “I promise I can make it so good for you.”

“With that knee?” she manages to say, almost smiling.

“My tongue isn’t broken and neither is my cock,” I tell her boldly. Adrenaline and heat and desire push their way through me as I pull her arm down so her hand is at my erection, pressing against it.

For one brilliant second she makes a loose fist around it, as if testing me. It’s enough to make my eyes roll back in my head.

Then she’s pulling back, and I let go, knowing I’ve taken it too far again, a line I haven’t crossed with her before.

At least she knows what that line feels like.

She backs up a few steps, shaking her head, though the rest of her seems to be trembling too. “I’m your therapist,” she says in a faint voice. “I’m your therapist and we can’t do that.”

“But you want to.”

“Whether I want to or not is irrelevant,” she says, the strength coming back into her words. “I’m your therapist. I’m here to help you heal and nothing more. If you can’t respect that, and respect me, then I’m going to have you transferred to someone else. I don’t want to do that because I like you, Alejo. But for my job, I will. And I won’t hesitate.”

I’ve never seen her so serious before. I immediately feel bad for being so bold and reckless with her.

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be sorry,” she says angrily. Then she takes a deep breath and squares her shoulders. “Now I’m going home.



I'll see you tomorrow. Oh, and Mateo says you should show up to watch practice.”

Then she turns and leaves.

I don't think I've ever hated myself more.

## CHAPTER 9



**M**anuel drives me home from Valdebebas and I'm an absolute wreck.

My whole body is buzzing, like I've been plugged into a wall socket.

My heart won't stop pounding.

The air is caught in my lungs.

It's like I'm having a panic attack, but it's not a feeling I want to get rid of, because I don't think I've ever felt this way before.

I feel...alive.

As stupid as that sounds, I feel like my body is finally waking up after being dormant for so many years, like I'd been buried by the aftermath of my divorce and the ash is finally brushing off.

I feel alive and terrified.

Because I was that close to giving in to Alejo.

That. Close.

The moment I felt how hard he was, the hot stiff length of his cock under my hand, that was the tipping point. I could have easily, so easily, kept going. Made those gorgeous eyes of

his roll back even further in his head, bring him to the point of no return.

But it really would have been the point of no return for me.

And once I did that with him, it would all be over.

I would lose respect for myself for giving in so easily, just because he's a beautiful boy and a warrior of a man all wrapped into one. Just because he says charming things and looks at me in the way I've always dreamed someone would look at me.

Oh, jeez. My heart is squeezing just thinking about it.

I did the right thing.

I know I did.

My job is all I have. It's not worth the roll in the hay, no matter how amazing Alejo would be in bed. I would get off and then have to deal with seeing him every day at work. What happens when he starts seeing someone? How do I know he's not already? Would I be able to put my feelings away, where they belong, and not let it compromise my career?

*He's also a hell of a lot younger.*

But when it comes to getting fucked, I don't think that matters.

Okay, maybe a little bit.

Maybe I'd feel like a bit of a dirty, pervy cougar if we had sex.

That said, I grabbed his cock tonight and I didn't feel dirty over that.

At all.

I mean, not in a bad way.

Fuck.

I'm an absolute wreck by the time Manuel drops me off on my narrow street in La Latina.

I head up to my apartment and close the door.

Flop down on my bed.

Bring out my vibrator.

I take my pants off and spare no time in getting into it. I'm wet in a second with thoughts of Alejo. How his hands would feel skimming down the sides of my body, how his lips would feel on my neck, how he'd kiss me with so much passion and need and want that I'd melt on the spot. I imagine him naked — not hard to do since I've seen a lot of him — and how that cock would look, jutting right out of him. I think about that cock sliding into me, the skill of his hips as they rock into my hips.

I'm coming in seconds and moaning his name.

Fuck, I hope I got that out of my system.

I think I woke up the neighbors.



TWO WEEKS PASS BY LIKE NOTHING HAPPENED.

Okay, that's not completely true.

Lots has happened.

Real Madrid have played three games since Alejo got injured.

They won the first one. Barely.

They lost the last two. By a lot.

Suffice it to say, they're a bit on edge.

Meanwhile, Alejo's knee is coming along, slowly but surely. We're doing some hydrotherapy, which is helping, but progress seems to be slow and I don't think Dr. Costa is too happy about that. The threat of surgery is looming over us at any given moment.

But when it comes to Alejo and me, what happened between us has been swept under the rug.

I mean, nothing really happened.

He basically wanted me to fuck him.

I said no.

I may have grabbed his penis in the process.

And that's that.

Ever since, he's changed. He's still quick to smile and is as charming as ever, but the innuendo has stopped and he isn't hitting on me.

I appreciate that. I really do.

Even if I miss it.

Just a little.

The only thing that has stayed the same is the way he looks at me, especially when he thinks I'm not looking. If I catch him in the act, he'll look away and become aloof. Pretend it didn't happen.

But I can't pretend I don't see him staring at me like I'm the only thing in his world.

And I don't want to pretend, either.

"Hey," I tell him as he walks out of the changing room, a robe wrapped around him.

We're at the hydrotherapy pools, ready for another session. I haven't seen him since yesterday and he seems to have evolved into a moody beast since then.

"*Hola,*" he says, barely looking at me as he drops his robe.

I don't look away from his body. I never do. It's just too perfect.

He sits down on the edge of the pool where the steps are and undoes his brace. His knee still looks a little swollen, but other than that, it looks normal.

He gets in the water, and I barely have to instruct him. He does the exercises in the pool using the noodle that I throw in right beside him or up against the handrail.

Later on, I'll have to get in the water with him, but we're not quite at that level yet, so I just roll up my pant legs, sit on the edge and stick my bare feet in the water. From here, I have a good vantage point.

"Something wrong?" I ask him as he sits in the pool noodle and uses his abs and arms to stay upright, keeping his feet level with the surface.

"Other than this terrible exercise?"

I smile. "Yes, other than that."

"What do you think?"

"I'm going to say the fact that you're not healing as fast as you want?"

He gives me a sharp look. "The team is on a losing streak."

"You lost two games in a row."

"We would have lost three had it not been for dumb luck with that goal."

I give him a sympathetic look. “It’s just the way it goes sometimes. And it’s out of your hands, so there’s no use worrying about it.”

“But it’s my fucking fault,” he says, and I can hear the anguish in his voice. “This stupid fucking knee. If it wasn’t for me, I would be out there. Now we’re playing tomorrow and I can’t do anything but watch the game from here.”

“You could go to the stadium,” I tell him.

“You know what I mean.”

I sigh, knowing how frustrated he must feel. “Look. You’re going to get better.”

“It doesn’t feel like it. You said I would be out three weeks and it’s been three weeks.”

“No. We said that if you could wear a brace during the game, then you’d be back in it. But as you know, if you wear a brace, you’re making your injury a target for the other players, and you know yourself it’s a target they will take. And anyway, so things are happening slower. We just keep at it. Every injury is unique.”

“You must be sick of me,” he mumbles.

For some reason, that little offside comment breaks my heart. “I could never be sick of you,” I tell him softly.

He shoots me a wary look and goes back to his exercise.

I watch him for a while, feeling his frustration across the water. Then I have an idea.

“Hey, this is going to sound weird, but a lot of clubs do it. Why don’t we try yoga?”

“Yoga?” he repeats with a scoff. “Do I look like I would enjoy yoga?”

“It’s not about what you’re enjoying. This isn’t a hobby. This is about getting you better and I think it could make a big difference.”

“We don’t do yoga at Real Madrid.”

“I know. I’ve mentioned it to Dr. Costa and he emphasized how you focus on weights, and that’s fine. It works. But other teams do use yoga and it works for them, too. I just think it would help your recovery. It’s worth a shot.”

He grows quiet. “I don’t know.”

“Are you worried about the other players seeing you?” I ask.

He shrugs. Or attempts to shrug, which momentarily puts his head below the water. He breaks the surface, his dark hair plastered to his forehead.

I’m laughing.

“Very funny,” he says, spitting out water. But then he’s grinning at me.

This beautiful boy. He never fails to take my breath away.

*Watch it*, the voice inside my head warns. But that voice sounds so very far away these days. Now that Alejo has stepped back in his, well, pursuit of me, I feel it coming from inside of me now.

A craving for his attention.

“I promise I’ll make yoga as fun as possible. And no one will see,” I add.

“When?”



“Why not tonight?”

He arches a black brow. “Tonight?”

“Just trust me. Come find me after dinner. Wear something flexible.”

That brow is still raised as he studies me. “You’re full of surprises, Thalia.”

I think I’m surprising even myself.

It’s hard to hold a yoga session in the compound when it’s the night before a game. Everyone is staying over, which means all members of the team are scattered everywhere. Right after dinner I go to the warm-up room, to the gym, to the physio room, to the game room, even the little cinema, and there are Real Madrid players everywhere.

But by the time Alejo knocks on my door, I have an idea.

“At your service,” he says to me with a bow as I open the door. He’s dressed in a black t-shirt and grey shorts which look fucking fantastic on him.

“Actually, I’m at your service,” I tell him as I reach down and pick up the yoga mat I keep in my room, handing it to him. “Let’s take this outside.”

“Outside?” He looks so thoroughly confused with his face scrunched up, it’s adorable.

“Yes,” I say, trying to bite back a smile. “We’ll go to the field. One that doesn’t have a bunch of your teammates scattered on it. Someplace quiet.”

Alejo doesn’t look so sure.

“Come on,” I tell him, pushing past him. “Be a man.”

I knew that would get to his machismo side.

“Fine,” he says, following me.

We head down the stairs and to the back doors that open onto one of the fields. This one is dark and empty, not used as often as the main training field, which is a replica of Santiago Bernabéu stadium, right down to the grass.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been out here like this,” Alejo says, looking around in awe. “It’s like a totally different animal.”

The field is lit up only faintly where we are standing from the lights of the building, but as we walk off across the field to the opposite side, it grows darker and darker until no one would be able to see us at all.

The moon is out, almost full, providing us with just enough illumination, and the air smells sweet, like grass and the night-blooming flowers that line the property. There’s a light, warm breeze, and every now and then there’s a roar of an aircraft from the nearby international airport. We stop walking and watch as the plane’s lights soar high into the star-spangled sky.

Alejo looks at me, and I see something simmering in his eyes. Maybe it’s the moonlight. Maybe it’s the last two weeks of unsaid words, of putting up walls, of trying very hard to pretend that something very big almost happened between us.

I give him a hurried smile and take the mat from him, unfurling it so it’s flat on the ground.

“Sit, legs straight out.” I gesture to it, trying to ignore the heat in my core, the flutters in my stomach.

He reluctantly tears his gaze away and does as I say.

“How does that feel?” I ask him.

“Fine,” he says.

“Okay, good. So what we’re going to do is work on modified poses so that you get all the benefits but at no cost to your knee.”

He glances up at me. “You sound like a yoga instructor.”

“Well, I was a yoga instructor once upon a time.”

“When?”

“Before I was hired by LA Galaxy. I worked part-time for the Seattle Sounders, just trying to get a leg up, pun intended, and I taught yoga in my spare time.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re impressive?”

I laugh. “Not enough. Okay, so you know what? Let’s start with downward-facing dog instead.”

If he’s not looking at me with those magnetic green blue eyes of his, then I can do my job *a lot* better.

“And how do I do that?” he asks.

Right.

I hold out my hands and help pull him back to his feet.

Then with my hands still on his forearms, his very strong, muscled forearms, I push him back so he’s standing at the end of the mat.

I then go right beside him and demonstrate how to do a downward dog, which is pretty much your body shaped like a jackknife, and one of the easier poses.

He attempts to do the same, except his lower back is arching.

“You need to have a flatter back,” I tell him, and when he doesn’t seem to quite get it, I get up and go over to him. I

place one hand on his lower back and one hand on his abs and pull up gently.

*Damn these abs are the definition of washboard.*

I shake the thought off, but my hands still have work to do.

I correct his hamstrings.

I correct his shoulders and arms.

Then I tell him to breathe through it.

“Am I not breathing?” he gasps, trying to look up at me.

“No. Not really. You’re not yoga breathing.”

He starts huffing and puffing, exaggerating, and in the moonlight I can see his face going red.

“Okay,” I say slowly. “So, yoga breathing is the opposite of hyperventilating.”

I then try and get him to walk his feet up slowly to the front of the mat, then gradually rise up halfway and come down in a fold.

That also doesn’t go so well.

“No, you’re not folding,” I tell him.

“I am, too. I’m folded like a paper airplane.”

He protests in such a way that I have to laugh. I think he’s a lot like me; he gets frustrated if he doesn’t get things right the first time. It’s probably why he’s so good at his job and why I’m not so bad at mine.

Still, I come up right behind him, my hips pressed against his ass, and reach down his sides, making sure his knees are bent as his arms come to the sides of them.

“This is an extremely sexual position,” he says.

I bite my lip and smile. “Not when I’m doing this to you.”

“I mean in general. You’re giving me ideas.”

I pause. “No, I’m *not*.”

“I didn’t say I was talking about the two of us,” he says.

Hmmphf. He’s got me there.

I don’t say anything to that, lest he call me out for being presumptuous.

“Okay, last one. Inhale, connecting breath and movement, stretch long as you come back up,” I tell him.

To his credit, he gets that right.

“Next, touch your toes together but keep your heels apart, and then go into a deep bend of the knees until you’re in chair pose.”

He does it as far as his brace will allow but doesn’t put up his arms and starts to rock backward.

I quickly reach over and grab his arms, pulling them up and out in front of him for balance, and the strength of his abs does the rest.

“See, you’re getting it,” I tell him. “Don’t forget to breathe.”

He scowls at that.

“So, people actually do this for fun?”

“Yes,” I assure him. “Fun but also to destress. You learn how to breathe. You learn how to connect to your body. You learn how to be grounded and flexible. All of those things are extremely important for an athlete like you.”

I run him through a few more poses and then make him sit down on the mat, almost cross-legged but not quite, his back straight, chin level, hands upturned on his knees. Then I sit down on the grass right in front of him and go into lotus pose with ease.

He stares at my tangled limbs with wide eyes. “Can I just watch you do the poses instead?”

“This takes practice. I don’t even want you sitting cross-legged because of your knee. Next time I’ll bring a prop so that you have a little more support.”

“Next time,” he says.

“Yeah. Next time. I’m making this a part of your therapy. Believe me, this will help. And most of all, it’s going to help you deal.”

His gaze sharpens. “Deal with what?”

“Being a professional football player.”

“I can deal with that.”

“Can you?” I ask, squinting at him. In the distance, another airplane takes off. “Because you’re injured, which is part of the job, and earlier you seemed to be quite angry at that fact. You think the team is losing because you’re not there. Whether that’s true or not, that’s a lot of weight on your shoulders.”

He stares at me for a moment, and I prepare for him to say something macho and dismissive. But instead he swallows thickly. Nods. “Si. Maybe it would be good for me.” He pauses, looks like he’s about to say something. Then doesn’t.

“What?” I prod.

He licks his lips, eyes resting on the turf between us, the short blades lit by the moon. “I guess I haven’t been myself

lately.”

“It’s normal.”

“Do you think...do you really think yoga would help? With...you know, issues?”

“Of course,” I say softly. The whole moment has turned soft, with Alejo talking about something I’m not even aware of. This isn’t just about his knee.

God, how I want him to open up to me.

I want to know the man behind the eyes. Behind the easy smile and jokes and that body of sin.

So I continue to sit there.

I wait for him to be ready.

The night air fills with crickets and humidity.

“My father died when I was young,” he eventually says.

Oh.

That’s where this is going.

“I saw that in your record,” I say, my heart pinching at his admission. “What happened to him? It didn’t say.”

“He hung himself. And I saw him.”

My chest sinks. I immediately lose the pose, shoulders slumping with the weight of his words. “I’m so sorry, Alejo. I am...so, *so* sorry. I had no idea.”

He gives a little shrug, looking away, the moonlight reflecting in his eyes, which are watering slightly, breaking my heart. “I was young and I took my brother to the beach. My father was a drunk and a gambler and he had gotten fired, so my mother told us to leave. She said he would come home

angry. We stayed out for as long as we could and I figured...” He closes his eyes for a moment, breathing hard. “I figured we could come home and he would be passed out or something. I didn’t expect...I didn’t expect to see him like that. I still see it, some nights, when I close my eyes. Like it happened yesterday. And yet, everyone, my mother, my brother, they pretend like it never happened so I have to pretend that it never happened.”

I see a single tear spill out beneath his eye and that’s enough to get me crawling over to him and wrapping my arms around his shoulders. I hold him tight, pressing my face into his arm, letting him know that I’m here.

And...my god.

Even though I’m the one hugging him, trying to console him, this is the first time I’ve actually had intimate physical contact with someone. This is the first time I’ve put my arms around someone in so long. It’s been forever since I’ve had this kind of contact.

Fuck me.

I’m lonely.

I am so terribly lonely.

The realization hits me like a frying pan to the face and now a few tears are escaping my eyes, a sob building up in my throat.

Shit.

“You don’t need to cry for me,” Alejo manages to say, his voice choked, and he pulls away, sliding his hand up against my cheek and raising my face to look at him. “It’s okay. I’ll be okay. I’ve gotten this far.”



I don't want to tell him I'm not just crying for him. I don't want to admit how lonely I am, that there are things in my past that I'm having trouble dealing with too.

That I'm not sure if I'll ever feel whole.

"I know you'll be okay," I whisper as he runs his thumb under my eyes, wiping away the tears. His lashes are long and wet and gleaming, and he's just so raw and real and beautiful.

He has some kind of power over me that's going to be my downfall.

*This man is going to destroy you.*

But wouldn't it be a beautiful way to go?

"I guess your yoga really does work," he says, managing to smile.

Our faces are inches apart.

His gaze is dropping from my eyes to my mouth, his hand cupping my face.

He's going to kiss me.

I can't breathe.

I need to stop him.

I don't want to stop him.

But then he stops himself. He suddenly pulls away and manages to get to his feet before reaching down and pulling me up beside him.

"Well, what do you say?" he says quickly. "I think we should call it a night. I'm already feeling it in my thighs."

I'm pretty sure that's a lie because he has thighs of steel and what we just worked on was like yoga for babies, but I let

it go. Something has him spooked.

I mean, he won't even look at me.

"Okay," I say feebly and reach down to fold up the mat.

Alejo is already walking across the field.

"Hey," I cry out, running up beside him. "You could wait for me instead of leaving me in the dark."

"The moon gives you enough to see by," he says without turning around.

I reach out and grab his arm, pulling him back to a stop.

"What's wrong with you?" I ask. "What just happened back there?"

His eyes follow the path of an airplane flying overhead, the lights reflected in his eyes. "Nothing."

I punch him lightly on the chest to get his attention. "No, it wasn't nothing. Are you ashamed of showing emotion in front of me?"

He looks at me quizzically. "No. Why would I be?"

"Then why are you like this suddenly?"

His chin raises. Stubborn. "Like what?"

I gesture to his face with a swooping motion. "Like this. One minute I thought we were having an intimate moment, and the next you got up like your pants were on fire."

"They are not on fire," he says calmly.

"It's an expression."

"Never heard of it."

"Alejo..."

“What do you want me to say?” he says, his eyes burning now. “Do you want the truth? The real truth, even if it will make you run away?”

“I won’t run away.”

“I call bullshit on that. You know what bullshit is in Spanish? *This*.”

“Just tell me.”

He shakes his head and turns to move, but I step in front of him.

“Tell me,” I demand.

“Fuck, now you’re the persistent one,” he says to me.

And suddenly his hands are grabbing my face.

Fingers pressing into my cheeks.

“This is the truth,” he growls.

And then he kisses me.

He *kisses* me.

His lips are pressed against mine, hard and violent, full of force and passion before they grow soft, just enough for his mouth to meld against my mouth, a slip of his warm tongue caressing me until my stomach dips and my world starts to spin.

I moan into his mouth, my legs feeling weak, my hands reaching for his arms, trying to stay up, trying to grab on, hold on.

Before I can completely give in, he pulls away.

Our breathing is ragged and hard.

Sweat rolls down my brow.

His eyes search mine, heavy-lidded, brooding, practically smoldering in intensity.

“I was going to kiss you,” he says thickly, licking his lips. “And I knew you wouldn’t have liked it. I knew it would have pushed things over the end. I knew I could have lost you. So I didn’t do it.”

He lets his hands drop. “I wish you hadn’t made me tell the truth.”

Then he walks off again.

And I let him go.

Standing on the middle of the field, I watch him go, his form growing bright as he enters the lights of the building and disappears.

Around me another plane takes off into the starry sky, but my heart is beating louder than the jet engines. I don’t hear it.

He kissed me and my world started over.

A blank slate.

Erasing the past.

Creating a future.

A future in which I am totally and utterly *fucked*.



**T**he *day after* always has an ominous tone, and for a good reason.

It's the day after I kissed Thalia, and I'm so fucking beside myself, I don't know what to do.

It's also the night of the Real Madrid versus Real Sociedad match.

To be more specific, it's right after the game.

We lost.

Again.

So there's really no choice on a night like tonight but to get utterly and completely wasted.

I skipped my therapy that morning and went on the bus with the guys, to watch the game from the sidelines, to get back into that headspace and to put as much distance between Thalia and I as possible.

Childish? Perhaps. But I couldn't deal with seeing her again, and the game seemed like the biggest distraction.

Now, Luciano and I need to get distracted.

We're in the back of a private car, ordering the driver to take us to The Last Resort, the only bar we would be remotely

safe in tonight.

“There are going to be angry mobs everywhere,” Luciano says in a daze, staring out the windows as we drive through downtown Madrid. Thank god people can’t see in because there are a ton of them on the street and they’d probably rock the car.

*Madridistas* are a wild bunch. They’ll boo you on the field if you fuck up too much. They’ll whistle when they’re unhappy. If they see you on the street after a few losses, they might try to get a punch in. They take the game very seriously, almost as much as we do, so on nights like tonight, we have to be sharp.

Luckily, the bar, even though it’s crowded, knows us and knows to leave us alone. We’re led to the VIP area with bodyguards and I tell the waiter to keep the champagne coming.

“No champagne,” Luciano barks. “There’s nothing to celebrate.”

“Beers, then,” I tell the waiter, and he walks off, giving us both a sympathetic smile. I’m not sure which is worse, the pity or the anger.

“Mateo won’t be too happy about beer,” Luciano says.

“Well, the manager isn’t here, is he? And as far as I’m concerned, it can’t really hurt at this point, can it?”

“We lost three games in a row, Alejo,” Luciano says. He’s staring straight ahead, hunched over, rocking one knee up and down. “This isn’t good.”

“As soon as I’m back in, we’ll be winning,” I tell him.

He gives me a quick glance. “Uh huh. And what if that doesn’t work? Alejo, you saw tonight. You’ve watched the games. It’s not just that you’re not there to score a goal or two. We have other players to score goals. I should be scoring fucking goals. We couldn’t even get the team to the place where we could shoot. It’s like we lost all ability to play as a team.” He shakes his head. “Unreal.”

I know it’s my job to try and make him feel better, but I’m not sure how because what he’s saying is all true. “I guess we just need to focus on our errors. Watch feedback of the game. Make sure we know what we’re lacking.”

Luciano raises a brow at me. “Don’t tell me you’re after my job.”

I slap him on the back. “You’re El Capitán. I just want to score goals. I just want to play.”

“You will,” he says with a sigh. The waiter comes by and drops off a bucket of beer, knowing we’ll be through them all pretty quick. “How is it coming anyway?” Luciano asks. “Mateo said it’s been slow?”

I nod, not sure how much I want to say. “Slow, yes, but it’s getting better.”

“Has Thalia been a help?”

See, I didn’t want to talk about Thalia. She’s the last thing I want to talk about, and the only person I can think about.

“She has been.”

Luciano studies me and then gestures to the beer bottle. “What’s this?”

“What’s what?” I ask before I take a sip.

“I don’t know. You seem different. Not sure I like it. When did you get so serious?”

I shrug. “I guess since my knee got fucked up and I haven’t been able to play my game.”

“Right,” Luciano says. “So tell me about Thalia.”

Swallowing becomes hard all of a sudden. “Why?”

“Because I’m the captain of the team and she’s in charge of rehabbing one of our star players. I want to know if she’s doing a good job.”

“She’s doing a great job. Why wouldn’t she be?”

“No reason. I’ve just heard grumbles from Dr. Costa. He thinks you might need surgery. He doesn’t know if she’s doing a good job.”

“She’s doing a good job,” I tell him adamantly. “She’s an impressive woman. She knows everything there is about anatomy and she has healing hands.”

“I bet she does,” he says under his breath.

“What the fuck does that mean?” I snipe.

He pauses and slowly looks at me, forehead creased. “Whoa. Calm down there, Brother.”

“You were insinuating something that wasn’t true.”

“Okay. Okay,” he says, his voice high and searching for resolution. “I get it. I’m sorry. I didn’t think you would take offense on her behalf.”

“I’m not...” I trail off and finish my beer.

Luciano frowns. “I have to ask though, and maybe it’s none of my business. But...is there something going on between you two? I’ll keep it between us.”



“No,” I say quickly. With maybe too much emphasis.  
“There is nothing going on. Truthfully.”

“Okay.” He takes a swig of his beer.

“I mean I kissed her last night.”

He spits out his beer.

“What?” he cries out, wiping his mouth with his arm.

I give him a crooked smile. “Yeah. It wasn’t my best moment.”

“You kissed her?!” he whispers harshly. “Holy fuck, dude. Why?”

I raise my brows.

He nods frantically. “Okay, okay, I know why. I know why. She’s gorgeous. She could be a supermodel. She’s one hundred percent someone you would put on your wall as a kid. But...I mean, no offense, but you *are* kind of a kid, Alejo.”

I roll my eyes. “Twenty-fucking-three. I am an adult, *imbécil*.”

“Okay, you’re right. That’s not fair. You’re an adult. It’s just that she’s so much older.”

“Would it matter to you?”

“Maybe not,” he says, tilting his head in consideration.  
“Unless you’re planning on something more?”

I shake my head. “No. It was a mistake to kiss her.”

“What did she do? Kiss you back?”

I nod, the memory sliding down my spine, making me hot.  
“She kissed me back. And then I stopped it before she could stop it first.”

“I see,” he says. “You know she could get fired.”

“I know. That’s why I stopped it.”

“Good.”

“But fuck, man,” I look at him. “I want that to happen again.”

“Wanting and doing are two separate things. Maybe it would be easier if she passed you off to another therapist. You’ve been working together in such close proximity these last three weeks, I guess I’m not too surprised something would happen. I suspected as much.”

“You did?” My heart thuds in my chest, and I quickly grab another beer, popping off the top.

“Part of my job is to watch our team. I know you. And I’ve been watching you. And I’ve been watching her and the two of you together. I don’t think it’s obvious to anyone else, but it’s obvious to me that you like her. And she likes you.”

“*Like*,” I say with a dry laugh. “It sounds like when we were kids.”

“That’s how it starts for everyone. You like someone. It’s a good start. It doesn’t always evolve from there. I hope in your case it stays right where it is.”

I nod, even though I want to argue. It’s rising inside me like fire. “But would it be bad to evolve?”

“You’re ignoring the part where she could get fired for sleeping with you.”

“We haven’t slept together.”

She did grab my cock, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“Right, but that is where things evolve *to*.” He exhales, and from the stern look in his eyes, I know a lecture is coming. Both Luciano and Mateo like to go into “I’m older than you” lecture mode, and they’re both so very good at it. “Listen,” he says.

Oh yes, here it comes.

“I may not know everything, but I know some things, and it’s so much easier to fall in love with someone who is necessary to you than someone you are necessary to.”

“I’m not in love with her,” I tell him. “Remember, we were just talking about *liking* each other.”

“Fine. You’re not. But you know what I mean. You’ve become dependent on her because she can heal you. She’s become necessary to you.”

“And I’m necessary to her. She needs me to prove herself.”

“Okay,” he says gently. He smiles. “I’m not arguing with you, Alejo. You know yourself and what kind of situation you’re in better than I do. I’m just trying to give you some advice, as unwarranted and out of touch as it may be.”

“I don’t think it’s out of touch,” I tell him. “You must have had someone break your heart at some point.”

He gives me a funny look. “What makes you say that?”

“Because you’re old and you’re single.”

His eyes narrow. “*Que te jodan.*”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. Fuck you.” But he’s laughing. “Okay, fine. Yes, when I was younger there was someone who broke my heart.

Only she never knew that she broke my heart. She was a sports journalist. She was dating my brother.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. So you can see it already starts off badly. She was dating my brother and I think I fell in love with her without knowing. They broke up. She left to do her journalism elsewhere. To get away from him and the memories. Okay? Then she came back once to Lisbon, when I was with Sporting, before I joined Real Madrid, and we had a beautiful week together. And then the next day she left. She told me she was staying, but then she was gone and I don’t know what happened. But she was definitely the one that got away.”

“And that’s why you’re single?” I ask. I find that hard to believe since the media is always fawning over Luciano. Almost more than they fawn over me.

“No, I just...I’m happy being alone. It’s easy. If I want to get laid, I go get laid. If I need someone to talk to, I have you. I have friends. Family. I’m just fine the way I am.”

“You don’t want your own family? Children?”

Luciano shakes his head, even if he looks a little sad.  
“No.”

I decide not to press him anymore.

So we sit there in the club, and we drink. Eventually some people we know find us and start chatting away about the team, and Luciano comes alive again, acting like the captain with a plan.

But I’m locked in my head.

I have to figure out what to do about Thalia.

The lines that were crossed last night.

I had tried for two weeks to ignore that incident in my room.

I thought I did a very good job of it.

Every sordid thought, every primal urge, every inappropriate remark, I found a way to bury it deep inside me. I managed to push through it and do what was right for the both of us.

But when we did that yoga session, everything fell apart.

The resolve I had built up, the steel I wrapped myself in to keep it all together, that dissolved and disappeared.

For the first time in my life, for reasons I can't even explain, I was on that moonlit football pitch, beneath stars and airplanes, and I was vulnerable. I opened myself up to someone as I had never done before.

I talked about my father. About his suicide. That night.

I felt the things I tried to hide for so many years.

Everything came forward.

All because I was with her.

Because I trusted her.

Because I thought I could wrap up all the dark and ugly bits I've carried with me, present them to her like a wound I was hoping she could fix.

She can fix my body.

Why not my soul?

And it was in those barest moments that she came over to me and she held me.

I can't remember the last time I was held like that, held by someone who accepts your pain and wants to help you. My mother and brother don't count. My teammates don't count.

Kissing her was inevitable.

My head was so fucked up.

My soul bare, a raw nerve, exposed for her to see.

My heart heavy with the horrors of my past.

What else could I do but try and express it?

But it doesn't matter now. I can try and spin it every which way in my head, try and come up with the reasons why I did it.

I did it because I wanted to.

Because I want her.

And I'm fucking terrified that this feeling isn't going to go away.

That I'm going to see her, and it's going to be hell because all I'm going to think about is kissing her again and again and again.

But maybe, when it comes down to it, there's no use even fighting it.

Maybe our lives have been set in motion from that kiss.

Maybe everything after this is inevitable.

## CHAPTER 11

### THEA

**I**'m running.

I don't really know where, but the sun is just coming up and I'm hitting the streets of Madrid before the heat and humidity rise. Even though the summer is coming to a close in these early fall days of September, it's still hot as hell here, and if I don't jog in the morning, I won't get to jog at all.

I know I could always use the treadmills at the gym at Valedobebas, but since it's my day off, it's the last place I want to be right now. There's so much damn tension there that it's probably for the best that I stay away if I can.

Most of that tension has to do with the team's losing streak.

The rest of the tension is between Alejo and me.

Granted, I haven't seen him since he kissed me on the football pitch.

He didn't show up for our therapy session the next afternoon and then I found out he was on the bus, heading with the team to the game. I think it probably did him some good to go and support them and get his head back into that space after being injured and cut off from it for so long.

But I also think he left because of me.

In a way, I don't blame him.

For better or for worse, that kiss changed something in me. It might have changed something in him. It for sure changed our relationship. I was able to recover from that incident in his bedroom and he seemed to as well. But this was something else.

And yet, I have no choice but to be professional about it.

I can't let it come between us, even if it's changed the way I view him.

That kiss brought him from a beautiful boy to a magnificent man, the kind of man who is comfortable baring his soul, the kind of man who can almost bring me to my knees with his lips.

I try to shake it out of my head. I keep running, hoping that I can sweat the angst out of me. Maybe it will clear my head, help me figure out just what the hell I'm supposed to do next.

Before I know it, I'm running past the royal palace and on the path alongside the river, running until I can't breathe anymore and have to stop.

I rest, bent over with my hands braced on my knees, trying to get a grip.

Apparently I can't run away from my problems. That might just make things worse.

Or give me a heart attack, at the very least.

Suddenly my phone rings from the armband on my bicep, and I quickly fish it out to answer it, blinking in surprise at the display.

It's my mother.



“Hello?” I answer.

“Oh good, you’re up.”

“What time is it there?” I ask, and my heart beats even faster because I’m usually the one calling her. “Are you okay? Is Dad?”

She chuckles. “Of course. We’re fine. It’s only ten p.m. We were just at the Stephaniuk’s for dinner and you came up in conversation. Made me realize I hadn’t talked to you in a while.”

I should be annoyed that it takes other people to make my mother realize we haven’t spoken, but I’m used to it by now. She’s always lived in her own little world. She’s a retired school teacher, but I always felt with her teaching classes and then having five kids at home, she shut out everything the best that she could.

Including my father.

My parents were the type of parents that fought bitterly the entire time I was growing up, and yet they never, ever divorced. Things seemed to calm down as soon as my mother retired, but until then it was a battle every day. I remember bringing it up once, when I was old enough to recognize it and the thought of them divorcing wasn’t traumatizing, and she said marriage is until death do us part.

You can imagine she hasn’t been too thrilled her only daughter is divorced.

“How is everything?” she asks.

“Fine. I’m just up early, jogging.”

“How is the team? I’ve seen you on the sidelines once. Your father was able to watch part of a game on the internet.”

“Well, my job is good, if that’s what you’re asking. The team has lost a few games, but they’ll get back at it.”

“I’m sure they will. That’s the good thing about your job, you don’t have to worry about the wins or the losses.”

“Well, I kind of do. The players care and I take care of the players. They become like a family. You want them to do well. They’re your team.”

“But Manchester United was your team.”

“It was, but now I’m here. That’s how it works with professional sports.”

“But Stewart is the coach for that team. Don’t you care about him?”

I hold the phone away from me and make a face at it.

*Seriously?*

I bring the phone back to my ear. “No, not really,” I tell her in a clipped voice.

“Thalia. Just because you’re divorced doesn’t mean you should cut him out of your life.”

My face suddenly flares with anger. She did *not* just say that.

“Yes! It does! That’s what getting divorced means!”

“I just don’t understand why you couldn’t have made it work with him.”

“Oh my god!” I exclaim, making a fist around the phone, seconds away from chucking it in the river. “How dare you fucking say that to me!”

She makes a scoffing sound. “Oh, Thalia. Your language. Grow up a little, huh? You don’t have to speak like the men

you work with. I'm just trying to make a point."

"That you think Stewart can cheat on me and I'm supposed to ignore it?"

"For better or for worse. This is the worse."

"He's with another woman!" I cry out, not caring that people walking past me are staring. "Even if I got hit in the motherfucking head and went crawling back to him, we are divorced and he's with someone else."

Silence. Except for my heart, which is pounding in my head like a drum.

"You shouldn't have gotten divorced," she says. "That's just my opinion."

"And it doesn't count. Okay? It's my life."

"Sheesh, the last time I talked to you everything was fine and you weren't throwing tantrums over the phone. What's your problem?"

"I don't have a problem," I say through a clenched jaw. "You're the one who brought up Stewart. What's done is done and there is no turning back."

"Okay, fine. So are you just giving up on dating all together? You're not getting any younger."

*Give me a fucking break.*

"My divorce was finalized almost three months ago. I'm taking all the time I need to figure myself out."

"I'm just saying, it doesn't hurt to get out there and look."

"Well, for your information," I say, and I'm powerless to stop the words from coming out because I'm so hell-bent on shutting her up. "I am interested in someone."

“Oh yeah? Who?” she asks brightly.

“Uh, well, he’s a nice guy.”

“What’s his name?”

“Manuel...”

“Oh, very Spanish. What does he do?”

“He’s...on the team.”

Oh shit. I need to shut up. Now she’s going to go look for Manuel on Real Madrid and he doesn’t exist.

“Thalia,” she warns. “Did you not learn anything with Stewart? You can’t get involved with someone from your team. It’s going to get messy.”

“It’s not like that.”

“I don’t care what it’s like. You’re a smart woman, *usually*. Grow up and look at the big picture. You only get one choice here; you get your career, or you get love. You can’t have both, and you especially can’t mix the two. Believe me, it’s one or the other, and I know you know it, too.”

I don’t know what to say to that.

She sighs loudly. “Look, I’m glad you found someone you like but you have to look elsewhere. Madrid is a big city and there are plenty of fish in the sea. Go out there and meet someone who has nothing to do with your job, and then I’ll be happy for you, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Promise me you won’t do anything stupid.”

“I won’t.”

“Are you coming home for Christmas?”

Now it's my turn to sigh. "I don't think so. There are a lot of games around then."

"That's what you say every year. Same goes for Thanksgiving."

"And every year it's true." Kinda.

"All right, well, see if you can make it work. And call me with good news next time, okay? Love you."

She hangs up before I can say I love you back, before I can remind her that it was her that called me.

I close my eyes, pressing the heel of my palm into my forehead, and take a deep breath. Dealing with my mother can leave me so rattled. It's no wonder I took off for LA as soon as I had the chance.

I turn around onto the path, trying to put my phone back in my armband, just as someone big bumps into me from behind.

My phone goes flying to the ground and it clatters alongside another dropped phone. I look up to see a big burly Spanish man, dressed in jogging gear, staring at me in horror.

He starts mumbling something in Spanish that might be an apology, or it could be that he's blaming me for running into him. It's hard to tell.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Spanish," I tell him, waving my hands like I'm making an X, before I go to bend down and pick up my phone.

Just as he does the same.

*Bam.*

Our heads knock into each other, and we both stumble back a bit.

I'm laughing, because it's just so silly and embarrassing and funny, and he's laughing too.

"Now this would be a serious meet-cute," I tell him, stepping back as he quickly ducks down to get both phones.

"A meet-cute?" he repeats, handing my phone back to me.

"Yeah a...oh sorry. I don't speak Spanish."

"Yes, I know, you've said that twice already," he says.

"Oh, you speak English," I say, feeling sillier by the moment. "I thought you were just repeating it back to me."

He's a pretty cute guy. Maybe a few years older than me, some grey hair at the temples, dark skin, kind eyes. "I do speak English; I just don't know what a meet-cute is. Is your phone okay?"

I glance at it and nod. "No cracks."

"I'm not so lucky," he says, showing me his. It's a Google phone with a crack in the corner.

"Well, it's not an iPhone, that's your first problem," I tell him.

"Very funny. I suppose that was my fault for running into you."

"I should have been watching where I was going." I pause, feeling bad. "I can help pay for that screen if you want."

"Nonsense," he says. "It's not a big deal." He gives me an unsure smile. "But, if you want to learn Spanish, I might be your man."

I cross my arms, feeling coy that this man is flirting with me. "And who said I needed a man for that?"

"No one. But since you wanted to pay for the screen..."

I laugh. “I said help pay. And how is that making up for it? I break your screen and you have to teach me Spanish?”

“Believe me, it would be my pleasure. Here.” He motions for me to give him my phone. I hesitantly hand it over.

He opens the notepad app and types his phone number. “If you need to practice, give me a call. I’m Sergio, by the way.”

“Okay,” I tell him as he gives my phone back. “Well, nice meeting you, Sergio.”

“Meet-cute, right?”

“Yes. Meet-cute.”

He gives me a little wave and then continues on his way jogging.

I watch him go and then turn around and head back to *La Latina*. I’m not sure if I’m going to call him or not, but I’m feeling particularly emboldened after running into him. Maybe my mother was right. There are plenty of fish in the sea, plenty of the right men to hook up with, good ones who don’t jeopardize my career.

I just have to keep my eyes open.

Or not.

Otherwise, I won’t bump into them.



THE NEXT DAY I’M SILENT AS MANUEL DRIVES ME TO WORK, though I find it amusing that he has no idea I pilfered his name when I invented a fake guy.

After the jogging fiasco, I went back to my apartment and spent a good, proper day exploring Madrid. I had lunch at an outdoor café, drank too much sangría, went shopping at Zara

and Mango, and spent an hour in an English bookstore. I had dinner by myself at a charming little restaurant by a square where I watched street performers and drank even more sangría. Then I strolled around a bit, watching the world go by.

I tried to conjure up that independent woman I once was, the one I know is buried inside me. I tried to bring her out, to make being single and alone an adventure. After all, when you're recently divorced you're supposed to take the time to do all the things you weren't able to do when you were coupled up.

But it just sort of made me sad.

I saw couples.

I saw families.

And when I saw pregnant women and babies, I got even sadder, the ache inside me returning.

Then I started getting angry at myself for being so sad.

I drank more wine.

A stupid amount.

I went to a bar hoping I could find someone, anyone to hook up with. The more random, the better. I didn't care if I got fucked in a dirty bathroom or in the alley with the garbage, I just needed someone to fuck these feelings out of me. I just wanted to get lost and wild and let myself truly be free, in the way I can't quite seem to.

My past has such a hold on me, like I'm stopped at a red light that never changes, waiting for that green light that never comes.

I wish I could just *go*.



I even thought about calling Sergio.

He was good-looking. He would have been up for it.

Maybe it would have been a quick lay, maybe it would have been something more.

Hey, we would have had a great meet-cute story.

But I didn't.

Something stopped me.

Maybe fear.

Maybe something else.

Like a hand reaching out and pulling me back.

I ended up going back to my apartment and passing out on the couch.

So, suffice it to say, I'm silent this afternoon because I kind of feel like I'm going to throw up in the back seat of the car. I slept through my alarm, missed the morning's therapy, rushed like mad to get here.

I'm also silent because I'm going to see Alejo today, and I really don't know how I'm going to deal with that. I guess I don't really have a choice but to sweep it under the rug. Maybe enough time has passed and we can pretend we don't remember.

But I remember.

I remember exactly what it felt like to be kissed by him.

It was a kiss that erased my past.

Maybe that's why I never ended up finding anyone last night.

I knew they wouldn't even compare.

Manuel drops me off at the building, and after waving my pass through a few security checkpoints, I make my way into the first team building.

Yeesh.

I'm not a hippie-dippie kind of person, but I do believe in energies, and I can definitely feel the energy in the air as I walk down the hall.

It's not good.

There's an undercurrent of anger and hopelessness, a tension that seems to come from the walls. Bad vibes all around.

It's also pretty quiet, even for siesta time. Usually there's some noise somewhere.

I walk past Mateo's office, but the door is closed and I don't hear him inside. Maybe he really is sleeping. I want to apologize for missing this morning, but I don't want to push my luck.

I then make my way to the physical therapy room, glad that I'm ten minutes early so I have enough time to prepare and get this hangover under control.

Except Alejo is already there.

Sitting on the table, his back facing me.

Wearing the light blue shirt he uses for training, the same shirt that makes his eyes look icy cold.

I breathe in deep through my nose, ignoring the queasiness in my stomach, and walk over to him.

"I didn't think you'd be here so soon," I tell him.

"I'm always here early," he says without turning around.

“No you’re not. You’re always late.”

He finally looks at me, and for a moment, the breath is knocked out of my lungs. Shit, I didn’t think *looking* at him would feel so vibey.

He frowns. “Are you okay?”

“Do I not seem okay?”

“I heard you weren’t here this morning and” —he gestures with his finger at my face— “this isn’t the face of someone who is okay.”

I give him a funny look, wondering what the hell kind of face I’m making, then go straight to the mirror.

Okay. I’m not sure how I managed to miss it this morning, but I have last night’s mascara smudged under my eyes. I thought I’d washed it off, but I didn’t even put on makeup after to make up for it.

“Ugh,” I say, going over to the shelves and bringing a kit down. I take out a cotton pad and some coconut oil and quickly wipe it under my eyes, then rub a bit of oil on my face for good measure, slicking some back in my ponytail too.

At least I remembered to brush my teeth.

I walk back over to him. “Better?”

He gives me a small smile. “I don’t think you could ever look bad.”

“You should have seen me when I first woke up,” I point out, happy that so far things don’t seem too weird.

“Why? Are you hung over? Is that what’s wrong with you?”

I nod. “Took myself on a date last night. Had too much sangría. I’m a cheap drunk but not a cheap date.”

“You couldn’t find anyone to take you on a date?” he asks, his voice quiet.

“I wasn’t really trying,” I say. I clear my throat, putting my hand on my hip. “Besides, it was fun. I had fun. But they don’t really serve sangría in single servings. It’s the whole pitcher or it’s nothing.”

“I’d be more than happy to share a pitcher with you,” he says. “So you don’t have to take yourself on a date.”

I open my mouth to say something dismissive but he keeps going. “In fact, I make a really good batch of sangría. The best in Madrid.”

“Oh, you do?” I raise a brow.

“At least the best on the team.”

“Okay.” I’m smiling at his sincerity.

“We could skip the session right now and I’ll go make you some. I can drive us to the store. Let’s go.”

He makes a move to get off the table, but I press my hand down on his thigh to keep him in place. Okay, maybe I’m a little too close to him now but...

“You’re awfully impulsive,” I tell him.

The corner of his mouth curls up in a sheepish smile and I know he’s thinking of our kiss.

And now I’m thinking of it too.

It’s hard not to when I’m touching his warm, muscular thigh and staring at his gorgeous mouth.

“Is that a bad thing?” he asks gently. “Sometimes it’s better to just do something than think about it.”

“Yes,” I say carefully, giving him a warning look with my eyes. “And sometimes you can get in trouble by acting without thinking.”

“Am I in trouble?”

My brow shoots up. Obviously we’re now talking about it.

“No.” I swallow, feeling caught in a million different feelings and a million different ways I could handle things. “But you could have gotten me in trouble.”

That has a sobering effect on him. His face falls, eyes growing serious. “I am sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I tell him, biting my lip and looking away. I just don’t know what the right thing to say is here. “Let’s just forget about it. Put it past us.”

He pauses. “Are we talking about sangría right now?”

I burst out laughing and smack him across the shoulder. “You know what we’re talking about.”

He grins back at me, fucking cheeky devil. “I don’t know. You’re hung over. Maybe you’re not making much sense.”

“I’m making sense,” I tell him, putting on my serious business face. “Now, have you been doing the exercises every morning and evening?”

“Yes,” he says. “Of course. I just want to get better.”

“You’re getting there. Do you think the yoga helped at all?”

“In what way?”

I stare at him. “Your muscles. Your flexibility.”

“Maybe.”

“Well, I honestly think we should continue.”

“Is that a good idea?”

“Why not? Are you planning on kissing me again?”

And there it is.

He bursts into a smile. “Do you want the truth?”

I raise my hand in front of his face, blocking that devastating grin. “No. I don’t. Look, I think it’s a good idea. Come on, no one’s here. Let’s do it right here.”

He hesitates. “The...yoga?”

“Yes, the *yoga*. Okay, fine. Come here.”

I grab his arm and tug at it until he gets off the table looking bewildered, then I lead him all the way to the warm-up room.

It’s empty, except for the Croatian, Luka, who is using the basketball net.

“Hey, Luka. I’m teaching Alejo yoga. You don’t mind, do you?”

Luka grins at Alejo in such a way that I know it’s going to get under his skin. “I don’t mind.”

“Thanks a lot,” Alejo mutters to me under his breath.

“I’m sure your machismo can handle it,” I tell him as I head to the corner of the room and pull out one of the mats. The warm-up room floor is entirely made of turf, the same as the stadium, but he’s going to need the extra support.

For Alejo’s sake, I make him start off by facing me in the easy not-quite cross-legged pose, his back to Luka, who is

watching us curiously.

I go through a few rounds of just focusing on his breathing, and to be honest, being under the bright lights, having Luka nearby, the door open to the hall, I feel like my old self, back into the role of therapist and patient.

I concentrate on healing Alejo the best that I can, and he responds by giving it his all, even with an audience.

We go through many modified, easy poses, getting into a natural flow, as I do the same moves beside him.

At the end, I tell him to lie on his back and close his eyes, imagining sinking into the floor. It's only now, though, that I notice Luka had left at some point. I don't blame him. Yoga is a pretty silly thing to watch if you're not doing it.

"*Bobo*," I say out loud.

"*¿Qué?*" Alejo asks, opening one eye.

"Keep your eye closed. I'm just remembering the word for *silly*."

"*Sí, Bobo*. Are you trying to learn Spanish now?"

"Actually, I think I should start taking it seriously. I don't want Mateo to keep translating shit when he's talking to you guys or the doctor. I live in Madrid now. Spain is my home. I need to assimilate."

"Spain is your home," he repeats, a slow smile spreading on his face. "I like the sound of that. Do you need any help?" He opens his eyes to look at me.

"Keep your eyes closed."

"*¿Por qué?* That means *why*. Are they too pretty for you?"

I giggle. Like a fucking schoolgirl.

“Yes. I mean, no. You’re supposed to find deep peace and search your body inch by inch.”

He licks his lips. “Isn’t that your job?”

“I mean internally. Like concentrate and—”

“I can’t concentrate,” he says. “I’m waiting for an answer.”

“About what?”

“Your Spanish.”

My mind goes to Sergio’s offer, his name and number in my phone.

And I know I’m never going to call him.

“Sure,” I tell him. “I would like that.”

*God, what are you doing? This is a terrible idea.*

I push that voice somewhere in the back of my mind, where I can’t hear it anymore.

“So,” he says. “Let’s start. You work on me every day, I work on you.”

“Seems fair.”

“It’s about as fair as it will get between us.”

I frown, not really understanding that. “What does that mean?”

His gaze turns serious. “Maybe I’ll tell you some other time. For now, Spanish lesson number one. The swear words. Very important. Or *muy importantes*.”

“*Muy importantes*,” I repeat.

“Like, *eres muy importante para mí*.”

“What does that mean?”



“You are very important to me.”

I stare at him.

I can't *not* stare at him, caught up in those eyes like I've stepped into a snare.

If I struggle, it would make it worse.

And I'm struggling.

I manage to look away, my eyes searching the room, trying to regain the easy charm and professional decorum we had earlier.

He sits up and places his hand very close to mine. He lowers his head, trying to see my face. “Why did that upset you? Don't you see how important you are to me?”

“I'm not upset,” I say softly.

But I am upset.

Upset that my stomach is filled with butterflies, that my heart is aching, that the heat inside me keeps building and building with no release. All of these feelings, these visceral, palpable feelings are swirling around in me like the perfect storm just waiting to unleash.

He reaches out and touches the tip of my chin with warm, strong fingers, bringing my face level with his.

Oh god.

My eyes widen.

But he doesn't make the move.

He just holds my chin in place and gazes at me, his naturally arched brows coming together in confusion. “I don't want to upset you when I tell you the truth. I upset you the other night. I've upset you now.”

“I wasn’t upset,” I whisper.

*I wanted you to kiss me.*

*I want you to kiss me again.*

But the words, the traitorous thoughts, stay behind my lips and his gaze drops to my mouth as if he knows I’m holding back.

“Thalia?”

I hear my name being called.

Alejo immediately drops his hand seconds before Mateo walks into the warm-up room.

“Ah, there you are,” Mateo says, strolling inside. “Luka said you were in here teaching Alejo yoga?”

“Uh, yeah,” I say, hoping my voice sounds strong and not shaky, hoping he can’t hear my thundering heart.

*Holy shit*, I don’t know how that would have looked to someone walking in on that scene. And we weren’t even doing anything.

“I have to say, this is an odd one,” Mateo muses, stroking his chin. “I don’t think any trainer has used yoga before.”

“Yeah, well they should,” I say, getting to my feet. “It does athletes a lot of good. Keeps their muscles long and lean and flexible. Prevents injuries.”

Mateo looks skeptical. What is it with men and yoga?

“It’s true,” Alejo says, getting up. “I already feel better.”

I know that’s a lie but I really appreciate it.

Mateo shrugs. “Okay. Whatever works.” He gives my shoulder a squeeze. “Keep up the good work. Maybe we’ll

have the whole team doing yoga. Might help them win some fucking games.”

Mateo is smiling and his tone is light, but there’s a tightness in his eyes. The more games they lose, the more his job may be on the chopping block.

And the more his job is on it, the more mine is too.

“Maybe that’s not a bad idea,” I tell him.

But he’s already walking away, waving for Alejo to follow. “Come, Alejo. I need you to watch practice today. Maybe you can tell me what we’re doing wrong.”

I watch them go, and once they do, I press my fingers to my lips, feeling like I might just keel over. I’m not sure if it’s my hangover, or the fact that we were almost caught in a compromising (albeit innocent) position.

Or the realization that I can’t be around him anymore without something almost happening.

*Shit.*

I think it might be that last one.

**H**ydrotherapy has been an incredibly important (*muy importante*) part of physical therapy, but it also does wonders for someone like myself, who isn't under any real duress.

(I'm ignoring the fact that my patient kissed me, and I want to kiss him again, and he happens to be a lot younger than me and it could also get me fired, plus the team is playing poorly, which might get the coach fired, and without him, there is no one to bat for me, so I might get fired anyway.)

The hot and cold plunge pools, the jets, it all helps you destress, keeps your muscles in good working order while taking it easy on your joints.

I have a session with Alejo in ten minutes, a session that I know will probably get me in the water with him to work on his hamstrings, so I decided to put my swimsuit on (a modest black two-piece with a high waist, nothing scandalous) and get in the water before he shows up.

First, the warm pool to do a few short laps.

Then, I go into the cold pool to wake myself up and slap some fucking sense into me.

I'm alone down here. There's no one in the steam room, no one in the showers or the pools. We'll be alone, and I almost don't want to be alone with him because I'm not sure if I can trust myself.

But that's no excuse to put off a very crucial part of his therapy.

*Alejo comes first. Your pathetic urges come second.*

Though to be honest, with a man like Alejo, I'm pretty sure he'd make sure I came first.

Just saying.

I shake that nonsense out of my head, reminding myself that it's not to be taken lightly.

By the time my legs feel like they're going numb and I'm shivering a little, Alejo strolls into the room wearing his robe.

"You're in the water," he points out. "In the cold water, like a crazy person. You know what we call a crazy person in Spanish?"

"*El pollo loco?*" I say through chattering teeth, trying not to stare at him as he undoes his robe and lets it fall. I don't care how many times I've seen him in his black speedo, the sight of his beautiful, golden body never, ever loses its appeal.

"That's the crazy chicken," he says. He purses his lips thoughtfully and then shrugs. "It could work."

He walks over to the edge of the cold pool. "Want me to get in there with you?"

I shake my head. "No, I was just waking myself up. Get in the other pool. I'll come join you."

He gets into the warm pool until the water level is at his shoulders, his eyes on me the entire time. He watches as I get out of the cold pool, and I feel completely awkward and vulnerable and self-conscious being in a bathing suit in front of him for the first time.

I mean, I work out every day. I'm lean. I have muscle. I watch what I eat. I work really hard for the body I have, and I'm proud of it. But when you're half-naked in front of a much younger man for the first time, a man who is used to girls in their early twenties, well, you become very aware of how you might be perceived. I just have to work it and ignore the fact that not everything is tight anymore. I have cellulite and my boobs aren't perky. I really don't think they ever were.

"That is more like it," he says, something dark coming over his eyes as I walk down the stairs and into the other pool, my body erupting in pins and needles the moment the warm water collides with my ice-cold skin.

"What is?" I ask him, relishing in the warmth as I slowly walk toward him.

"That thing I said the other day. About how things between us aren't fair. This helps."

I walk as far as I can without my head going under, and he starts circling me with long, slow strides.

"I don't follow."

"Our relationship has always been so lopsided," he says, his chin and mouth dipping briefly below the water. "You always get to see my half-naked body while you are fully clothed. Now I get to see you."

"I see."

“Now since you get to touch me all you want and I can never touch you, I can think of a way of making that fair, too.”

I swallow, my eyes going wide.

*Deflect, deflect!*

But I have nothing to say. There’s nothing *to* say. Tell him he’s being inappropriate? I’m starting to think I might be welcoming it.

I turn around and swim to the edge of the pool at the four-foot marker, where an underwater bench runs along the length.

“Come over here,” I tell him.

He hesitates, then swims over, his body gliding through the water.

“Sit,” I command, and he does so, settling on the bench facing me. “Spread your legs.”

His forehead wrinkles in surprise. “Oh really?”

I give him a smirk. “Yes, really.”

He spreads his legs, and through the water I can already tell he’s getting a hard-on, which is going to make this a lot more difficult for me.

*Don’t touch it, under any circumstances.*

“We’re going to work on your knee flexion today,” I tell him, putting on my professional voice, which honestly sounds a little weak. I clear my throat and reach down for his knee. “And help those hamstrings.”

I straddle his leg, keeping my hands just below his knee, at the taut muscle of his calf, and gently pull it up, keeping my focus on his knee.

Not on his erection.

Not on his eyes, which I know are boring into me.

“How does that feel? Does it hurt?” I ask him, avoiding his gaze.

“It feels a little tight,” he says after a moment. His breath sounds ragged, like he’s trying to control himself, which, in turn, makes me feel like I’m losing control.

I let his calf fall back down and then raise it up again. “I think we’re getting to about eighty, almost ninety degrees flexion now. That’s much better than before.”

“Really?”

I steal a glance at him and wish I hadn’t. His eyes stare at me so intently, filled with hope and something carnal. The weight of his gaze is intoxicating.

“Yeah,” I say, my voice quiet. “You just needed a little neuromuscular re-education. Keep at it and you’re going to be back in no time.”

“Then I won’t have you like this,” he says.

“I’ll still be your therapist,” I assure him.

“But not like this.” He frowns, his expression faltering. “Right now, you’re mine. I want you to stay mine.”

Oh Jesus.

It feels like the rug is being pulled out from under me. The sincerity in his eyes, in his voice, unravels me, a thread being pulled, seams becoming undone.

What happens when there’s no more thread left?

Who am I underneath it all, when he’s left me bare and exposed?

I suck on my bottom lip, worrying it between my teeth.



*Try to focus on his knee.*

“Don’t do that,” he whispers hoarsely.

“What?” I pause, looking at him, thinking I hurt his hamstring.

“With your lip,” he says, his stare going from my eyes back down to my mouth. “I know what those lips feel like against my lips. I know what your mouth tastes like. Sweet. Soft.”

“Soft isn’t a taste,” I manage to say. My voice is trembling. My whole body is on the verge of something, skirting around an edge that would be far too easy to tumble over.

One misstep and everything changes.

“Maybe not in English,” he says. “To me, it is a taste. You taste how you feel.”

He leans forward, ever so slightly, to place his hands at the small of my waist. In the weightlessness of the water he picks me up, and places me on his lap, right up against his cock which has somehow gotten loose of his Speedo.

Oh. My. God.

*Get off him. Stop this. Push him away.*

I don’t do any of that. I am completely frozen in place as his palms slide up my sides. “You’re in the water. It is not the same as having you in my bed.” He slides his hands back down before bringing one hand around, across my belly.

I try to inhale, to suck in my stomach, but I’m absolutely breathless.

I know what’s happening, and I’m powerless to stop it.

I stare into his eyes and he stares into mine, the air heavy and thick, the energy between us crackling with electricity. He continues to stare at me as he slips the back of his hand underneath the front of my bikini bottoms.

He bites his lip, his gaze intensifying, and lets his knuckle slide all the way down until it's gliding over my aching flesh.

My eyes close, my mouth opening, a low, guttural groan surprising me, like I've got some primal, carnal woman inside that I've ignored for too long.

"*Si*," he hisses quietly. "So soft."

I'm feeling a little dizzy. I'm not sure what I'm doing. I place my hands on his shoulders, round and hard as rock, and try to adjust myself, wanting more of him and needing to get away at the same time.

My face comes close to his, and he stares at me through his long black lashes, his hand retreating briefly to come at me from another angle, this time sliding his hand all the way under until the length of his fingers find me silky with need.

I let out another gasp, and he grins at me. "I never knew you could make such beautiful sounds. I dreamed about it, but I never knew."

I'm being reduced to an aching mess and with his cock right up against me. I know it would take nothing at all for him to lift me up, just enough so that he can plunge his length inside me.

I'm dying for it. Throbbing for it.

But I also know I can't get carried away.

"We can't...I need to stop this," I manage to say.

“Then stop this,” he says as he slowly inserts another finger.

I groan, clenching around him, needing him, needing this.

I should stop this.

But I can't.

I need this more than the air I breathe.

I adjust myself in the water, and for a moment I think I might have hurt his knee.

And then I remember.

His knee.

Why I'm in the water with him.

Where I am.

I blink at him, and he frowns, knowing the connection was just altered. Not severed, but we certainly can't continue like this out in the open where anyone could stumble upon us.

I push back against his shoulders as he quickly removes his hand.

I start swimming away toward the steps.

The moment my back is to him I'm mouthing, “*Oh my fucking god*” and staring wide-eyed at the water. I do a quick sweep of the area, just to make sure there's no one here for sure, and then I walk out of the pool, heading into the steam room.

“Hello?” I call out softly as I open the door. The steam billows around me, making it hard to see. I walk along the benches that edge the room, but there's no one in here.

I can still feel his fingers inside me.

*What are you doing, Thalia?*

*Why are you doing this?*

Because I want to.

Plain and simple.

The door to the steam room opens, and I hold my breath, not knowing if Alejo will have followed me or not.

A tall, shadowy figure emerges from the steam, like the villain in an old film noir.

But it's not the villain.

It's Alejo.

And he's completely naked.

Before I can even take in the magnificent sight of him, he's at me, his hands sliding into my hair, tugging my strands loose from my ponytail and covering my mouth with his.

Fuck. Me.

This is like the kiss from the other night but on steroids.

I am a goner.

I'm absolutely melting into his hands as he walks me backward until the back of my calves hit the bench, lips and tongue and teeth all over my mouth and jaw and neck.

Inside, a frantic need wells up, like a river rising over a dam, wanting more of him, so much more.

This is *happening*.

This is Alejo's mouth ravaging mine, his hands tugging at my hair, running down my back. This is his cock jutting up between us, making me salivate.

This is no longer a fantasy or a threat of what might happen.

This is me finally giving in to him, about to give him everything I have.

Before I can do that though, he's pulling his mouth away from mine, leaving me breathless and bereft, and wrapping his hands around my waist. In one smooth, effortless motion he lifts me up so that I'm sitting on the upper bench. He immediately places his big hands on my thighs and parts them, stepping between them.

His head is almost level with my hips, and he puts his good leg up on the bottom bench in a lunge position, bending down slightly as his palms slide up over my thighs. He kisses me through the material of my bikini bottom, a torturous tease of not-quite-feeling him.

But I do feel his stubble, the way it scrapes against the soft skin of my thighs, making me shiver.

I arch my back until the back of my head rests against the wall, my hands going into his hair, holding his head.

My god he's got amazing hair.

It's thick and silky and strong, the kind you want to pull and tug at all night long.

I make a fist in it as he slides a finger under the hem of my bottoms, pulling it to the side until I'm naked and exposed.

There's a moment, a pause, where everything slows down and my heart beats so rapidly that I wonder if the steam room is a good idea, and then he nudges his face in and covers my sensitive skin in a long, slow lick.

I cry out in a ragged moan, my body so starved for this, for him. We could quit right now and it would still be worth it, just for me to know that I'm still a living, breathing sensual woman with needs, a woman that could make a young man like this worship me with his tongue.

But god, I hope this keeps going.

I don't ever want him to stop.

With one hand pushing the fabric to the side, he pushes a finger inside me, while the other hand moves back to my hip, holding me in place as he assaults me with lips and teeth and tongue.

*Holy shit, holy shit.*

I'm going to come so fast, it's pathetic.

God, this is too. Fucking. Good.

He seems to know how to play me just right, almost hitting all the perfect spots, alternating between rough and soft, not afraid to cause a little pain, knowing how to make me grow wetter and thicker and needier. He just needs a little more guidance, and I have no problem stating what I need.

"Harder," I whisper to him, my words rough. "Lick me harder."

He's eager to learn, I'll give him that much. He responds in an instant, and I pull his face further between my thighs until there's nowhere else to go, until I'm possibly drowning him.

"Yes, yes. Right there," I cry out. "God, yes, Alejo, keep going."

He lets out a low groan that vibrates through my body like electric currents, and he plunges three fingers inside me, sucking my clit into his mouth in one long draw.

“Yes! Oh god.” I don’t care if I’m vocal. My legs spread wider and he eats me out like he’s in a frenzy, messy and wet and hungry.

My orgasm sneaks up on me like a hunter on his prey.

One second I’m growing tighter and tighter, and the next it’s as if I’m shot straight up through the ceiling and into the sky. My body quakes violently, and I let go of his hair to grasp the edges of the bench, holding on while my hips thrust, making nonsensical noises.

“Oh god,” I say, the words falling from my mouth in a breathless prayer as my brain feels completely jumbled. I’m senseless and thoughtless and something very, very raw and real.

When I open my eyes, all I see is steam, all I feel is *everything*. He’s drugged me with his tongue.

I straighten up, my muscles cramping from the way I was positioned, but before I can really get my bearings, Alejo steps up onto the lower bench between my thighs, his head nearly touching the ceiling, and he dips down, cupping my face in his hands.

His mouth is wet from me, his face covered in sweat. I’m sweating too, and when he kisses me, I taste the sweetness of my own desire and the salt of his exertion.

“How was that?” he murmurs into my mouth, taking the time to run his tongue along the rim of my bottom lip before sucking it with a moan. “Did I please you?”

I laugh, pulling away an inch to gaze into his eyes, his beautiful eyes that are so heavy-lidded and drunk with need. “Yes, you pleased me.”

He kisses me again, long and hard and drawn out and then brushes my damp hair off my face, gazing at me with a mix of carnality and tenderness. “Can I please you again?”

His voice is hoarse, just a little rough, just a bit of a hint of what he has in mind.

“*Sí*,” I tell him, and he grins at me, sliding his fingers back in through my hair and covering my mouth with his, kissing me even deeper than before, his lips opening and closing against mine, wet, wanting, his tongue stoking the flames inside.

While he ravages my mouth, his hands move down to my bikini top, pulling down the straps and the sides until my breasts are spilling free. His palms spread against both breasts, gently squeezing, feeling.

“Oh,” he moans and then says something in Spanish that sounds so decadent, my body gets goosebumps.

“What?” I manage to say as he pulls away and lowers his head to my breast.

“You have perfect breasts,” he remarks before he places his lips over one of my nipples, slowly bringing his tongue around it in measured, pressing circles. With a sharp nip he takes it between his teeth and gives it a tug, bringing that low, aching need back between my legs.

As if I didn’t just come, as if I’ll never be satisfied.

“I can teach you more Spanish now, if you’d like,” he murmurs, focusing his attention on my other breast as he cups the both of them. “*Tus senos son más grandes que mis manos. Y tengo manos grandes.*”

With a lick he sends my eyes back into my head.



“What does that mean?” I gasp, my hands moving up to his shoulders where I dig my nails in.

“Your breasts are larger than my hands and I have big hands. I wonder what it would feel like to fuck them,” he says. “But first I need to fuck you properly.”

My eyes widen at his bluntness, and before I know what’s happening, he’s pulling off my bikini bottoms and then lifting me off from the top bench and onto the bottom one. The air down here is cooler, and my brain is struggling to catch up with what’s happening. He sits down and pulls me down on top of him, so I’m straddling him. I grab the upper bench for leverage while he grabs his cock and positions it in place beneath me.

He stares into my eyes like a man possessed, the kind of intensity that makes my stomach flip over and over.

Slowly, so slowly, I lower myself down on him, doing exactly what I was fantasizing over in the pool. He’s still watching me with a serious, focused expression, the kind that cuts far inside me, like this is the most important moment of his life.

“Fuck,” he says through gritted teeth, his jaw tense as he slowly sinks into me.

And fuck is right.

My eyes close, my body widening to accommodate him. He’s big, I knew he was, and I’m wet as sin. And yet each movement downwards is taking my breath away, making it hitch in my throat.

Inch-by-inch I slide over his cock until I’m at the hilt and we both let out a long, shuddering breath. I open my eyes to see him gazing at me, and I’m captured by the determination

on his face, torn open by the vulnerability. I'm a close-your eyes-and-come kind of girl when it comes to sex, but with Alejo, he wants the eye contact, he wants to look at me and I can't help but do the same to him.

It brings the experience to another level, one that makes me hunger for him so acutely that I can't physically bear it.

Impatiently, I use my upper body strength to lift myself up along his shaft before coming back down, but he cries out softly. "*Despacito*," he says through hushed words. "*Con calma*. Do not rush. Let me feel you slowly. I have been waiting too long for this to be rushed."

He places his hands over my hips and starts to control the tempo. "Easy," he murmurs, bringing his mouth to my neck. "Just like this. I need to fuck you just like this."

I close my eyes to his touch, to his lips, to the torturous way he's making me slide up and down over his length, stretching over his girth, the tip of his cock hitting the sensitive bundle of nerves inside me.

I gasp lightly, my nails digging into the wood of the bench, the sweat trickling off me and onto him. There's pressure inside me that wasn't there before, a knot being pulled tighter and tighter, making my body start to shake with anticipation.

Alejo runs his tongue up along my neck, starts nibbling at my jaw. One hand lets go of my hip and slides along my clit. I'm so drenched, from him, from me, from sweat, that I'm hair-trigger sensitive.

"*Córrete para mí*," he says through a grunt as his pace gets faster. "Come for me."

There's strength and determination and control all over his gorgeous face, and he's the master of restraint right now

because I know how badly he's holding back.

I want to see him let go.

I start fucking him harder, up and down, his cock sinking in deeper and deeper as his fingers play with me, pushing me past the point of no return.

"I'm coming," I cry out, my back arching, my hair spilling back like a waterfall. "Oh, *Oh*." My eyes pinch shut and my grip on the bench grows vice tight as I ride him like a fucking cowgirl, and then...

The world is splintered into a million shiny pieces.

"Oh god," I groan, voice broken and delirious, and I'm coming hard on his cock, squeezing his length as he pumps his hips up into me.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

My thoughts are rabid and my body is twisted on itself with pleasure, like I might not ever untangle.

Then I'm falling.

I want to fall forever.

"Now we don't take it slow," he says, pressing his lips against mine in a hurried kiss, my chest still aching for breath and I'm climbing off of him in a daze.

He's flipping me around so that I'm bent over, my back arched, ass in the air. I grab the edge of the bench again and he grabs my hips, pulling me back.

He enters me with one hard, stiff thrust, and the air is expelled from my lungs. His rhythm immediately grows punishing, with the hard slap of his hips against my ass echoing in the steamy room.

“Yes, just like this,” he says through a groan. “Yes, Thalia. This is it. Right here.”

He trails off and his grip on my hips turns mean with a bruising kind of strength, and I’m drunk on the way he’s fucking me, so rough, so fast, like he’s finally letting himself loose.

He’s turning into the animal I knew he was.

Rough, eager grunts fill my ears until his breaths become shorter and shorter, like he’s planning on fucking me right through this wall, and his hand is over my breasts, pinching my nipples, trailing down to my clit.

His sounds are enough to make me come again, let alone his deft and confident touch, but this time I’m holding back, waiting for him.

“Fuck, fuck.” The words seem to fall from his mouth. Sweat drips onto my back. His cock drives in so hard I almost lose my grip. “You feel like the sun. *El hermoso sol.*”

Then his fingers press into my skin so hard it makes me cry out, and the mix of pleasure and pain melds with his low, growling noises, and I’m coming, my body quaking with pleasure.

He’s coming now, too.

“Thalia,” he cries out with rasping breath and then I feel the warmth of his cum as it spills inside me. “Thalia, Thalia.” His grip on my flesh loosens, his pace beginning to slow.

I’ve never been fucked so much and so thoroughly in my life. Three damn orgasms in a row and Alejo seems like he can go all night. I suppose that’s an advantage to being fucked by someone younger.

The thought wants to turn into something more. It wants me to think about it.

Think about what I've done.

What just happened.

But the haze of the orgasm has slowed my brain and my limbs feel like jelly, while my soul is soaring elsewhere, higher and higher.

*Holy. Shit.*

Alejo slowly pulls out and I feel his seed run down my legs.

My body feels empty without him.

My heart is pounding from him.

And the awareness of the situation, the reality of what just happened, is knocking at the door of my conscience, trying to get in.

I can't believe he just fucked me in the steam room.

He places his hand on my lower back since I'm still bent over. "Are you okay?"

I get up. Too fast. The steam, the heat...everything is making me feel dizzy.

"Yes," I say, my hand to my head, closing my eyes briefly. "I'm fine. I think...I think I need to get out of here."

"Of course," he says, handing me my bikini bottoms. "Do you want help?"

I shake my head and try to get them on, holding onto his arm for balance.

I glance at his cock, half-spent and yet looking like it could go again.

What the hell? Is he a machine?

“Where did you put your swimsuit?” I ask.

“It’s out there.”

“Okay, I think I should go first, then you follow me.”

“I might just stay in here for a few more minutes,” he says.

I nod. “Okay.”

I make a move to go but he reaches out and grabs my arm, pulling me up to him and kissing me. “Tell me you’re not running away,” he says as we break apart, his eyes searching mine.

I swallow, feeling spent and thirsty. “I’m not running away. I just need to go outside and get fresh air.”

I’m not sure he believes me.

I’m not sure I believe myself.

CHAPTER 13

THALIA

**I** have a dreamless sleep.  
If I even sleep at all.

I should have passed out. My body is absolutely aching everywhere Alejo touched me, memories of his fingerprints feeling like little bruises. I'm sore between my legs, sensitive on the neck and jaw where he nipped at me, my lips and nipples tender from his tongue and teeth. My hips are slightly purple. He fucked me like the world was ending and maybe it kind of was, just for us, just in that moment, the steam swallowing us whole.

But as exhausted as my body was from all of that, my mind would not shut down.

I wasn't even having coherent thoughts; it was just the images of me and Alejo over and over in my head, mixed in with a million feelings.

I felt wanted.

I felt dangerous.

I felt stupid.

Ashamed.

Confused.

Horny.

Obsessed and broken and empowered.

I felt all of those things wrap around me all night, pulling me into an internal battle, and now that I'm lying here and staring at the faint grey morning light that's coming in the window, I'm more torn and confused than ever.

It didn't help that the moment it was over between us and we left the steam room, I went straight home to shower. I wasn't needed at Valdebebas anymore but still, my first instinct was to run, so I came here and drank a lot of wine and watched a lot of stupid shows on Netflix, trying to forget that it happened.

But that was impossible.

Now, I'm trying to conjure the power to get out of bed and get ready for work. There's a game tomorrow; I'm needed as a therapist, not just to Alejo but to everyone else. I need to go in there with my can-do attitude and focus on my job.

I just don't know how the hell I'm going to do that now.

Alejo touched me all over.

I called out his name, dug my nails into his skin.

He came inside me.

Thank god I have an IUD, but I still should have been more careful.

Fuck, maybe we should have not done that at all, if we're looking at all the *should haves*.

But it happened.

And I need to make peace with it before I fuck up bigtime.

We won't be so lucky next time.



*There is no next time, I remind myself. Stop thinking like that. You did it, you got him out of your system. It's over.*

It's over.

I manage to shower and get dressed and go to work as if I'm in a dream.

As usual, tensions are high, but I'm so locked in my head that I barely even notice. I go through the motions, working on some of the players with wrapping their ankles or massaging their upper thighs. It isn't until Luciano calls me over to him that I snap out of it.

"What seems to be the problem?" I ask as I go over to him where he's sitting on the table.

"Luciano?" Mateo says to him from the door of the warm-up room. "Time to go."

"I'm going to get Thalia to look at my shoulder," he says, to which Mateo just nods and walks off.

"Your shoulder? Is it bothering you?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says, bringing it up and wincing. "Anytime I hold it back here, I get this pain." He winces and reaches over, pressing down between his neck and his shoulder blade. "Right here."

"Have you tried not holding your arm back like that?" I joke.

"Ha ha," he says. "I just don't want it to get worse at the wrong moment."

"Of course. I saw Eduardo working on you. That didn't do anything?"

“A little, but now it’s like I have a numb knot back there. I heard you can do that thing with the needles.”

“Dry needling? Sure.”

I go and grab my kit and glance over his bare upper body.

Like Alejo, he’s perfectly ripped, even at his age.

Which is more or less my age.

Funny how of all the people on this team to get involved with, I mean if I *had* to, Luciano would have made the most sense. He’s handsome, he’s charming, he’s funny, he’s got a great body, and he’s the freaking captain of the team, as well as the captain of the Portuguese national team. We’re close in age. He’s single. He’s got a good way about him. It would have made sense.

And yet that didn’t happen. If Luciano got injured and I had been rehabbing him in such a way every day for weeks on end, would we have ended up the same as Alejo and me? Something tells me no. I think Alejo was after me from the moment we laid eyes on each other. His injury only brought us closer together and made more opportunities arise.

It was always going to be Alejo.

It’s like I knew from the very start.

“Everything okay?” Luciano asks.

I realize I’m just staring into space.

“Yes, yes, *sí*,” I tell him, quickly feeling for the knot he’s talking about.

“You almost sounded like a Spaniard,” he jokes.

“Well, Alejo is helping me with my Spanish.”

His brow raises. “Is he now?”

“*Si*,” I say emphatically, not liking that look in his eyes as I’m swabbing down his shoulder.

“You guys have gotten awfully close,” he comments after a moment.

I pause with the swabbing before clearing my throat and slipping on the latex gloves.

“I guess you could say that,” I admit carefully.

He doesn’t respond to that, so I take the chance to move on and take out the needles. I explain how it’s going to feel, and it’s just after I’ve tapped the second needle in and am picking up the third that he says, “Just go easy on the kid.”

“Go easy on the kid?” I repeat, looking around to see if anyone can hear us. We’re alone. “What does that mean?”

I have a bad feeling about this.

Luciano doesn’t know...does he?

“I’m afraid he’s infatuated with you.”

My heart thuds around in my chest, loose and reckless. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Thalia, he told me.”

“What?” I cry out then quickly keep my voice down. “What the fuck are you talking about, he told you? Told you what?”

“Uh, maybe you should put the needle down.”

I bring the needle close to his face. “If you don’t tell me what he said, I’m going to stab this fucker in your eye.”

“Whoa, hey, okay, calm down,” he pleads before rattling something off in Portuguese.

“I was calm,” I practically hiss at him. “You’re the one who brought it up. Now what did he say?”

“He said that he kissed you.”

I blink at him.

“That was it,” he adds.

Thank god. I mean, this is bad but it could have been worse.

Still...

“Does this mean I’m fired now?” I ask quietly.

“Fired? No. I can’t fire you, I’m just the captain. That would be Mateo’s job. And before you ask, no Mateo doesn’t know. Alejo wouldn’t have told him, and his secret — well, your secret — is safe with me.”

I bring the needle up to his eye again. “How can I be so sure?”

He glances nervously at the needle and then up at me. “Because I don’t want to lose an eye. I just want you to fix my shoulder.”

I take in a deep breath and step back from him, taking a moment to stare at the ceiling and gather my thoughts. I need to get back into my role and properly.

“Sorry. Let’s fix your shoulder,” I tell him, going back to work with the needles.

He tenses up, wincing.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I assure him.

“Are you sure? You seem kind of mad.”

“I’m not mad,” I say, tapping the needle in. “I’m just... upset that Alejo told you that.”

“We’re like brothers,” he says. “Good friends, not just teammates. He tells me because he trusts me and I would do the same with him. And I care enough about the both of you that I would never tell. I don’t want you both in trouble.” He pauses. “Which, by the way, is what will happen if the two of you keep this up.”

There’s a knot forming in my throat, the kind that won’t budge. I’m tempted to stick a needle in it. “I know,” I say softly.

He peers at me, purses his lips thoughtfully. “Huh.”

“What?”

“I thought maybe Alejo was the one who had it bad for you but I can see you have it bad for him as well.”

“Well, whatever it is, you’re right that it’s bad,” I grumble under my breath.

“Hey, I don’t want to be a, a...what’s the phrase? Wet dog?”

“Wet blanket?”

“No, I don’t think so. It doesn’t matter, I don’t want to be the one to put a damper on things.”

“Like a *wet blanket*?”

“Maybe. I just want what’s best for both of you, and... well, if you have a chance to break it off now, I would. Before it goes too far. Alejo can be...impetuous. That’s the right word, right?” I nod. “He still struggles with control over his emotions, he makes irrational decisions, and sometimes that happens during the game. I don’t want him to be...”

compromised. And I don't want you to get fired. I think you're good for us. I mean, hey, my shoulder feels looser already."

"Does it really?"

"Honestly."

That makes me feel a tad better. "Just so you know, there's nothing to break off."

"You know what I mean," he says. "Just make sure things between you stay professional. I mean, I can't live your life for you, but if you want my advice, that's what I would do."

I cross my arms and stare down at him. "And if I don't want your advice?"

He laughs. "Then you're just like Alejo."

I finish doing the dry needling on him, then he gets dressed and heads to the warm-up room before going out onto the field.

It's at this point that I put the kit away, tidy up around the room, and go down the hall to my office just as I see Alejo walking toward me from the main doors.

Shit.

I was hoping for a moment to compose myself after that talk with Luciano and get my head on straight.

"Alejo," I call out to him softly. My voice catches a little. "Can I speak with you in my office?"

His expression as he gets closer goes from happy to see me to something worrisome.

"Am I in trouble?" he says as a joke but I can't even smile back at him.

I can't even really look at him properly because I don't want to be swayed. Just looking at this man can turn me into a puddle of want, and I need to keep my head on straight.

I go into my office and sit down at my desk, telling him to close the door behind him.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

"No," I tell him. "Sit down. *Por favor.*" I gesture to the plastic chair in the corner.

He shakes his head, jaw tense. "I would rather not."

"Fine." I sigh and put my head in my hands for a moment, trying to compose myself.

"Are you crying?" he asks softly.

I whip my head up. "No. I'm not crying. I'm just... Alejo...you told Luciano!"

He has the nerve to look aghast. "I did not!" he exclaims.

"Yes, you did. He just told me that you told him you kissed me."

"Oh. *Sí.* That."

"Yes, *that.* Why the hell did you tell him that?"

He shrugs. "I tell him everything."

"But you could have gotten me in trouble."

"No, no. Luciano is not like that."

"It doesn't matter," I cry out. "You kissed me. That was a personal thing. That was something between you and me."

He nods, a softness coming over his brow. "I understand. You're right. I'm sorry."

“And because you apparently tell him everything, don’t you fucking dare tell him that we slept together.”

“It wasn’t quite sleeping,” he says wryly, his eyes dancing.

“That’s not funny.”

“Why are you so upset? Look, I’m sorry I told him and I won’t tell him anything else. I won’t tell anyone anything.”

“Good.” I pause, scratching at my temple, my eyes trained to the wall where I’ve hung my degrees. Reminders of what I’ve worked so hard for. “Because there isn’t going to be anything else.”

“What are you talking about?”

I glance at him with pleading eyes. “Alejo. Yesterday was a mistake.”

He flinches like I just slapped him in the face. “A mistake? You thought that was a mistake?”

“Anyone could have seen us.”

“Then we’ll be more careful next time.”

“There isn’t going to be a next time,” I tell him imploringly. “Okay?”

He shakes his head and leans across my desk, bracing himself with his hands. “What is going on in that head of yours?”

“My head?” I cry out. “I’m looking out for the both of us. It was a mistake. I broke a code of ethics. I broke so many fucking rules, I don’t even know where to begin. I didn’t work so fucking hard my whole damn life just to throw it out the window.”



“You’re not throwing anything away,” he says. His eyes seem so dark and troubled and there’s a vein at his temple I have never noticed before. “Let’s talk about this like adults.”

“I am being an adult! I could have lost my job. I took advantage of a client.”

He laughs bitterly. “You took advantage of me? No one took advantage of anyone. We both wanted that. We both needed that. And I’m not going to let you just push me away again, not after what happened. That was the most intense fuck of my life and I dare say it was the same for you. Maybe rules were broken, but they were rules worth breaking.”

My eyes close as the word *fuck* conjures up so many images. I try to bat them away. “No, they weren’t. It’s not worth it.”

“That’s a lie,” he ekes out, practically seething. “This isn’t over between us. It’s just beginning. I’ve had a taste of you. I’m not going to want anything else.”

The way he says *taste* makes my legs squeeze together, the heat building in my stomach.

I take in a shaking breath. “Alejo...”

“You’re mine.” He reaches over and grabs my chin, making me look him in the eyes.

God, he’s mad.

“Yours?” I volley back, tearing my head out of his grasp. “You have no right to be possessive over me.”

“And you have no right to tell me how to feel!” He practically shouts that last part. It’s enough to give him a warning look. We need to shut up.

I rub my lips together, at a loss. “I don’t know what to do, okay? I’m just doing what I think is best for the both of us. We need to move on and put this past us. It’s not a big deal. We’re two consenting adults. We’re attracted to each other, we both like each other. We got carried away with our...desires and now, well, it’s time to put a stop to it before it becomes a big deal.”

“You’re playing games with me,” he says, jaw clenched.

“I’m not playing games with you!” I cry out softly.

“Yes, you are. You touched me and you pulled back, told me it couldn’t happen again. You let me kiss you and again, the same threats. Now you fuck me and you’re pulling away, telling me that we can’t. But we can. We just did!”

“It’s not a game...it’s...” I can’t even find the words. “I don’t know. I just know that I keep doing these things and they are the wrong things. I don’t know why...I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

Okay, I need to hold it together. Tears are starting to burn behind my eyes and I’m on the verge of a minor breakdown here.

I stare down at my hands, my hands that were healing Alejo one minute and holding onto him the next. I shake my head, feeling small and vulnerable. “I need to figure myself out. And I’m sorry that you’re being dragged into this mess. I really am. I don’t mean to lead you on, if that’s what I’m doing. I guess I just...”

“You need me,” he says softly. “You like me. I know both those things are true.”

I want to tell him I don’t need him, but that would be a lie.

I think I do need him.

I need him to set me free.

Give me that green light to move on.

But the scariest thing is, what if I end up moving on to him?

What if it turns into something more?

What if it turns into something that can never, ever be?

We're the impossible.

What if all my fear about Alejo has nothing to do with my job or his age at all but the very fact that he might end up breaking my heart one day?

I close my eyes and take a steadying breath through my nose. I need to make sure this doesn't happen again.

God, I am such a fucking broken record, I'm starting to annoy myself.

"I'm going to need to be alone now," I tell him in a small voice, avoiding his eyes.

Alejo stares at me for a moment. For longer than a moment. He stares at me so long that I finally have to meet his gaze.

His hurt and rejection is written all over him.

It makes me ache between my ribs.

I didn't think it would feel this bad.

And he doesn't say anything, which makes it worse.

Just opens the door and leaves, shutting it behind him.

It's like shutting the door on a tomb.

## CHAPTER 14



**M**anuel drops me off in front of Thalia's apartment at eight p.m. The streets are just waking up for the night and the bar beneath her, Esteban's, already has smokers spilling out onto the cobblestones, drinking beer. The nights are getting a little cooler now but people will still be eating and drinking outside until winter appears.

I adjust my backpack and keep my face turned away from them. I don't mind being recognized — I actually like the celebrity aspect of being a famous footballer. But when the team is losing, that's another story, and right now, the team couldn't be more hated.

Only problem is, I don't have keys to get into her apartment and I'm not going to buzz her because it will be far too easy for her to say no to me. She has no idea I'm here, and I'm surprised how easy it was to get Manuel to take me here. I told him I wanted to give her flowers for doing such a good job on my knee and he didn't think anything of it.

At least I don't think he did.

So I wait with my backpack, shielding my face from the revellers with the massive bouquet of pink roses, and wait until someone comes out of the building.

“*Gracias*,” I tell them, quickly slipping in through the door before they can protest.

The apartment building is old and dark and smells like cigars and grilled meats. I head down the hall to the staircase and go up to the third floor, nearly tripping over the steps in the dim light.

That would have been pretty sad if I fucked up my knee again on my way to surprise my therapist.

And she will be surprised. Whether she’s going to let me in and listen to what I have to say is another story.

I go down the hall, knock on her door, and wait.

It opens and her eyes go wide like saucers at the sight of me.

“Alejo,” she whispers harshly as I stick the roses in her face, handing them to her as I brush past her, into the apartment. “What are you doing here? You can’t be here. How did you find me?”

“You know, the standard greeting here in Spain is *hello*. Or, *hola*, if you want to continue our Spanish lessons.”

“I’m serious,” she says, holding the roses in one hand and the door handle in the other. It’s still open. She jerks her head at it. “You can’t be here.”

“I need to talk to you,” I tell her, placing my backpack on her kitchen counter.

“We have nothing to say to each other,” she says.

I raise my brow. “You can’t speak for me. I have plenty to say to you. First of all, I want to apologize for being *un imbécil* the other day in your office. That wasn’t very nice.”

It's been a few days since we had sex at Valdebebas and things between us have been strained to say the least. Too strained. It's making life just a little bit uncomfortable for me, yet I don't want to be transferred to another therapist either.

So, something has to be done.

"Alejo," she says, her voice a soft warning.

"You can say my name over and over again but it doesn't change the fact that I'm here and I want to have a conversation with you."

"We already had a conversation about this," she says, hastily brushing her hair behind her ears. It's only now that I realize she's wearing it down, all dark gold and bronze, shining in the amber lights of an antique light fixture. "What?" She frowns at me.

"Your hair," I tell her. "I love it when you wear it down. You should wear it down more often."

"You know I can't at work. It gets in the way."

"That's why I'm here."

"My hair?" Her nose scrunches up adorably as she runs her hands down her strands in confusion.

"No. Sorry. What I mean to say is...I think who we are at Valdebebas is getting in the way of who we are inside. And who we really are to each other. When we are there, we are in the roles. And I understand the lines that can't be crossed. But when we're away from it all, here, just you and me, standing in your apartment, I think...we deserve to get to know who those people are."

She mulls that over, worrying her lip between her teeth. I hate it when she does that. It reminds me that I know what her

lips taste and feel like. It makes me imagine her lips elsewhere.

“What did I say about biting your lip,” I gently chide her.

She stops and raises her chin. “This is exactly why you can’t be here.”

“I’m not here to make love to you, Thalia,” I say softly, and there is no mistaking the desire in her eyes. “I’m here to talk to you. To be with you. To get to know you.” I raise my hands. “I promise I won’t touch you.”

“Okaaaaaay,” she says warily. She glances at the backpack. “What’s in there?”

“I’ll show you. Just close the door. Let me be inside with you without your, your *pelo de gato*.”

“*Gato*? As in cat? What exactly are you saying here?”

I’m impressed she knew that word. “Hair of the cat,” I reassure her. “Your hair is raised.”

“My hackles, you mean?”

“*Sí*. Hackles are raised. Just relax and trust me. Be happy that I’m here.”

She nods and reluctantly closes the door, then leans against it with her arms folded. “Okay. I’m relaxed. What’s in the bag?”

Inside, I feel victorious.

She let me in. She closed the door.

“It’s a treat for you. For us.”

I go to the bag, unzip the top, and start taking things out, placing them on the counter.

Oranges.

An apple.

Green grapes.

A jar of maraschino cherries.

Cherry brandy from Portugal.

Two bottles of red wine.

A small bottle of orange juice.

“Sangría,” I announce. “A specialty of number twenty-eight, Alejo Albarado.”

“Trying to get me drunk?” she muses.

“Trying to share a pitcher of sangría with you, so you don’t have to drink it alone.”

I start rummaging through her kitchen. Her apartment must have come fully-furnished, but even so, there’s not a lot of plates or cookware. I do find a glass pitcher, at least.

I fill up the sink a few inches, put the stopper in it, and hold my hands out for the flowers which she is subtly sniffing.

“They’re nice,” she says as she hands them to me.

“Grateful for our long growing season here,” I say as I stick the roses in the sink. “You can use the pitcher as a vase, after we’ve drunk everything.”

“Yeah, the apartment didn’t come with too much,” she says, looking around.

“You can always add your own touches, no?” I say. “Can’t say I see any of your personality in here.”

It’s true. It’s a nice place, warm sunny walls with dark wood furnishings, but other than a few stock framed photos of



Madrid and a throw over the couch, it might as well be a hotel room.

“I don’t have the time,” she says somewhat defensively, slowly walking out to the middle of the room while I get started on the sangría, bringing out a small plastic cutting board from IKEA and some cheap knives.

I groan in disgust at how badly they cut, even through an orange. “And you don’t even have sharp knives. This is a mockery of a Spanish kitchen.” I glance at her curiously. “What was your other apartment like?”

She shrugs. “The same. I mean, this place is much better.”

“Did you have your own stuff?”

“Yeah, I had some furniture and things from the divorce.” You can tell she doesn’t want to talk about it.

But I can be pushy. “So, how come that stuff didn’t make its way here? I’m sure you had some personal items that you liked or that meant something to you.”

She gives me a small smile and plops down on the bar stool across from me. “You know what? I don’t know. I never really thought about it.”

“What did you do with them?”

“Gave them away. I donated everything. I guess...I just wanted a clean slate. I wanted to leave every bad part of me behind in Manchester and I wanted to start over.”

That sadness comes back into her eyes, the sadness that she’s been dancing with since the day I first saw her.

“Do you think you’re starting over?” I ask her as I put the chopped fruit into the pitcher. “Or do you feel like this is a temporary stop on your way to somewhere else?”

Her brows knit together as she stares absently at the fruit in the pitcher. “I...hope I’m starting over. I’m not so sure about temporary. What makes you ask that?”

“I just don’t get a feel for you in here. And I don’t get a feel for you in general.”

She looks annoyed. “All because I don’t have my own stuff here? As I said, I’m busy.”

“You work as much as I do, five days a week. If you wanted to, you could start making it like home. But instead you still have Manuel drive you everywhere and you’re still living in this apartment which the club found you. I don’t know, maybe they pay for it, too. They have the money.”

“Is this why you came here? To lecture me about how settled or not settled I am?”

“Maybe,” I tell her, measuring the brandy. “Would you rather that or that I came here because I wanted to fuck you?”

She presses her lips together, blinking.

“Thalia,” I say gently. “We’re just talking. I want to know you outside of work, so here we are. We’re having a conversation. And since I like you a lot, it concerns me if you were just thinking of Real Madrid as a stopping point to some place better.”

She shakes her head. “There aren’t many better places.” She pauses. “Barcelona, maybe.”

“Hey!” I exclaim, but she’s smiling, knowing how much of a rival Barca is. I quickly do the sign of the cross, press my hands together, and stare at the ceiling, talking to Mary. “*Por favor*, she did not mean it.”

I pour in the wine and orange juice to mix with the fruit and brandy, mixing it around with a bent IKEA spoon. “I think I know what I’m getting you for Christmas.”

“What?”

“Better cutlery. At least spoons and forks. It’s bad luck to give someone knives, but just promise to stock this kitchen.”

She laughs. “I suppose you’re right. I used to cook a lot, back in England. Or just...*before*. Since coming here, I’ve just been eating at work and then maybe taking some extra home for dinner.”

“Like a squirrel.”

“Yes. Like a squirrel. Or I grab something to eat at the bar below me. I think I’ve eaten my weight in patatas bravas already. Those tiny potatoes are addicting.”

“Yes, but patatas bravas isn’t dinner.” I grab two wine glasses from her shelf. “What would be your favorite meal to cook? If you had the time?”

She thinks that over, tapping her finger against her lips as I pour the sangría from the pitcher. “I actually do a really good rack of lamb. With rosemary and this mint salsa as a garnish.”

“I’m impressed,” I tell her, sliding the sangría toward her. “Perhaps, one day, you can make it for me.”

“Perhaps,” she says as she picks up the glass. She takes a dainty sip and her eyes light up. “Oh my god. That’s *good*.”

“I told you.”

“What’s the secret?”

“Love,” I tease her.

She rolls her eyes. “Come on.”

“It’s this,” I tell her, holding up the bottle of Ginjinha. “It’s sour cherry liquor from Portugal. Luciano got me hooked on it.”

“Hooked on it,” she repeats, looking me over. A few seconds pass before she says, “You know, I knew a little bit about you from your games against Man United and the media and all that. I have to say, you’re nothing like I thought you were.”

“You say this after I’ve been inside you.”

She doesn’t blush easily, but her cheeks are going pink, matching the rose blooms in the sink.

“So go on. Tell me more wonderful things about myself,” I coax her.

She clears her throat and has another sip before she says, “I thought you were a hard-partying, screwing every woman, drunk all the time kind of player who didn’t take his job seriously.”

I cringe. “Well, that was me for a few years. I graduated from the youth academy and joined the first team at nineteen. The years nineteen to twenty-one were pretty fucked up. I guess...I mean, how do you get so rich and get so much fame and responsibility at such a young age without losing yourself? I lost myself in it. I made some mistakes. The biggest mistake was just getting that reputation. Not sure when I can shake it loose.”

“I’m not surprised that you went off the rails a bit. Especially since you lost your father.”

I take a big gulp of my sangría and make a noise of agreement.

She goes on, her voice gentle. “Is it true, what you said... that you never really talk about your father with anyone?”

I still, staring down into the glass for a second. Then I glance at her. “That was true. Everything I tell you is true.”

She nods slowly, looking at me with sweet eyes. Beautiful eyes. It fucking kills me to have a counter between us, that I can't take her in my arms and ravage her, kiss her, flip her on the counter and slip inside her. But I made a promise to myself that I would control myself tonight.

I will follow her lead.

“I guess I never told you that...” she starts. “It really meant a lot to me that you told me that. That you trusted me.”

“Of course I trust you.”

“Only because I'm your therapist. And your health is in my hands. I've seen it happen before. Patients, they become dependent on you. They trick themselves into thinking you're a savior, that you mean more to them than you really do.”

“No,” I say adamantly, my voice raising. “You think I feel this way about you because you're my therapist? That isn't it at all.”

Why is she trying to dismiss me so easily?

“Then what is it?”

“What is it?” I ask, shaking my head. “It has nothing to do with the work you're doing for me. I trust you because I feel I know you. Even if you're not quick to show yourself, I feel like we're one and the same in so many ways. I feel like we both know loss. I feel like we're both looking for a connection in this world and we may have found it in each other.”

She's staring at me like she's startled, the glass slightly shaking in her hands. She lowers it, self-conscious, and stares at the counter. "What makes you think I know loss?"

"Your eyes," I tell her. "Because you seemed to sense my loss in some way, from the beginning."

"My loss isn't the same," she says slowly. "I don't... sometimes I wonder if it's even loss." She swallows. "You know how you mentioned a connection? Sometimes I don't feel like I'm really participating in life. Like it's just something that's happening to me but I'm not happening to it. Like I'm a spectator. I felt like that before Stewart and I divorced. Before I found out about the other women."

She gets up and walks over to the window, staring down at the street below, her face aglow from the streetlights.

I want to follow her, but I also want to give her space. So, I sit back and watch her, wondering if she's going to start unraveling in front of me. I wonder if she's going to give me a piece of herself.

"I had been trying to get pregnant for a long time," she says, her voice subdued, almost dull. "It was never on my radar but Stewart really wanted kids. And I warmed up to the idea. Of course, by the time I was fully invested, I started having fertility troubles. We had tests, there was nothing wrong. It was just...the way it was." She takes in a deep breath. "Then one day it...took. I got pregnant. I was over the moon with excitement. So was Stewart."

Since Thalia doesn't have kids, my heart is aching for her before she even has a chance to tell me what happened.

"I named her Grace," she says, giving me a tragic smile. "After my grandmother who was my best friend growing up."

We didn't know the gender, of course, but I knew it was a girl. I really thought...and it sounds so stupid to say, God, but it was true. I really thought Grace was my purpose in life, my... connection to the world that I've always felt a little bit removed from.”

Her eyes close and she wraps her arms around herself. “Grace was never born. We only had her for three months. I never told my family because we wanted to make sure, you know, they tell you to wait because you could lose the pregnancy and...I lost the pregnancy. I know miscarriages are common. I know they happen to so many women, and mine happened early. But I felt...so alone. So at fault. Because it was my body that my baby was supposed to grow in, my body that was supposed to be a home, and it was my fault that it wasn't good enough for Grace.”

“I'm sorry,” I whisper, getting to my feet. “I am so sorry.”

I gingerly walk over to her, stopping close enough to reach out and hold her hand. I give it a squeeze.

She wipes away a tear with her other hand and sniffs, staring out the window. “Stewart was never the same after. That's where the rift began. I think, I know, he blames me, just as I blame myself. He would never say it but the look in his eyes changed. You know your partner well, and he just started viewing me as someone else entirely.” She lets out a caustic laugh. “Probably helped him justify the cheating. He could pretend I just wasn't me. Meanwhile, I felt so lost and angry and sad. So fucking sad. And lonely. I had no one to talk to. I didn't even tell my girlfriends; I don't know why. I guess I felt ashamed.”

“But you're telling me now,” I say. “Because you know I will listen to you. Because you know I won't judge you.”

Because I can help carry your burdens alongside you.”

“I don’t need you to carry my burdens, Alejo,” she says, her voice cracking. “I just need...*someone* to...to....”

Another tear spills from her eyes and then she’s crying, breaking down in front of me.

I immediately pull her to me, wrap my arms around her, hold her head against my chest as she sobs. I stroke her hair. “I can be your someone.”

The pain she’s feeling is so visceral, I feel it in my gut like a sharp, sticky pain that gets deeper and deeper, emptier and emptier. The pain reminds me of my father. It reminds me of those years after where it felt impossible to move on and yet everyone around me already had.

I know how it feels to grieve when the loss becomes a phantom, just thin wisps of smoke trailing to the sky. I don’t think you’ll ever feel as alone as you do when you’re alone with grief.

Thalia holds on tight, her hands clutching the back of my t-shirt, and I hold her right back, kissing the top of her head, reassuring her that it’s going to be okay because it has to be okay.

“I don’t know if I ever will be okay,” she mumbles into my chest and then raises her chin to stare up at me, her eyes full of tears. “This pain I carry, it’s the *coldest* pain.”

My throat feels too thick to swallow.

I know that cold pain too well.

And I know there’s nothing to say to make that go away.

I hold her for a long time. Or maybe it’s just minutes. Time doesn’t seem to live here. She brings her head back and then



rests it in the crook of my arm. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“Don’t be sorry. You have nothing to be sorry about.”

She takes in a deep shaking breath and I hold her tighter.

“I’ve got snot all over you,” she says. “You came over here trying to woo me and instead you got snot.”

“It’s an honor to have your snot.”

She lets out a laugh that’s still a little sad, still a little broken, but at least it’s a laugh.

I cup her face in my hands, feeling the warmth of her soft skin against my palms, and wipe her tears away with my thumbs. “Thank you,” I tell her emphatically.

“For what?” Her eyes search mine.

“For telling me your truth. The truth that hurts the most is the truth that needs to be told.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re awfully wise for your age?”

“Well, I do turn twenty-four next week.”

“Is that so?” she says, and then her face grows serious as she blinks up at me. “Can you...will you stay with me for a little while?”

The fact that she asked me that makes me feel like the sun is rising in my heart. “Of course I will.”

She frowns. “I don’t mean...I just don’t want to be alone.”

“You won’t be. We can drink more sangría. Watch something stupid on TV. Do whatever you want.”

“I think I’d like that.”

CHAPTER 15



THALIA

**M**y plans for the evening included Netflix and literally chilling.

By myself.

They didn't include Netflix and chilling with Alejo and sangría.

And they especially didn't include conjuring up old pain that still feels like fresh pain and reliving it in front of the man you just let screw you, the man you can't stay away from, the man you shouldn't have.

But they say life is what happens when you're busy making other plans, and if that's true then life is definitely having its way with me right now.

We're both sitting on the couch.

His arm is around me.

I'm snuggled up to his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his strong heart.

*Happy Gilmore* is on Netflix and Alejo is laughing his ass off, even though he's also quoting every line verbatim. I can't imagine how many times he's seen it.

The sangría is all gone, so now we're sipping the cherry liquor straight out of the bottle, since my woefully equipped apartment doesn't have shot glasses.

I should be surprised at how perceptive Alejo is, but I'm not. He was in here for a few seconds before he noticed how un-lived in this place is. The funny thing is, it's not like I'm never here. If I'm not at work, or jogging, or eating at the bar downstairs, I'm right here on this couch. It's all I really have in this city.

And he's right, I've been treating it like a hotel. I dipped my toe into the waters of permanence by attempting to learn Spanish (and look where that got me), but I have yet to buy a car and drive myself to work, or buy new things for the apartment, things that are sorely needed. It's like I've come to Madrid and this job with one foot out the door.

To where, I don't know.

All I could think about when I was applying for jobs was just getting out of Manchester, getting away from Stewart and the humiliation and the pain. I just wanted to be gone.

And now I'm here. I have a job that's challenging but I'm rising to the challenges (getting Alejo back to the game will be considered my first success), it's prestigious, I like the environment (despite the losses), and I really like the people.

Alejo excluded. What I feel for him is more complicated than that.

I need to stop thinking that Madrid is another stop to somewhere else. This *is* the somewhere else. This *is* my new life. Maybe it's a result of being divorced, but there's a part of me that feels seriously unmoored, like a boat bobbing along in a grey sea, storm clouds in the distance. Like I've found a

pocket in the weather, a refuge, and I'm just waiting for it to get worse.

Whatever it is, having Alejo here and pointing it out to me is sobering.

First thing tomorrow, I'm going to look into leasing a car.

Give poor Manuel a break.

"You okay?" Alejo asks me softly. I haven't been paying attention but we're at the part of the movie where he's about to punch Bob Barker in the face.

"I'm good," I tell him. I crane my neck to look up at him. "*Muy bien.*"

"*Muy bien,*" he says proudly. He lets his fingers run through my hair, and I close my eyes to his touch.

Honestly, as much as my body is a livewire, wanting and needing him in some dark and desperate, totally forbidden way, I'm also craving this kind of contact. Just to be held. Just to have a warm body to curl up against and pretend it's sheltering me from the storm of my own life.

"So, is it really your birthday next week?" I ask him.

"Mmhmm," he says. "Catching up to you."

I laugh. "Right. So, what do you want?"

"For my birthday?" I nod. He gives me a breathtaking smile. "Right now, at this moment, I have everything I could possibly want."

A warmth spreads through my chest, radiating outward.

God, this man is setting my soul on fire.

We finish the rest of the movie and once the credits roll, Alejo begins to adjust himself.

“Well, I think that’s a sign I should probably go,” he says. “It’s past midnight and I know you’ve got work.”

“You have work, too,” I tell him, but my heart is chilled at the thought of him leaving so soon.

“Barely,” he says.

I sit up and move out of his way as he gets to his feet. I watch as he heads to the kitchen to collect his bag. I get up and walk over to him, standing a few feet away, my hands at my sides, unsure of what to do with myself.

*I don't want you to go.*

The words rest on the tip of my tongue.

*Stay with me.*

But so far, Alejo has kept to his word. He hasn’t made any moves on me, just giving me the comfort that I sorely needed. His eyes might say otherwise. Even now, he’s stealing a heated glance at me as he slings the bag on his shoulder. In his gentle touch I felt sparks and desire. And yet he’s aimed to keep things as professional as possible between us.

Something I asked for.

Something I need to hold strong for.

*Think about your career, not the beautiful boy.*

But it’s hard for me to think about anything else.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says to me. “We can continue your Spanish lessons then.”

For once I know he actually means it, and Spanish lessons aren’t a euphemism for sex (though it’s a pretty good euphemism, if you ask me).

“Okay,” I say, walking over to the door.

He opens it and steps out.

*“Buenas noches,”* he says.

*“Buenas noches, Alejo.”*

I close the door on those beautiful, smoldering eyes.

Exhale deeply.

Rest my head against the door, close my eyes.

*Go after him.*

*Open the door and go after him.*

*Tell him not to leave!*

I inhale, resting my hand on the doorknob.

If I open it, my life will change again, and I will move on.

If I keep it closed, I'll never know what could have been.

I turn the handle.

And open it.

Alejo is still standing on the other side.

Like he was waiting for me.

His eyes glint with fire as he meets my gaze.

I can't help but smile. “Alejo, I—”

He cuts me off.

Hands in my hair, mouth covering mine, moving together as one, we step back into the apartment. He manages to slam my door shut with his foot, and we are a mess of lips and tongue and teeth as we try to devour each other.

My hunger for him is acute, a burning, aching pit inside me that won't be satisfied until I've run my hands all over

him, until I've tasted every inch of his body, until he thrusts inside me and makes me scream his name.

One of his hands makes a fist in my hair while the other slides down my neck, down over my breasts until my nipples harden underneath my shirt. A moan falls from my lips, and he tugs my hair in response and suddenly things get feverish, desperate, like we both just realized how badly we need this. Tongues tangling, hands everywhere, we stumble across the living room, knocking against a wall that rattles a painting.

He pulls back just enough to stare into my eyes with this dark, raw desire. "I'm going to worship you." He nips my lip between his mouth and sucks until I groan. "Turn your body into an altar. Use my tongue to bring you to heaven."

Oh. *Oh.*

He pulls away and tugs me toward the dimly lit bedroom, and I am reeling with lust and impatience and raw nerves as we spill toward the bed.

I'm falling back on it and he's prowling on top of me, holding my hands above my head at the wrists, gazing down at me. He runs his thumb along my bottom lip and slowly sticks his thumb in. It tastes like sangría.

"I've been wanting to do this all night," he murmurs roughly as I gently suck and lick. "When you started eating those cherries from the glass, it was all I could think about. All I could see. You're all I can see." He gently removes his thumb and then slides it down, down, down, until his hand is slipping between my leggings, under my panties, and moving slickly over my clit.

I arch my back, legs falling open, greedy for his touch, and press my hips up into him.

“You have no idea how beautiful you are,” he says. “How real you are right now, when I’m touching you, when I’m making you wet and hungry. I want to do this all night, every day. Just to see that perfect mouth of yours open and wanting, to hear those sweet little sounds.”

He removes his thumb and brings it up to my lips. “Suck,” he says. “Taste what you taste like to me. Pure woman.”

I take in his thumb, not minding how I taste, then he puts his thumb near his lips and licks up the side of it, his eyes on me the entire time.

I feel like sinking into the bed. I’m so turned on and this is *so* intense.

“This is part of the worship,” he says as he reaches for the hem of my shirt and pulls it up over my head until I’m completely bare before him. The first thing I do when I get home is take off my bra, so I’ve been without one all night.

“These breasts,” he says, his lips curling into a wicked curve. He spreads his palms over them, giving them a light squeeze. “Tell me what you like.”

Normally I don’t have a problem being vocal in bed, but right now I am tongue-tied.

It doesn’t matter anyway because he lowers his head and sucks a nipple into his mouth while squeezing the other with his hand. “Do you like that?” he says against my skin, causing goosebumps to erupt all over my body.

“Yes,” I whisper, wanting more. My heart is beating so fast I can feel it in my neck.

He responds by taking my nipple between his teeth and giving it a tug, a sharp pinch of need that makes my skin feel hot and tight.



“Do you like that?”

I make a whimpering sound.

He pulls his mouth away, blowing on it until I’m squirming, then starts flicking the hard pebble with his tongue until my hands start grasping the bedcover and I feel like I’m going to die from the tension.

“What do you want me to do?” he says, and I stare at his wet mouth. “How do you want me to touch you?”

“By fucking me,” I tell him. My voice sounds so desperate and needy but I can’t help it. I’m wound so tight, it’s agony. “Please, just fuck me. Fuck me until I don’t know my own name.”

“Okay,” he says, his voice nearly inaudible from the rasp of it. “*Si.*”

He kisses me, pressing his fingers into my jaw while his tongue delves deeper, teasing me, making me want his tongue on my clit, plunging inside me. He’s fucking my mouth, getting me riled up to the point of desperation and I feel crazed and delirious.

We don’t talk. There is no space between us for words. We just communicate through skin on skin as I run my hands under his shirt to his bare stomach and firm chest. His skin is hot to the touch, and I’m pulling his shirt off, wanting the softness of my body to meld against the heat of his.

His shirt is off, then his pants and underwear, my leggings and panties are pulled down and discarded, and every time we break apart to remove our clothes, our lips rush back to each other like long-distance lovers.

His head dips down to kiss and lick my breasts again and I’m reaching over his shoulders, feeling his soft skin and taut

muscles, giving him a light scratch with my nails.

A moan comes out over my nipple, the vibration rolling through me, and then I feel him grabbing his cock, adjusting himself between my legs.

I spread them a bit to let him in, but he just rubs the thick head of his cock against my clit in circles.

“Fuck,” he whispers hoarsely, and then mumbles off a bunch of words in Spanish that I would normally want the translation of but right now I think I get it.

Whatever he’s feeling, I’m feeling the same, especially as he dips the head of his cock inside me, just briefly, and with a sucking sound, drags my wetness back over me.

“Ah,” I gasp softly, my hips starting to press against him in urgency, my nails digging in so deeply I know they must be breaking skin. I don’t think I’ve ever needed sex this intensely in my entire life.

“I love it when you hurt me,” he says, before bringing his mouth to my throat and sucking along my neck. “Knowing you can heal me too.”

I take my hands away from his shoulders, not sure if I’m really hurting him or not, but he pulls back to gaze into my eyes. “Put them on my back, on my ass, and make it harder.”

And at that, he thrusts himself inside me.

I still for a moment, my lungs constricting as I unfold around his girth, then as he slowly pulls back out, my hands are at his ass and I’m tugging him back, nails digging in deep.

Damn this ass. Most footballers are blessed in the booty department, but Alejo’s ass practically needs its own orbit, a bouncy, muscle-packed piece of machinery that knows how to

make it count on the pitch and in the bedroom. It's the fuel behind his thrusts that makes me lose my breath each and every time his cock pumps in deeply, dragging against my most sensitive spots.

His mouth finds mine again and he pulls me into a long, hard kiss as he keeps working me, and I'm so fucking wet it's obscene. I raise my head and look down, watching him fuck me. The sight of him moving in and out of me, his thick shaft shiny with my desire, the sound graphic, it's like watching a porn come to life.

"You see how wet I make you?" he says before determination flits on his dark brow. "I can make you wetter."

Then he's straightening up and grabbing a pillow from the head of the bed, lifting up my hips and shoving the pillow underneath.

He leans back on his knees and I can't help but wince.

"Your knee?" I whisper, knowing that it's probably okay on the soft mattress but still.

"Never been better," he says, his mouth open as he grabs my hips and starts pulling me on to his cock, the angle changing.

Shit.

My eyes flutter closed as my body winds itself tighter and tighter.

I can tell Alejo wants to go all night, but I can feel my orgasm in the distance, getting closer and closer. If he starts playing with my clit, I am done for.

He grins at me, deliciously sinister, and I know he knows this.

“I’ll touch you when you tell me to touch you,” he rasps, his strong shoulders moving overhead as he pumps in and out. “I won’t send you over the edge until you’re ready.”

I nod, biting my lip, and it causes him to lean down and kiss me, hard and rough and violent. When he pulls away, I can see the shadow of a vein on his temple, sweat on his brow, his neck corded with restraint. He’s ready to come and he’s doing what he can to hold it off.

I roll my hips up into him, tiny noises escaping from my throat each time his hands skim over my body, pinching at my breasts, tugging at my hair, his fingertips ghosting over my hips like whispers. They go everywhere but where I’m hot and swollen and begging to come undone.

“Just tell me and I’ll release you,” he says, bracing himself with his hands planted on either side of my head, slowing the pump of his hips until it becomes this slow, decadent, rhythm intent on driving me mad.

Somewhere outside my bedroom, on the street below, a bottle smashes. People laugh. But these sounds seem to come from another place. In this room, there is only Alejo. I’m starting to think he’s the only thing I focus on in each room I’m in.

Right now, I’m so focused that I can’t even think.

I can only feel.

He rocks into me, the exertion apparent on his face, his muscles straining from each and every thrust.

I don’t think I’ve ever been fucked like this. In all my forty years, there’s never been one man to be this attentive, to be this involved. Sex to me always had a barrier between me and the other person, a veil that kept me from truly committing to

them in the moment. Something stopped me from being open and real. Maybe it was self-consciousness, maybe it was self-protection. Either way, I was always disconnected. I liked sex, I knew what I wanted from it and I could get myself off easily if I needed to (and, yeah, sometimes I needed to), but it wasn't everything to me.

But now...I don't want to get ahead of myself, but with Alejo it's different. There is no veil, there is no wall. It's just me at my most vulnerable with him, our bodies connected, our hearts racing at the same pace, sharing the same space.

"Come back to me," he says, and I bring my attention to his eyes as they stare down at my eyes, at my mouth, at my breasts. His mouth is open, wet, his hair sticking to his damp forehead, and he's the most gorgeous sight I've ever seen.

I try and commit him to my memory, knowing full well this is a moment in my life that I will never forget.

Perhaps it's the moment I'm set free.

"Tell me when," he whispers roughly, his eyes pinching closed as the pace starts to pick up.

"When," I say softly, pulling my thighs up to wrap my ankles over the small of his waist.

His hand goes between my wet thighs and slides along me in one long wet stroke.

I am a butterfly caught in a net seconds before it finds the way through.

My body explodes into shards of light and liquid hot pleasure radiates outward, making my fingertips buzz and my toes curl and my limbs quake and shake from the violence of my orgasm.

“Alejo,” I cry out, and it sounds like the voice of a woman gone mad. I dig my nails into his ass, I keep him pumping even though the sensation is nearly too much to bear. “Oh god. Fuck.”

I am a girl dissolved.

Alejo makes a sharp grunt as his hips snap into mine, and I manage to open my eyes in time to watch him come undone, from the rigid tension in his shoulders, arms, chest, to his clenched jaw, seething out animalistic noises through clenched teeth. His eyes pinch shut and his head goes back before it falls forward, droplets of sweat falling on my rising chest, his pumps gradually slowing.

He almost collapses on me, his elbows taking the brunt of his weight at the last second, and he stares down at me with a dopey smile, smoothing my hair off my forehead.

“You gave in too easily,” he teases, his breath ragged. “I could have gone all night. In fact I will, if you just give me a second.”

I let out a soft laugh, my body full of stars and butterflies and everything delirious and happy. “You’re going to wear me out. And you really shouldn’t do that to your knee. I’m serious.”

“Yeah,” he says, kissing my nose, the corner of my mouth. “You’re always serious. How about next time you give your knees a workout, *si?*”

I reach up and run my fingers over his strong jaw, his stubble tickling. “I can do that.”

“Okay,” he says. He rests his face in the crook of my shoulder, still breathing as hard as I am, waiting for our bodies to recover. For a moment I think maybe he’s fallen asleep on

top of me, then suddenly he pushes himself up and gets off the bed.

I sit up, watching him walk to the washroom, admiring his full body from the rear, marveling that a warrior like that was actually inside of me, giving me the best sex of my life.

I'm so giddy and delirious, I'm smiling from ear to ear.

I can't help myself.

And I can't believe that just happened.

God, how I want it to happen again.

When he returns, he walks to the edge of the bed, grabs his cock, which is somehow erect again, and grins down at me, white teeth, bronzed skin.

"Well," he says pointedly.

"You can't be serious," I say through an awed laugh as I sit up, my eyes darting between his cocky gaze and his very resilient erection.

"I am. Get on your knees so we can give my knee a break."

I get on my knees.

Gladly.



**M**ateo Casalles is in a mood.

I can't really blame him. As a team, we've all been in moods. We ended up winning a game last week, barely, but then lost the game last night, so the team's confidence has been shattered again and it's all resting on Mateo more than anything.

We're sitting in Manuel's car, me at the front, the married couple in the back, heading from Vera and Mateo's house in the fancy Salamanca *barrio* where I was having pre-drinks, to Alejo's house.

It's Sunday night.

It's Alejo's birthday.

And it's a surprise.

So, really, we should all be feeling pretty excited about this. At least I am, not only because I don't think Alejo has any idea about the party, but because I haven't seen him outside of work for a few days. When he came over to my apartment, that was actually the last time we had been alone in that context. Granted, he railed me all damn night, so it's like I got my sex fill for the next year, but even so, I've been missing his touch.



Oh, I'm still touching him every day and he's valiantly trying to teach me Spanish, but we made a point not to do anything at work, and I suppose our schedules just haven't aligned these last few days. While I've been sitting at home, he's had some football gala to go to and dinner with his family and the like.

On the plus side, his knee really is getting better. In fact, I'm optimistic about it and think he can return in two weeks or so. But I'm also a little hesitant to say anything, just in case the team starts counting on him and it all falls through. Every injury is unique, and you never really know until it's put to the test.

"You can at least give me an estimate," Mateo says. "*¿Más or menos?*"

I glance over my shoulder at him.

Mateo won't stop asking about Alejo's progress, and the more I withhold, the moodier he gets.

"I would give you an estimate but I don't want to get your hopes up, and I don't want you to bank on him."

"Just tell me, *por favor*, do you think he'll play the *El Clásico*? Give me a percentage. Forty percent? Fifty percent? Sixty-five per cent? Anything."

It's odd to see Mateo pleading. He's usually so suave and in control. I mean, usually. During the game is another thing. And when I look over at Vera, I see she's giving me the same puppy dog eyes. Everything that matters to him, matters to her.

I sigh. "I won't give you a percentage. But I will give you a maybe."

"You think there's a chance?"

I nod slowly, sucking in my upper lip before I say, “Yes, I think there is a chance.”

Mateo exhales in relief and leans back in his seat. I exchange a look with Manuel, like *whooo boy*.

“So what made you want to become a physical therapist?” Vera asks me, trying to change the subject away from anything stressful.

I twist around in my seat to face her. She’s so gosh darn pretty, even in the dark car with the lights of the city flashing past us. Tonight her ombre hair is swept up into a high top knot, she’s wearing a Led Zeppelin t-shirt turned into a dress, and she’s smudged the sparkliest purple eye shadow on, so much so that when she went to hug me and kiss my cheek, she left me in a cloud of glitter.

“It’s going to sound kind of lame,” I say, “but I always wanted to heal people. I always played sports, and when someone was hurt, I was always the first person at their side, trying to fix them. The weird thing was, I seemed to work magic on them.”

“You have magic hands?” Vera deadpans.

“No,” I say with a laugh. “It was a coincidence. It just felt like it. But it gave me the confidence to go into sports medicine, even though I was always so terrible at math and science. I barely passed those courses, but when it came to the human body, I couldn’t get enough. In another life I feel like I was an engineer or something, and this is another look at engineering.”

Vera nods. “Okay. That’s honest. I like that.” She glances at Mateo to see his reaction but he’s playing with his watch and staring out the window.

“Mateo, baby, please,” she says, sliding her hand along his leg, her voice taking on this husky Scarlett Johansson-esque tone. “Lighten up. Put it behind you for Alejo’s birthday.”

He grunts in response and I continue to watch her rub his thigh, higher and higher, until I feel awkward.

I face forward and my mind can’t help but drift to the two of them. She’s so much younger than him and they make it work. But why not? She’s sexy, he’s sexy. He’s got the younger woman instead of someone his age.

Someone *my* age.

He’ll grow older, but she’ll be a hot little number for years and years to come.

But if you look at me and Alejo...

I know I look good for my age, I know I can pass for younger, I know that forty is the new thirty. But after a few years, I will age, and I refuse to up the Botox to catch up. I want to age as gracefully as possible, but what does that mean to Alejo? What will that look like in his eyes?

*Oh my god. Why are you even worrying about this?*

That voice is back and it has a point.

A few rounds of hot sex and I’m already planning for a future?

*Get a fucking grip, you crazy old cougar. This won’t last forever. Enjoy it for now but don’t forget to move on.*

I hate that voice, as right as she is. But at least it’s a good reminder to live in the present.

And tonight, that’s exactly what I plan on doing.

The surprise party was my idea. I just thought with the way the team was playing and how excluded Alejo must feel from it all, not being able to practice every day and take part in the games, that it would be good to have his team around him for the party in a safe environment.

Since his mother doesn't like me though, I passed that part on to Mateo, so he could coordinate with her. Then I had Luciano take Alejo out for birthday drinks. They're at some club downtown right now, getting proficiently hammered. In an hour from now, Luciano and Alejo will take a cab back to his place and then we're all going to jump out.

Once we arrive at his place though, we see some challenges.

Real Madrid might have eleven players on the field, but it has twenty-four players in general, and that's a lot of people to hide, even in a house as big as Alejo's. We spend a good amount of time trying to get everyone sequestered away, especially since their Belgian goalie is six-foot-six and can't properly fit behind the couch.

I'm hiding in the closet with Vera, right where you walk in the front door. From here I can hear Alejo's mother yammering on and on about something in Spanish while everyone else is shushing her.

I giggle and lean into Vera. We had a few shots of some almond liqueur with the team when we first got in and I'm feeling a little tipsy. "His mother hates me," I tell her.

I can see her eyes through the slats in the closet. "Why would she hate you?"

"I showed up once to bring Alejo to Valdebebas and I think she thought I was some crazy fan. She tried to take my jacket

off, and I don't know why."

"If it makes you feel better, she's suspicious of me, too. The few times I've met her I've always gotten the stink eye. But I often get weird looks, so I'm used to it. I don't let it bother me. I used to..."

"So how did you and Mateo meet again?" I ask her. "At an English program, right?"

"Yup."

"How soon after his divorce?"

She blinks at me, and if I'm not mistaken I see a glimmer of something like fear or shame in her eyes. "Ummm," she says, rubbing her lips together. "We met when he was still married."

A bitter taste forms in my mouth. "Oh."

"Yeah, it wasn't our finest...we fell in love and maybe it didn't happen at the best time or maybe it happened at the right time. I don't know. I don't know how it could have had any other outcome though."

I grow silent, mulling that over. It's not like I'm mad at Vera. I barely know her, and I don't disapprove per se. It just kind of hurts, in ways I can't defend or explain. I guess because of Stewart. The way he cheated on me with someone younger. Vera was the other, younger woman.

An awkward silence falls between us before she clears her throat. "I heard about what your ex did and I know this makes things kind of weird. But just so you know, if it makes a difference at all, after we fell in love, I went back to Canada and he got divorced. We didn't prolong it. He came clean and things got messy, but we didn't...we didn't keep having an affair behind her back. Their marriage was already broken."

“My marriage was already broken too,” I say softly. “But the difference is, I don’t think Stewart ever gave a shit about being hated or being a villain. He’s not Mateo, is what I’m saying.” I sigh. “And I certainly don’t knock you for falling in love. You can’t help who you fall in love with. Obviously you were meant to be together.”

“I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t want you to look at me differently,” she says, putting her hand on my arm briefly. “I like you and I want to be your friend, and I just hoped you might understand.”

“I understand. I don’t condone it, but I understand.”

A hush comes over us again as the voices from the living room continue at a murmur. Hopefully, Alejo shows up soon or this group of drunken footballers is going to get rowdy and spoil the whole show.

“So, are you seeing anyone?” Vera asks me, innocently enough.

“No,” I lie. “Haven’t had the time to meet anyone.”

“Well, if you want to meet some people, I have some friends. I know some single guys. Nice, cute. Maybe a bit young for you...”

I glance at her sharply. “Too young for me?” I ask.

She gives me a quick smile. “Not *too* young for you. I mean, look at you, you can get anyone. They’ll be falling over each other trying to get into your pants. But I mean, young guys, they’re only good for flings, right?”

“Right,” I say slowly.

“At least the guys I know, if they’re under thirty, they don’t want commitment. But since you’re just getting out of a

divorce, maybe you don't want that either."

"That's true."

Suddenly, there are headlights out the window, and I hear the whir of the front gate.

"He's coming, he's coming, everyone get ready!" I yell through the closet door.

Everyone falls silent, except for someone giggling. It's either Rene or Armando.

I hear Luciano outside the front doors, and through the slats in the closet door, I see them step in.

"¿*Qué es ese olor?*" Alejo asks, sniffing.

Pretty sure Alejo is smelling someone in this house. Instinctively, Vera raises her arm to smell her armpit and ends up banging her hand into the hangers.

"¿*Qué ese eso?*" Alejo asks, stepping toward the closet.

Uh oh.

Luciano says in English, "A present for you."

That's the cue.

I throw open the closet to see Alejo's shocked face (he literally jumps) just as everyone else springs up from their hiding places in the living room and the kitchen.

"¿*Sorpresa!*" everyone yells. Surprise!

"¿*Oh, dios mío!*" Alejo cries out, hand to his chest, laughing. "What is happening? What are you...oh my god, you're all here!"

He glances at me — our eyes meeting for a few long seconds — and then Vera, and gives us a wry smile before he

proceeds to greet all of his teammates and family.

It's not long before the music is playing, the drinks are flowing, and the noise level is out of this world. I make the rounds, talking to the players, even dancing around with Vera like a lunatic, letting our hair fly around us. I have to admit, it feels good to let loose a little. I don't think I've laughed this much in a long time.

I'm also doing my best to avoid his mother who is still giving me the stink eye.

In the kitchen, when I'm filling up a glass of water from the sink, I run into Armando.

"It's you again," he says in English.

"Hi," I tell him. "I'm Thalia. We never properly met before."

I offer my hand, and he gives it a limp shake. "Hey," he says, sounding all lazy and trying to be cool.

I hide my smile behind my glass. He's the spitting image of Alejo, though shorter and hair a bit lighter. Pretty sure he's wearing Alejo's leather moto jacket though because it's a bit too big on him.

"So, are you really my brother's therapist?" he asks, getting a beer from the fridge.

I feel like I should scold him on the beer, but the attitude toward drinking is so lax here.

"I really am. And he's getting better every day."

He nods at that. "Seems like it."

"Your English is very good. Did you learn it in school?"

"I did. Do you speak Spanish?"



I shake my head. “Your brother is trying to teach me. I guess I’m a slow learner.”

“Probably easier if you just fix his knee.”

I laugh. “Yes. That is actually easier.”

“Perhaps Luciano could teach you,” Armando says.

“Ah, what’s happening here?” Luciano says, appearing in the kitchen. “Are you talking about me? *De qualquer forma, eu estou com uma pulga atrás da orelha.*” He looks between the two of us.

“And what on earth does that mean?” I ask.

“I have a flea behind the ear,” Luciano says.

I’m still staring at him. “For real?”

“It’s a *saying* in Portuguese. Means I have a flea behind the ear.”

“I was just saying you should be teaching her Spanish instead of Alejo, so she can concentrate on Alejo’s knee,” Armando explains, while I’m still hung up on the flea behind the ear thing.

“Is that right?” Luciano muses. He folds his arms across his chest and rubs at his chin. “And how are those *Spanish lessons* coming?”

Okay, that has to be a euphemism again, right?

“Fine,” I tell him. “More importantly, he might be back for *El Clásico.*”

I know I shouldn’t start talking like this, but I’ve had a few drinks and it’s getting harder to keep my cards close to my chest.

“I know, I was just talking to Mateo about it,” he says.

“Word travels fast, huh?”

“It’s good news, right?” he asks hopefully.

Armando mutters something in Spanish under his breath and leaves the kitchen. Probably along the lines of, *this is boring*.

“It is good news. Whether it’s for *El Clásico* or not, he’s going to be back soon. I can’t say that it will end your losing streak. Only you and Mateo have a feel for that.”

“It will help,” Luciano says with a shake of his head. “It’s been hard. You know, you lose a few games in a row, and with each loss, the team forgets how to play. They second guess themselves. They start trying new things but those new things might be worse. That’s what I’m dealing with now. We have the skill. We have some of the best players in the league, and yet we keep fucking up. We’re not a unit anymore.” He has a gulp of his beer and then winces, giving me an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m laying this all on you.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“You know what we need to do?”

“What’s that?”

“Mateo actually taught us this. We need to run that animal down.”

I frown. “Animal?”

“Okay, so hear me out,” Luciano says, his hands becoming animated. I watch his beer carefully as it sloshes around in the bottle. “Humans have the ability to hunt any animal, whether it be a horse or a lion or an elephant. Whatever it is, we can hunt them, and it’s not because we have the tools but because we

have the will. If we keep walking and tracking and keeping on the animal, staying the course after them, day after day after day, eventually the animal will tire, it will weaken, it will give up. But we won't. We'll keep going. We have the willpower and the determination and the intelligence to succeed. We run that animal down. That's what we need to do. Just keep at it and eventually we'll be back in the game."

"Run that animal down," I muse. "Sounds like you've got it figured out."

"We'll see," he says, raising his beer to his lips. He looks past the kitchen to the living room where Alejo is in a conversation with Kroos. "So, I've noticed you guys have been avoiding each other all night. Everything okay?"

I give him a steady look. "Everything is fine."

"You won't even talk to the birthday boy."

"Maybe because if I do, people like you will think there's something going on."

"Is there still something going on?"

"Luciano, I'm one of your therapists. I'm not going to tell you anything. That's something you can bug Alejo about."

"I have. He won't tell me shit."

I smile to myself. *Good boy.*

"Maybe because there's nothing to tell."

He narrows his eyes at me in mock suspicion. "I don't like it."

"How about you concentrate on running that animal down?"

He grumbles something and heads off into the living room.

The movement catches Alejo's attention, and his eyes go past Luciano, right to me, holding me in place. He gives me a small smile, pats Kroos on the arm, and then starts walking over to me.

Luciano was right; I have been avoiding Alejo just because I don't want to inadvertently give him heart eyes or something. But perhaps it is a bit of strange behavior between us since we're usually in close proximity to each other.

"*Hola,*" he says to me, stopping a few feet away and letting his eyes rake over my body before settling back on my face. "You look very beautiful tonight."

It's an innocent comment, but I still freeze up a little in case anyone heard that.

"Your hair is down." He gestures to it with his beer. "And your dress is lovely. Maybe too lovely. Not sure I want my teammates admiring you the way they are."

I roll my eyes at his possessiveness and lean back against the kitchen counter. "Okay, *alpha male.*"

"It's just true," he says. "And you've been avoiding me too."

"You know why," I say quietly.

"Afraid we'll give something away?"

I glance around his frame at the other partygoers, but no one is paying us any attention in here. Still... "Maybe."

"I've missed you," he says, his voice so low and impassioned I have to do a double take. "Stay the night with me."

"Won't that be suspicious?"

“No one will know. Just stay. The last person to leave will be too drunk to notice you’re still here.”

“And your mom?”

“She has her own private suite, private entrance, and she’s asleep. She’ll be fast asleep all night. She doesn’t normally drink, but she had some wine and she’s going to be snoring.”

“I never thought I’d date a guy who still lived with his mother,” I muse teasingly.

“She lives with *me*,” he says. “Because that’s what a good son does.” Then he folds his arms across his chest and cocks a brow, chin raised. “And what is this about *dating*?”

I blush. Stupid of me to say that. I try to play it off. “Dating is a more polite term for fucking.”

A dark heat comes over his gaze. “You know you don’t have to be polite with me. I like it when you use that word. *Fuck*.”

We stare at each other for a few heavy moments and I have no doubt he’s feeling the same way that I am, the oh so intense desire to get completely naked and lose ourselves to some of that *fucking*.

Then out of the corner of my eye, I see someone moving toward us with an empty bottle, perhaps getting another drink.

I quickly turn around and fill my glass up with water again.

When I look back, Alejo is gone.

And the night goes on.

Eventually Mateo starts yelling at everyone to go home or he’s going to make them all suffer tomorrow. Something tells

me that they're already going to be suffering.

"Let's go," Vera says to me, grabbing her purse that's stuffed beside me on the armchair.

"I'll catch an Uber later," I tell her.

"Suit yourself," she says, and to my relief she doesn't seem to give it much thought. Vera goes to join Mateo who looks at me expectantly, and I know she's telling him I'm staying. He gives me a dismissive wave, as if to say *it's your hang over*, and then they're gone.

With that, the great migration begins as the players start leaving and calling it a night.

For us though, I think the night is just beginning.

I wait, sipping on a glass of red wine, waiting until the last people, Rene and the goalie, stumble outside drunk, Rene calling a cab on his phone.

Then Alejo goes over to the door and locks it.

He turns around and gives me a smile that's decidedly *wicked*.

Now that it's just the two of us, I can't help feeling nervous. Not in a bad way, in the way that reminds me of being young, like high school young, and finally getting a chance with a big, juicy crush of mine.

I suppose that's what Alejo is, a *big*, juicy crush.

Alejo has a massive collection of rare vinyl records, and the current one, some metal band, is spinning. He walks over to it, puts on another record, and smooth jazz comes out, something a little sensual and dark.

He comes over to me and grabs my free hand while I put the glass of wine down on the side table, lifting me to my feet.

“Dance with me,” he says, immediately sweeping me up in his arms, moving back and forth to the decadently slow grooves.

I can’t help but let out a soft laugh, my heart growing warm inside my chest as he spins me around. I can’t remember the last time I danced like this. Probably at my wedding.

A pinch of disappointment forms deep in my gut, but I close my eyes and lean into Alejo, letting him sweep those cold cobwebs away. I won’t be tangled up in them now.

“Luciano taught me a saying,” I say after a moment. My voice is low. It feels wrong to speak loudly, as if it will break the spell.

“If it’s a Portuguese one, I hope you know they make no sense.”

“No. Well, there was one about a flea. Anyway, he said it was something that Mateo taught him. To compete, to win, to succeed, you have to be persistent and keep going. Don’t let any failures or setbacks stop you. You have to run that animal down.”

“*Si*,” Alejo says. “It’s true. That’s what we need to do.”

I pull back to stare at him, smiling. “Is that what you’ve been doing with me? Am I the animal?”

He bites his lip thoughtfully, a stray lock of dark hair falling onto his forehead. “*Si*,” he says. “But you’re more like a rare bird. One that’s hard to find and even harder to catch.”

“Not a squirrel?”

He laughs, rich and joyful, the kind of laugh that makes your heart skip two beats at once. “Not even a squirrel.”

We sway for a little bit, slow dancing in an empty room.

And then his hands slide down the sides of my hips.

Curl around the hem of my cocktail dress.

Start pulling the dress up, over my hips.

I’m breathless at his attentiveness, at how slowly his fingers work, around my thighs, pausing before they slip to where I really want them.

“Am I making you wet already?” he says into my ear, causing icy shivers to cascade down my spine until they dissolve in warmth. “Shall I test and see?”

I let out a breathy, “Yes,” already so eager for him. There’s no point in trying to control my hormones or my body at this point. Alejo has opened up a reservoir of desire for me and I’m jumping right into the deep end.

With his gaze locked on my eyes, he slips his hand under my panties, and I inhale sharply.

He groans, his eyes fluttering as his fingers sink inside me. “You are soaked. So fucking wet. I could play a game and make you beg for it,” he says roughly. He brings his fingers away, and I feel cold without his warm hand there. He deliberately sticks his finger in his mouth, sucking, and then kisses me softly, teasingly, until I taste my salt.

*Sweet Jesus.*

My knees are starting to buckle, I swear. I grip his arms to steady myself.



“Or,” he adds as he pulls away, resting his forehead against mine, “I could get you to sit on my face. Eat you out until you’re wild and squirming for release.”

I gulp. Eyes wide.

“Yes, please,” I manage to say.

His mouth curves into a cunning smile, and he grabs me by the waist, spinning me around until I’m falling backward onto the couch.

“Turn around,” he says. “Take off your underwear.”

“Bossy boy, aren’t you?”

He raises his chin in defiance. “Not a boy. A man who’s going to tongue-fuck that sweet, pink *coño* of yours until you’re coming on my lips.”

Well, I won’t be making that mistake again.

And I definitely don’t need a translation for what *coño* means.

I get on my knees and turn around, reaching down to take off my underwear until they’re dangling on one foot. I kick off my heels and wait, my back to him, my heart marching in my chest, my limbs shaking slightly.

I hear him get on the floor behind me, the back of his head resting on the edge of the couch between my thighs.

His hands slide up my legs and grip my hips, bringing me down over his face as I hold along the top of the cushions.

“Fuck,” he murmurs, his warm breath on my pussy causing me to shiver, seconds before he makes contact with the wet slide of his tongue.

I immediately start quivering, my limbs stiffening as he sucks me closer to him with his warm, strong mouth.

Already my eyes are starting to roll backward. I want to prolong this, to give him a show, but I don't think I'll last that long, especially as he starts to kiss me like he'd kiss my lips, probing and delicate and sweet one moment, intrusive and rough and hungry the next.

He makes another guttural moan that I feel travel through me, and I squeeze my thighs around his head, wanting so badly to get off.

The room fills with the sound of him eating me, the wet smack of his lips, the breathless little noises I'm making. It's the biggest fucking turn-on that just pushes me over the edge.

I fall willingly.

The orgasm blasts through me like pure, wet heat. My hips start bucking wildly, slamming my pussy into his mouth like I've gone rabid, like I've lost my mind and all control of my body. A torrent of gibberish falls from my mouth, alternating with the sharp cry of his name.

“Alejo!”

*Alejo, what are you doing to me?*

But just as the throbbing wanes, and the orgasm fades enough for me to catch my breath, I hear a *knocking* sound.

I freeze, listening.

There's someone at the door!

“Shit,” Alejo swears, lifting me off his face and getting up.

I flip around, my thighs drenched, and see movement at the frosted glass panels that bracket the door.

He doesn't have to tell me to hide. I get up and scamper behind the couch, throwing myself behind it and staying still.

I hear Alejo walk across the room, clearing his throat.

The door opens, and I hear a voice in accented English say, "I'm so sorry, Alejo. I forgot my phone. I was halfway home before I realized."

It's the Belgian goalie.

"No problem," Alejo says, just a hint of an edge in his voice.

I hear the Belgian approach the couch, shuffling through the cushions, so close to discovering me, when Alejo announces quickly, "Found it."

I exhale as quietly as possible.

"Thanks," the goalie says, and then pauses. "What's that all over your face? What have you been eating?"

Oh *god*.

"Flan," Alejo says proudly, and I can hear the smile in his voice. "Best fucking flan in the world."

"Okay then," he says. "Sorry about that. I'll leave you to your flan. Happy birthday."

"Thanks, man. See you tomorrow."

I hear the door close and then Alejo exhaling.

My heart is pounding so hard from the adrenaline of almost getting caught and the orgasm I can still feel throbbing between my legs that I'm shaking.

"Hey," Alejo says, poking his head around the top of the couch.

His mouth is absolutely shining with me. No wonder the Belgian was concerned.

“Let’s go somewhere a little more private.”

He reaches down and pulls me to my feet, taking me through the living room and up the stairs to the second floor.

This is the first time I’ve been up here. As he tugs me along to his bedroom, I count five other doors down the hall.

“You have so much room in this house,” I tell him as he closes the door to the bedroom behind me. “What are you planning to do with all of it?”

“I use it to store my trophies and other shit that tells the world how good I am,” he says, sliding his hands in my hair and drawing my mouth into a long, sweet, deep kiss. I can still taste myself on his tongue.

He pulls away. “And one day, I will have a wife and a family. A big family.”

I don’t know why but his words are a punch to my gut.

One day he will be married and have a big family, but it’s not going to be with me.

*And why would you ever think any differently?*

I close my eyes and kiss him, because I don’t want him to see these thoughts in my head, because I want to stop thinking and let his body blur out the world.

He kisses me back and we stumble backward to the bed.



A miracle happens at a time it's needed the most. A week before *El Clásico*, with Thalia's permission, Mateo puts me on the pitch to train alongside the team. I've been taking part in practice lately, and I've been doing a lot of training with Thalia and the assistant coach to get me to one hundred percent. I've been doing speedwork, corework, drills, running up a ramp while attached to weights, I've been giving it my all.

But this is the first time I've been able to fully train with my teammates without the brace.

After practice, and once Dr. Costa gives me the final once-over, I am deemed healed enough to play in the game.

I couldn't be more elated.

All this time I've spent with my knee, sitting on the sidelines and watching others play the game that I love, made me realize how much the game matters to me. Being out there on that pitch, using my God-given talent and the body I've been blessed with, it's like every puzzle piece in my life is sliding into place.

Yet I know that's not just the game that's making things fit again.

It's Thalia.

I've become completely infatuated with the way she's slipped into my life, sliding into the seams, holding everything together. There's not a moment that goes by where I'm not thinking of her in some way. The only time my mind seems to clear of her is when I'm on the pitch, and thank God for that, because that could get messy fast.

Instead, it's like I can't imagine my life without her in it, which I suppose is a little dramatic, even if it's completely true. She makes everything else make sense and grounds me while letting me soar at the same time.

She's like the sun.

*El sol de mi corazón.*

The sun of my heart, but a sun that's always rising, always beautiful, a sunrise that makes you stop and stare and wonder.

Right now, she's standing behind me on the airport bus that's zipping across the runway at Madrid International Airport. The whole team is packed on here, standing, holding on to the bars, and the excitement in the air is unbelievable. We're finally all together as a team, heading to Barcelona for the annual match, and we're going to win this fucker.

The bus comes to a stop outside our private jet, which is an Emirates plane since they're one of our major sponsors, and when the stairway is pushed to the open door, we all start climbing into the plane.

I'm completely tempted to sit beside Thalia. I want to keep looking at her. This is the first time she's been on a private jet (she told me as much the other day), and she's taking it all in with complete awe and wonder, and I want to be a part of that.

But the team sits near the front and everyone else is at the back. All I can do is occasionally look over my shoulder at her, hoping to catch her eye, but she's staring out the window with her headphones on, lost in thought.

I can't imagine how sweet it would be to actually be with her, out in the open, nothing to hide. Can that ever happen between us? Are we forever going to be a clandestine secret, hidden behind closed doors? Can I even go much longer without telling the world how much she means to me? Feelings like this, the ones that have been building in my chest for days and weeks and months, are intense and unyielding, and I'm not sure how much longer I can keep it to myself.

Granted, Luciano kind of knows, but I know he doesn't quite understand either. I think it would be hard to see what Thalia and I have if you're outside of it all.

But I'm inside it. Deep inside.

I don't think there's a way out for me.

And I don't want there to be.

The flight to Barcelona is short. We could have taken a six-hour ride on the bus, but that leaves a chance for things to go wrong.

We land and are greeted by photographers and *Madridistas* with banners, shouting our names as we pass through arrivals. I smile for each and every photo, especially with so many people telling me how happy they are to have me back in the game. Every now and then I look behind me at Thalia, who trails behind with the assistant coaches, trainers, and the medical team, and I catch her smiling.

She looks so proud.

It makes me feel like a king.

“It’s too bad you’re not making your return in Madrid,” Luciano says to me as we get on the bus that will take us to our hotel near the stadium. “I can’t imagine what the reception would be like when you first step onto that pitch.”

“You’re right. I’ll probably get booed or whistled at here.”

“Good old-fashioned rivalry,” he says. “You know those whistles really mean that they’re scared. Scared they’re going to lose now. We’re going to run that animal down.”

“Fuck yeah we will.”

Luciano gets up and turns around in his seat to yell at the rest of the bus. “What are we going to do tonight? We’re going to run that animal down!”

Everyone cheers.

“I didn’t hear you!” Luciano yells, miming with his hand to his ear. “What are we going to do tonight?”

“Run that animal down!”

The bus practically shakes with the yelling and cheers, like warriors doing their battle cry. I catch Mateo’s eye, and damn it if he doesn’t look proud of us. Confident.

We’ve got this.

I’ve got this.

I won’t let my team down again.

The rest of the day passes in a blur. I have to drown out everyone, even Thalia. I slip on my headphones and sink into my playlist as we get to the hotel, settle in our rooms, do some push-ups and sit-ups on the hotel room floor to try and get rid of my nerves, even though I know that my nerves aren’t going anywhere except into energy.



*Stay focused, I remind myself. Run that animal down.*

I repeat the mantra as we get to the stadium, Camp Nou.

I repeat it as we get changed from our suits into our warm-up clothes, and head out onto the pitch to train a little.

The tension is high, a twisting rope that wants to snap.

I don't hear the crowd with my headphones on. I don't want to hear the crowd right now.

I try and concentrate on doing some passes, even though my eyes are trained on Barca's best players, the incomparable Lionel Messi, their captain and arguably one of the best players in the world, and then there's Gerard Piqué, one of the best defenders that ever was (also shacking up with Shakira, so he's no slouch in that department either). I'm going to have to watch out for him because he's going to be right on my ass this entire game, and if I show any weakness at all with my knee, he's going to exploit it for all he's got.

In fact, just as I'm thinking that, he looks over at me from where his team is warming up, and our eyes meet. I've talked to him a lot; he's actually a great guy, but on the field we are mortal enemies.

Right now is no exception.

He's going to try and run me down.

I won't give him that option.

When warm-up is over, we head back into the locker room, and I get changed into our kit and become *Los Blancos*. I take my headphones off and Mateo says a few words.

"I know we've had a rough go," Mateo says as we all gather around him. "I know I've been giving you a hard time lately, but I've also been giving myself a hard time. Losing is

not acceptable. Failure is not acceptable. That's not what royalty does. That's not what Real Madrid does. And that all ends tonight. Tonight, we come together as a team, as a full team." At that he looks right at me. "We keep our cool, stay focused, and do everything we can to get those balls in the goal. Once Barcelona gets control of the ball, it's very easy for them to keep it. I'm counting on each and every one of you to not let that happen and to get it back at the first opportunity. And, let's not forget, this is the first game back for Alejo. They are going to be on him. Do what you can to keep Alejo free. Both teams will fight dirty if we have to." He raises his arms out to the side. "Let's go out there and introduce a little anarchy!"

"Yeah!" We all yell, fist-pumping and clapping before Luciano pulls us all into a huddle.

"Now that our coach has faith in us again," Luciano jokes, "it's time to have faith in ourselves. Okay? And remember, it's a game. It's entertainment. Entertainment that people have millions riding on. We're going to give them a show they're going to remember."

I'm pumped. My energy reservoirs are at capacity and spilling over. My veins are filled with electricity.

I'm ready.

We head out into the tunnels that lead to the pitch, and wait as the Match Mascots are brought over to us, children in matching kits who are given the chance to walk out with us and stand beside us for the national anthem. This doesn't happen for every game but certainly the most important ones.

I'm introduced to Ágata, a six-year old girl from San Sebastian who is adorably shy and keeps rubbing her nose

when she talks to me, but she loves the game “with my whole heart” as she says.

Someday, I hope I have a little girl like her.

We walk out together, holding hands.

The stadium erupts.

The sound is earth-shattering.

Right now, there are no whistles or boos.

The 99,354 people in the stadium are all cheering for their team, whether it be Barca or Madrid, and it’s an experience that brings tears to my eyes. I’ll never stop feeling this way about it.

I’ll never stop feeling I have something to prove.

I catch Thalia’s gaze from the sidelines, right behind Mateo, and give her a nod.

I won’t stop proving myself to her, either.

We head out to centerfield for the national anthem.

We shake hands with the other team.

The captains, Luciano and Lionel, pose for a photo with the refs.

The coin toss is made.

We win. We choose the goal.

The kickoff commences.

It’s *on*.

Immediately my nerves dissolve. All I feel is focused energy, my eyes trained to the ball, my feet always moving. I don’t even have to think, I just do this on instinct alone.

Luka passes me the ball. I take it and spin around, knowing Piqué is right behind me. The stadium is chanting, and my heart tries to make a similar sound in my chest.

There's so much pressure on me, from all sides, but I do a fake-out, managing to trip them up and quickly find an outlet to pass to Marcelo, who takes it and kicks it to Rene, who takes a shot at the net.

It hits the goal post and bounces off.

All of this is in the first minute of play.

We're off to a good start.

The rest of the first half is played with the same intensity, with close calls becoming goals.

Luciano scores first against Barcelona, and half the stadium erupts into a frenzy. I'm running over to him, jumping high onto his back, yelling with my fist in the air, hamming it up for the photographers, knowing these are the money shots.

Messi scores the second goal, just a few minutes after, our goalie in no position to even try to take down the shot.

It's even.

One-one.

But we aren't done yet.

Then Barcelona scores *again*, a goal that barely squeaks into the net.

The ball comes to me, and I'm twisting it around from Piqué and the other defenders, shooting it off to Rene who runs with it and then passes it back to me once I'm cleared. I take it to the goal, pass it back to Rene who shoots it to Marcelo who shoots it back to him.

Rene takes the shot.

GOOOOOOALLL!

The game is tied.

Halftime.

We gather in the locker room and Mateo gives us strategy. Tells me to switch sides with Rene to mix things up. Tells Luciano to keep Messi in check. Gives us the confidence to keep going.

“It’s not over until it’s over,” Mateo yells at us.

We get back out there.

I go on the other side of the pitch, Rene to where I was positioned before.

The game begins.

I get the ball as much as I can, but I can’t seem to get through them, can’t seem to get a goal in myself. They’re always on me, like a moving fortress.

Then, at ten minutes in, I’m struck by a Barca player from the side, his feet slipping between mine and tripping me.

I go down.

On my other knee, the good one, tumbling over.

I hold on to my leg, rolling on the ground. It hurts but I know I’m going to be okay.

I just want people to worry a little.

Maybe give that player a yellow card.

It works.

Luciano comes running over to me to ask if I’m okay, and I nod slowly, wincing dramatically. I’m sure now the

commentary is that it wasn't my bum knee that was in question, but the other one. But in this moment, Barcelona may not remember which knee is the fucked up one. They might think they've done some useful damage to me.

That will be their biggest mistake.

Luciano helps me to my feet. I wave to the crowd with an overly brave face, kissing my badge on my shirt, and I'm met with cheers and whistles and the soft chant of, "Alejo, Alejo!"

Okay. Back to the game.

Now that Barcelona might think I'm no longer as much of a threat, I'm about to show them how much of a threat I really am.

Unfortunately, they have control of the ball and are spending too much time at our end. Messi gets another shot on goal, but our goalie's skill and height aren't to be messed with, and he catches it before it tips into the top of the net.

Another shot goes near the goal, hitting Luciano's back.

Barcelona gets a corner kick.

Rene manages to jump up and punt it out of the way with his chest.

It rolls to Kroos.

Kroos runs with it, passing it to Luka.

Luka gets it close to the goal, but no one is watching me and I'm running as fast as I possibly can down the side of the pitch, having gone off like a rocket.

I hear my breath, the beat of my heart, the footfalls as I churn up the turf, the rising tenor of the crowd as I get closer and closer and there's no one to check me.

I don't think I've ever run so fast in my whole life.

Except once.

When I ran away from the police and into our house.

But I don't let the memory of my father's death stop me in my tracks.

I use it to fuel me.

Because he would be proud of me.

He *will* be proud of me.

I dart in-between two players who have suddenly become aware of my existence, one sliding toward me but missing by a few inches.

Luka kicks the ball to me but it goes high.

I go high too, jumping up several feet and twisting in a spiral as I go, hoping to make a header.

My head makes contact with the ball, and it's already moving in the right direction.

I fall in slow motion, watching with wide eyes as the ball shoots to the left of the goalie and soars to the back of the net.

GOOOOALLLLLLL!

I land on my feet, and, buoyed by pure joy and adrenaline and a special kind of madness you can only feel when nearly a hundred thousand people are making noise and paying attention to you, I run and do a leap into the air in the corner of the pitch near the cameras, screaming at the top of my lungs in a dramatic stance while the crowd wearing white erupts.

Seconds later, it feels like all my teammates are jumping on me, hugging me, yelling my name, and we're all caught up in pure euphoria.

We haven't won yet, and Barcelona could easily score again.

But I made that goal.

Maybe the most important goal of my life so far.

The goal that proved I'm back.

And as luck would have it, Barcelona doesn't score again that night.

We win *El Clásico*, three to two.

The team is back on track.





**E**ven hours after winning *El Clásico*, I'm still full of so much energy and adrenaline, I'm not sure what to do with myself. Everyone wants to go out drinking and partying in Barcelona's Gothic Quarter, and I'm tempted, considering it's one of my favorite cities.

But my need to be with Thalia trumps all of that.

So while they're off drinking, I tell them I'll join them later, that I'm going to call my mother and brother. I'm not sure if they believe me or not, but since family is as sacred to them as it is to me, they let it slide, so long as I make an appearance.

And I do quickly text my mother and brother, but then I've only got one thing on my mind.

My interactions with Thalia tonight have been professional and brief but I text her to make sure she's around and to find out what her room number is.

It's important that I don't get caught going to her room. I'm sure I could pass it off as something innocent if I tried — perhaps she has to take a look at my knee to make sure there was no damage done from my fall, but I would rather not raise any suspicion at all.

Her room is at the opposite end of the hall from mine, by the elevators.

I slip down the hall, dressed in black track pants and a white shirt, totally not the thing you'd plan on wearing out for a night of partying, and just as I'm about to go to her door, the elevators open and Rene steps out, dressed in slacks and a dress shirt.

"Hey, you coming right?" he says to me. "I forgot my nice shoes."

I glance down at his shoes, Adidas trainers.

"Some bars won't let you in without dress shoes," he says, looking me up and down. "And as much of a pretty boy as you are, no one is letting you in dressed like that."

"I'll meet you later," I tell him, and quickly lie. "I'm just getting some ice."

He gives me a funny look.

"Ice machine is the next floor up," I go on, pointing to the elevators.

"You're not carrying an ice bucket," he muses.

"Oh, right."

I turn to walk back to my room, and he walks with me, stopping at his room.

I grab the ice bucket from my room, but then he's outside my door and talking my ear off about both the game and all the girls he's going to score with tonight as he walks with me back down the hall to the elevators.

Well, shit.

He presses the down and up buttons on the panel.

The up elevator arrives first.

Guess I have to go in.

I give him a wave goodbye as the elevator takes me up to the floor above. As soon as those doors open, I immediately push the button for them to close.

That button *never* seems to work.

Finally, the doors close and I press the button for my floor, and the elevator takes me back down.

The doors open.

Rene is still standing there waiting for his elevator down.

“What happened?” he asked me, frowning at how fast I came back down and my lack of ice.

“Crazy elevators,” I say as an excuse, shrugging as he gets in the elevator with me.

I push the button for the floor below and get off.

“See you later?” Rene says, though now he’s eyeing me suspiciously.

“Sure,” I tell him as the doors close on his frowning face.

To be safe, I go to the ice machine on this floor, fill it up with ice, then take the stairs back up to my floor. No one’s around when I quickly rap on Thalia’s door.

*Hurry up. I’m running out of excuses.*

Thalia opens it with the chain across and peers at me and the ice bucket. “I don’t recall ordering any ice,” she says, then smiles as she undoes the chain.

I step inside and quickly close the door behind me, ready to take her in my arms.

But I stop.

She's wearing an oversized Real Madrid jersey, and it takes me a moment to realize she's wearing my jersey, the one I gave her oh so long ago when coffee spilled all over her.

And this time, it's straight out of the fantasy I had that day.

She's wearing that and nothing else.

She might not even be wearing underwear.

"I thought you wouldn't mind," she says rather coyly, her voice sounding all sex kitten-ish. That sound and this sight is all it takes for me to be harder than I've ever been in my life. "I sleep in it sometimes."

I can barely put the ice bucket down on the TV stand before I'm at her, pushing my hands into her hair to tilt her head towards mine, my tongue slipping against hers, our kiss deepening and deepening as the hunger starts to roll through me.

She puts her hands on my biceps and pushes back a bit to look at me. "You were amazing, Alejo," she says breathlessly, squeezing my arms. "You looked like you belonged out there, more than you ever have before. I'm so proud of you."

My heart swells from her words.

My dick swells from her touch.

I kiss her again, not sure how to show my gratitude, and then we're falling back into the bed.

But as much as the lust and desire is coupling with the adrenaline from tonight's crucial match, I don't want to rush things. I don't want to pound her senseless.

Not yet.

I want to take my time and savor her, though I'm not sure she has the same idea.

Her hands go to my track pants, gripping the outline of my cock, her thumb moving back and forth over the tip until I'm groaning. I have to stop myself from pushing harder into her palm. I want to take time and break it into tiny pieces, so that we have more of it to explore each other, to feel everything.

She lets go of me and starts to remove my shirt from her head, but I make her stop.

"Keep it on," I whisper to her. "Let this be a fantasy come to life."

She bites her lip and nods, pulling it back down over one breast, leaving the other exposed, the pink nipple tightening, her hands continuing to skim down her sides until she's parting her legs.

Turns out I was right. No underwear at all.

I let my gaze fall on her, taking her all in. She's already wet and beautiful.

*Fuck me.*

I take off my shirt and pants (no underwear for me) and prowl over to her on the bed, the heat of my body pressing against the heat of hers, my cock thick and throbbing between us, twitching desperately for purchase.

But I take my time.

I kiss her lips, the corner of her mouth, her jaw.

Suck at her earlobe until she's gasping and squirming.

Lick along her smooth neck and yank down the collar of the shirt to taste her delicate collarbone until she's making my

favorite, breathless little sounds.

I move down, my palms skimming over her body like I'm playing an instrument, knowing all the right places to hit in order to produce all the right notes.

Her gasps are music to my ears.

I knead her breasts, suck and nip at her nipples until they're hard pebbles in my mouth, then continue to place long, wet kisses down her soft stomach, until my lips find a home between her legs.

"Alejo," she gasps as her hands go into my hair, and I lose myself to the feeling of pleasuring her, how decadent she tastes, how her body responds like clockwork to my every touch. At this point, when we're together, we are one. There is no second-guessing, no wondering; we meld to each other like second nature. It's hard to imagine this being any other way.

Heat slides through my veins, building in my dick as I continue to lick her out, pausing to swirl around her clit before my tongue plunges inside her.

She loves this. I love this. I reach down and stroke my cock, feeling the precum slide from tip to the base, and I know this could be a mistake, that I might come before I'm ready, but it's so fucking hard not to touch myself.

Especially when she's squeezing my head between her thighs, hips bucking up into me, fucking my mouth. Desperation licks at my skin and I respond by ravaging her.

Thalia comes with a long, drawn-out groan, her back arching, hips up and limbs shaking, pulsing under my tongue. But I know this is just the first orgasm for her, the first of many.

I get off the bed and stand at the end of it, holding my cock rigid between my thumb and forefinger.

Thalia knows what to give me and wastes no time.

Her chest still heaving, she crawls to the end of the bed, and a visceral thrill runs through me as she holds onto my cock, bringing it to her open mouth, all while I can see my name emblazoned on the back of her shirt. When I was younger, when I played with that shirt, I had enough women to keep me occupied, but none of them were like her. None of them were this beautiful, this secure with their sexuality, this confident in what they want in the bedroom, while giving me exactly what I want.

None of them had my heart in the way that she does.

She slowly licks around my head, really taking her time to taste me with her tongue, like I'm a melting cone of gelato, gazing up at me with those glittering eyes.

Then she deep throats me.

All the way down, her teeth razing my length.

*Jesus.*

My eyes roll back in my head, my body stiffens, and everything inside me tightens like a wire.

She knows how to suck a guy off, that's for sure.

But as much as I love coming in her mouth or on her breasts, tonight I need to celebrate my victory by coming inside her.

When I'm unbearably close to shooting my load down the back of her throat, I put my hand on her head and gently push her back.

“Let me come inside you,” I tell her, my voice raspy and faint as she stares up at me with a very wet, swollen mouth.

She smiles and leans back on her knees.

“Am I free to take the shirt off now?” she asks as she starts to raise it above her head.

I nod, giving her a hoarse, “Si,” as she takes it off and tosses it.

She leans back on the bed, totally naked.

I take a moment to let my eyes rake over her body, her milky white soft curves mixing with toned muscle, then I motion for her to flip over onto her stomach.

I grab my cock and get on the bed, straddling her thighs just below her firm ass. I playfully smack her cheek with my dick and she flinches in surprise.

“Hey,” she says, then giggles.

Grinning, I then start teasing her between her legs with the tip.

I grab her hips. Hold her in place and ease into her.

She feels like hot silk.

Thalia gasps.

Her fingers curl over the hotel’s bedspread.

Slowly I pull out then slide in even deeper.

In and out.

Every inch is bringing me closer to heaven.

Every inch is bringing me closer to her.

I’ve had sex with a lot of women.



Some of those women I had feelings for.

But whatever we had wasn't like this.

It wasn't even close.

I've never felt this before, the melding of hearts, bodies, souls, and minds.

And I can't be the only one who feels this.

I need her to feel *everything*.

I continue to pump into her, driving in deeper, pulling out further, making sure every stiff slide of my cock is hitting her in all the right places. She's so fucking tight like this with her thighs together, that each time I push inside I feel another thread inside me snap, the tension threatening to unspool.

Sweat breaks out on my forehead, running over my nose and onto her back. Her face is against the bed, one cheek exposed to me, slowly turning a patchy shade of red as the intensity ramps up.

Her eyes are pinched shut, her mouth open.

I reach forward and gather her shiny hair in my fist and pull back so her head lifts off the bed, her neck and back arched. I hold her hair like the fucking reins of a wild horse.

She cries out, but from the throaty sound, I can tell that she likes it.

"That's it," I tell her, my voice starting to shake along with the bed as I start pounding her faster, harder. "That's it, Thalia. Come for me."

After a while, I let go of her hair and she falls forward on the bed. Then I push back against her ass until my cock slides out. I slip my hands under her hips, lifting them up slightly,

and move back enough so that I can lower my head to her level. As I hold her in place, I bring my face to her ass and pussy and start going fucking wild.

“Oh my god!” she cries out, and I press my lips and tongue and teeth to every wet, slick inch of her, eating her out everywhere until she starts to tremble violently, coming hard in my mouth.

As she’s still riding the wave, I quickly get up into position and thrust my cock back inside her, just as she’s squeezing me tight, her orgasm still milking me.

“Alejo!” she cries out again, and I can barely speak, I’m so crazed and hell-bent on coming that I fuck her deeper and faster than ever before, my hips pistoning against her bouncing ass, the headboard banging against the wall so hard that the lights in the room flicker, and the painting on the wall threatens to come down.

“Fuck!” I can’t help but yell, my neck arched, face to the ceiling, the words rising up from my gut. Explosions go off along my spine like a controlled demolition, and lights flash behind my eyes, which are pinched shut in delicious contortion.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I cry out hoarsely, and I’m delirious and coming harder than I’ve ever come in my life. Just fucking out of my mind.

I can’t feel anything but her.

I nearly collapse as the exertion rushes back into my body, and I come back down to earth. Slumping against her, I kiss her back between her shoulder blades, tasting sweat and skin, and then roll over onto my side.

She flips onto her back and her head lolls to the side, staring at me.

She never looks quite so beautiful as she does right after I've made her come.

Her cheeks are flushed pink, her lips red and swollen, her eyes liquid. There's a faint rash on her white chest, the kind she gets when she's turned on, and her golden locks are the most gorgeous example of sex hair.

"*Hola*," she says to me in a sweet, quiet voice.

I lean over and kiss her on the nose. "*Hola*."

We're both still breathless.

She licks her lips and stares at me. "I don't have words."

I give her a knowing grin. "You're in luck, because I *always* have words."

She lets out a soft laugh. "That's true. You do."

"So, what was more impressive tonight? This or the game?" I ask, half-teasing.

Her eyes roll to the ceiling. "You know you can't make me choose."

"But I am. Pick one."

She seems to think. "This was. Only because it's the freshest thing in my mind. But ask me again the next time you play and win, and the answer might be different."

"What if I fuck you a million more times between now and then? Then what?"

"You certainly won't hear me complaining, I can tell you that much."

My smile starts to fade a little as something hard surfaces in my chest. A knot. I swallow. “So, how long do you think we need to keep this a secret?”

She stills, and stares at me, blinking. “What do you mean?”

“Well, see, I had a hell of a time sneaking in here tonight. The boys are out partying—”

“You could have gone with them.”

I give her a steady look. “I know I could have. I didn’t want to. That’s not what this is about.”

“Then what is this about?”

I sigh, wishing I didn’t have to spell it out for her. “I don’t want to sneak around. Not anymore. It was fun at first, but I just want to be with you. Easily, around everyone. I want us to...*be*.”

“Alejo,” she says, twisting so she’s on her side, propping her head up with her hand. “You know this has to be a secret. I’ll lose my job. You know that.”

“But maybe you won’t have to. Maybe I can negotiate for us. With Jose. Give him an ultimatum.”

Her eyes flash and narrow. “Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t do that. And you’re under contract for two more years. They know they have you where you are. And I don’t want anyone to know.”

“Are you ashamed of me?”

“God, no, Alejo. Not even a little. I just...it’s complicated. You know it is. I’m in a tough position, and we have to make the best of it. I’m sorry but this just is what it is.”

“Then what is it? What are we?”

I hate how desperate I sound, but my emotions are running all over the place.

“We’re two adults who enjoy being with each other very much,” she says.

“But I don’t think you get it,” I tell her, getting frustrated.

“What is there not to get?”

“You’re making it sound simple. It’s not so simple. Or maybe it is too simple, I don’t know. But I *feel* for you, Thalia.” I swallow, my heart pounding. I know I can come on too strong, and I don’t want to scare her, but on the other hand I’ve only ever told her the truth. “You mean everything to me. You are the world. More than the world. You are the sun, Thalia. *El Sol*. And the sun doesn’t worry about being too bright for the moon or the stars, it just burns and shines. Just like you. You shine. You’re *el sol de mi corazón*.”

I reach over and kiss her shoulder and whisper the translation, “You are the sun of my heart. I’m sorry, but it’s the truth.”

I dare to meet her gaze since she’s fallen silent.

To her credit, she doesn’t look away. She just holds my gaze with longing burning in her eyes. Longing for me, longing for what could be, I don’t know.

Finally she looks away, rubbing her lips together for a moment before she says, “I like hearing that. Don’t ever stop telling me things like that. I like your truth.”

I frown. “Why do I feel there’s a but at the end of that sentence?”

“There is no but. It’s real. It’s honest.”

A silence falls over us, and I'm troubled by how much she's holding back.

"You know," I say slowly. "You can't keep me out."

"Keep you out? I let you in the room, didn't I?"

"That's not what I mean. You know that's not what I mean. I mean here." I tap my fingers along her breastbone, right above her heart. "I know there is room for me *here*."

She nods, blinking away.

I slide my hands up into her hair and bring her focus back to me.

I'm going to give her an easy way out.

For now.

"Kiss me," I tell her.

Her eyes flutter with relief, and she leans forward, pulling me into a deep, dark kiss.

## CHAPTER 19

### THEA

I'm running again.

Down by the river, my feet smacking the pavement as my ponytail bobs behind me.

It's early, seven a.m., just before the dawn, but since it's early November and the clocks fell back last week, I'm grateful for the little extra light, even if it's cold.

I'm running because I'm trying to outrun my nerves.

Two weeks ago, Alejo jumped right back into the game with flying colors and Real Madrid defeated Barcelona in an extremely close El Clásico game.

Two weeks ago, Alejo snuck into my hotel room and gave me what can only be described as very passionate love-making.

He also told me I was the sun of his heart. That his world revolved around me. That he didn't want us to be a secret, and that I needed to let him *in*.

I know Alejo's personality is very bold and romantic, I know he speaks from his heart so purely and unabashedly that it sometimes seems like too much. He wears his emotions on his sleeve and he's not ashamed to show them. It's refreshing and I like that about him.

A lot.

But the things he told me were not the things you tell someone you're just having a fling with. They aren't the things you say to someone who is just in it for sex.

They were words that came from his heart, telling me how much I mattered to him and how much he wanted me. Not just for now, but beyond the now.

And as much as they made my heart melt, they scared me.

Because all this time we've been fucking each other, I did my best to not get attached to him. To keep my heart guarded and at a distance. To revel in his touch but not let myself get carried away with thoughts about the future or the next step. I haven't been letting him in the way he has with me.

I guess I just assumed we would keep sleeping together, and eventually, one of us would put an end to us. It would hurt and sting and be a little awkward between us, but with me no longer giving him one-on-one attention at work, we could both walk away from this with our hearts and pride intact.

But...

I don't think that's the case anymore.

In fact, the thought of ending it and walking away cuts right between the ribs.

And yet, I also know that this can't possibly go anywhere, and if things between us start to get deep and complicated and emotional, it's going to be trickier to break apart with everyone unscathed.

Because, eventually, we *will* have to break up.

What future does a forty-year-old woman have with a twenty-four-year-old man? A man that happens to be on the



team I work for, one that is forbidden to me for the sake of my career?

As much as I want this to continue, as much as I can't stand the idea of not slipping over to Alejo's every night or him coming to my apartment, I know that eventually, the good times are going to come to an end and I'm going to have to wake up and face that bitter music.

So that's why I'm running. I'm trying to clear my head and run from my problems at the same time.

And what a problem, right? Oh, this young football sex god says his world revolves around me, wah wah waah.

The thing is, he has to know that we don't have a future together.

Right?

*Forget about him, do you even know that?*

I shake that voice out of my head.

Keep on running.

I'm *also* running because Helen is coming to visit today. I'm supposed to pick her up at the airport after work in my new Audi. Since I decided to lease a car and drive myself around the city in an effort at permanence here, Mateo and Jose were both adamant that I have an Audi since they sponsor the team and all the players are given free ones. I wasn't given a free one, but I got a great discount at any rate.

I'd been trying to convince Helen to come visit me (on her own, without her husband, Frank) for a while now and almost got Kizzy and Liz on board too, but they both cancelled at the last minute. I would have loved for them to be here, but since

it's just going to be Helen now, I'm a little anxious about the whole thing.

I know it's weird to be nervous about your friend visiting, and maybe that's saying something right there, but Helen and I have been drifting apart ever since the divorce, ever since she very firmly decided to stay friends with Stewart. She wasn't even that good of friends with him to begin with, it was all her husband, but ever since I left, she's really tried to up the ante. The gap has widened even further since I moved to Madrid, so I feel like this is sort of our last shot to save the friendship.

If it's even worth saving. I've never been that good at having friends. I'm so focused on my job, and I'm so lost in my head most of the time that I have a hard time remembering to reach out. My best friendships have always been the people I can call at any time and pick up where we left off, the ones that know you deeply and don't make demands, like my best friend growing up, Ainsley, or even Liz, who is also low-maintenance.

But who knows, maybe I haven't been fair to Helen. Maybe I've been pushing her away too much and she's reacted in kind.

I'll know soon enough.



*“ME CAGO EN TUS MUERTOS,”* I REPEAT AFTER ALEJO.

He immediately starts laughing, covering up his face with the Spanish to English textbook.

“What? What did I say?” I ask. “Don't make me come over there.”

Alejo is sitting at my desk, going through a textbook in an attempt to give me a real Spanish lesson, while I'm leaning

against the doorframe, trying to learn.

The door to my office is wide open.

On purpose.

Nothing funny to see here.

Except that something *is* funny and it's whatever the hell Alejo has me repeating.

We're supposed to be discussing dialogue and terms that have to do with business, something that would be quite helpful to me if I ever hear Jose and Mateo speaking freely without knowing I can understand them. My Spanish is starting to come along and I'm up for the challenge.

I just wish Alejo would stop pulling my leg.

"It means," he says through a laugh, "I shit on your dead relatives."

"Oh my god," I say through a gasp. "That's awful! Is that really in there?"

He shakes his head, clutching his stomach. "No." He takes in a deep breath, calming down. "No. But I figure it's helpful in negotiations."

"You're the worst. Give me something real."

"Oh, I'll give you something real," he says, biting his lip.

"Knock it off," I warn him, my eyes darting to the open door and back.

"*Vale, vale, vale,*" he says, which I know means "okay." He flips through the pages, frowning. I didn't realize until today that he wears reading glasses and I also didn't realize how fucking sexy he is with glasses on. He's like my own Clark Kent.

“*Pollas en vinagre*,” he says, glancing up at me, straight-faced.

“*Pollas en vinagre*,” I repeat. “Something about vinegar? What’s *pollas*? Chicken? Chicken in vinegar? Is that slang for a bad business deal?”

He swallows, eyes steady on me, unblinking.

Then they flit over my shoulder.

I look behind me to see Mateo standing in the hallway.

“What’s going on here?” Mateo asks, his eyes volleying between the two of us.

“*Pollas en vinagre*,” I say to him. “The chicken is in the vinegar. Right?”

He runs his tongue over his teeth and looks over at Alejo, mildly amused. “Is this what you’re teaching her?”

“Did I say it wrong?” I say.

“No,” he says. “You didn’t say it wrong. I know exactly what you mean. Do you know what *you* mean, that is the question?”

I look over at Alejo who is trying so hard not to crack a smile, it’s killing him. He’s practically shaking.

Damn it. Fooled again!

“Look,” Mateo says. “I hate to interrupt these bizarre Spanish lessons you have going on, but we need to practice.” He gives Alejo a pointed glance. “¡*Vamos!*”

“*Sí, sí, sí*,” Alejo says, putting the textbook back on my desk and getting up, heading over to the door. He smirks at me just as he passes through the doorway, and then he’s bursting into laughter once he’s in the hallway, following Mateo.

That *capullo*. I'm going to have to Google that later to figure out what he just made me say to my boss.

Anyway, since it's his practice time, then it's probably close to the time for me to pick up Helen.

I lock up my office and head out to the car park, taking a moment to admire my car. Alejo has a grey e-tron, while I have the teal, but he also gets his own parking spot with his name and a twenty-eight on the placard, right outside the first team building, while I have to park in the boonies.

I put on some Lynyrd Skynyrd which always reminds me of being young and getting to tag along and go camping with my dad and my brothers on their "boys" trips to Olympic National Park in Washington, an instant mood-lifter, and head down the motorway to the airport, which isn't that far away.

By the time I'm parking in the short-term lot, I feel more excited about seeing Helen rather than nervous, and because I'm early, I head into the airport to grab some flowers for her. Who doesn't like getting flowers when they get off a plane?

They don't have much of a selection, so I get roses that were probably grown in a factory somewhere. They don't smell, don't open, and they don't have that same beauty as the ones that Alejo first bought me.

A thrill runs through me, making my insides feel buoyant and fizzy like champagne. I get that feeling every time I think about Alejo, but especially that night. That night he showed up, not wanting to let me get away. That night he made me speak my truth and admit to him the things I carried deep. I mean, I hadn't even told Helen about my miscarriage, but I told Alejo. It's like he knew there was a part of me that was dying to trust him, dying to let him in.

But I haven't really let him in, have I?

Before I can dwell on it, I spot Helen coming through the arrivals with her Louis Vuitton luggage in tow, waving at me.

I go over to her, feeling strangely awkward all of a sudden as I present the flowers.

"So glad you're here. The plane landed early for once," Helen says as she embraces me, smelling like some powdery French perfume. "You look lovely, Thalia." She grabs the flowers. "Oh, thank you, these look lovely too."

I pull away and look her up and down. She looks the same, tall and thin, maybe a bit of a trim to her black bob. "New hair?" I ask.

She preens like a peacock and puffs up the ends of her hair with her hand. "Yes, thank you. Anastasia is always working her magic with me."

"Need any help with the luggage?" I ask out of politeness since it's just a carry-on.

"No, no, I'm fine," she says, walking alongside me as we head out of the airport and over to the parking. It's cold, and there's a light wind whipping up, and she shields her face with her scarf. "Oof, I didn't think it would be so cold here," she says.

"Only at night," I assure her. "During the day you can wear a t-shirt, I promise."

"Well, anyway, I'm so glad I came, if only for two nights," she says. "Too bad Kazy and Liz aren't here though."

I rarely hear Helen mention anything about Liz, so it makes me think that perhaps she was looking forward to using those two as a buffer as well.

“This is the new car,” I tell her, pointing to the Audi.

“That’s quite the perk,” she says as I *beep-beep* unlock it remotely and start putting her suitcase in the trunk. “I don’t remember Stewart getting anything from Manchester.”

Here we go. Mention of ex-husband number one.

“That’s because Manchester doesn’t have Audi as a sponsor. They have Chevrolet. And that’s why Stewart chose to drive a BMW.”

“So, how are you liking living here? I mean, really?” she asks as we’re in stop-and-go traffic close to the city. “You can tell me the truth.”

“I would always tell you the truth,” I say to her, shooting her a curious look. “And I like it here a lot. Took some time to grow on me but I think I’m finally finding my footing, so to speak.”

“The team doesn’t give you a hard time?”

I shake my head. Even Dr. Costa has grown to tolerate me, and the Slovenian midfielder actually thinks I’m pretty funny. “No, everyone has been great.”

“They haven’t tried to bribe you for information about the Man U players, maybe get you talking about their weak spots and past injuries?”

“Actually, no. Not even a little. Everyone has been very professional.”

Well, almost everyone. But Alejo doesn’t count.

“Hmmm,” she muses, looking out the window.

“What?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I mean, I’m happy for you. Don’t get me wrong. You definitely have changed. You’re all glowy and you look happy too.”

“Okay...”

“But, I guess I thought this was just a temporary move for you.”

I stare at her before bringing my attention back to the road. First Alejo picked up on it, now her.

“No. Not temporary. I have a car. I’m learning Spanish. I just bought some new knives for my apartment. I really like my job. This is it.”

“But didn’t you say that about LA Galaxy before you came to Manchester? And you said that about Manchester...”

“Yeah, well, you move around when you have to, for various reasons, but I really think I’m putting roots down.”

I have to admit, it feels good to say it out loud.

“So, what, you’re just going to fall in love with a Spaniard?”

I blink, pressing my lips together as I grip the steering wheel. “I don’t know. Who said anything about love?”

“You know I talked to your mother the other day.”

Oh my god. Instinctively I hit the brakes which makes the car behind me honk.

“Goodness, these are touchy brakes,” she comments.

“Why did you talk to my mom? When?”

“The other day.”

“What did she tell you?”



“*Nothing*. And don’t get so worked up. I had such a hard time getting a hold of you that I thought I would call her and see if she heard anything.”

“Well, she wouldn’t have heard anything. If I’m too busy to talk to you, I’m too busy to talk to her.”

“You know, Stewart has always had a higher position than you — I mean, he’s the manager, and yet he finds the time to come over and hang out with his friends.”

My knuckles are ghost white on the steering wheel. I have to physically grip it as a way of holding it together so I don’t lose my temper and snap at her, which I am so very close to doing.

As a result, it takes me a moment to say anything. I just drive and stare wide-eyed at the road before I whisper, “Can we please not talk about my ex-husband?”

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Helen says, staring at me. “Look, I’m sorry if that rubbed you the wrong way, but it had to be said. You have to put in the effort, Thalia. Into every relationship you’re in.”

Oh, she did *not*.

I slowly turn my head and stare at her. “*Every* relationship I’m in?”

“You know what I mean,” she says quickly, looking away.

I know I’m giving her a look that could slice her down the middle. My resting bitch face has always been pretty good, but it’s my glares that I really excel at.

And I know what she’s saying. That somehow it’s my fault with Stewart because I didn’t put in the effort. I mean, I don’t even know what to say about that.

But I do know that this trip is starting off on the wrong foot.

I count down from ten and inhale deeply through my nose.

*Let's start over.*

*Put on a good face.*

*Try to have a fun time. It's only two days.*

“So, what do you feel like doing tonight?” I ask her, and just like that, the conversation changes to something lighter. I’m still seething a little from her implications but maybe if I try hard enough, shit like that won’t come up again.

We get to my apartment and she seems mildly impressed at the space, particularly the age of it. She has a shower to rinse off the “airplane smell” and then we both doll ourselves up for a night on the town. I have work the next day, but as long as I don’t lose my head and get drunk, I’ll be okay.

I really want to take Helen to the Last Resort, and I hope to run into some of the players so I can show off to her a little. I know that’s pretty petty of me, but I can’t help it. I get this feeling that she wants to keep undermining me, and I can be too, I don’t know, humble or something to really feel proud about things.

Instead, we go to Bar Cock, the first place I went with Mateo and Vera for drinks. It’s just flashy enough for Helen to be impressed but has that flair of Madrid so she can feel like she’s actually in another country.

We settle at a high-top table near the bar, and order martinis.

“Your team has been doing well, though,” she says to me, seemingly out of the blue since we were just talking about

clothes.

I nod. “Yup, we just won against Lille in the Champions League, so we’re waiting for the draw for matchday five of six, which we’ll play later this month. But we’re in good standing so far.”

“Things really turned around because you guys were bloody shit for a while.”

I try not to take offense. I wiggle my fingers at her. “Maybe it’s my magic hands.”

“Maybe. You know the boys just won their draw as well against Juventus.”

I don’t have to ask what team she means when she says *the boys*.

“They’ve always been one of the best teams,” I tell her.

“Isn’t it weird now that you’re not there anymore?” she asks, leaning in as if I’m going to let her in on a secret.

“It was at first, but your allegiances change. Players have to go through it all the time when they get transferred, and if they can do it, I can do it.”

“What happens when Man U plays Real Madrid?”

I can’t say I haven’t thought about that. A lot.

I shrug. “Then they play each other.”

“Oh, I really hope they do. Makes things so much more interesting.”

Interesting wouldn’t be my first word, but I let it slide.

“Meet-cute!”

A strangely familiar voice interrupts us, and I swivel in my chair to see Sergio approaching us.

“Who is that?” Helen hisses.

“Sergio,” I whisper back.

“*Buenas noches*, meet-cute,” Sergio says to me. “What a surprise to see you here. I assume your Spanish must be perfect now or else you would have called me.”

“*No perfecto pero lo...suficientemente bueno*,” I say, wishing it rolled off my tongue like a native, but at least I’m trying.

“Hey, not bad,” he says, and then he says something super fast in Spanish that I don’t understand.

“*Pollas en vinagre*,” I tell him.

He stares at me for a moment with big brown eyes before he bursts out laughing. “Do you even know what you said?”

I shake my head. “The chicken is in the vinegar?”

“Chicken, no. *Cocks* in vinegar. *Pollas* is penis.”

“Jeez, *you* should know that one,” Helen comments, amused.

I shut my eyes and put my face in my hands. “Why on earth did Alejo teach me that?”

“This Alejo is your Spanish teacher?” he says. “Sounds kind of immature.”

“Hold on. Alejo as in Alejo Albarado?” Helen says, pressing her hands into the table. “The boy with the knee you’d been working on for the last two months is also your Spanish teacher?”

“It’s just a way to pass the time,” I say as nonchalantly as possible.

“Wait a minute. You work for Real Madrid?” Sergio asks, and then I can see it all come together in his eyes. “You’re the girl. The woman. The physical therapist.”

“Cat’s out of the bag,” I say before I take a distracting sip of my martini. I cough. “Know a Spanish equivalent to that saying?”

“Wow, so funny to know this about you,” he says. “Of course, I am an Atlético fan, but I can cheer for *Los Blancos* sometimes.”

“Why don’t you sit down and have a drink with us?” Helen asks.

“I will. Can I buy you ladies another?”

“*Si*,” Helen says, and when I don’t say anything she kicks me under the table. “One for Thalia too.”

“Thalia,” Sergio repeats thoughtfully. “So now I know your real name.”

Then he turns around and heads to the bar.

“Okay, spill the beans,” Helen says to me in a hush. “Who is this man and why are you being so weird about him? You already sleep with him?”

I give her a look. “*No*. I met him last month or something, when I was jogging. We bumped into each other, dropped our phones, he gave me his number in case I wanted to learn Spanish. That was it.”

“You do realize that *learn Spanish* actually means *have sex*, right?”

Boy, do I ever know that.

“Yes, I’m aware. And anyway, so I never called him.”

“Because you have your own Spanish teacher?” she says, eyeing me suspiciously.

You see, earlier today I thought that maybe if things went well with Helen, and we were back to being old friends, I would confide in her about Alejo. I’m fucking *dying* to talk to someone about him, and I have no one, and I figured maybe, just maybe, she would understand.

But now, I have no plans to do that. I don’t think she’d understand at all.

“Because I’m busy,” I tell her. “And believe me, if you’re upset I’m not calling you or my mother, then I’m definitely not calling some stranger I ran into.”

“Hmmm...” Helen makes that musing sound again.

Sergio comes back with our drinks, and for the next hour he does a lot of asking me questions about football and the team. You know, what it’s really like. And as much as I thought he was into me, it turns out he’s way more into the football aspect of it.

Which is fine by me. When Sergio finally leaves, he doesn’t make any motion to ask me on a date or anything; instead, he says for me to call him if I’m ever given extra tickets. I mean, it’s not even his team, but whatever.

“I think you guys had nice chemistry,” Helen says. She’s slurring a little and we’re both tipsy by now. It’s getting late, but I’m ignoring that. Perhaps we’ll kill the night.

I just nod. “Sure.”

My phone beeps and I pull it out of my purse to look at it.

It's Alejo.

**If ur ever tired of ur friend, I know of another thing that will tire u out.**

He ends it with a winky face, in case I didn't know what he meant.

I can't help but grin at the phone, my stomach doing flips to know he's thinking of me.

"What the hell has you smiling like *that*?" Helen asks, and as I prepare to lie and move to put my phone away, she reaches over with crazy quick reflexes and plucks the phone out of my hand.

"No!" I cry out, trying to reach for it, but I end up knocking a glass of wine across the table, where it then goes crashing to the floor.

Someone calls out "*Opa!*" and I'm trying to get off my stool to get the phone away from her, but it's already too late and she's scrolling through the messages.

I mean, every single text that Alejo and I have sent each other.

In the last while, there have been *a lot*.

And almost all of them are dirty.

"Thalia," she says darkly, staring at me with a mix of confusion and resentment. "What is this?"

I just grumble to myself and start wiping down the table with the napkins, a waiter coming by to drop off a cloth and pick up the glass pieces that are scattered on the floor.

No point in hiding it now.

That changed so fucking fast.

I thank the waiter, giving him five euros for the trouble, and then nod my head to the door.

“We should go,” I say to Helen, who still has my phone.

I grab my jacket and leave, stepping outside into the brisk air, trying to figure out what Helen is going to do with that information. I mean, I could deny it and pretend it’s some other Alejo. There has to be hundreds of thousands of them in this city. But after the conversation earlier, I know there’s no point. And despite my resting bitch face, I’m a terrible liar.

And I don’t want to lie about him.

Helen eventually steps outside the bar and hands me my phone back.

“You have a lot of explaining to do,” she says stiffly.

“Look, before I tell you anything, can you promise me it will stay between us? That you won’t tell Stewart, or even Kazzy or Liz? Or Frank? Please?”

She gives me a steady look. “I won’t tell anyone on one condition.”

I frown. “What’s the condition?”

“I’ll let you know after. Now, talk.”

We walk through the streets for a while, and I tell her everything.

From the very beginning.

And I have to admit, even though this is less than ideal, it feels *good* to finally get it all off my chest. I’ve been carrying this around with me for so long.

But Helen doesn’t look impressed in the slightest. Not that I expected her to be, I just thought maybe she could be happy



for me, just a little bit.

“I haven’t told anyone else,” I admit when I’m done.

“I don’t blame you,” she says. “And if I were you, I’d keep it that way.”

Ouch. Okay, that hurts a little.

“Listen, Thalia. I don’t know how to say this without coming off as insensitive or a twat, but you’re really disappointing me here.”

Oh god. It feels like I’m talking to my parents.

“Disappointing *you*?” I repeat, my gut clenching. “Because I didn’t tell you right away?”

“Because you’re shagging a twenty-three-year-old boy!”

“He’s twenty-four.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’ve lost your bloody mind is what has happened here. You’re drunk on Spanish dick and making some extremely bad decisions!”

I swallow hard. “It’s just sex,” I say quietly.

“Is it? No. It’s not. I just read your texts, I just listened and watched you talk about him for the last twenty minutes. You’re in deep, Thalia, and you know this is only going to end in tragedy for you. The worst is that you can lose your job, which is just so bloody *stupid* on your behalf. Other than that, he’s going to get bored of you and find someone else, because that’s what boys his age do. I mean, you’re forty! You’re old!”

I glare at her. “Forty is not old,” I snap. “You’re forty-three.”

“I’m old!”

“You’re the delusional one here.”

“Okay, so maybe I’m old compared to him. But so are you! Listen, I’m glad you had some hot sex and maybe you needed a rebound to get back at Stew—”

“This was never about getting back at Stew!”

“Or maybe to get over Stew. Whatever it is, I get it. You’re divorced and feeling bad, and your self-esteem is low and you’re lonely so you turn to this Spanish football star. But seriously, Thalia, you need to take a good hard look at yourself and what you want in your future. Because if you keep this up with him, it’s not going to be a happy one.”

I want to argue about all of that with her. I should.

But the truth is, I have nothing to say.

Her words sink in because there’s some truth there in the mix.

We get an Uber for the rest of the ride back to my apartment, and we’re both silent the whole way. It isn’t until we’re going up the stairs that I say, “You said you wouldn’t tell anyone on one condition. What was the condition?”

She sighs and pauses on the dim stairway, looking up at me. “The condition is that you’re completely honest with yourself about why you’re with him. I just want you to dig a little deeper and really think about your future here. Because, honestly, from the outside looking in, it’s not good. And you look bad. You don’t want to be one of those old cougars trying to hit on young men, making bloody fools of themselves.”

I turn around and head back up the steps and down the hall to my apartment.

Already feeling like a fool.



**I**t was an extremely awkward two days.

After the night that everything came out in the open, things were weird between us. I went out of my way to make sure she could really explore Madrid while I was at work, but she didn't seem all that interested. And when I came home from work, she didn't seem like exploring much of the city, either. I practically had to drag her to an Argentinian steak house, and it was only then, when she had some wine, that she loosened up a little.

She left this morning, which brought me nothing but relief, and if that doesn't say something then I don't know what does.

I know she's disappointed in me. She thinks I'm being an idiot. What was her term, dick drunk? Dick drunk for a younger Spanish man. She thinks I'm no different than some cougar at the bar hunting down men younger than her. She thinks I'm acting beneath the person she thought I was.

In a lot of ways, I can't blame her. She might be honestly concerned about me losing my job, and if that's the case, I don't know what to tell her. And maybe I am acting completely out of character for myself. I don't know. I don't know because half the time, I'm not even sure *I* know myself.

But she's definitely added to those voices in my head, the ones that tell me this whole thing is a big mistake that's not going anywhere and is going to end with my heart being smashed in two.

"Thalia," Luciano says to me, coming around the corner and clapping his hands together with a *whack* as I'm opening the door to my office. "Just the person we all wanted to see."

"What's up, *Capitán*?" I ask, wondering why he's looking at me like he knows something I don't.

"You didn't hear the news?" he asks. "Well, actually no one has heard the news yet. We got word from Jose because he has ways of finding this stuff out early."

I step into my office, shaking my head. "What are you talking about?"

"The draws for the next round robin for Champions were picked," he says. "I mean, they'll announce it officially later, but we already know."

"Yeah, and?"

He gives me a twisted grin. "We're playing Manchester United."

I still. "What?" I eke out.

"That's right. November twenty-sixth."

I plunk down in my chair.

I can't believe it. That can't be right. I mean, I have been praying and hoping that this wouldn't happen, that we wouldn't play them. It's been on my mind a lot lately.

But perhaps I've been thinking about it too much.

Perhaps I willed this into happening.

*Okay, Thalia, get a grip. You knew it could happen. You didn't want it to happen but it's happening.*

Still, I glance uneasily at Luciano. "Are you sure?"

"We'll win. *Água pela barba*, but we'll win."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Water in the beard, in Portuguese," he explains.

"That still doesn't explain anything."

"I said we're going to have to put in the hard work, but we can win. No problem." He gives me a sly smile. "Especially if you give us some of their secrets."

Well, well, well. Here I was telling Helen that this team wasn't like that, and here's Luciano asking me to tell him everything about Man United.

"You're playing dirty, Luciano."

He grins. "Nah, that's Rene. He's the dirty player. I'm just a strategist. You have to be as a team captain."

"Well, I'll tell you what you need to know, but I don't see how that's going to make a difference."

"Is it hard because it's your ex team? *And* your ex-husband's team?"

"Yeah!" I say, giving him an obvious look. "That's why it's hard."

"You don't want us to beat them?"

"Of course I do. I want you to fucking cream them. It's just going to be fucking weird to play them, that's all. But that's my problem, not the team's."

“Stewart is a *bastardo*. He will pay for what he did to you. But that’s why you’ve got to help us make sure that happens. Sure, we can win on our own, but don’t you want to see them *really* go down? I mean, you’re here, on our side. *Dá deus nozes a quem não tem dentes.*”

I raise my brow.

“God gives nuts to those without teeth,” he says.

My brow is still raised.

“It means we have to seize the opportunity or it’s going to go to waste,” he explains with a sigh.

“It goes against my code of ethics,” I manage to say.

Luciano crosses his arms and leans back, observing me. “Is this an actual code or your own personal code?”

“My own personal code.”

“And have you ever broke one of your ethics codes before...and enjoyed doing so?” He winks at me.

Yeah, I know what he’s getting at.

I glare at him.

“I have to think about it. How about you go worry about your team?”

“Already happening,” he says as he waltzes out the door.



LATER THAT NIGHT, I TEXT ALEJO TO COME OVER WHEN HE’S done eating dinner with his family. There is a part of me that wishes I could have dinner with his family too. And I know that if I asked, he would welcome me with open arms.

But then what? That's not the kind of thing you do when you're sneaking around. And I can guarantee his mother wouldn't approve. Not that it matters, but it sort of does.

I end up eating *patatas bravas* from the bar downstairs and drinking a few glasses of wine by the time Alejo is knocking at my door.

I open it, already smiling, a little off-balance, and he comes in, pulling me into a kiss, one hand at my cheek, the other at the small of my back.

There's also something prickly pinching my skin back there.

"What the?" I say as we pull apart and twist around to see him carrying a small potted cactus in one hand.

"It's for you," he says, striding across the room and putting the cactus on the windowsill. "My mother has a few. They keep out evil spirits, bring good luck."

"Another one of your superstitions?"

He gives me a one-shouldered shrug before walking back to me. "Maybe. Guess I feel like I need a lot of luck to keep you with me."

I blink at his choice of words. "I'm not going anywhere."

The corner of his mouth curls into a soft smile. "I haven't been with you for a few days," he says, slipping his hands around my waist and pulling me to him. "It feels like forever. What did you end up doing with your friend? Did you have fun?"

I frown, not sure how I even feel about it.

"Uh oh." He runs his finger between my brows. "This line means things aren't good."

“It means my Botox wore off,” I joke.

“You don’t need that shit,” he says, placing his lips where his finger just was.

“Actually, I do. I’ve been told I have resting bitch face since before the term was coined. Even when I’m just thinking, people always think I’m plotting to murder someone.”

“You mean you’re not?”

I smack him across the chest and head into the kitchen to get him a glass of wine.

“I guess you heard the news about Man U,” I tell him as I pour the glass, glancing up at him.

“I did,” he says. “But before we get into that, let’s go back to your friend. What happened?”

I sigh and bring him the glass, clinking the edge of mine against his.

“It’s a long story.”

“I have all night.”

“I’m pretty sure you didn’t come here to listen to me talk all night,” I point out.

“I came here to be with you,” he says. “The how and the why? It doesn’t matter. Come here.” He takes my hand and leads me to the couch, sitting me down with him next to me. “Helen, right?”

I take a big sip of my wine and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Yes. Helen.”

“And Helen, she’s the one still friends with your ex-husband?”



I'm surprised Alejo remembers that. I must have mentioned her a long time ago.

"Yes. I mean, her husband is best friends with Stewart. I actually met Helen through my ex-husband. So, she has claim to him."

"Claim to him? I don't follow."

"Meaning, it's not exactly fair of me to make a fuss over the fact that she's friends with him if she was friends with him first."

"Right, but was she really friends with him, or was her husband?"

"Her husband was."

"And does she know all the shit that *cabrón* put you through?"

I nod. "She does."

"And she's still staying friends with him why? I mean, maybe I don't understand the dynamics of female friendships since it seems rather complicated. But if you were to ask my opinion, I would say this Helen is not your real friend."

I let out a long, noisy breath through my nose, feeling a pang in my chest. "I know. And I know I should say something to her, but I'm just...I don't like confrontation and she's so strong-willed and sharp-tongued that I don't stand a chance. She has to be the alpha in every room she's in."

"Okay. She's those things and she's also not your friend. If she were your friend, she would not stay friends with him. She may have to see him and tolerate him, but it sounds like it's more than that, no? Or you wouldn't be upset by it. I think she can't be trusted."

“Maybe it’s more like...I’ve been closed off with her and she’s very demanding. High maintenance. Envious, even. Sometimes I think she’s trying to be friends with Stewart to somehow make me jealous of her. It sounds so absurd.”

“But you think those things so they can’t be absurd.”

“Oh, believe me, I have some pretty crazy thoughts.”

“Actually, Thalia, you are extremely level-headed. Annoyingly so.”

I smack him again. “It’s called maturity.”

He laughs. “Is it? No, it’s not quite that. It’s just you like to really analyze things before you do them. You think deeply and keep your feelings close to your chest. You’re the opposite of me. But perhaps I make you a little loose and you make me a little grounded, and it all works out.”

I give him a soft smile. “Yeah.”

“So, what are you going to do about her? Have you said anything to her? Did something happen that made things worse?”

I give him a furtive glance. “She found out about us.”

He winces. “Ouch. I take it that did not go well.”

I shake my head, reliving the disappointed look in her eyes when she saw our text messages. “No, it didn’t. She doesn’t understand.”

“That’s her problem then.” He pauses. “Did it feel good to tell someone, though?”

“Yeah, it did. Even if I didn’t like what she had to say.”

“And so now what? You had a falling out?”

“I really don’t know what it was. But I think it was the beginning of the end. In some ways I think she *does* really care about me and worries about me, but in other ways...maybe she just uses me to feel better about herself. Because she’s still married and has her life together and I’m just kind of...”

“Finding out who you really are and what you really want,” he fills in. “That’s what you’re doing, and you should be proud of it. Not everyone in life gets that chance. Most people die without knowing the person they are inside.” He leans over and cups my face with his hand, gazing into my eyes. “I know the person you are, even if you don’t. And I think she’s amazing.”

My throat grows hot and tears burn at the backs of my eyes.

“Thank you,” I whisper before he leans in to kiss me.

*Thank you for knowing me. Thank you for still being here.*

“Now,” he says as he pulls away, kissing me briefly on the forehead. He sits back and a wicked gleam comes over his eyes. “Let’s talk about Manchester United.”

“Ugh, I’m going to need more wine.”

I make a move to get up, but he puts his hand on my thigh and holds me in place. “You don’t need wine. There’s nothing to worry about. We’re going to beat them.”

“Yeah, but I have to go back to Manchester. I’m going to have to see Stew. Helen will probably be there. The media.” My eyes widen at the thought. “Oh god, the media! They’re going to know! They’re going to hound me and write mean things.”

“Who cares what they write? It can’t be worse than what they’ve already done to you. Besides, no one will be hounding

you. You're a physical therapist. You'll be with the team and Mateo, doing your job. Otherwise you'll be protected by us. No one that you don't want to see will be able to see you. I assume you don't want to see your ex?"

"Fuck no," I cry out. "Why would you even suggest that?"

"Because I'm your man and he's your ex-husband, and it's only natural to worry."

"Alejo," I tell him imploringly, finding it almost sexy at how protective he's being. "I hate Stew. Okay? I won't even look in his direction. You have nothing to worry about."

He tilts his head as he takes that in. "If you say so. Though I would love to go over to him and fuck him right up for what he's done to you."

"You will do no such thing," I tell him sharply. "You and your Spanish bravado."

"What if I see him in a bar? Permission to fight him?"

"No," I cry out. "That would raise some serious questions about us."

"You and Stewart?"

"No, you and me," I explain. "Look, the way you get back at Stew is by humiliating his team by playing the best you can."

"*Vale, vale, vale,*" Alejo says, kissing the tops of his fists. "I'll keep these bad boys locked away."

"You're such a dork," I tell him, laughing. "Anyone ever tell you that?"

"Other than you, no."

I sigh and lean against him, my head on his chest. “Listen, Luciano came by earlier, badgering me over the game and whether I knew any weak spots with their team.”

“*Si*,” he says, running his fingers through my hair, something I find so relaxing.

“I told him I’d think about it, but it kind of breaks my personal code of ethics.”

“*Síiii*.”

I glance up at him, resting my chin on his pec. “But I’m already breaking my code by doing this with you.”

“Technically,” Alejo says, “it’s not just your personal code. It’s in the employee handbook. I know. I looked it up.”

“My point is, since I’m breaking all the rules with you... might as well break *all* the rules with you.”

He peers down at me, brow arching. “I’m listening...”

“This is just for you. I’m just going to say that one of their defenders, Mark York, is going to be on you like glue. And he has a very weak right ankle. Any kind of twisting and he’s out of the game. He’ll recover, and I’m not suggesting you try and maim the guy. But if you need to get away and get him gone for the night...”

He nods. “Got it.” A slow smile spreads on his lips. “This is a very cunning side of you. I think I like it. What other sides do you have?”

He puts his hand behind my head and brings my face up to meet his, kissing me long and slow.

“I can think of a few new ones to show you,” I say in a husky voice, being the ultimate tease.

He grins and kisses me again.



NOVEMBER 26TH.

Eleven a.m.

Our Emirates private plane has just landed in dreary Manchester.

I'm staring out the window at the grey, windswept, puddle-strewn tarmac, and a million nasty feelings are swirling inside me, so much so that I might need to vomit.

I can't believe I'm here.

That I'm back.

The last time I saw Manchester was at the end of July, and though I knew I would be back one day to see friends or to play a match, I just never imagined what that would be like. It was always something vague and abstract.

Now that I'm here, I feel sick to my stomach. I guess I never really had an idea what kind of impact this place had on me until I left.

I wish I could stay on the plane and have it take me back to Madrid, but that's not an option.

I get off the plane with everyone else and I know at some point during today someone is going to think, "Oh hey, Thalia used to live here," or "Thalia used to be married to the manager of United," or "Thalia used to fix those boys." I've already fielded a few curious looks from the players.

I also wish that I could just lean into Alejo and have him take care of me, but that won't ever happen. So I have to deal with the feelings on my own. He's already got his noise-

cancelling headphones on, getting into the right frame of mind for the game, a frame of mind I would never dare interrupt.

The day moves fast though. We get to the hotel, we check into the rooms, and there's some media stuff and interviews some players have to do, including Alejo. I just hide out in my room, wishing I could drink on the job (that's a big fat no), so instead I raid the mini bar for sour candies and eat a bag of them while watching the BBC, trying to keep my mind off things.

Then it's time to go. We get on a bus and are shuttled to the infamous Old Trafford stadium.

The place I spent so much time.

The place I fell in love with Stew.

The place I couldn't face anymore after I lost that love.

And now I'm here, in support of *Los Blancos*, getting fucked by one of their football stars.

Funny how life works.

My nerves don't calm down once inside the stadium, and even walking in I already heard a few reporters and photographers calling my name, which is so fucking crazy considering I'm nobody. I'm just some forty-year-old woman they want to pick apart, which is par for the course for them.

At one point, I could see Alejo ahead of me as we walked to the locker room, hanging back to see if he was needed. I just gave him the eyes that I was fine.

Something that managed to catch the attention of Mateo, who gave me a discerning look in return.

I need to be more careful.

I don't go into the locker room when they're changing if I can help it, so I hang around outside until I see a staff member, Freddie, who notices me.

"Thalia," he says, throwing his arms out for a hug. "It's really you!"

"In the flesh," I tell him. Freddie was always a good guy.

"I can't believe you're here."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You haven't seen the papers? Oh god, load of rubbish they are. They said you wouldn't come because of Stewart."

"They said *what* now?"

"All speculation of course. Said the chances of you showing your face and being here were low. Glad to see you just proved all those wankers wrong." He smacks my shoulder hard. "Good to see you again. Keep that chin up."

He walks off, and I am livid.

I go into the locker room, not caring about whose dong I happen to see, and I pull Mateo aside.

"Have you seen the papers? The local papers here?" I ask him in a hushed voice.

"No. Why would I?"

"There were stories about me, wondering if I would even show up. Said the chances of me showing my face were low."

Mateo looks sympathetic and dismissive at the same time, and I can't really blame him for the last part. "You're here now. You showed them. Don't let this worry you, okay?"

"What's happening?" Alejo asks, appearing at my side.



“It’s nothing. Just the fucking press,” I tell him.

“She’s fine,” Mateo says, putting his hand on Alejo’s shoulder and trying to push him away.

“I’ll see if she’s fine,” Alejo says, giving him a hard look, not moving. I stiffen at that because Alejo more or less just talked back to his coach, and that’s usually a no-no.

Mateo holds his gaze for a moment and then moves on into the rest of the room.

“What did the press say?” Alejo asks.

“It’s nothing. Really. I shouldn’t even care, and it’s definitely nothing for anyone else but me to worry about.”

But Alejo does seem worried and a little worked up.

I want to kiss him, hug him, even just put my hand on his shoulder, but we can’t do any of that, especially as I feel Mateo’s eyes boring holes into us, so I just step away and say, “Have a good game, okay?”

Alejo frowns and nods, and I’m terrified that I’ve already distracted him in a really bad way.

The game is getting ready to begin.

I go out on the pitch with the rest of the medical team, sticking by David who is my closest friend on staff, keeping my chin up, head held high, mentally giving a “fuck you” to every naysayer in the crowd.

I do not look over at Stewart’s area.

I do not look over at my ex-colleagues.

I look straight ahead and go into a trance of sort until the players do their walkout.

The game begins.

It's already intense.

Luciano, Luka, and Rene are playing really well, quick on their feet, good at dribbling, long and short passes, looking out for the best ways to score.

Alejo, however, is running like a bit of a wild card. I'm not really sure what he's doing, but when the ball is passed to him and a defender gets on him, he makes some moves that are a little bit aggressive. Usually, he's just so light-footed that he can kind of dance his way with the ball, like you're watching some kind of art come to life, doing acrobatics with his feet. He doesn't need to be aggressive.

But tonight, he is.

It's enough to put me on edge; it's enough that I can see Mateo is on edge, pacing up and down his area, hands continuously moving in some sort of display of emotion or trying to give instructions.

I manage to sneak a peek over at Stewart in the technical area right next to ours, trying to see how he's receiving the game, if he's collected and calm.

That was a mistake.

The minute I look at Stew, my heart lurches.

Not in any response to lost love, but because he was once my husband who meant the world to me, and now I'm looking at him like he's a total stranger.

The only thing I feel is disappointment, that I wasted those years of my life on someone who would cast me aside for someone easier, younger, and more uncomplicated in the end.

I really, truly thought he was the one when I married him.

I was so in love, for the first time in my life, and I thought what we had would last me until the end of time.

How very fucking wrong I was.

Looking back now, I wonder how I didn't even notice his true colors, or if I did notice and overlooked it, because when you're in love that's what you do. You overlook the bad and say a hope and a prayer that it will get better in time.

Sometimes it does.

Oftentimes, it doesn't.

It didn't for us. It took tragedy for our real selves to come out, and while I'm still searching for me, he was quite happy being himself.

As if he knew I was looking, Stew turns his head away from the game and looks behind him, right at me.

Our eyes meet.

He gives me a tight smile.

I give him nothing.

I look away, back to the game, back to Alejo, who is actually staring at me.

Not at the ball, not at the pitch, not at Mateo, but at me.

Just as the Slovenian kicks the ball to him.

Alejo reacts but just a split second too late. The ball misses him, going right into the legs of Mark York who takes it and passes it to another player who then scores.

Manchester United has a goal.

Real Madrid has none.

And the Slovenian is losing his mind, making hand gestures at Alejo, as in how the hell did you miss that?

And Mateo is pulling out his fucking hair and yelling, losing his shit over that sloppy play.

I look down at my hands, not wanting to be a distraction anymore.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

This was my fault somehow.

I got under Alejo's skin where he was once impenetrable. I've found a way to fuck up what is most sacred to him, his game.

*Fucking hell.*

David swears beside me in Spanish, and I can only nod.

Yeah. Yeah to all of that.

Thankfully, things pick up for a little bit, though I can only look in bits and pieces, not wanting to get into Alejo's headspace again. Luciano scores and it's tied.

We celebrate cautiously.

On the pitch, however, *Los Blancos* really play up that victory, hugging and hollering, Luciano showboating with a long slide on his knees.

Then things take a turn for the worse.

A player from Manchester kicks the ball. Alejo leaps up to head it off, his height coming in handy. York does the same, and Alejo pushes him off with his hand. It's slight, but it's not allowed and Alejo knows it.

The officials give Alejo a yellow card.

If we were playing at Bernabeu back in Madrid, the fans would be whistling by now. They'll turn on you fast if you're taking too many chances and not playing right.

The yellow card is just a warning of course, and Alejo is allowed to continue playing.

But then United scores.

And then again.

The score is three to one in their favor and it's not even halftime.

I can see desperation on their faces. Luciano seems unsure.

Alejo's eyes look wild.

Mateo is going to have a heart attack and lose his hair if he doesn't stop pacing and pulling at his head.

Marcelo passes the ball to Alejo, and he has a fairly good shot at the net if he can find a way through.

But York is coming right up on his side.

Alejo sidesteps and deliberately steps on York's right foot, causing him to tumble forward onto the turf, crying out in pain.

Oh.

Shit.

I can't look away as the move is viewed as a very obvious penalty by not only the crowd but by the ref.

Alejo is given a red card.

He's out of the game.

I feel my heart drop in my stomach like a free-falling elevator.

I had told him three weeks ago, when I was tipsy and angry about Helen and Stewart, about York's weak spot. I had meant for Alejo to use it wisely, to just get him down if needed. Hell, I even forgot about telling him until recently and assumed Alejo had forgotten too.

But this was dirty. This was very dirty and unprofessional, and against every good thing that Alejo loves about this game. I know that players often take the low road. I mean, there's a reason why players don't wear braces around their injuries, because the opposing team will hit them like a target.

Even so, this isn't like him.

My Alejo.

And I know that it has to do with me.

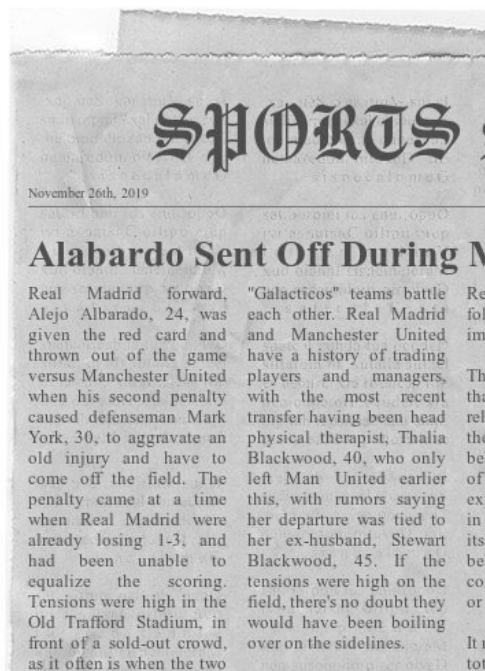
With us.

With Stewart being here and Alejo being so protective over me and angry over what my ex and the media did. He lost his focus. His excess energy came out in a very broken, destructive way.

The whole team is going to suffer the consequences.

And I think the two of us are going to suffer the consequences worst of all.

## CHAPTER 21



**I**'m in *mucha mierda*.  
Loads and loads of shit.

Outside my hotel room, it's dark and cold, and the city of Manchester is heading out for the night, already celebrating United's win over Real Madrid.

Inside my hotel room, it's also dark, and a bit cold too.

It could just be the icy fingers of panic that are wrapping around my throat.

Either way, there is no celebration tonight.

I fucked up.

I fucked up royally during the game.

My teammates hate me.

My coach hates me.

I hate me.

All because I lost my cool.

I became the thing I hate the most.

Someone with no respect for the game.

There's a knock at my door, but I'm afraid to answer it. I don't want to talk to anyone right now. After I was sent off to the sidelines, I kept my head down low, not watching the game, certainly not watching Thalia or her ex-husband. By halftime, Mateo was too angry to even speak to me, and I spent the rest of the game in the locker room by myself, playing it over and over again in my head. The things I should have done differently, my chest raging like I had a hornet's nest inside.

Suffice it to say, there's a part of me that doesn't want to open the door.

But I also can't hide forever.

I want to, but I can't.

That's not what I do.

I get up and look through the peephole.



It's Thalia, looking small and distorted in the fishbowl lens.

I open it quickly, knowing it's not a good look for her to be caught coming in here, though I doubt that would be the least of anyone's concerns right now.

She gives me a stiff smile and slips past me.

I shut the door behind us and turn to face her.

I hadn't seen her properly after I was sent off the pitch. I'd been too afraid to look at her for one reason or another. Mostly because I feel ashamed.

"Hi," I say softly.

"Hi," she says. She seems paler than normal, fragile somehow. She goes and sits on the edge of the bed and fidgets with her hands in her lap. I don't like seeing her like this.

"I'm really sorry," I say, and it comes out as a hoarse whisper.

She glances up at me, squinting. "Sorry for what?"

"I fucked up, Thalia. I lost my cool. First, I was so fucking distracted by you and your ex-husband making eyes at each other, that I totally missed the ball. Then—"

"Hold up," she says, raising her palm in the air, that fragility twisting into anger. "Backtrack there. You thought me and Stew were making *eyes* at each other?"

"At the time, yes," I admit, though now that I have a cooler head, I can see how that might not be the case. All I know is that one minute I was in the game, the next I noticed the two of them staring at each from across the technical areas.

“After *everything* I told you, everything that he’s done to me, that’s what you thought?”

I shut my eyes and rub at my forehead. “I didn’t say I was right.”

“Is that what really distracted you? Was it because of me?”

She wants me to tell her that it’s not true, but I can’t be anything but honest with her.

“Yes,” I admit cautiously. “It was you. It was the thoughts I had of you. The fear that you might go back to him, the fear that you might leave me.”

Her face crumples and she shakes her head ever so slightly. “No. *No*. I was just looking at him because I hadn’t looked at him yet. I’d been avoiding it. I wanted to see if he was upset about the game, I wanted to read him.”

“He wasn’t upset,” I answer quickly. “And why should he be? It went perfectly for him.”

“Alejo, when I told you about Mark York, I did not mean for you to full-on step on his foot like that.”

And here we are, at the even shittier part of the game.

“I know,” I say, sliding my hand down over my jaw, trying to dissipate the tension. Remorse rolls through my veins. “I know. I’m sorry. I was so into it, I wasn’t really thinking, I just knew I had to stop him, and I wanted the team to suffer. It was a mistake.”

“Fuck yeah it was a mistake.”

I glare at her. “You can lay off a little, okay? You think I don’t regret every single thing I did? You know that’s not like me. I’m not that dirty, I respect the players, I respect the game.”

“Well, you didn’t tonight.”

I can’t explain how it feels to have the woman who has your heart tell you how shitty you’ve been at the game you love, but it stings like a motherfucker.

“I don’t know what else to say.” I throw my hands up. “It happened. It won’t happen again.”

“I know it won’t. Because it can’t. You can’t afford to come back into the game to help pull them out of their losing streak only to put them back in it.”

“Thalia. Please. Enough. I can’t take it.”

She starts wringing her hands together and looks off, out the window. “I know. I’m sorry. This is my fault, too.”

“Just forget about that.”

“I can’t,” she says emphatically, looking at me with shining, pleading eyes. “I can’t forget it. You lost your cool because of me, because of your feelings for me.” She takes in a deep breath and I feel the energy in the room change into something dark and foreboding. “We need to step back.”

“I don’t know what you mean. Step back and analyze it?”

She shakes her head, hastily tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “No. We need to knock it off. This. *Us*.”

My eyes nearly fall out of my skull. “Knock it off?” I exclaim. Her words cut into my chest like razor blades.

“Not forever,” she says quickly, getting to her feet and putting her hand on my arm. “Just for a while. Until you get your head back in the game. *Us* sneaking around, it’s getting so complicated, and we can’t afford to have these complications getting in the way of you winning.”

“No,” I tell her, holding her face between my hands and staring down at her imploringly. “Please. We can make this work.”

“We’re not breaking up, Alejo. It’s just...we need a bit of space. You know it’s true. I don’t like this any more than you do.”

“Yeah fucking right,” I swear, my hands dropping away.

She pokes me hard in the chest with her forefinger. “What are you saying? Don’t say that. I care. I want this to continue.”

“No you don’t,” I practically sneer, so many raw emotions snaking inside me. I know I have to get them under control or I’m going to say something I don’t mean at all. “I’ve been laying my soul bare for you and you’ve given me nothing in return.”

“We’re together almost every single night,” she says quietly.

“Yes. I have your body, but I don’t want just your body, Thalia. I want your fucking soul. I want to take it and keep it and mix it up with mine until it burns between us like the sun. That’s what I want from you.” I pause, trying to swallow the sadness in my throat. “At the very least, give me your heart.”

Her eyes start to water, and she looks away. “You can’t make those demands of me.”

“I know I can’t,” I say softly, reaching out to touch her arm, suddenly so afraid that this is the end. “I know I can’t, but it’s how I feel. I can’t lie about what I want from you.” I take in a deep, shaking breath. “Please. I don’t want a break. I don’t want this to end.”

“It’s not ending,” she says, walking toward the door, holding her arms across her chest, looking very small. “It’s

just for now. Please, you have to believe me, to trust me on this, okay? Let's just put us on the back burner for the next few games, just so you can prove yourself to the team again."

"I won't let tonight happen again."

"And I won't let this fall on my shoulders again. You're far too good of a person, of a player, to ever have to go through what you did tonight. You need to rise up, and fast, and erase it so everyone can move on. You had a bad game, but so what? It will be easy to explain. But if it happens again...I don't want to be the reason why the game you love turns against you. I couldn't bear it."

I watch as her shoulders slump, her hand moving to the door knob. She shoots me a weak glance over her shoulder. "I wish you could understand, but this is truly for the best."

"I wish *you* could understand," I tell her, "and believe me when I say that I won't let it happen again. It was a mistake, and I lost my head. I don't want to be distracted either. But that doesn't mean *we* have to stop."

"It's just for a week or two," she says. "That's it. If we can survive that, we can survive anything. I promise you that."

I'm not so sure about her promises.

All I know is that she's opening the door and walking out, and I feel like someone has slammed a vise around my heart, slowly bleeding me dry.

I stand there for a moment, trying to breathe, trying not to feel everything all at once, the world threatening to crash all around me.

There's another knock on the door.

Maybe she's changed her mind.

Maybe she's come back.

It's happened before.

I answer the door without looking.

Mateo is standing on the other side, still in his black suit from the game.

"Can I have a word with you, Alejo?" he asks, his voice cool and collected, but there's tension simmering in his eyes.

This is definitely a night where I shouldn't be answering any doors.

"Sure," I say with an air of defeat, because I know this isn't going to be very good either.

Disappointing Mateo is something I desperately try not to do. I want his approval, I want to do well by him, and tonight, there was no such thing. Tonight I failed him.

"I don't know where to begin," Mateo says, putting his hands behind his back and rocking back and forth on his heels. "I really don't."

"Can we start with me saying I'm sorry and that it won't happen again?"

He cocks a brow. "You can say that, sure. But that won't change anything." He takes in a deep breath. "Alejo, what happened to you tonight?"

I shrug, trying to play it off. "Had a bad day, I guess. I didn't sleep well last night."

"No, no, I don't think that was it," he says. He starts to pace around the room, hands behind his back, much like he does in his technical area on the pitch. But maybe with fewer arm gestures.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I say.

He comes to a stop and stares at me, his chin raised high, an eerie calm in his eyes. Mateo can be extremely intimidating when he wants to be. “Do you want me to tell you what I think happened? You can feel free to correct me if I’m wrong, but I’m not so sure that I am.”

“Okay,” I say, sitting down on the bed.

“I think that earlier, when Thalia was upset about what the press was saying about her, you somehow took such offense to it that it actually pulled you right out of the game. I think you stepped out there on that pitch, seething full of anger at the press and the people in the stands, the other team, and especially her ex-husband, the team’s manager, and you let your emotions cloud your brain.”

I try to swallow. “What makes you think that would have any effect on me at all?”

“Because I’m not stupid, Alejo,” he says. “Do you know that I just ran into Thalia out there in the hallway?”

*Oh shit.*

“I saw her coming out of your room,” he adds. “I asked her what she was doing, and she made up some lie about talking to you about the game, which maybe wasn’t a lie because she didn’t look happy at all. In fact, I think she was close to tears. But anyway, I call bullshit on all of this because I have been watching the two of you for the last few months, and I would have to be a real fucking idiot not to suspect that something is going on between you two.”

“We’re just friends,” I say weakly.

Mateo lets out a dry laugh. “You are a horrible liar, Alejo. That’s one of the things I like about you. You wear your heart

on your sleeve and you can't lie for shit. But it's also your downfall. I know you aren't just friends. I know you're screwing around. I don't really care to know when it started, but it's obvious it has."

"How so?" Now I'm curious, though I don't want to admit anything.

"It's in the eyes. It's always in the eyes. No matter which room you're both in, your eyes always find each other. You say something to each other that no one else can hear or understand, but you both know what it is. That's what it's like when someone becomes your whole world. They're all you see."

My eyes flit to the carpet, but if Mateo knows everything through my eyes, then he knows everything by now.

"Tell me I'm right," he says.

I shrug again. "You're right."

Silence.

"Alejo...do you even know what you're doing? Have you actually slowed down and taken a moment to think about it?"

I glance at him sharply. "She's all I think about."

"She's forty!" he exclaims with wide eyes. "You're twenty-three!"

"Twenty-four."

"Whatever."

"But weren't you almost forty and your wife twenty-three when you first met her?"

He stills, blinks. Shakes his head. "Yes, but that was different."



“How is that different? Because you’re a man and Vera is a woman? It’s not okay the other way around?”

“It’s a different scenario. Completely. Alejo, Thalia is your physical therapist. She’s off-limits. She’s forbidden to you. You’re crossing a line that can’t be crossed.”

I cock my head. “And weren’t you married when you first were with Vera?”

He frowns and gives me the kind of look that tells me he wishes he could slap me in the face. “This has nothing to do with my personal life.”

“But everything to do with my personal life?”

“Yes!” he exclaims. “And what you do with your personal life affects the team. What I do in mine doesn’t. That’s the difference.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better at all...she just broke it off. Kind of. A break, I guess, until Christmas.”

Mateo sighs dramatically and runs his hands down his face before sitting next to me on the bed. “Look. This has to stop. Not just until Christmas, it has to be stopped beyond that. You can’t do this.”

“What if I play better than ever?”

“It’s not just about the game,” he says, his voice going low and grave. “Okay? It’s about Thalia. I’m her boss, okay? I am in a position to fire her. It is well within my right to go to her room right now and fire her because she’s breaking a very important rule, and it’s a rule I know she’s aware of. You understand?”

I swallow.

*Fuck.*

Things are going from bad to worse.

I look to Mateo, panic clawing through me. “Please. Please don’t fire her. I’ll do anything.”

He pats my shoulder and gets up, his back to me as he walks across the room. “I’m not a monster, Alejo. I like Thalia a lot. I think she does a great job, and so far, her side of things hasn’t been compromised.” He pauses and gives me a loaded glance over his shoulder. “Maybe that says something about the fact that *she* can keep her emotions in check but you can’t. Regardless, I don’t want to fire her and I’m not going to. But you have to cut this out. Because if Jose finds out or someone like Dr. Costa, then I’m going to be forced to do something I really don’t want to do. Okay?”

I nod, my heart rate slowing down. “Okay.”

“I mean it though,” he says. “You have to stop this with her. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, and believe me, I’ve been through some shit with my love life. I’d fallen in love with someone I shouldn’t have, but in the end I stand behind all the choices that I made because it brought Vera into my life. But this could end up hurting the both of you in ways you can’t imagine.”

“And what if this is a moment in my life, a moment I will look back on, like that moment you went through where you chose love over everything else? What if this is that moment for me, and in the future, I’ll stand proudly behind my choices?”

The word *love* spills from my lips, the first time I’ve uttered it in this regard.

It feels right.

Just like she does.

“The difference between you and me,” Mateo begins, “is that Vera didn’t have a job on the line. A career. She didn’t have to give up much to be with me. But Thalia? She’ll have to give up everything she’s worked so hard for her whole life. Do you really want to do that to her? Do you really want to put her in that position?”

My head drops, my body feeling exhausted and weak all of a sudden.

The pain in my heart is draining all my energy.

“You’re a good man, Alejo,” Mateo says, putting his hand on my shoulder. “I’m proud of you, I really am. I just want what’s best for you. That’s all.”

He takes his hand away and moves toward the door. He pauses. “Tomorrow we’ll just tell everyone what you originally told me. You had a bad game. You slept poorly. A one-off thing that won’t happen again. People will forget about it pretty quick, so long as you let them forget it.”

I just nod. I can’t even form words.

I feel numb.

“Have a good sleep. Someone will give you a wake-up call in the morning.”

And with that, Mateo is gone.

I feel like he left me with nothing.

## CHAPTER 22

### THALIA

I make myself a cup of coffee and curl up in my new reading chair that faces the window, fluffy slippers on my feet, a plush lavender blanket wrapped around my shoulders. It's early, so it's still dark outside and cold as fuck. Central heating in Madrid isn't really a thing, at least not in my apartment.

I glance warily at my cactus on the windowsill.

Despite the gloom, it's still thriving.

I wish I could say the same for Alejo and me.

I take out my phone and call home.

My mother answers on the third ring.

"Thalia," she says. "You're calling me. Please tell me you're actually in Seattle somewhere and you came home early for Christmas."

It's mid-December and Christmas has been on my mind, mainly how I'm actually going to be spending it alone. It won't be the first time that has happened, back in the day, before Stewart. Sometimes my work schedule made it impossible, sometimes I just didn't want to go home to the chaos of my family.

But that's not why I'm calling her.

“I’m not,” I tell her. “Listen, is Dad there?”

“You want to talk to your father?” she asks, sounding rather incredulous.

“I do,” I tell her. “I want to talk sports.”

“Oh. Fine.” I hear a muffled sound and then, “Charles, your daughter wants to speak with you about *sports*.”

“Hey, sunshine,” my dad greets me. I’ve always taken pride in the fact that out of all my siblings, I’m the only one with a nickname. “Haven’t heard from you in a long time.”

“Hi, Dad,” I say softly. “I know. I’m trying to be better about calling.”

“To be fair, I suppose I could be calling you too.”

“Yes, you could.”

“So, what did you want to talk to me about? Are you coming home for Christmas?”

I hear my mother yelling in the background, “Tell her she has to! She listens to you.”

“No, I’m not coming home for Christmas,” I tell him. “I just got settled here. I’ve been traveling so much for work. Last week we were in Qatar for the FIFA Club World Cup. The Middle East is always a trip.”

“I know, I watched the game. You won. You’ve been doing great, actually.”

“The team has, yes.”

“Nah, I mean you too, sunshine. You’re part of the team. Don’t sell yourself short. You have a bad habit of doing that. You need to puff yourself up a little. Be proud.”

I don't know what crack my father is smoking, but when I was younger, hell, even up until recently, he'd never say anything like that. My father wasn't exactly one of those encouraging parents. In fact, he was a perfectionist, and demanded excellence from all of us. Just because I was the only girl, and the youngest, didn't mean I was off the hook.

In fact, I think he was tougher on me than the rest of them, maybe because he wished I was a boy. I don't know if that's true or not, but when you're the only girl out of four very active and competitive brothers, you can't help but think it. That's one reason why I threw myself into sports when I was young enough to remember. I just wanted to be one of the boys. I wanted to be included, and I wanted my father's attention and approval. The more I played, the more involved I was, whether it be soccer or tennis or ice hockey, the more he seemed to respect me.

Suffice it to say, I didn't grow up hearing things like this. It was a lot of tough love, and we were never allowed to boast about our wins or our accomplishments. It taught me to do the work without expecting recognition, and maybe in the long run, it actually helped me get to where I am today.

"Well, don't worry about Christmas," he goes on. "We're having it at Ted and Josephine's house, and it's going to be hell. All their kids terrorizing the place, it ruins the occasion."

"Charles, they're your grandkids!" my mother's muffled voice pipes up again. "It's going to be lovely!"

"Well, I didn't ask to have ten grandkids, did I?" he shouts back. "Thalia, I know your mother gives you shit for not having kids with Stewart, but thank god you didn't. All your brothers' kids are more than enough. Your old man needs a break."

Surprisingly, the mention of kids, and my lack thereof, doesn't cut like I thought it would. It just slides right off me.

"Dad, can I ask you something?"

"Of course you can."

"Can you keep it between us? As in, not tell Mom?"

"Do you think I tell her everything?" he whispers into the phone. "A man needs to have some secrets too."

I giggle. "You can say the same for me, because I happen to have a secret."

"I'm not going to guess, lest someone overhears and starts to wonder..."

"Right. Well. Okay, I don't really want to talk sports. I mean, it's kind of about sports because that's my life, but it's also...I know I don't talk to you about this stuff normally but I figured maybe you'd be the best person to ask, because I've never asked for your opinion on it."

"Lay it on me."

"I need advice, Dad. About my love life."

"*Ohhh*," he says softly. He clears his throat. "Okay."

This is totally out of left field for him, I know that. Like I've said, my father and I have never had a very deep and open relationship. It's only as he's gotten older (and as I've gotten older, I suppose), that we've become closer, more like adults than father and daughter. It's a tough zone to move out of, but I think having moved away right after high school, going to university and then to LA, really helped in setting that up. In fact, I think that going off on your own and creating a bit of separation from your parents is the only way you're really allowed to grow and become the person you're meant to be.

You can't do that if you're forever trapped in old roles you've outgrown.

"I kind of told Mom about this a few months ago, but I lied, and even with the lie she disapproved. I'm not looking for approval. I don't need a lecture. I just need advice on what to do next. Maybe I just need someone to listen to me and not judge me for once." I take a sip of coffee and stare at the cactus. "I have developed some very strong feelings for someone that I work with."

"I see. Another therapist?"

"No. No, that would be...easier. It's a player. And I'm not going to tell you who, although I'm sure you will figure it out."

"Oh." He clears his throat. "I assume that's against the rules."

"Yes."

"But that doesn't exactly help when your heart is involved, does it? It doesn't listen to the rules."

I exhale, happy that so far he's not calling me an idiot or something. "No, it doesn't."

"Have you told him?"

"Uh. I know he knows I like him. I mean...we've been, uh, together, for a few months now."

Silence. "*Oh*. Okay. So this isn't just someone you work with that you have feelings for and that's it?"

"No. It's beyond that. We both have feelings for each other. It's turning into something and that something is terrifying."



“Terrifying because...?”

“Because...I could lose my job. Because I just went through a horrible divorce and my heart is just this raw, uncooked meat right now. I can’t...I can’t imagine giving it away to anybody. I won’t survive it if things don’t work out.”

“And what makes you think things won’t work out?” he says, whispering again. My mother is probably lurking near.

“Because he’s younger than me. He’s a lot younger than me. And I’m not sure what kind of future I can have with him.”

“Does he love you?”

His question causes my stomach to drop. “I don’t know,” I say honestly. “Maybe? He’s Spanish and passionate, so it can be hard to tell sometimes.”

“Do you love him?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know that either.”

“You would know if you did,” he says after a beat. “But that doesn’t mean you won’t.”

“Well, right now, we’re kind of on a break.”

“Was that your doing?”

“Yeah, but our relationship started to complicate his game. He really fucked up and I thought it would be for the best if we just avoided each other for a bit. Just until a few games were played, so he could prove himself.”

“Prove himself to you?”

“No. To everyone. I just didn’t want that all on my shoulders. I wanted to put my feelings to the side and let him do his job.”

“You know, your feelings still exist, even if you’re ignoring them.”

He’s got that right. My feelings are welling up inside me like a tangled knot I’m afraid to undo.

“And how did he take that break?” my dad asks.

“Not well. He won’t even look at me most of the time. He has been doing great though, so at least there’s that. Back to scoring lots of goals, being a menace on the pitch.”

“Alejo Albarado,” he says, figuring it out. “That’s him, isn’t it? I saw the game against Manchester United.”

“You did?”

“Sweetie, I watch all your games. But I knew that one was going to be a doozy, with you being back in England and Stewart being there. I was really hoping you’d wipe the floor with them.”

A great thing about my dad is that he never, ever liked Stewart. Even pulled me aside at our wedding and asked if I was sure I wanted to marry him. I was angry and upset about it at the time, that I didn’t have Daddy’s approval, but in hindsight, I think my dad sensed something was off.

“We all hoped for that. It didn’t happen though.”

“He’s really young, Thalia,” he says quietly.

“I know,” I say, closing my eyes.

Is this ever not going to be the first thing people say?

“I’m sure you do know, and if you’re still having these feelings for him, I’m sure they are valid. In fact, I know this is something important and serious to you because otherwise you

would have never called to ask for my advice. So, do you still want my advice?”

I nod, gripping my phone tighter. “Yes.”

“You’ve always been cautious and a bit of an overachiever. Maybe because of me, I don’t know. You’re hard on yourself and you always have been. You need to cut yourself some slack.”

“Cut yourself a slab,” I mumble under my breath. “Eat the ham.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

I can practically hear him frown over the phone. “Anyway, it’s true, sweetie. You’re being hard on yourself right now, I can tell. The only advice I can truly give you is that...life isn’t something that happens to you, it’s something that happens *for* you.”

I let the words sink into my skin.

My dad goes on. “Right now, Albarado, he’s in your life and he’s happening *for you*, and there’s a reason for that. Maybe you need to be with someone who is the opposite of Stewart. Maybe you need to feel wanted and desired. Maybe you’re finding out who you really are and what you really want. It could be all of those things. You just have to ask yourself, does this feel right or does this feel wrong?” He pauses. “And if you think it feels right, then you have to open yourself up. I say this because I know you, Thalia. Opening up is hard and it’s scary, but you have to do it if you want to move on in life.”

“You mean, give myself the green light?”

“Yeah. Sure. Whatever analogy you want. You have the green light here, so go through it. If you get where you need to go, great. If you don’t, hey, at least you’re not standing still. Right? If I may throw another analogy your way, you miss one hundred percent of the shots you don’t take.”

“Michael Scott,” I comment.

“No, Wayne Gretzky,” he says incredulously, not getting my *Office* joke. “Anyway, I’m really glad you called me. You know, your brothers never talk to me about any of this stuff.”

“That’s what their wives are for.”

“Hey, Dads are good for something too.”

“They are. Thanks for listening, Dad” I tell him, my heart feeling full.

“You’re welcome. Now I’m going to go upstairs and hit the hay before your mother yells at me about falling asleep in the recliner again. I love you, sunshine.”

“I love you too.”

I hang up the phone and stare at it for a moment.

The need to text Alejo is rising. I should reach out to him, say something. After what my dad said, I feel like I’m losing time for some reason.


But Alejo’s pissed at me for putting our relationship on pause, and in retrospect, I don’t blame him. Yeah, he’s funneled that energy into the game and he’s scored two goals in the last three games, which is great. He’s back and his passion for it is showing.

But, selfishly, I miss him.

I want him.

We have a gala tonight at some old palace to honor Luciano getting the Sportsman of the Year award.

Maybe I have the chance to make things right.



“THALIA, YOU LOOK FANTASTIC!” VERA EXCLAIMS, TOTTERING over to me on her spiky high heels as I step inside the entrance to the palace, slipping between two grandiose pillars. “You’re like a disco ball. But make it sexy.”

I look down at my dress and stick my hips out like *ta-da*. “Thank you. You don’t look so shabby yourself.”

My dress is one-shouldered, nipped in at the waist, with a scandalously high slit up the side, made entirely of ice blue sequins. Since it’s the Christmas season and Madrid is going through a cold spell, I figured it would suit the occasion.

Vera’s dress is a 1950s style black, off-the-shoulder velvet number that clings to her hips in a very flattering way, her breasts pushed up to her neck, her hair down in ringlets. I took inspiration from the last time we were together at Alejo’s party and smudged my eyes up with dark blue glittery eye shadow as an homage to her.

“Where’s Mateo?” I ask her, looking around.

There’s a ton of people here gathered around the large hall. Dim glowing lights hang beside opulent chandeliers, there’s a red carpet, everyone’s in a tux or in gowns, and waiters dressed like penguins walk around with plates of champagne and tapas.

Vera plucks two glasses off a passing tray and hands one to me. “He’s off being a coach and doing his coach duties,” she says. “Face of the team and all that.” She gives me a smile. “So, how are you doing? You know I keep saying this, but we

should really talk more. Granted, you're probably as busy as Mateo is, but still."

"I agree. We should. And I should start carving out some time for some kind of a social life."

"Well, what are you doing for Christmas? Are you going home?"

I shrug, even though I know I'm not.

"Okay, but if you find yourself with nowhere to go, you can always come over and have Christmas with us."

"You don't go home for Christmas?" I ask her.

"Are you kidding?" she says with a laugh. "My family is a mess. And anyway, we're scattered all over the place. My brother Josh lives with his wife in New Zealand. My sister is in New York. My parents are divorced. It's much easier to stay here."

"Well, thank you for the invite. I'll let you know."

"Oh, and there's the man of the hour himself," Vera says, raising her glass of champagne at Luciano who comes striding over.

I do the same. "Congratulations, big shot."

He puffs out his chest, looking extremely suave in his tuxedo, his dark hair slicked back. "Thank you, thank you," he says. "It's an honor to be nominated."

Vera snorts. "You win this thing like every year. There's never anyone else nominated. They should just call it the Luciano award."

He gives her a cocky grin. "What can I say, the people at the magazine love me."

There are numerous sports awards given every year in Madrid, this one being held by a prestigious local magazine. And apparently, Luciano almost always wins. I guess that's what you get for being captain of Real Madrid.

Still, it's fun to see all the players here, dressed up and mingling.

"Where's your date?" I ask Luciano.

"Don't have one," he says, then leans in closer to me, lowering his voice. "Where's *your* date?"

"Don't have one either," I tell him, giving him a pointed look, especially with Vera right there. I know what he's getting at.

"You don't even have a *secret* date?"

"No." I sip my champagne and give him the death eyes.

"Whoa, whoa," he says to me, raising his palms. "I don't want any trouble here, not before I accept my award."

"Luciano!" someone yells for him in the distance.

"Excuse me, ladies," he says, looking a little frightened of me as he strides away.

"You know," Vera says, watching him. "I think you and Luciano would make a very cute couple."

I nearly spit out my champagne. I cough. "What are you talking about?"

She shrugs, smiling dreamily. "I don't know. I guess I'm always trying to play matchmaker. He's single, you know. And oh so handsome. He reminds me of an actor..."

"I'm aware of that."

"Of the actor or that he's single?"

“That he’s single.”

“You’re single.”

“Also aware of that. We’ve had this discussion before. In a closet, remember? You wanted to set me up with your friends.”

“I know, but Luciano is a much better choice.”

“It’s not going to happen.”

“Oh, who cares if you’re on the same team? The heart wants what it wants.”

I give her a steady look. “I’m not interested in Luciano.”

“Then who are you interested in?”

I frown. “Who says I’m interested in anyone?”

She bites her tongue for a moment as she looks me up and down. “I don’t know. Just a feeling I get from you. Your vibe. You keep looking around the room like you’re looking for someone, and you look beyond gorgeous. Like you’re really trying to impress someone tonight.”

I don’t say anything to that. As someone who is told to open up more, I guess I’m extremely easy to read. I’ve been looking for Alejo this whole time and I haven’t spotted him yet.

“Meet-cute!”

“Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me,” I mutter under my breath.

“What, what?” Vera says, turning around to see motherfucking Sergio of all people coming toward us. He does look quite good in a suit, but he’s not the person I want to see.



“What are you doing here?” I ask him, in probably not my most polite moment.

“I figured I’d see you here,” he says.

“I’m starting to think you’re stalking me,” I say, half-serious.

“I suppose I could say the same to you. I work at the magazine as a graphic designer. This is my event.”

“And who are you, anyway?” Vera asks pointedly.

“My manners,” Sergio says. “I’m Sergio. A friend of Thalia’s.”

“A friend, huh?” Vera says suspiciously, looking between the two of us with one brow permanently raised. “Okay. I get it now.”

*Absolutely nothing to get,* I want to say.

“*Buenas noches, damas y caballeros. Gracias por venir,*” a man with a mic announces from the small stage set up at the end of the room, the lights dimming slightly. People start to crowd around the stage, the volume in the room going to a murmur.

“The awards are starting,” Vera says. “I’m going to go find my husband.”

She leaves me with Sergio.

Meanwhile, my eyes are still scanning the crowd for Alejo.

“So, you never called me about those tickets,” Sergio says to me, leaning in close. I have my hair piled high on my head in a messy updo, and his breath is uncomfortably close to my neck.

I move my head away a little and give him a steady look.  
“I’ve been busy.”

“So I’ve seen. Qatar, Brugge. You must be traveling all over the place these days. But your team has been winning them all. It’s a nice turnaround.”

“Because they’re the best,” I say, raising my chin.

He chuckles. “The best is always changing, isn’t it?”

“They’ve won the most UEFA world cups out of anyone.”

“Doesn’t mean a thing,” he says. “But I didn’t come over here to talk to you about *Los Blancos*.”

“Why did you come over here?” I ask him wryly. “To offer me more Spanish lessons?”

“*Más o menos*,” he says, putting his hand at my hip and holding me there. “Maybe I wanted to ask you out on a date.”

*Oh boy.*

I twist my body away from his hand, trying to think of the right way to turn him down, and as I’m doing so, I see Alejo at the opposite side of the room, near the stage.

He’s in a tuxedo, looking so devilishly handsome that I can’t breathe for a second.

And then I meet his eyes.

His eyes that are staring right at mine with shock and hurt and rage.

*Fuck!*

He rips his gaze away and starts moving through the crowd, away from the stage, away from me.

He obviously just saw Sergio putting the moves on me.

Great fucking timing once again.

“Well?” Sergio asks, sounding impatient and trying to get my attention.

I blink at him and absently hand him my glass of champagne.

“Here, have this,” I say to him, and then I start walking toward Alejo who has already disappeared down a long, dark hallway.

I look back over my shoulder to see Sergio looking at me in bewilderment, but no one else is paying any attention to me. All eyes are on the stage.

I hurry, my heels clicking, hoping there’s no exit here and that Alejo hasn’t left. I see the coat room, a restroom...

And Alejo’s figure stepping out of another room.

He grabs my arm and pulls me inside.

“What the fuck are you doing to me?” Alejo cries out, spinning me around until my back is against the wall.

It’s dark except for the lights from the street outside streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, bracketed by velvet drapes. The room is completely empty, the wallpapered walls peeling and bare.

In the dim light, Alejo’s eyes are shining and impassioned, his jaw clenched, a vein at his temple rippling. Even when angry, he’s extremely sexy.

“Doing to *you*?” I repeat.

“Who the fuck was that?”

“No one,” I tell him.

“Bullshit. Bullshit! Is this why you wanted to have a break, so you could fuck around with that guy?”

“Hey!” I yell right back. “I haven’t fucked around with anyone but you. I don’t *want* anyone but you. That’s a guy I keep running into, and for your information, the moment you saw us, he was asking me out and I had just said no. Can’t you read my body language? Did it even look like I was interested?”

He swallows and looks away, his arms on either side of me bracing him against the wall. I can see his pulse racing in his throat. “You have to understand what it’s like for me, okay?” He looks at me, his eyes searching. “You tell me you want a break and then you avoid me like I have the fucking plague. Now I see you here with some guy, when you knew I’d be here.”

“It was bad timing,” I tell him, practically pleading for him to believe me. “And I haven’t been avoiding you, you’ve been avoiding me! We’ve been flying all over the place, we’ve been practicing, we’ve been everywhere together, and yet you never once looked in my direction.”

“Maybe I was doing it when I knew you weren’t looking.”

I close my eyes, not happy with the way this is going. “Alejo...”

“You broke my heart a little,” he says, his voice dropping, full of hurt, hurt I feel in the pit of my stomach. “Do you know what it felt like to fuck up so badly that I not only made my team lose the game but I also lost you at the same time?”

“You didn’t lose me,” I protest. “You never lost me.”

“I did too! You put our relationship, whatever the fuck this is, you put it on hold. You either want to be with me or you

don't, Thalia. Make up your fucking mind."

"That's not fair!" I snap at him. "That is *not* fair. This, *us*, it's complicated. We're complicated. I'm just trying to figure it out!"

"You're the one making it complicated! Everything I feel for you is as straightforward as possible." His eyes drop to my mouth. He's breathing hard. "So, tell me. Do you want me or not?"

"Alejo..." I begin.

"Do you want me or not?"

Before I can answer, he leans in swiftly and presses his mouth to mine, taking me in a hard and punishing kiss that makes me dizzy.

My head bangs back against the wall and his hands slip around my neck and waist, holding me hostage while our lips devour each other, all our hunger, all our anger and frustration coming out in a frenzy.

"Tell me you want me," he says against my mouth, pressing his erection against my stomach. "Tell me we still have something."

"We still have *everything*," I manage to say before he kisses me again. His hands slide down the sides of my dress and he hikes it up around my waist. His fingers move between my thighs and find me wet already. I can't help but whimper.

"Did you not wear underwear because you knew I'd be here?" he asks through a groan, kissing down my neck, sucking at my skin.

"I was planning on talking to you," I admit. I close my eyes to the sensation of his fingers sliding where I'm achingly

slick and as sensitive as a bomb.

“Talking like this?” he asks as he reaches under and grabs my ass, hoisting me up with a grunt until my legs wrap around his waist.

“I was feeling optimistic.”

I reach down and fumble for his belt buckle, my hands not moving fast enough, my body growing more desperate by the second.

He unzips his pants, taking his cock out. I gape at it for a moment; it’s almost gratuitous how thick it is. I revel in knowing how hard I make him.

But the thoughts quickly dissolve.

With one fluid motion he pushes himself inside me to the hilt.

I gasp, nails on his tux jacket, trying to breathe through it as I’m practically impaled against the wall. “Oh god,” I cry out softly, feeling every hot and hard inch of him.

He comes at me again, pulling out just enough and quickly slamming his length back in, pushing the air out of my lungs, making my limbs tremble.

“Fuck, Thalia,” he growls, his pace becoming fast and frantic as he fucks me against the wall. “It’s been too long. I’ve been too long without you. Never put me through this again.”

“I won’t,” I say through a moan as his hand slips down and he slides his thumb against my clit.

God, I’ve needed this. I’ve wanted this.

“I’ve missed this,” I say, my words low and broken and raw. I dig my nails in deeper, holding on to him, holding on to what we have. “I’ve missed you. I’ve missed *you*.”

He brings his mouth to mine, his tongue sliding in hungrily as he pumps against my hips at a dizzying pace. His forehead is furrowed in pure concentration, this desire to fuck the doubts out of me, to make sure there’s no one else but him.

And there isn’t anyone else but him.

It’s only ever been him.

Something inside me threatens to break at that moment, and it’s not the orgasm that I can feel around the corner. It’s something different, something new, something delicate and fragile and beautiful. It’s coming alive inside me, unfurling in my chest, and wanting to consume me whole.

*Don’t make me fall in love with you.*

*Spare my heart from that pain.*

“Thalia,” he whispers against my mouth, his voice breaking. “I need you to come. I need to know what I still do to you.”

His fingers slip down, pressing against where his cock is disappearing inside of me, swirling around until my mind splinters and I’m brought to dizzying heights.

Like a match trying to light, it finally strikes the right place.

I come so fucking hard and so fucking fast, captured between his lips one moment and spiraling out of control the next. “Oh god!” I cry out, not caring that my voice echoes across the room, that there’s a world out there with people who could find us, find this.

I don't care anymore.

I only care about him.

“Fuck,” he says through a groan. As my body feels like it's being shot through a kaleidoscope of colors, he drives into me with one final, brutal thrust. His eyes are pinched closed in bliss as the orgasm rips through him. “This is my heaven...my heaven...”

His words trail off as his pumping slows, and I stare up at him, a sheen of sweat on his forehead, at his wet and open mouth, the way his eyes are heavy and sated as they stare at my lips, my nose, my eyes.

“If you're going to be with me, you're going to be with me,” he says hoarsely, still inside me. I'm trembling, my hips cramping from my thighs squeezing him so hard. He brushes a strand off my face and kisses my temple. “No breaks. No complications. I'm yours and you're mine. Promise me this.”

I nod, swallowing, my heart still racing in my throat. “I promise, Alejo.”

He pulls out slowly and then gently lowers me to the ground. I yank down my dress and shoot him a shy glance.

He's staring at me with such hope and tenderness that I fear I might turn into more of a puddle, and that seems impossible after what his orgasm did to me.

This morning my father asked me a question that I wasn't sure I had the answer to.

Does it feel wrong or right?

Now, looking at Alejo, trapped in his gaze, my heart warms, expanding and beating for him, and I know what the truth is.



This feels right.

This feels more than right.

Alejo comes over to me, kisses me hard and long and soft, and it's enough to make my toes curl, for the butterflies to flutter in my stomach, even though he'd just been inside me.

"Let's go congratulate Luciano on his award," he says, still cupping my chin.

"I feel bad I missed it."

"He wins every year. It's rigged." He then pats me on the ass, gives me a wink, and leaves the room.

I wait a few minutes to put enough space between us, taking the time to gather my thoughts and catch my breath before I follow.

## CHAPTER 23



**M**adrid during Christmastime is a magical place. Usually when people think of a European Christmas, they think of the German markets or ice skating in Paris or sparkling winter villages in the Austrian alps. But Madrid spares no expense in pulling out all the stops.

There are lavishly decorated trees everywhere, with a one hundred and fourteen foot golden Christmas tree in Puerta del Sol. The whole city is lit up with festive lights, there are roasted chestnuts at every street corner (making the air smell fantastic), there are puppet shows and mulled wine and churros dipped in chocolate, and everyone is telling you *Feliz Navidad*.

But maybe the whole reason my first Christmas in Madrid feels magical is because I'm with Alejo.

After our tryst at the gala, I decided to throw myself into us with an open heart. I've blocked out the voices that warn me that I'm going to get hurt, I ignore the fear that this isn't going to last, I stop the negative thoughts in their tracks.

I'm committing to being with Alejo, and more than that, I'm committing to the moment.

Life isn't happening to me; it's happening for me.

Alejo is for me as much as I am for him.

We're in each other's lives for a reason, whatever that reason may be.

I'm taking that green light.

"What are you doing right now?" Alejo asks me over the phone.

"I'm perusing the stands at the Christmas market in Plaza Mayor," I tell him. This market isn't as good as the ones in Germany or Holland, but it still packs a punch, and since the plaza is close to my apartment, I've been coming by here after work to try and soak in some of that festive flavor.

"Again?"

"I like the food here," I tell him. I've eaten my weight in Christmas cookies, but I've decided to worry about it after the holidays. Until then, I'm stuffing my face.

"How fast can you be packed?"

I stop outside a giant gingerbread man display. "What do you mean? Packed? Where?"

"How fast can you be packed?" he repeats. "For some place a little warmer and sunnier than this."

"What are you talking about?"

He sighs. "It won't be a surprise if I tell you. Just go home and pack. I'll give you forty-five minutes. *Vamos.*"

"*Vale, vale, vale,*" I tell him before hanging up and turning back to my apartment.

Today is actually the start of our holidays, the team having played against Atlético last night for the final game of the year (ending in a draw, which luckily didn't hurt our standings in

La Liga), and none of us have to be back until right after New Year. I know I get more of a holiday than most since the players still have to keep training and practicing on their own accord, but it's a relief to have the time to enjoy life and breathe.

Of course, things have been kind of weird for me since I have no place to go on Christmas. Alejo has asked me what I am doing and I said I might go to Vera and Mateo's, which still seems like a viable option for me, you know, instead of eating gingerbread cookies by myself in my apartment.

I would never infringe upon Alejo. He has his mother and brother and some family elsewhere, I forget where. I'm *with* him but we're still not public, and honestly thinking about the fact that we likely never will be gives me anxiety, so I try not to. Whatever this relationship is, it's not the kind where he can introduce me to his family as his girlfriend or anything like that.

It's not perfect.

But it is what it is.

And I would rather have Alejo like this than not have him at all.

I go back to my apartment, feeling the excitement build through me. Perhaps he's taking me away for the night. We have a couple of days before Christmas so a quick trip somewhere hot might be in order. Or maybe he's not spending Christmas with his family at all, who knows.

All I know is that my heart is practically tripping on itself at the thought of going away with him.

I am a fucking smitten kitten.

And I am falling for him, hard.

*No safety net with this one*, I think to myself, but I don't dwell on it. To dwell is to stall.

Grinning, I start throwing shit in a carry-on. Sunglasses, sunscreen for my sun-hating skin, a "packable" hat that will resemble a blob after I unpack, shorts, bathing suits, workout clothes in case he wants me to work out with him, some light layers, and a few sundresses.

Thirty minutes later, there's a knock at my door.

Alejo is there, wearing his leather jacket and a scarf, his car keys in hand.

He comes in and kisses me. "You ready?"

"I think so," I say, smiling up at him.

"Okay, get your passport, and let's go," he says.

I swipe it off my counter, lock up my apartment, and head down to the street. He throws my luggage in the trunk of his Audi and we're off to the airport.

"Are you going to give me any hints of where you're abducting me to?"

"No," he says, and I notice he's palming the steering wheel as if he's nervous. Hmm. That's interesting.

"I guess I'll have to figure it out at the airport," I muse, trying to figure out why he's nervous. Is it because this is the first trip we've taken as a couple? That could be it.

Though Alejo doesn't seem like he'd get nervous about that. He's definitely not one to shy away from grand gestures, or worry if things are moving too fast.

Once at the airport, he takes me to Iberia Airlines and scans his passport at one of the machines. I don't want the

machine to ruin the surprise yet, so I keep my eyes on the passersby in the airport, a busy time of year for sure.

A few of them seem to recognize Alejo, but they keep walking. They don't give me much of a glance but it does make me wish I had my blobby hat out of my suitcase so I could pull it down over my face.

It gives me pause. Even though we're not holding hands or being affectionate in any way, there's still a chance that someone could spot us together and make some kind of assumption about *why* we're together at an airport. I mean, I'm fairly recognizable, too. Thankfully I've never seen anything negative about me in the Spanish press, but I know a lot of people know who I am. A lot of the press use me as an example of the women's right movement, for better or worse.

But I forget about all that when he hands me my boarding pass.

*Tenerife.*

I look up at him in surprise. "Tenerife? The Canary Islands?"

"*Sí*. Have you been?"

"No, I just heard it's pretty popular. Isn't it kind of far away though for such a short trip? It's off the coast of Africa."

"Only a three-hour flight." He takes in a deep breath and gives me an awkward smile. "And it's not a short trip. My family is there. Aunts and uncles on my father's side. My mother and brother flew down yesterday. I want you to spend Christmas with me, with all of us. I want to show you off as my girlfriend."

I feel a pull, a physical draw to be with him, and it takes everything to stand my ground, knowing we could be watched.

This. Fucking. *Man*.

He wants me to meet his family, show me off like I'm some jewel. He makes me feel like...like I'm the rarest, most precious thing. He makes me feel like I shine and that it's okay to take up the space I do.

"Is that okay?" he asks warily, searching my expression.

"Yes," I cry out. "Yes, yes it's okay. I'm just...are *you* sure it's okay? This is a big move. I mean, how are they going to understand us or any of this?" I gesture to us, making wild circles with my finger in the air.

"They'll understand, you'll see."

"Your mom hates me."

"She doesn't know you. After she meets you, *really* meets you, she'll love you to pieces. Just like..." He doesn't finish his sentence, just gives me a quick smile and nods at the ticket. "We are running a bit late though, so we should get going."

That is the understatement of the day. Fortunately we make it, and secure our first-class seats just before the doors close.

I take a quick, furtive peek at the other passengers around us as we're taxiing down the runway.

They're staring at us.

Well, they're staring at Alejo.

When they meet my eyes though, they look away.

I lean into him, my nose close to his neck. He smells like mint and oranges, whatever fancy schmancy Hermés body wash he uses. "People recognize you," I whisper.

"They usually do," he whispers back, stroking his chin and mugging for me. "Come on, look at this face."

I can't even roll my eyes at that because it's true. "I know, but don't you think they're going to talk? They might recognize me, or maybe they don't, but they're going to wonder who I am."

"I'm really not concerned about a bunch of passengers."

"But I am. Should we have some story just in case?"

He sighs, closing his eyes. "I hate this," he says softly. He lets his head fall to the side and looks at me. His eyes seem to dig straight into my heart. "Why do we have to hide? I don't want to hide."

"You know why," I say quietly, making sure no one can hear us over the drone of the engine. "I don't like it either, but that's just the way it is."

He searches my face and then nods reluctantly. "Okay. I don't know. Just say you were alone at Christmas, and we're friends and you came over for the holidays. Simple as that."

That doesn't sound very simple to me, but if it comes up it will have to do.

The jet takes off into the sky.

The flight goes by fairly quickly. We're picked up at the airport in South Tenerife by a private car, but it's fairly late and too dark to see anything. The driver zips us along a highway, and here, in the dark in the back of the car, we fold into each other.

His arm around my shoulders, my head in my favorite spot, the crevasse between his chest and his arm. Our hands entwined. I hold on to him, knowing how precious moments like this are, especially after a period where we aren't allowed to touch each other. When I have to be apart from him like that, I become so aware of what a connection we have. My



body trembles inside the way that magnets do when they're held too close to each other.

Soon we enter the seaside fishing village of La Caleta. The moon reflects off the Atlantic, giving a sense of desolation, and the town seems to be only a few streets long. The car veers along the rock coast and comes to a stop at a set of massive gates framed by palm trees.

The gates slowly open, and the car goes through a long gravel driveway until it stops in front of a Spanish-style hacienda lined with a few weather-beaten trucks.

"This is where your aunt and uncle live?" I ask him, incredulous. "What do they do for a living?"

"He's a fisherman," he says, opening the door.

"And are the fish he's catching filled with gold?"

He laughs. "I bought them the place. They're all I have left of my father, really. They deserve it."

Wow. Alejo is certainly putting his money to very good use. My heart warms at the thought.

"In fact," he says as we step out of the car, "I've offered to buy them a place in Madrid, so we can be closer to them, but my uncle won't give up his fish."

"Ahhhhh!" someone yells from the house as the door opens and a whole load of people pile out. "Alejo!"

I stand back politely as the small crowd swarms around him, chattering away in highly excitable Spanish that my newbie ears can't pick up on. There's an elderly woman who must be in her late eighties, a middle-aged couple, an older man with white hair, two men my age or maybe older, his mother, Armando, and a girl who looks a bit younger than

Armando. There are lots of kisses and hugs and ruffling of his hair. It's like watching the Pope come to town (minus the hair ruffling), and they're all staring up at him with such reverence.

*This is your man.*

The realization is a sweet arrow to my chest.

He catches my eye and gives me a smile that's both warm and slightly embarrassed.

*"Todos, todos,"* he says to everyone. *"Quiero que conozcáis a Thalia."*

At that, every head swivels toward me.

I lift my hand in an awkward wave. *"Buenas Noches."*

*"¿Quién es ella?"* an elderly woman asks him.

*Who is she?*

*"Alejo,"* his mother says in a hushed voice. *"¿Por qué está aquí?"*

*Why is she here?*

Alejo just gives his mother a kiss on the cheek and strides out of the group, coming over to me. He holds my hand, gives it a much-needed squeeze for my own personal bravery, and faces them.

Then he starts spouting a bunch of things in Spanish while his captive audience looks on. I can only pick out a few words here and there: therapist, girlfriend, secret, lovely, and Christmas.

That pretty much sums it up.

The elderly woman comes to me first, a big smile on her lined face, her eyes shining. *"Hermosa,"* she says, calling me

beautiful as she pulls me in for *besos*, kissing each cheek.  
“*Muy Hermosa! Alejo, tienes suerte.*”

*He is lucky.*

I point to myself. “I’m lucky. *Alejo es...*” I glance at him, the words failing me. “*El mejor.*”

*The best.*

“*Sí, sí, sí,*” she says, patting me on the shoulder. *We know.*

“This is my grandmother,” Alejo says. “We call her Yaya.”

Yaya. Even her name is adorable.

After that, after Yaya gives her approval, everyone comes over to say hello.

I meet his Aunt Maya and Uncle Luis.

Their daughter Mila.

His Uncle Nacho.

I meet Santiago and Xavier, Nacho’s sons.

And then of course Armando, who gives me a very cheeky smile, and when he gives me a rather sweet kiss on the cheek, he whispers, “I knew it.”

Last but not least, his mother.

She looks me up and down, one brow raised, her lips pursed.

Then she just looks at Alejo and nods, motioning for everyone to follow her inside the house.

Okay, so I wasn’t expecting her to pull me into a big bear hug and welcome me into the family or anything like that, but still, her distance chills me.

“Don’t worry about her,” Alejo says, holding my hand.  
“Give her time.”

I have to take his word for it.

The house inside is surprisingly modest for its size, but clean and welcoming with tiled floors and dark wood furniture. The living room is scattered with glasses, so obviously they were all up waiting for us. It’s nearly midnight now, so it’s no surprise that everyone decides to go to bed.

We say goodnight and Alejo leads me to a small bedroom at the very end of the second floor. I don’t realize how tired I really am until I see the queen-size bed and immediately flop down on it.

I barely crawl under the covers before I pass out.

Sleep comes for me quickly.

I’m not sure how long I’ve been out when Alejo kicks me in the leg.

I wake up, heart pounding, turning in the bed to look at him.

He’s lying there, face in anguish, holding on to the covers.

“Papá,” he cries out softly, the kind of cry that comes from the heart and cuts through the night. It brings me chills.

He’s having a nightmare.

Do I wake him up?

I put my hand on his shoulder and very gently shake him.

“Alejo,” I whisper, keeping back enough in case he wakes up with arms swinging. “Alejo, it’s Thalia. You’re safe. You’re dreaming.”

Suddenly he freezes and his eyes open.

He blinks, his mouth wide and gasping for air.

I immediately grab his hand. “It’s me. It’s okay. You had a nightmare.”

He looks at me, still blinking, and grips my hand tighter. Slowly, his features relax, his hand loosening.

“My god,” he says, breathless. He shakes his head. “What a horrible dream.”

I wince in sympathy. “It looked pretty bad. You called for your father.”

He nods. “Yes. I have this dream sometimes. Maybe it’s not even a dream but just a memory I’m having to relive. The night that he killed himself.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, rubbing my hand on his shoulder. “I can’t imagine what it’s like.” I pause. “How often do you have these? This is the first that I’ve noticed. Not that we get a lot of *sleeping* done together.”

He gives me a ghost of a smile. “It doesn’t happen so often anymore.”

“Maybe being here with your family triggered it? It must be so bittersweet to see your aunt and uncle.”

He nods. “It is. My Uncle Luis lost his brother. Yaya lost her son. I look in their eyes and I see my father. It’s inevitable. But at the same time, I need them. Being around them feels like being around my father. When he was sober, of course.” He sighs and leans back into the bed. “It’s complicated. I wish...I wish for so many things.”

“Have you ever thought about going on medication?”

“*Sí*,” he says carefully. “But I have, how you say...coping mechanisms.”

“Such as?”

“The game. It’s always been the game. Maybe for a while there it was drinking and women and driving fast, I don’t know. But the game has always been there for me. It’s a way to lose myself, to channel things. And sometimes, I feel like it’s the only way I’m close to him” He gives me a sad smile. “He knew I would do great things, that I was born to play. Until his other vices claimed him, all he cared about was me out there on the pitch. So here I am. Out there on the pitch. Doing what he believed I could do, doing what I love to do. And it’s all because of him.”

He picks at the lint on the embroidered bedspread, eyes now downcast. “Sometimes, I do feel a little guilty. Like...had he not died, I would have not put everything I had into playing. I wouldn’t have felt the pressure to provide for my family. I would not have worked so damn hard to get into the youth academy and beyond. Sometimes I worry...he died so I could succeed.”

“You can’t think like that, Alejo,” I tell him, my fingers trailing over the side of his face. “It’s not fair to you, and it’s not fair to your father. We don’t know why things happen in life. Why certain tragedies happen and whether they put us onto different paths, for better or worse.”

“Then how do you make sense of things?” he says, eyes going to mine.

I feel lost in them, the sense of almost drowning, barely keeping my head above water. I’m so close to going under and losing myself completely to him.

Body, mind, and soul.

Heart, too.

I swallow hard. “A few months ago, I couldn’t tell you. Because nothing in my life made sense at all. I was just floundering, grasping for a second chance at life.”

“And now?” he whispers, gaze dropping to my lips.

“Now? I think I need to let my heart tell me what makes sense. And what feels right.”

He moves in an inch, his fingers slipping into my hair, this thumb pressed along my cheekbone. “Does your heart make sense of us?”

I nod, smiling faintly. “It does.”

The relief in his eyes is visible before he closes them and pulls me into a kiss.

It’s passionate and strong, leaving me wanting so much more.

Just like he does.

## CHAPTER 24



**T**he next day I wake up bright and early, the sun coming in through the window panes. Alejo is still sleeping. I suppose that nightmare really knocked him out.

I get out of bed and go over to the window and gasp at the sight.

It was so dark last night that I had no idea Maya and Luis' house was right above the rocky coast, waves crashing not too far below the window. A little stone staircase leads into a flat area of a boat launch, a couple of small fishing boats bobbing on the water. The color of the water itself is stunning in the morning light, a bright turquoise that leads to a deep, vivid cerulean blue.

I can't believe I'm here.

Not just in Tenerife, this volcanic Spanish island floating off the coast of West Africa, but that I'm here with Alejo, surrounded by his family.

I put my fingers at the bottom of the window and push it up, fresh salty air flowing into my face, moving my hair.

I can't help but let out a little laugh and turn my head toward the sun, letting the rays beat down on my face. It's



been so gloomy in Madrid that I'd forgotten how much I missed the feeling of sun on my skin, even if my skin tends to go pink during the summer.

"What are you doing?" Alejo mumbles from the bed.

"I'm soaking this all in," I tell him, scampering back to bed.

I get under the covers. It's warmer than Madrid, but the morning air is chilly.

Alejo puts his arm around me and pulls me to him.

"Thank you for being so understanding last night," he says, kissing the top of my head.

"Why wouldn't I be?" I ask, peering up at him. "You can always talk to me. I went for so long without anyone to talk to. I had a psychologist, and that helped, as did the meds he gave me. But sometimes you want to open up to someone you're invested in."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you're invested in me," he says. "In all my parts, or just some of them?"

I laugh, noting the heat building in his eyes. I slide my hand down his firm stomach and over his cock, hard and waiting.

"There might be one I favor over the others," I joke, making a fist, watching as his eyes roll back in his head.

The way we make love in the mornings might just be my favorite. It's a little sleepy and slow. It's easy. It's intimate. There's never any pressure, we just seem to find each other at the right time, and we're always ready to go.

I work my fist until I can tell he's close to coming, then I let go and slowly pull myself up on top of him.

“Did I tell you good morning?” I murmur to him, kissing the corner of his full lips, his jaw, his neck.

“*Buenos dias,*” he says, groaning as my nails rake over his chest.

He puts his hands down at my waist, shrugging me up a little until I feel the head of his cock between my legs, pressing eagerly against me. Slowly he pushes up and I spread around him, feeling breathless already.

I’m about to push myself up to ride him like a cowgirl, but he quickly pulls out, grabs my shoulders and flips me over so that he’s on top, his shoulders moving over me.

“Maybe this morning I want to be in control,” he says, staring down at me with a heady mix of lust and tenderness, his gaze only wavering when he starts to push himself in again.

My legs spread, feeling every inch of him as he thrusts inside. I close my eyes and bite my lip in a lazy grin.

“This is my favorite view,” he says to me. “You, beneath me, smiling. Don’t ever change.”

“Don’t ever stop fucking me like this,” I tell him, briefly sticking out my tongue.

His lips curl in a lopsided smile, and he leans in, kissing me.

This, this, this.

I want this forever.

I love how he kisses me when he’s inside me, the way his lips rarely leave my skin, whether they’re working my mouth or pressed against my cheek or brushing over my breasts.

There's always some connection between us, as if our bodies only get greedier the more they're with each other.

He pulls back for a breath and rests his forehead against mine as his pace continues to be easy, slow, and intensely deliberate. "Thalia," he whispers to me.

"Yes?" I stare up into his eyes.

"Thank you for coming here," he says to me. His voice is low and brimming with so much gratitude that it unravels me to the core. "Thank you for stepping into my world. I hope you stay. I hope you let my world become yours."

And just like that, I know.

I *know* what I've been trying to figure out.

I'm hit with a feeling so acute, so potent, I feel it physically manifest in my chest.

In my heart.

*I love you*, I think, the elation growing by the second.

*I'm so fucking in love with you.*

I have to close my eyes and nod, trying to keep back the tear that wants to be released.

Every emotion seems to rush at me, wanting me to acknowledge them, to give them attention, but all I can think is love, love, love.

This is it.

He's it.

I love him.

I *love* him.

“Thalia,” he whispers again, and my name sounds so beautiful that it burns. “I’m yours.”

He continues to rock into me, our bodies synchronized in an easy rhythm, our hearts beating like wings.

I come first, something soft and slow, the kind of orgasm that pulls at every feeling you hold dear, bringing them to the surface. I cry out his name and I shed a few tears, letting the waves break over me again and again.

He comes right after, hard and intense, and he bites my shoulder to keep from yelling and waking up the house.

I hope his teeth leave permanent marks.

I want to remember this forever.



THE DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS PASS AT A SLOW AND EASY PACE, reflecting the kind of lives lived here at this small fishing village caught between tall volcanic mountains and the deep blue sea.

With each passing day, I fall in love with Alejo a little more.

Then a little more turns into a lot more, until my heart fills to the brim, like it’s starting to spill over, and I fear there’s no more room. But it makes room. It keeps making room for him.

He once asked me if there was space in my heart for him.

I want to show him now just how much space there is.

But because I’m a chickenshit, I don’t say anything. I keep the words bottled up because it’s less scary than saying them aloud. Instead, I hold on to his heart with mine, just out of sight.

His family is absolutely lovely, by the way.

His Aunt Maya and Uncle Luis are so sweet and welcoming, going out of their way to make sure I feel comfortable in their home. *Mi casa es tu casa*, and all of that. Plus, they both speak a bit of English, which makes things easier since my Spanish is pretty abysmal.

Then there's their daughter, Mila, who is fourteen. She also speaks fluent English. Apparently she hates sports, which she told me right off the bat, but loves fashion and wants to be a designer. Since I'm still a bit of a girly girl, despite my job, we find things to talk about.

Nacho is robust, loud, and gregarious, constantly doing party tricks.

Santiago and Xavier, by contrast, are quieter, but Xavier will talk your ear off about fish if you really get him going. In Spanish and in English, often switching between the two.

Armando is Armando. The more I spend time with him, the more I realize that his slacker, devil-may-care attitude hides a pretty sensitive soul.

Then there is Yaya, who is probably my favorite. As it turns out, once she feels comfortable, she can speak some English. She said she dated an Englishman in college, obviously a long time ago, and liked to watch American soap operas, so she picked the rest up that way.

Which leaves me with Alejo's mother.

I think she's coming around. She's often in the kitchen baking Christmas treats with Maya and she'll bark at me if I'm around to come and help. Never with a smile and always with a suspicious look. Sometimes I'll catch Maya telling her to be nicer, but she waves her off.

Still, it's nice to be included, I guess. At least she thinks I'm a good help, since my kitchen duties seem to keep piling on.

Then Christmas Eve comes, and the whole house is in a frenzy preparing for tomorrow.

Or I should say, the women are.

The men relax in the living room watching some Spanish variety show, drinking beer and wine, or smoking cigars outside on the patio.

Meanwhile, me, Alejo's mother, Maya, and Mila are all working away.

I don't mind, though. I mean, I'm sure if one of them was my husband I'd whoop their ass into helping me, but the women seem to take great pride in it, even Mila, who is dutifully creating a broth for the seafood stew that will be part of the appetizer. Since we're on the coast, seafood plays a big part in the cuisine.

I'm in charge of the truffle stuffing, which appears to be the most important part of the cooking other than the turkey. I'm just preparing it, but even so, there's a lot of work to it and a lot of different things to be chopped.

Most importantly are the truffles, which Alejo's mother carefully brings toward me like she's presenting Jesus in the manger instead of a bunch of dark mushy things in a crinkled paper bag.

Her eyes implore me to follow her every move, which I do.

First, she takes out a proper paring knife, then she delicately removes each crumbly truffle and places them on the cutting board. "*Vigilalo,*" she says to me gruffly.

*Watch this.*

Or, the way she probably means it, watch this or I'll cut your eye out.

She slices through the truffles at the speed of sound, her hands going fast. Part of the truffle is sliced off into paper thin shavings. She holds one up to the light so I can see.

“*Muy bien,*” I tell her.

She nods gravely. “*Sí.*” Then she looks over at Mila and Maya, and says something to them. I watch them grab bottles of wine from the counter and disappear into the other room.

Oh great. Now I'm alone with her.

Is this where she murders me?

“Now you,” she says in broken English.

At least she's trying. *And* she's giving me the knife.

I take it with a grateful smile. Then I take out a truffle and attempt to do what she just did.

I make a total mess. The truffle turns into mush.

I glance at her standing right beside me, shaking her head. She looks upset but also like she's trying not to laugh.

“Can you?” I say, handing her back the knife. “*¿Otra vez?*”

“*Vale, vale,*” she says.

Once again she moves her hands so quickly I can barely see what's going on.

The knife comes back to me.

I'm about to cut into another truffle, to mimic her, but she says, “*¿Lo amas?*”

I still, unsure of what she just said.

“¿*Qué?*” I ask.

“*Lo amas,*” she repeats. She frowns, licks her lips. “Do you,” she pokes me in the arm, “*love my son?*”

My mouth drops and I blink at her. I place the knife down on the board.

“Do I love Alejo?” I repeat.

“*Sí, sí,*” she says, watching me intently.

“*Sí,*” I say, the smile spreading across my face like a tidal wave. “*Sí, me encanta Alejo. Alejo...*” I press my hand to my heart. “*Mi corazón.*”

She watches me for a moment. Then nods. “Okay.” Then she rattles something off in Spanish that I don’t understand even a little.

“*Lo siento,*” I tell her. “No *entiendo.* I don’t understand.”

“Do you want me to translate?” Alejo’s voice cuts between us.

I gasp and turn around to see him standing in the middle of the kitchen.

He’s grinning like a fool, a smile from ear to ear.

He had to have heard all of that, right? *Right?*

*Oh god!*

“She said,” he goes on, “she gives you her blessing.”

His mother nods and then starts talking again with lots of hand gestures.

Alejo happily translates. “She says that she doesn’t understand how this, us, came to be, but that it doesn’t matter.



Not everyone will understand your journey. It's not theirs to make sense of, it's yours. In this case, it's ours."

I manage to give his mother another grateful look and try to nod my thanks, but my heart is pounding so loudly I'm almost dizzy.

She just gives me a dismissive wave and leaves the room, leaving us alone.

"Did you..." I start to say.

"Did I hear you tell my mother that you love me?"

I swallow thickly. "Yeah. That."

"I did," he says, taking a step toward me. "Was it true?"

I'm still scared to say it, even though I already said it to her, even though he already heard, but the longer I look into his eyes, the more I know where I stand and there is no fear anymore.

"*Sí*," I tell him. "*Te amo*."

He puts a hand at my waist, the other at my chin, eyes peering down at me with so much intensity that I think I might shatter. "Tell me again, in English."

"I love you," I whisper.

"Tell me again in Spanish."

"*Te amo*." I lick my lips, feeling like my heart might explode. "I love you Alejo, and I can't...I can't feel or think of anything else but that. I love you."

He smiles at me, the kind of smile that leaves a mark on a person. It's the smile of a man who has everything he's ever wanted.

"*Te adoro*," he says, pressing his lips against mine.

*He adores me.* Sweet, but not exactly what I wanted to hear in response.

His hand slips down over my ass. “*Te necesito.*”

*He needs me.* Okay, still...

Then both hands cup my face. “*Mi corazón late por ti.*”

I’m not sure of that one.

“My heart,” he murmurs, “it beats for you, Thalia. Now and always. I love you. *Te amo.* And this love burns like the sun.”

Then he kisses me.

Sealing our fate.

Behind us, applause erupts.

We break apart, breathing hard, happy, giddy, staring at Alejo’s family who have all gathered in the entrance to the kitchen with their wine.

“¡*Salud!*” they all cheer, raising their glasses.

I don’t think I’ve been happier.



ALEJO GIVES ME SPOONS AND FORKS FOR CHRISTMAS.

I stare at the box for a moment, not getting it. The rest of his family is leaning over, trying to make sense of the package I just unwrapped.

“Does this mean something in Spain?” I ask him, trying not to sound ungrateful but...

He laughs. “No, it means I stay true to my word. Remember your poorly stocked kitchen? I said I would get you new cutlery.”

“No knives, I hope,” Luis says. “Bad luck.”

“No knives,” Alejo assures.

“Well, thank you,” I tell him.

“I also got you this,” he says, handing me another, smaller box.

We’ve been sitting around the tree for the last hour opening presents. The family really likes to give lots of little gifts, and there are a lot of us, so we’ve been taking turns. Except Alejo seems to want me to open all of mine at once.

Thinking that the box of forks and spoons was a silly, fun kind of gift, I open the next one expecting something to show Alejo’s deeply romantic side.

It’s nice. Expensive, anyway. A bottle of Tom Ford perfume, *Soleil Neige*.

“Oh, *muy bien*,” Yaya says as she slips on a giant sweater Maya had knitted for her.

“*Soleil Neige*,” Alejo says, gesturing to the box. “Winter sun. Because you’re like the sun in winter.”

“You mean bright but cold?” I joke, and everyone laughs.

I thank Alejo for his gift. I mean, really, it’s a nice gesture, and whenever I wear it I’ll think of him. I can’t help but think maybe he’d be a little more sentimental but then again, he’s twenty-four, he’s doing his best, and I didn’t do much better with what I got him.

“I love it,” I tell him, spritzing some on my wrist. It actually smells divine, a scent you want to wrap yourself in.

Then it’s time for my gift to Alejo.

He was damn hard to shop for. I mean, what do you get a man who has absolutely everything and all the money he could ever need?

I hand him the package and he tears into it.

“*Oh, Dios mío,*” he exclaims as he stares at it.

I took a picture of everyone at his surprise birthday party, with him in the middle, then had it blown up, printed, and framed.

“Look at everyone,” he says, laughing. “Ah, we look so drunk. That was such a good party.” He looks at me with heart-melting eyes. “But you’re not in this picture.”

I shrug. “That’s okay.” As long as I’m with you anyway. “You can photoshop me in.”

He seems to think that over, probably getting some naughty ideas.

When everyone is finally done with their presents and we’ve cleaned up the best we can, there’s a bit of time before I’m needed in the kitchen. Alejo comes over to me and grabs my hand.

“Come for a walk with me,” he says.

We put on our sandals and head outside. He takes me around the house to the back of the property where there’s a path winding through rosemary and sage, skirting alongside the crashing waves.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“There’s a private beach,” he says. “Or as private as it gets. Can’t get there by road so we like to claim it as ours.”

“Classic Albarado move,” I comment.

He shoots me a smile. “You’re damn right.”

The beaches in Tenerife aren’t the white sand beaches people are used to, but more of a dark brown thanks to the volcanic activity. It doesn’t make them any less beautiful and it doesn’t make the water any less clear. Here, the azure waves crash against the beach, making a beautiful contrast against the blue sky, the kind of waning, soft blue you get in the wintertime.

“This is gorgeous,” I tell him as he helps me climb down the rocks and onto the sand. From where we are, there is only dark volcanic soil and green shrubs. There are no houses, just the faint peak of a volcano far in the distance.

“*Si*,” he says, sitting down on the sand and looking out at the waves. “My aunt and uncle used to live in the next town over, in this tiny little house. I wanted to buy them this one so they could have this beach to launch his fishing boats from. But of course Luis then insisted that he still make his own boat launch, right up to the house. You can’t keep that man away from the water.”

I sit down next to him, trying not to get sand under my dress. I didn’t know we’d be having Christmas here, so this plain black sundress was the dressiest thing I packed.

“Listen,” he says, twisting to face me. “I have something here for you, and it means a lot to me. I didn’t want to give it to you in front of my family because it’s personal, and really, it’s just between you and me.”

Now I’m intrigued. “Okay. What is it?”

He reaches into his pocket and takes out a small velvet pouch. He unties the string and then lifts out a small, shiny silver locket on a necklace, placing it in my outstretched palm.

“I had this made a month ago,” he says. “I wasn’t sure if it would be ready in time for today, but thankfully it was.”

I peer closely at it. “It’s a pocket watch.”

“It’s my father’s pocket watch,” he says.

“Alejo,” I tell him, trying to give it back to him. “No. I can’t take this.”

He presses his fingers over my hand, closing my palm. “Yes. It is for you. I had it remade into a necklace, just for you. It says so inside.”

He takes his hand away, and I open the front of the locket, revealing a ticking watch face underneath.

There’s something engraved on the inside.

“Thalia, *te amo*,” I read it out loud. I blink at the words to make sure I’m seeing it right. Then I blink up at him. “*Te amo*,” I repeat, puzzled. “But you said you had this made a month ago.”

“I loved you a month ago. I loved you two months ago. I think I might have loved you even before I saw you. I just knew you had my heart.”

Dear sweet lord.

It feels like a thousand wings are beating in my chest, chasing my heart, making me rise higher and higher until I can’t bear it.

I have no words.

It is absolutely the sweetest, most beautiful, touching gift anyone has ever gotten me.

“Do you like it?” Alejo asks, and his brow is furrowed in such a way that all his hopes are riding on my answer.

“I love it,” I whisper, clutching it close to me. “I love it. I love you.”

“Thank god for that,” he says, chuckling.

“Would you still have given it to me had I not inadvertently told you I loved you?”

He nods, blinking softly. “Yes. I would have. I could not stand to hide my feelings from you anymore. I told you, you had my heart, and I meant it in every way possible.” He takes the watch from me. “Here, let me put it on you.”

He fastens it around my neck where it rests just below my collarbone. The silver looks stunning against my skin, especially in this winter light.

Alejo looks me over, eyes shining with approval, before leaning in and kissing me in such a way that my body shivers from head to toe.

He pulls away, placing another kiss on my nose, and puts his arm around me. We stare at the horizon where dark clouds have gathered, a patch of dark grey amongst the blue and gold.

“Looks like a storm might roll in,” he says. “Hopefully, it misses us.”

“I love storms,” I admit. “Maybe because we never got any good ones on the west coast. I love the feel in the air, the lightning, the charge.”

“You say that, but if the power goes out during Christmas dinner, it’s not going to be a good time.”

He’s right about that.

We stay for a bit, watching the storm roll in, the clouds billowing in monstrous waves. Then, just as we start to see flashes of lightning on the horizon, it seems to head west,

away from us. It will probably go on across the Atlantic, picking up speed, plowing through everything in its path.

It makes me think of Alejo.

About us.

About how the moment we laid eyes on each other, everything seemed to click into place.

We got together and picked up steam.

Were we meant to be?

Or were we like the storm, building and building, removing all obstacles in our path, paving a way for the future?

Maybe love is a force of nature that can't be stopped.

And if that's the case, maybe the two of us can figure out how to keep going.



“So, if I choke and die, I hope you know this will all be your fault,” I tell Alejo, staring at the large bag of grapes in front of me. Twenty-four grapes, to be exact.

“Don’t blame me, blame Spain,” Alejo says with a shrug.

It’s New Year’s Eve and we’re gathered in the Puerta del Sol, the big square in Madrid with the famous one hundred foot tall golden Christmas tree. Thousands upon thousands of revelers are around us in this crowd, and yet no one knows who we are.

I’m wearing a gold Venetian mask and so is he, though his reminds me of *The Phantom of the Opera*. I’ve got on my blue sequined dress underneath a big coat, with boots, he’s got on a suit under his trench. I’m wearing red lipstick, and he let me apply some smudgy black eyeliner around his eyes, so it would not only disguise him a little more, but give his mask extra mystique.

It worked. I mean, all night I can’t stop looking at him. Not that that’s any different than normal. But with the mask on, showcasing those hypnotic eyes, which lean more blue today, it’s been making me feel all shivery and squirmy, and it’s nothing to do with the cold.

Could have something to do with the copious amounts of Cava we've been drinking all night.

It was Alejo's idea for us to do something special to ring in the New Year. I wasn't sure what, since going out in public is kind of tricky for us. Even when we were in Tenerife, we didn't venture from the house together, and it was a miracle we were able to even fly there and back without seeing anything in the papers (I know, I looked).

But when I discovered that a lot of people dress up in costume for the night, I thought that might just let us squeak past people if we donned some masks and made a thing out of it.

So far, it's worked.

I mean, it's almost midnight, so I'd say it was a success.

We're both staring up at the screens near the end of the square near the clocktower where the TV presenters are stationed for the live broadcast, about to count down to New Years.

Everyone has their grapes.

I assume everyone is also wearing red underwear like me.

The Spaniards and their superstitions.

"Are you ready?" Alejo asks me, just as the announcers ask the crowd the same thing.

*To choke and die? Sure.*

You see, it's tradition in Spain to eat twelve grapes symbolizing twelve months of prosperity for each second the clock strikes after midnight.

So, twelve grapes in twelve seconds or your year will be shitty.

I also think choking is pretty shitty too, but I'm willing to give this a go.

And then the clock strikes midnight.

Instead of everywhere else in the world, where people pop champagne and kiss each other while playing "Auld Lang Syne," we're all staring intensely at a bag of grapes.

Then they start playing the chimes for the seconds.

And we're off.

I'm cramming down a grape just as another *dong* of the chime sounds.

Shit!

I'm trying to pick the next grape up, my fingers tangling with Alejo's in the bag as he's simultaneously stuffing his face. It's not fair, he's a man, he's got a bigger head and a bigger mouth!

I finally cram the third grape in, half-chewing, half-swallowing, but I'm seconds behind already. So I just grab as many as I can and pop them all in my mouth at once, my maw so full I can't close it.

Alejo is doing the same. We both look at each other and start laughing hysterically, the grapes threatening to fall out of our mouths.

Chew, chew, swallow!

The final chime goes and I'm practically gagging on them, managing to swallow the last mashed grape down. Of course,

Alejo is done, and still laughing, I guess more at me rather than with me.

“Hey,” I tell him once I’m sure I’m not going to die, gasping for breath. “I did my best.”

“You did it!” he cries out, picking me up and twirling me around, my legs knocking into another couple.

“¡Lo siento!” I yell at them, giggling as Alejo leans in for a happy kiss.

“Happy New Year, Thalia,” he says.

“Happy New Year, Alejo.”

“You’re still wearing that red underwear for good luck, right?” he asks.

“How long do I have to keep it on for?”

“I think I’m free to take it off you at any time now,” he says and kisses me again, deeper this time.

He lowers me to the ground and he cracks open the next bottle of Cava he had stored in his backpack. He had the genius idea to line the bottom of it with plastic and fill it up with ice.

He pours us two plastic glasses (they both say “Cheer Up Fucker” in gold lettering—I saw them online and had to have them) and we clink ours together. “Here’s to a new year with you,” he says.

“Here’s to you wearing more sexy masks and eyeliner. I like it. *Me gusta mucho.*”

He gives me a self-assured grin. “We’ll see,” he says, sticking the cork back in the bottle and packing it up in his backpack. With glasses of sparkling in one hand, our other

hands intertwined, we make our way through the square and to the side streets where the crowds are spilling, going every which way.

This feels right.

This *is* right.

These last few days with Alejo have been some of the happiest I'd ever had. Being in Tenerife with his family (even his mother, who became less standoffish by the time we left), put our relationship into the stratosphere, a level where we can just *be* with each other. All the fear I carried with me, about how I felt about him, how he felt about me, what our future was, just...dissolved under that winter sun.

That's not to say there's a future that makes sense for us, but I'm choosing to ignore that pesky detail and do what I can to just enjoy every moment I'm with him and stop worrying so much. Our future together would never be guaranteed anyway, no matter our age or our jobs, and the same goes for everyone, so you might as well make every second count.

At least those seconds where you're not swallowing grapes.

"Where shall we go?" Alejo asks me.

We've made it a few blocks and I don't even know where we are at this point. Everything is a blurry, sparkling, drunken haze, with partiers constantly walking past us, hollering and blowing horns.

"I don't know but my drink is done, so keep pouring," I tell him, handing out my glass.

He takes it from me and starts fishing the bottle out of his backpack when my cell phone rings.

I glance at it.

It's Helen.

The name makes my stomach queasy, probably because I hadn't talked to her in weeks, not since I checked in to see if she arrived home okay after she visited me. I know it's a busy time of year and all, but even so, I didn't feel like calling her and I'm sure she didn't feel like calling me.

But something tells me I have to take this.

I have to see what's left of our friendship, even if I already know the answer.

"Hello," I say.

"Happy New Year!" she cries over the phone. She's at a party, I can hear many drunk voices in the background.

"Happy New Year," I tell her. "Where are you?"

"At a party," she says vaguely, which gives me an idea of *whose* party she's at. "Sorry I haven't stayed in touch lately, you know how the holidays are. Busy, busy, busy."

"Yeah, I hear you," I say, watching Alejo pour me more sparkling wine. He's frowning, trying to figure out who I'm talking to.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"I just celebrated the countdown by eating a lot of grapes," I tell her.

"You mean drinking wine?"

I don't have the energy to explain. "Yeah, sure. Wine."

"Where are you?"

"Just wandering around town."

“Madrid?”

“*Claro*. Of course.”

“By yourself?”

Here’s the loaded question.

I clear my throat. “No, I’m not alone. I’m with Alejo.”

Alejo’s eyes widen beneath the mask. He points at the phone and mouths “*Helen?*”

I nod, wincing.

There’s silence on her end though a familiar laugh rings in the background, her husband Frank and some other people.

“Are you serious, Thalia?” she eventually says. She coughs. “The *kid?*”

“He’s not a kid. He’s twenty-four. You know by the time my brother Steve was twenty-four, he was already married with a baby.”

“He’s a fucking kid,” she whispers harshly into the phone. “Hold on, I don’t want other people to hear this.”

At least she has the notion to keep things private.

I hear a muffled sound and silence and only then do I realize how loud my heart is drumming in my chest. But with each beat, I seem to get braver.

I hear the sound of a door closing, and then her exhaling. “Okay, how drunk are you?” she asks me.

“Pretty drunk,” I say, taking the glass from Alejo who is watching this phone call on edge. “Think I’m about to get drunker.”

“Okay, well we all do stupid things when we’re drunk.”

I laugh bitterly. “Alejo isn’t a stupid thing and that’s not why I’m with him. I love him, Helen. I’m in love with him.” The more I say it, the crazier, the sillier, the happier, the better it sounds. “I fucking love him!” I yell into the night, and some random reveler in the distance yells back, “Fuck yeah! ¡*Te quiero!*”

Alejo now is just shaking his head, bewildered, a small smile on his lips.

“Thalia!” She practically hisses. “You have lost your bloody mind.”

“I haven’t. I really haven’t. I think I found my fucking mind, that’s what. I feel like a new woman, like my old self. Or maybe those are the same things now.”

More silence on her end. “Why are you so mad?” I ask, goading her now. “Why does it bother you?”

“Because it’s disgusting!” she says and I have to admit, it stings to hear that, a little barb in my chest. “It’s gross. You’re not acting sane, you’re acting like some lunatic. You think you’re in love with some boy? Of course you do, if he’s shagging you properly. But this is all going to fall flat, you know this. You’re just...I don’t know, you need to find your self-esteem somewhere else.”

“Am I embarrassing you?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Yes! You are. This is not the Thalia that I know.”

“Okay,” I say, feeling a tear come to my eye, the kind of tear that usually shows up when I’m drunk and emotional. I take in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Well, then if I’m a new Thalia, I don’t think this version of myself wants to be friends with you anymore.”



“What?” Helen screeches. “You can’t do that! What are you, ten years old?”

“No, I’m forty. And old enough to know when a friendship does me more harm than it does me good. Goodbye Helen. Say hi to Stewart from me.”

And then I hang up.

I actually hang up.

I stare at the phone for a moment, all this adrenaline and alcohol rolling through me, my emotions being pulled in a million different directions.

I look up at Alejo and smile. “I guess I did it.”

I feel proud of myself that I finally told her off and ended it but...

And my smile falters.

It still kind of sucks.

I feel myself crumbling and then Alejo’s arms are around me, holding me tight against his coat. “Hey, it’s okay,” he says to me. “You did the right thing but you’re allowed to be upset. It’s never easy when you say goodbye to a friendship.”

I just nod, wiping away a lone tear. I don’t want to end our evening on a bad note, even if that phone call put my heart in a bit of a vice.

Thankfully, just being with Alejo is making me feel better.

“What do you want to do now?” Alejo asks. “Since you’re on a roll of being a badass.”

I laugh. “I don’t know about that.”

“Want to go eat the kind of food Mateo would disown me for? Want to go eat McDonalds?”

He sounds so excited, like he's seriously contemplating something naughty, that I have to say yes.

"Sure, let's do it. Start the New Year off on the right foot."

"Everyone knows January 1<sup>st</sup> doesn't count," he says, pulling away and taking hold of my hand. "Come on, let's go get a Big Mac and see where the night takes us."

I know he's trying to distract me but I couldn't be more grateful for it.

We walk off into the night.



I HAVEN'T FELT THIS HUNGOVER IN A *LONG* TIME.

And even though I just woke up, I have a feeling Alejo feels the same way.

Carefully, very carefully, I roll over in bed and see his feet aimed right at me. It takes me a moment for the scene to make sense, and I take another moment to actually appreciate his feet. I'm not a foot person, but considering Alejo kicks balls for a living, his feet look smooth and pampered.

Hmmm. I'll have to ask him about that later.

My gaze travels down from his feet to the blanket where he briefly disappears and then, finally, I see his dark hair at the end, half off the bed.

I have no idea what caused us to fall asleep like this but something tells me it had to do with a lot of Cava and a lot of grapes.

Ugh. Even the thought of grapes makes me want to vomit.

I slowly get out of bed, careful not to disturb either Alejo, who is snoring lightly, or my head, which is pounding heavily.

I do my business in the washroom, drink two cups of water at the sink, and splash copious amounts of cold water on my face.

I look like shit. My body is getting too old for this kind of stuff. I'm probably going to have a hangover for a few days, too, as extra punishment. Oh well, it was fun. At least all I have to do today is do absolutely nothing and...

Oh *shit*. I forgot that I'm supposed to meet Vera for New Year's Day brunch together. When I told her I wasn't going to their place for Christmas, she was adamant we see each other soon. At the time, I naively assumed I wasn't going to be hungover and so brunch sounded fine. Now that Alejo is here, and I feel like ass, I'm not sure this is the best idea.

*You're going. You need friends.*

Last night's memories of my phone call with Helen come flooding back and my heart sinks. I know that it's normal for friendships to end, for people to go their separate ways and outgrow each other. Even when someone is being a total dick, it still hurts to say goodbye to the friendship. There's still some rejection and disappointment. There's the loss of all the fun and memories you had together. It's still a big change and it's going to be a sore spot for some time.

Which is all the more reason I need to see Vera.

Besides, after everything that happened over Christmas with me and Alejo, I really need someone to talk to. Someone who might understand. Someone who might be happy for me.

I just hope I can trust her with this.

I look at my phone and send her a text.

**Are we still on?**

Since it's nine a.m. and my body likes to punish me even further by waking up early after I've been drinking, I don't expect a quick response but Vera responds fast.

**With bells on. Wanna meet at The Toast Café in an hour?**

I tell her yes and then I go back into bed, sliding in beside Alejo.

I decide to wake him up.

I start by tickling his feet.

Mumbled Spanish comes from beneath the covers.

Finally, he reaches back blindly to stop me, grabbing the side of my stomach and squeezing.

“Stop!” I cry out, erupting into giggles, trying to get away from his tickle fingers. “Stop or I'll vomit on you.”

He straightens up and twists around on the bed to face me. “I'm into a lot of things, but I don't think I'm into that.” Then he winces and presses his hand to his head. “Fuck.”

“I know,” I say. “Believe me, I would love nothing more than to just have a pajama day with you and—”

“What's a pajama day?” he interrupts.

“I don't know, a day in which we do nothing at all and stay in our pajamas.”

“You mean, naked.”

“Yeah, pajama day, naked day, whatever.”

He flops on his stomach beside me. “That sounds like the perfect day.”

“I know. But I have to run off.”

“Where?”

“I’m meeting Vera for brunch. But I won’t be long.”

“You’re ditching me for my coach’s wife?” he asks but he doesn’t seem too upset about it.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, putting my hand in his hair and playing with his soft strands.

“I’m just having fun.” He gives me a kind smile. “Seriously, you need friends too. Especially after last night.”

“Thank you for understanding.” I lean over and give him a kiss on his forehead.

He reaches out and tries to grab my legs but I get up, too quick for him.

“Are you going to stay here or go home?” I ask him as I start rifling in my closet for something clean to wear. Laundry took the backseat over the holidays.

“I’ll go home,” he says. “I need to do some training in my yard.”

I get dressed into a sweater and leggings, slip on some short boots and pull my hair back in a bun. No point even attempting makeup when my hands are a bit shaky.

“Okay, well, text me later,” I tell him, walking out of the bedroom and to the front door.

“Thalia, wait,” Alejo says.

I pause and turn to see him striding toward me, completely naked, his cock half-hard.

I blink up from the sight of it to his eyes as he cups my face in his hands and pulls me into a long, sweet kiss. “I love you,” he murmurs against my lips.

A wave of happiness crashes over me, swirling at my feet.

“I love you too,” I tell him, unable to stop from grinning.

I grab my purse and I’m out the door, feeling like I’m walking on a cloud.

It takes forever to grab an Uber, I guess because everyone feels like death today, but soon I’m being dropped off at the Toast Café. I already spot Vera by the entrance, sipping a giant mug of something.

“Hey,” I say to her, the restaurant busy and warm against the chill outside.

“Hey,” she says and I lean down to give her a quick hug before taking the chair across from her. “This is a good spot.” We’re right by the window so we have a view of the street, which is mainly people picking up garbage left from last night’s celebrations.

“So, how was your night?” I ask her because I know she’d ask me first otherwise. “Are you hungover?”

“Ugh,” she says, shaking her head and looking over the menu. “Bad enough that I’m not sure if I want their bottomless mimosas today or not.”

I laugh. “Oh, that bad?”

She grins at me. “We didn’t even go out. Mateo and I just got drunk by ourselves. Isabella, his ex, had Chloe Ann for the night, so we just drank a shit load of wine and Cava and tried to eat the grapes at midnight. Do you know about that tradition?”

I nod. “Yup.”

The waiter comes by and I order an eggs benedict with Iberian ham, plus a large black iced coffee. Vera switches her

coffee up for mimosas.

“Feel free to drink some of mine,” she says, fixing her large eyes on me. “What did you get up to last night? I hope you weren’t at home alone, that would make me sad.”

“You know what’s funny is that I’ve spent a few New Years alone and they’re actually the best nights to stay in. There’s no pressure to go anywhere and you wake up hangover free.”

“So did you spend it alone?”

“No.” I pause. Here I go. “I was with someone.”

“Who? Oh, was it that Fabio guy?”

“Fabio?” My face scrunches up. “Oh, you mean Sergio. And no. I’m...I’m spoken for.”

That gives Vera a pause. “Spoken for? Well, I do declare,” she says in her best Scarlet O’Hara impression. “So who is the new gentleman who has spoken for you? Or gentlewoman. I don’t discriminate.”

“Well, the thing is...he’s not really new. I’m in love with him.”

“You’re in love with him?” Her eyes go even wider. “Well, fuck, now I’m intrigued AF. Who is he? When did you meet him? I mean, last I saw you was at the gala and I don’t think you mentioned anyone.”

“I don’t really want to say...”

She blinks at me in surprise. “Oh. Okay. Like a secret thing? Are you ashamed of him? Does he have a leg for an arm and an arm for a leg?”

I laugh, picturing that in my head. “No. No. It’s uh...yeah, it’s a secret. He’s...off-limits.”

She sits up straighter. “I know all about that and I want to hear more.”

“I know you do. That’s why I wanted to talk to you about it. Can you keep a secret?”

“Yes.”

“Really?” I look her dead in the eyes.

“Yes,” she says.

“As in, you can’t tell my boss. Your husband. Mateo Casalles.”

“I swear to god. He doesn’t know everything. You’re allowed to have some secrets in life, you know.”

I study her face. She seems to be pretty honest.

I lean in closer. “If you tell, I’ll kill you. I know all the deadly pressure points on the human body.”

Vera stares right back. “I won’t tell.”

I lean back, satisfied. “Okay. Well, I’m in love with Alejo.”

She frowns. It takes her a minute before she exclaims, “Oh my god, Alejo Albarado!?”

“Shhh,” I hush her, looking around. The volume in here is loud and no one is paying us attention, but still.

“You’re in love with him?” she says, lowering her voice only marginally. “Does he know?”

“Yes, he knows,” I say, laughing. “Dare I say we’re in love with each other.”



“Are you sleeping together?”

“That part came first.”

“Holy shit. Since when?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. September?”

“What the fuck?” she says dramatically, then she bangs her fist against the table. “Damn it, I wish I could tell Mateo!”

“You can’t,” I remind her sharply. “You really can’t.”

“I know, I know. I just *wish* I could. And like, I mean in general, not just this. I wish he could just turn off his coach brain for one minute sometimes, you know? That job, it consumes him.”

“I’ll say the same for Alejo. They take their job to heart and it’s a lot of pressure.”

“So much pressure,” she says adamantly.

She pauses as the waiter drops off my coffee and her mimosa.

She has a sip, smiles at the drink like it’s her long-lost friend, and then continues. “When they were having their losing streak, oh my god. You did not want to be in our house. He was a miserable beast to be around. He was so low, so down, blaming himself. He really thought Jose was going to fire him.” She pauses. “And then they started winning again and he says it was because you fixed Alejo. He says he owes you.”

I shrug, swirling my straw around in the coffee, making the ice cubes rattle. “He doesn’t owe me. He’s the one that hired me to do that. I just did my job. And Alejo is integral to the team but he’s not the whole team.”

“I know, I’m just saying...maybe Mateo would understand about you two. I mean, what are you going to do? Are you going to stay a secret forever?”

I press my lips together before admitting, “I don’t know. I guess?”

“You know you can’t do that. It’s hard. Believe me, I’ve been there. It’s no fun.”

“It’s against the rules for us to be together. Mateo can fire me and he has legal ground.”

“He wouldn’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Listen honey, I *do* know that. I’m married to him. I know him. He wouldn’t do that. Not unless someone makes him.”

“Like Jose.”

“Yeah.” She looks crestfallen. “I suppose the only way you can really be together is for one of you to sacrifice something.”

I get a chilled feeling in my chest, like it’s made of frosted glass. “And the question is, who does the sacrificing?” Then I quickly wave it away. “But that’s not here nor there.”

“But one day, it will be,” she says softly, looking at me with sad eyes. “Isn’t it best to think of it now?”

Boy. I didn’t think she was such a realist.

I sigh and shove a strand of hair behind my ear. “Yeah. But, I could never ask Alejo to give up his career. He loves the game, it’s his whole life and is special to him for so many reasons, never mind the fact that it would be so wrong to everyone else who relies on him. It would be an affront to the

whole football world. He couldn't switch clubs anyway, he's under contract to Real Madrid for two more years. So, then there's me."

I stab my straw at an ice cube over and over. "But if I give up my career for him...where does that leave me? What does that say about how hard I've worked and the shit I've had to do to get to this position? You know, it's like when a man gives up his career for a woman, it's called romantic. But if a woman gives up her career for a man, she's called pathetic."

"Or, it could be expected of you," Vera points out, sucking on the orange slice from her drink. "But don't get me started on that. We're women. We're born with strikes against us. We upset people with any and all of the choices we make. So we might as well not give any fucks."

"Well, obviously I've already made some decisions just by choosing to be with Alejo, I guess we'll have to wait long enough to find out if it was the right one."

"Look, Thalia," Vera says, tapping her red nails along the table. "There are people who will understand and people who won't. I hate to sound cliché, but you really have to look inside and find out what matters to you the most and fuck what everyone thinks. If either choice is going to suck, ask yourself which one sucks less. And make sure Alejo is a part of this process. Don't leave him out. Communicate. Find a way *together*."

"I just want to keep being happy," I admit. "For once I'm happy, I'm really happy. I've never known that this life, this love, that it could be this way. This good. I don't want that to change, Vera. I don't want to lose him or the person I've become."

“I know,” she says after a beat, her eyes starting to water. “Some people will tell you that love isn’t worth risking your career for. Some will tell you that love is worth risking everything for.”

“And you? What would you tell me?”

She gives me a half-smile. “You know what I think. The bigger the love, the greater the risk. But love, real, true, can’t-live-without-you *love*? That’s worth everything in the universe.”

Shortly after that, we’re served with our brunch, and yet I can’t get her words out of my head.

The bigger the love, the greater the risk.

Our love is shaping up to be the biggest risk of all.



“Can I ask you something?”

I glance up from the book I’m reading and take off my glasses to look at Thalia, who is staring at me quizzically.

We’re at her apartment, sprawled on her couch, having “pajama day.” The term is in quotes because for most of the morning we’ve been in bed, naked, and not doing much else than making each other moan.

But we’ve now managed to slip on pajamas and are in the middle of the lounging part, which comprises of me sitting on the end of the couch with her lying across it, her feet in my lap, both of us drinking coffee and reading.

I have to say, pajama day has to be one of my favorite days. And it’s sorely needed too, considering we’ve been back to work for the last week and this is the first day off. We had a game last night against Valencia, which we barely won, and my body is exhausted and still trying to play catch-up after all the food and fun over the holidays.

“What is it?” I ask. From the serious expression on her face, I know it’s something important to her.

“Where do you see us in a year from now?” she asks. Her voice is so small, her posture so timid, I find it adorable. As if she thinks that question would scare me off.

“Hopefully right here, having a pajama day,” I tell her honestly.

“And in five years?”

Oh, she’s really going for it. I tilt my head, studying her. This isn’t like her at all. Usually she shies away from any talk of the future. I’m always the one trying to dream on and make plans.

“I don’t know. I just know I’ll be with you.”

“What about in twenty years?”

I laugh. “My answer hasn’t changed, Thalia.”

“But,” she begins, rubbing her lips together, something she does when she searches for the right words, “in twenty years from now, you’re going to be forty-four years old. You’ll still be in the prime of your life. And me? I’ll be sixty.”

“So?”

“So? Sixty!”

“*Sí*. And I’ll be forty-four. I don’t understand.”

She sighs noisily. “I’m not going to look like this,” she says gesturing to herself. “Okay? I’m going to look old. I’m going to look sixty. I won’t be able to delay aging, it’s going to happen to me and you’re going to be looking fit and as handsome as fuck. Maybe even more handsome than you are now.”

“That is impossible,” I tell her dramatically.

“You get my point now. You’re not going to want to be with me anymore.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. She’s sensitive about this and very serious and I don’t want her to think her feelings aren’t valid.

I get up from my end of the couch and sit right next to her, running my thumb under her lip. “Listen to me, *amor mío*. I love you. I love you for the person you are now and the person you will be. I’m very aware that you’ll change and so will I. But what I feel for you won’t. Don’t you see what we have? This,” I press my lips to hers before pulling back and searching her eyes, “this goes beyond looks. This is about a connection of the souls. It’s how we knew we were meant for each other the moment we laid eyes on each other. And that connection, that’s not going to go away with age, it’s only going to strengthen.”

She stares at me, seemingly in awe. “Where did you come from Alejo Albarado?”

“*España*,” I tell her. I peer over at her coffee on the table and see that it’s empty. “And you need a refill.”

I pick up her cup and bring it over to the coffee machine when there’s a knock at the door.

I freeze, looking at Thalia who springs to her feet.

She rushes over to the door and I know she’s lambasting it for not having a peephole. “Who is it?” she asks, her voice a little high.

“Is Alejo with you?” comes the voice on the other side.

Mateo’s voice.

Shit!

“Uh,” Thalia says but I can’t have her lie. She’s not good at lying and I don’t want to lie to Mateo right now. Don’t ask don’t tell is one thing but if he’s asking...

I give her the motion that I’m going to handle it and I open the door.

Mateo is standing there in a long black coat and he looks *pissed*.

His eyes dart from me in my t-shirt and plaid pants to Thalia in her matching pink pajama set, and it’s quite obvious we can’t pretend I’m here so she can check up on my knee.

He strides purposefully through the door to the middle of the apartment and looks around. It’s probably the first time he’s been in here but he doesn’t let it distract him for long.

“I need to have a word with the two of you,” he says, looking grim as he eyes us. “I think you better sit down.”

I exchange a worried glance with Thalia and the two of us sit down on the couch while Mateo stands. I’m prepared for there to be a lot of pacing.

“I know about the two of you,” Mateo says, the pacing beginning.

“*Vera*,” Thalia mutters angrily under her breath.

“No, it wasn’t Vera,” Mateo says, then shakes his head, looking aghast. “Wait, did you tell Vera? Does she know?”

Thalia’s lips go together in a firm line and she doesn’t say anything.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Alejo told me as much.”

“What?” Thalia exclaims, looking to me in shock.

“This was a long time ago,” he adds.



“But wait, you mean he knew and you didn’t tell me?” she asks me.

I guess I did kind of sweep that one under the rug. “Please,” I say to her. “I didn’t want to trouble you with it. It was after Manchester and he said he figured it out between us. At the time we were on a break—”

“Which clearly didn’t last,” Mateo says gruffly, “even though you promised me it would.”

“I don’t recall promising you anything,” I tell him, narrowing my eyes. I would never promise something like that.

“So then you *should have* promised me,” Mateo says. “Look, you guys. You both know that this is against the rules. No member of the staff, whether that includes the trainers, the doctors, the coaches, or the therapists, can have any relationship or sexual contact with the players. This will get you fired, Thalia.”

“So, you’re firing me,” she says softly.

“No,” he says, running his hand down his face. “Look, I’m not. I’m not...that’s not going to be up to me, do you understand?”

I shake my head. “I don’t. Explain.”

Grumbling, Mateo pulls out his phone, swipes through a few pictures and then comes to one on someone’s Instagram post.

It’s a picture of me and Thalia at the airport, I think before we flew to Tenerife.

“Who took that?” Thalia asks. “I never saw that pic.”

“I don’t know, some *Madridista* super fan,” Mateo says. “It was posted on his Instagram yesterday. He was excited he saw you at the airport Alejo and wasn’t able to post until now. And so first of all, I need you to explain this picture to me. What’s happening? You both are together, you have tickets in hand, where are you going?”

“I took her to Tenerife to spend Christmas with me and my family.”

Mateo nods. “Okay.”

“So?”

“So, Dr. Costa is the one who found this photo. I don’t know how, maybe he knows hashtags, but regardless he found it and sent it to me this morning.”

“Oh fuck,” Thalia whimpers, covering her face with her hands.

“He’s going to bring it up with Jose tomorrow. I had to come over here and get a backstory for this.”

“Well that’s the backstory,” I tell him, even though panic is starting to claw through my chest. “The truth.”

“But I can’t tell him the whole truth,” Mateo says. “Just that you became friends because of your knee and you knew she was spending Christmas alone so you invited her. Thankfully you both had the sense to at least behave respectably in public.” He pauses and gives me a sympathetic look. “But here is where the problem starts. I’m going to tell Dr. Costa and Jose this and they’re going to believe it. They’ll believe it because they believe me and they trust me. But they’re going to be suspicious of you both and they are going to watch you like a hawk. Believe me when I say Dr. Costa

would rather you be gone, Thalia, don't think he won't look for the first opportunity."

"Okay, we'll just...be even more discreet," I say. "We can handle that."

"I don't think you understand, Alejo," Mateo says, wincing at his own words. "I can't keep covering for you. I'll do it this time so that Thalia can save her job but that's it. I've got my own problems and my own matters to take care of. I have a whole team. We need to focus on that, I need to focus on that. This...it's a distraction from the big picture and I wish there was another way but, honestly, I don't think there is."

"So you're breaking us apart," I tell him bitterly, starting to feel anger swell through me. "Because it's too distracting to you."

"No, Alejo," Thalia speaks up, her voice emotionless. She stares at the floor. "He's leaving it in our hands. For us to make our own decisions."

"I'm sorry," Mateo says, walking toward the door. "But this is the way it's got to be."

I get up and walk toward him. "You of all people are supposed to understand!" I yell at him, the words coming out vicious, surprising me.

Mateo flinches like I've hit him. "I *do* understand. This isn't easy for me either, Alejo. I understand, but I also know that when it comes to love, life does what it can to fuck things up. You're both smart, consenting adults here. You both knew what the risk was by being together and you took that risk. And now...now you are left with choices. I can't tell you what the right choice is, either. You have to figure that out for yourself. Selfishly, I hope you both make the right one for the

sport, for the team, because I can't imagine this game without either of you in it."

He gives us one last look and a stiff smile and goes for the door. "I'll see you both tomorrow."

The door closes.

I'm left standing there, my heart hammering against my ribs so hard they might break. I have the most awful feeling in my stomach, like I've swallowed a ball of acid that's slowly disintegrating, spreading its caustic liquid throughout my body and eroding me from the inside out.

Slowly, I turn to look at Thalia.

She's sitting on the couch, hands wringing together, her face pale. Her eyes look almost dead, they're staring into space, frozen in some kind of fear.

"Thalia," I say gently. "We can fix this. We can work through this."

She doesn't say anything but I notice how hard she's breathing. Her chest is rising and she's trying to breathe deep through her nose. Maybe avoiding a panic attack, but fuck if I'm not about to panic for the both of us.

"Thalia, please say something."

She rubs her lips together, eyes still frozen.

Her mouth opens and the words are slow to come out.

"I...knew this was going to happen," she says, almost as if in a dream. "I knew this was going to happen. From the start, I knew that it couldn't go on forever. That at some point I would have to choose. That's why I resisted you for so long, for as long as I could. My heart...I couldn't bear it breaking again." A lone tear trails down her cheek. "And yet, here we are. My

heart is breaking and I'm not sure how I'm ever going to get through it."

What is she saying?

I slowly walk over to her, sit down beside her on the couch, leaning in to try and capture her attention, my hand over her hands. She feels cold.

"Thalia, I'm not breaking your heart. We're going to be together. I promise you."

Finally, she turns to look at me, eyes welling with tears, terror etched on her brow. "How? How can we be together now?"

"We keep sneaking around. We find a way. I love you. I love you so much that...it's impossible to keep us apart. I'll love you until I'm dead, and I'm not dying anytime soon." I grip her hands tight but she doesn't grip them back.

I need her to grip them back.

I need her to hold onto me and not let go.

"Thalia, please," I beg. "We can make it work."

"We can't," she says softly, staring into space again. "It's impossible."

"We're the impossible. We're the inevitable."

"Alejo," she says, her voice cracking. "We can't sneak around. We will get caught and I will be fired. Mateo may be a friend to you, even a father figure, but he's still your coach, and he's my boss. He will do what he can for you but...not at the expense of his career. Or yours. I..." She looks at me, the tears spilling now as she shakes her head. "I'm so sorry."

“No,” I tell her, grabbing her face, kissing away her tears, the salt hitting my tongue and making my heart splinter. “No, no, there is nothing to be sorry for. This isn’t the end. We’re not...we’ll find a way.”

“There is no way, don’t you see?” she pleads. “Unless I quit.”

“You are not quitting! I’m quitting.”

“You can’t. I would never let you do that and you can’t anyway.”

“Then I’ll buy out my contract.”

“It’s not worth it!”

“You’re worth it!” I yell. “You’re worth everything to me, more than the game, more than anything else I hold dear in the world. Fuck, Thalia, you are my world and everything in it. You are my sun, my heart. You’re...*not* doing this.”

“Then you know what we have to do,” she says. “We have to end this.”

I shake my head violently, still holding onto her face, the panic and the horror a fist in my chest, squeezing the air and the life out of me. “There is no end. There is no end. And you’re not quitting. We can make it work.”

But the more I keep saying that, the more pushback I get from her, and the more hopeless I feel.

It’s almost as if she wants to give up on us.

Like she wants this to end.

How can that be? Doesn’t she feel what I feel for her?

“Do you love me?” I ask her, so much hope and anguish in my words, so afraid of the answer.

“Of course I love you,” she says.

“No,” I tell her, trying to swallow. “No, there is no *of course* when it comes to love. It is not guaranteed. It’s not to be taken for granted. Do you love me? Do you really love me?”

“Yes!” she cries out. “I love you Alejo.”

“Then don’t leave me,” I plead, my hands wrapping around hers, holding on tight as I bring them to my lips. “Please don’t leave me. Don’t leave me. Don’t do this.”

“I have to,” she says, her voice choked.

I can’t hold back the pain any longer.

My tears spill onto our hands as I kiss them, holding on, holding on.

*Please don’t let me go.*

But she’s letting me go.

“This can’t be it,” I whisper against her knuckles, tasting her, feeling her, knowing I’ll never get to do this again.

I can’t imagine life without her.

I can’t...

I close my eyes and bring her into me, wrapping my arms around her as she cries into my chest and my tears fall onto her shoulder.

“Don’t leave me,” I say hoarsely, my words choked. “Please. I beg you to stay.”

“There is no other way,” she sobs against me. “We knew this was coming. We knew it from the start, the risks, and we took the risks and we fell for each other and we loved each

other and now...now comes that day we knew was coming.  
The day...the day it ends for us.”

I pinch my eyes shut, the pain swallowing me whole,  
making me feel like my soul has been ripped right out of me,  
leaving a gaping hole in its place.

I don't think I've loved anything in my life the way that I  
love her.

Her smile first thing in the morning.

The way her eyes crinkle at the corners when she laughs, it  
leaves me weak at the knees.

The way she stares at me when she thinks I'm not looking,  
the look of someone in awe of me, a look that tells me how  
much she adores me.

The way I've erased her sadness, how I've made her laugh.

The way she throws herself into her job with so much love  
and self-assurance, never asking for admiration or  
encouragement or praise, just doing something she feels she's  
meant to do.

And that's why I can't ask her to leave her job.

And she's right that I can't leave mine.

But I would. If I could. If I wasn't under contract, I would  
leave Real Madrid. Perhaps go to Atlético. Maybe even  
Barcelona. It doesn't matter, I would leave it for her.

But I can't.

And I can't let her quit.

And I don't want her to get fired. How humiliating it  
would be. I would never do that to her.



Yet, she's giving up so easily. How can she give up so easily on us?

How can she feel what I feel and not try to find some other solution?

There has to be one, there has to be another way.

"Thalia," I say softly, pulling back to stare at her beautiful face. "I know you're scared. I'm terrified. But I can't let you go. I can't let this be the end of us. I can't...you've taught me so much, to love so fully, so completely, that if you let this end here, right now...I don't know where that love is supposed to go. Am I supposed to love you from afar? Am I supposed to go into work each day and see you and know that the love we had is dying somewhere because we didn't give it a shot?"

"We gave it a shot, Alejo," she sniffs. "We gave it all we had."

"No, we didn't," I tell her. "Because you're giving up now. So easily."

She blinks at me, her face crumbling. "So easily?" she repeats. "Why do you think this is easy for me? I'm breaking here, Alejo! I am disassembling into many parts that I don't even recognize. I lost my heart to you, how on earth do you think this easy? I lost my heart to you and I don't even want it back, I just...please, don't make me out to be the bad guy here. I'm *not*."

"You're not fighting for us," I tell her. "Where is the fight?"

"The fight!" she cries out. "I've been fighting for us but there is a time when your hands are tied and you can't fight anymore. There's nowhere for this, for us, to go. It has to end."

Doesn't mean I want it to end, doesn't mean it's not destroying me from the inside out. I love you, Alejo."

"Then don't do this."

"I have to. One of us has to."

"Then this is a choice you're making. Not me."

"Fine," she says, getting up and walking to the middle of the room, her hands in her hair, shaking her head. "Fine. Fine, make me the bad guy. Make me the villain in this if you need to. I don't care. I'll take on that role."

I spring to my feet. "You're breaking up with me!" I cry, voice shattering along with my heart. "You're ending this. Not me. Just so we're clear on where we stand!"

She stares at me, her lower lip trembling and I want to rush over to her and hold her and tell her I'm sorry. But I'm also so fucking hurt, so devastated, like she's taken a rusty spoon and gutted me, until everything inside me that lives for her is exposed and laid bare.

"I think it would be best if you left," she says quietly, looking at the floor.

Stunned. I am stunned. I stare at her, mouth agape, trying to understand.

"So it's over, just like this?" I manage to say.

She closes her eyes and nods. "Yes," she whispers. "Just like this."

She's actually telling me to leave? Not just that she's breaking up with me, but that she wants me to leave.

"Please," she adds. "Go."

I don't even say anything. I'm too angry and whatever I say will be hurtful beyond words. So I keep my mouth shut, go into her bedroom to grab my stuff and then I'm out of there, slamming the door behind me.

Halfway down the dark staircase to the front door, I pause, nearly falling to my knees.

The reality of what just happened hits me like a wrecking ball, plastering me against the wall, breaking me apart.

It takes everything I have left in me, my heart that still beats for her, to pull myself together and make it outside to my car.

I'll fall apart later.

But there will be no one there to help me pick up the pieces.



**H**ave you ever felt a loss so powerful, so overwhelming, that it literally brings you to your knees? A loss that filets you, hollows you out until there's nothing but a gaping, black void inside, the kind of emptiness that has your hands pressed to your stomach, to your chest, trying to stop the hole from spreading?

But it doesn't stop.

There's nothing you can do to make it stop.

I've felt that loss twice before.

When I lost Grace.

When I realized my marriage to Stewart was over.

And now there's a third time.

The third time might be the worst.

I've lost Alejo and the pain is so deep, so raw, so cold, I would give anything to stop feeling it.

But telling your heart not to feel is like spitting into the wind. It just comes back at you, tenfold.

I hadn't realized, until now, just how hard I had fallen for Alejo, how much of my soul I handed over to him, hoping he would keep it safe. And the irony is, he did keep it safe. He

loved me and protected my love for him. His devotion to me is pure and honest and raw. I know he would have given up his beloved team for me.

He would have given up everything.

I couldn't let him do that.

What makes this pain that much worse is that I didn't stop loving him and he didn't stop loving me. I just had to make a choice because if it were up to him, the wrong choice would have been made. For better or for worse, I had to think about both of our careers.

Though now, now after I've been at work for a week, I realize that maybe I made the wrong choice.

Losing my job would have been devastating. Being fired would have been humiliating. Had word gotten out about us, the media would have hounded me like they did over Stewart, but a million times worse. A woman my age with a man like him? That's one thing. But the fact that this will have been the second time I've let personal relationships with a co-worker screw me out of a job, is something else. I know how it would look to everyone.

And I know how it looks to myself.

Vera had said not to care about what people say, to give no fucks, but when you've been dragged through the mud before, you'll do anything to prevent that from happening again.

But even though that's something that would have happened if we had been found out, if Dr. Costa discovered us in a more compromising way and turned it into something more, something Mateo couldn't cover up, I don't think it would hurt me as much as *this* hurts me right now.

Alejo hates me.

He loves me and yet he hates me.

I know he's beyond hurt that I had to be the bearer of bad news and break us apart, I know it makes me the bad person, the villain in the story. I know he doesn't really understand how big of a sacrifice this is for me and that I lose either way.

I just didn't realize how much my choice would ruin everything, not just my heart, but *everything* else I held dear in my life.

I...I just can't work here anymore.

I'm going through the motions, concentrating on the players as much as I can, trying to pretend Alejo isn't there, while also soaking him in at every opportunity. It's like my soul is being split in two.

But he's given me the deep freeze, and the few times our eyes have met each other, his gaze is empty. It holds nothing for me.

I've never seen him like that before. It's like all the joy and the life has been sucked right out of him, and I'm the only one to blame. It's only on the pitch that he comes alive again, going after the ball like a madman, channeling everything into the game.

At least, there's that. I don't think I could forgive myself if I fucked up his game as well as his heart.

Not sure when I'll forgive myself for fucking up my own.

*Cut yourself a slab*, I tell myself, but I can't even smile.  
*You had no choice.*

But I did have a choice.

"Thalia," Luciano calls from the physio bed after everyone goes up for lunch, lunch that I'm once again eating in my

office, like a motherfucking squirrel. “Can you do the needling on my shoulder?”

I blink at him in surprise. He hadn’t seemed in any pain lately and David was just working on his upper thighs.

“Sure,” I say, coming over to the wall and pulling down my kit. I go beside him and give him a small smile. “Take off your shirt.”

“It’s been a while since a woman has told me that,” he says with a grin before pulling it over his head. He lies down on his stomach while I start feeling around on the same area as last time, looking for the bumps and knots.

“So what seems to be the trouble?” I ask. “Is it playing up like last time?”

“A little,” he says. “I’m not getting any younger.”

“Neither am I.” I find the knot and then swab it down with solution. “Ever wonder when you might retire?”

He looks at me aghast. “We don’t say that word around here.”

“Right,” I say. I totally get it. To retire would be the end of everything Luciano holds dear. Something I know a little bit about. “You’ve got a lot of game left in you.”

“You’re fucking right,” he says, but there’s a hint of trepidation in his eyes, his smile faltering just a little. I know it must weigh on him. He is such an important player and such a great captain, but he’s thirty-seven and that’s almost unheard of in this game.

Nothing lasts forever.

I take in a deep breath, my heart pinching at that thought, and turn to slip on my gloves.

“Can I ask you something?” he says as I bring out the needles.

“*Claro,*” I say.

“What happened?”

I swallow the thickness in my throat and try to compose myself before I look back at him, needles ready. “What do you mean?”

He gives me a sweet smile. “Something happened to you. To Alejo. What changed? Are you not...” he looks around the room and when he sees there’s no one lingering, he goes on, “together anymore? I haven’t asked him because I’ve been waiting for him to bring it up but...”

I keep my jaw clenched, trying to blink away the rush of sadness that wants to come up. I will *not* start crying here at work, while I’m working on the team captain.

“You don’t have to talk about it,” he says quickly. “Perhaps I shouldn’t ask these kinds of questions when you have those needles. I learned my lesson last time.”

“Thank you,” I tell him, clearing my throat and getting to work.

I tap all the needles in, letting them work their magic on his muscles.

When I’m done, and the needles are removed, he sits up on the table.

“Better?” I ask.

He moves his shoulder back and gives me a triumphant smile. “Right as rain.”

“Good.”



I make a move to put the kit away but he reaches out and grabs my arm.

“Thalia,” he says. “I just want you to know that I’m sorry.”

Oh no. Now the tears are threatening me again.

I swallow, nodding, unable to speak.

“I don’t know what happened but I can make some guesses. I know Alejo is head over heels in love with you and I know you’re in love with him and it just...well, it fucking sucks that you can’t make it work together. I don’t know the details of what happened, I’m only fumbling in the dark but this was a love story that was never meant to have a happy ending, was it? I tried to...I tried to warn Alejo that this is what could happen and I don’t blame him for not listening because I know what it’s like. I’ve been there. I’ve been run over by it. You can’t stop love.”

“Love is a force of nature,” I say quietly, shutting my eyes as I remember that moment on the beach in Tenerife. “It’s like...trying to push back a hurricane with your bare hands. You’ll be ripped apart no matter what you do.”

“We have a saying in Portuguese,” he says.

“I bet you do,” I mutter, opening my eyes. “Is it about fleas again?”

“*E como tudo na vida, dê tempo ao tempo e ele encarregar-se-á de resolver os problemas,*” he says, letting the words roll off his tongue. “It means, in life as in everything else, give time some time and it will solve your problems for you.”

I give him a sad look and the mention of time reminds me of the pocket watch, which I have kept under my pillow these days, clutching it as I fall asleep. “I don’t think it will solve

this problem,” I tell him. “I don’t know what will. But I will say that...”

*Being here with him is next to impossible.*

*I don’t think I’m strong enough.*

“Yes?” Luciano prompts.

I shake my head. “Nothing. It’s nothing.”

“I’m really sorry, Thalia,” he says again and looking into Luciano’s warm brown eyes, I know he is. I think he was really rooting for us.

“Thank you.”

He leans in and gives me a hug and I have to keep it short and sweet or I’m going to completely break down. I can feel it coming, like a rip tide that wants to yank you off your feet and drag you out to sea.

Luciano goes upstairs for lunch and I decide to forgo it all together. I can’t even think about food right now, I think I’ve lost five pounds this last week, which sucks because a lot of that was muscle. But honestly, it’s the least of my concerns. Funny how losing love makes all your other problems disappear.

Instead, I go to my office and stare numbly at the wall, up at my degrees, torn between what I have to do. Even though I don’t want to do it, and I wish it wasn’t coming to this, it’s for the best.

I wait until it’s siesta time and then I go over to Mateo’s office, knocking at the door.

“*Pasa,*” Mateo says.

I open the door and poke my head in. “Is this a good time?”

A faint wash of sympathy comes over his face. “*Sí*. Of course. Come in, Thalia”

I step on in and shut the door behind me.

“Sit down, please,” he says, gesturing to the seat.

I shake my head. “I need to speak with you.”

“I can tell.” He narrows his eyes, studying me. “Are you okay?”

I press my lips together until they go numb and shake my head. “No,” I whisper. “I’m not okay.”

He sighs and leans back in his chair. “I’m really sorry about everything. What you must be going through. I know what it’s like.”

“You have no idea what it’s like,” I tell him, finding my voice. It’s sharp.

He raises his brow in surprise but doesn’t say anything.

“You have no idea how fucking hard this is.” I can’t keep the anger from my voice and I know it’s not Mateo’s fault, and I know I’m being unprofessional, but I don’t really care at the moment. I’m finding it hard to care about anything now.

“Thalia,” he says and then pauses. “There’s nothing I can do for you. You both knew what you were getting into. In the end, I think you made the right decision.”

“How can you say that?” I cry out. “I thought you were a romantic!”

He laughs and gives me a sad smile. “I am a romantic and a realist. And selfishly, I need you here. You’re great for the

team and had you and Alejo continued, you would have been caught. Believe me. I explained to Dr. Costa and Jose about the photo, and I supposed they believed my story a little less than I thought they would. You're on thin ice. They're watching you and Alejo, but mainly you, because you are expendable and Alejo isn't. Alejo will be forgiven for pretty much everything he does and you, you won't be."

I nod. "Well, I think I made the wrong choice."

"What?" he asks, brow furrowed.

"I said...I think I made the wrong choice. I chose wrong. I should have chosen Alejo. I should have quit. And that's why I'm here."

"No, Thalia," Mateo says, shaking his head and staring up at me imploringly. "Don't do this."

"I can't work here," I say softly. "I can't do it. My heart is too bruised, I'm...I'm not strong enough. Mateo, I love him. I love him and I can't work alongside him and not be with him. It's too fucking hard and I can't do it anymore. It's making me hate my job, it's making me hate everything."

Mateo covers his face with his hands, mumbling. "And this is why workplace relationships don't work." He looks up at me, weary. "I never imagined it would have happened here. When I hired you, I didn't even think."

"If it makes you feel any better, it never crossed my mind either. But you can't help who you fall in love with."

He looks shell-shocked. He stares into space. "No, you certainly can't," he says absently. "Oh, how I really wish you weren't doing this, Thalia."

"Well, what would you have done? If you have to choose between Vera or your career?"

He glances at me sharply. “I would pick my wife. Every time.”

“Yes, now. What if this had happened when you first fell in love. Then what?”

“It would make no difference. I love her more than anything. She’s my *Estrella*. My star. I would give up all of this,” he gestures to the room with a sweeping gesture, “over and over again just to be with her. It doesn’t matter at what point of our lives.”

It makes me wonder. Was there a reason that I chose my career over Alejo? I love him more than anything, he should have come first and the more I think about it, the more complicated it gets. All I know is that I made the wrong choice. The loss of him hurts more than the loss of all this. It hurts *so* much more than anything I could have imagined.

“But listen,” he goes on, “I am a different person than you. We have lived different lives and gone through different things. You’re on your own path Thalia, and I certainly can’t tell you if you’re doing it wrong or right. Only you can do that. Only you know what you can live with.”

“And if I made the wrong choice?”

He nods. “Only you know that. I have no say.”

“Then...” I take in a deep breath. “I’m quitting. I quit.”

Mateo holds my gaze, trying to measure how serious I am but I don’t waver. “Please tell me you’ve thought long and hard about this...”

“I haven’t,” I admit. “Which is very unlike me. But I know what feels right and being here, without him, it feels wrong.”

“Are you going to tell him?”

I shake my head. “He hates me. I would hate me too, to think that I came second.”

Mateo nods but he doesn't look happy at all. “I don't want you to go.”

“I'm sorry,” I tell him. “I'm quitting today and I'm not coming back.”

“I see.” He exhales. “You're putting me in a tough position, trying to find a replacement at the last minute.”

“You put me in a tough position.”

“You know I'm not making you do this.”

“I know.”

Mateo shakes his head in disbelief and then gets up.

He comes around the desk and brings me into a hug and it takes all of my power not to break down. I know I could now. I know it doesn't matter anymore about looking professional. I've been crying everywhere, why not on Mateo?

But somehow I compose myself, even though everything inside me is twisting around itself.

“I'm sad to see you go,” he says to me, pulling back and holding me by the shoulders as he studies my face. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

I nod. “And I'm sorry about leaving you in a tough spot.”

“You won't be easy to replace. I'm going to look for someone else with a very heavy heart.”

“Thank you, Mateo. For everything. For absolutely everything.” My chest burns. “You hiring me, it changed my whole life. Even with all this shit at the end, I wouldn't have

changed any of it. You helped make me someone I needed to be.”

“If you ever need someone to call, to talk to, if you ever need your job back, maybe after some time has passed and things smooth over, you can always come back here. I hope you know that.”

“Thank you.” I’m really going to miss him. Definitely the best boss I ever had. “I guess, I have to think about what’s left to do. I’ll leave the car here?”

“Take it home. There’s no rush for you to leave. I’ll have someone from the administration call you and work you through moving out and everything else.”

*Moving out.*

The thought hits me hard.

I had just settled and now I’m going.

Had I known all along that this was going to be temporary? Is that why I resisted making a home here?

I give him a quick smile and turn around, needing to get out of his office before I lose it.

*What are you doing?* I think to myself but none of my thoughts make any sense anymore. Nothing makes sense anymore.

I go back to my apartment and immediately start crying the moment I see the cactus on the windowsill. I’m not sure how much bad luck it kept out.

When I left for work this morning, quitting wasn’t on my mind, it wasn’t even an option and yet here I am, quitting my job and having to leave this apartment and this city behind.

Where the fuck am I even going?

What the hell am I going to do next?

And I quit, it's not like I get a severance package. All I have is what I saved in my bank account from my divorce settlement, and while it's quite a bit, I'm not sure how long it will last me, how long it will take me to get another job. It took forever and a lot of luck to get this one and now I'm just...

But as much as the idea of finding somewhere else seems too overwhelming to even handle, even though it makes me so damn sad to leave Madrid, I know it would be much worse to continue to go into work every day and see the man I can't have, see the man I love, knowing we could never continue.

And yet, as much as working beside Alejo while nursing a broken heart feels wrong, leaving Real Madrid doesn't feel right either.

I'm beside myself. I'm panicking, but it's a slow, festering kind of panic, the type that mangles your brain and seizes your heart bit-by-bit. I'm not sure I even know what I'm doing, to be honest.

I need someone to talk to, but I don't have many to confide in.

I would call my father, but he's still asleep.

I would call Vera, but it seems way too messy and complicated with her married to Mateo.

I would call Kizzy or Liz but I haven't stayed in touch with them like I should have.

Old me would have called Helen, if not just to have someone to vent to, but new me doesn't want anything to do



with her anymore. That ship has sailed and for the better.

*You could call Alejo*, the voice inside me speaks up.

I could call Alejo.

But I've seen the way he looks at me and I know how quickly even the deepest love turns to hate when you're devastated. He thinks I chose my career over him and I don't think that's something he's ever going to recover from. I certainly don't know how I would deal with it, if things were reversed. I suppose, maybe I would understand.

But Alejo is still so young and when it comes to dealing with his emotions in a mature way or compartmentalizing them, I still think he's got work to do. It would take a lot, probably too much, to have him see it from my point of view, to understand without the emotions clouding his judgement. Love is such a volatile and potent emotion that it's very easy for it to warp and bend to the heart's desire. It can easily change if the person wills it hard enough, the energy morphing to the opposite side. Two sides of the same coin, and right now it's not love.

And the real truth is...I'm scared to go back to him.

I'm so scared to put myself out there.

I'm scared that he'll crush my heart because it's easier than opening up and forgiving me.

I'm scared that my heart will end up bruised and battered beyond recognition from just a look.

The look that says it's too late.

I'm too late.

It doesn't matter. I'm a coward.

And I'm running again.



**W**hether during a game or during practice, all I can see is the pitch.

The ball.

Luciano running toward me with it.

I know how he moves, how he operates, I know he's going to go to the left, and I also know that he knows that.

So I wait until the last minute and then try to get the ball from between his legs.

He uses his arm to brush me off, a penalty if a ref decides it so, but I'm quicker with my footwork and manage to get the ball back, twirling around, one foot, the other foot, and then it's under my control and I'm off and running in the opposite direction, taking the ball and shooting directly into the goal.

I run around, arms in the air, showing off at my goal to the rest of my team, while Mateo claps his hands.

“Okay, good work, keep it up, Alejo,” Mateo says. He gives Luciano a sorry look. “You could have tried harder. Don't think I didn't see that arm.”

We're just about wrapping up our training for the day. It's cold and the weather has been threatening rain all day, rain that never came. There's a game tomorrow here in Madrid

against Leganes but I feel as focused on the game as I ever will be.

It's all I have at the moment. When I step off the pitch, my reality will come slamming back, making my heart feel like a hollow drum, just empty space where Thalia used to be.

And so I've been throwing myself into practice. I've been going the distance after training. I'm always on the pitch, I'm here even after it's dark out, sometimes shooting balls with Rene, other times by myself. I just can't let my mind focus on anything but this game.

I can't let it focus on her.

To be honest, it's the only way I've been able to get past the last ten days without feeling like I'm literally dying on the inside. I've learned to look past Thalia, never at her. I've learned to pretend she's not there, forcing my mind to switch to the sport.

It doesn't always work. Sometimes it's pure torture. Even when I'm not looking at her, I can feel her near, I hear her voice, a voice that should be whispering in my ear and telling me she loves me. I close my eyes and I see her smile, the way her eyes would take me in right after I kissed her, like my kiss had the power to change her whole world.

She changed my world.

I blink it away just as Luciano comes over to me, putting his hand on my shoulder.

"Not bad," he says. "When you make the Spanish national team and we have to play each other, I'm going to be in some serious shit." He moves his shoulder back and winces.

"Does it hurt?" I ask.

“Not really, just stiff,” he says. Then he frowns at me, his expression uneasy.

“What?”

“Have you seen Thalia lately?”

My veins turn to ice. I raise my chin, automatically defensive. “No.”

“Yeah, I figured,” he says. “I know...I mean, I don’t mean to pry and I’ve been trying to give you space thinking you’d bring it up with me. I know something happened with you both. She told me. She’s been looking so sad lately.”

There’s a vise around my heart, growing tighter. “When did you talk to her?” I ask stiffly.

“Three days ago.”

“What did she tell you?” I ask, lowering my voice as we start walking over to the rest of the team, to do one last agility drill before we head inside.

“I don’t know the details, man. I just know that it’s over between the both of you. And well, when you want to talk about it, I’m here. I just...hope you didn’t run her off.”

“Run her off?” I frown. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I wanted her to look at my shoulder yesterday and I didn’t see her. I didn’t see her today either. Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed?”

The truth is, I had noticed. But what I noticed was not her absence, but that she wasn’t affecting me as badly. I thought perhaps I was just handling it better. But if she hasn’t been here, that could explain it.

Luciano walks over to Mateo who is watching the assistants set up the poles we're supposed to dart around.

"Hey Mateo," Luciano says. "Where is Thalia? I haven't seen her these last few days. Has she been sick?"

Mateo looks directly at me and his face grows remorseful. He gives me the kind of look that makes my stomach drop.

I go over to him, wishing that this didn't matter so much to me, but of course anything to do with her is still going to concern me.

Mateo licks his lips, looking back at the team, some of whom are listening.

"Okay," he says slowly, eyeing everyone. "I didn't want to bring this up until after the game tomorrow..."

We're all waiting for him to go on.

My stomach feels like it's about to be filled with cement.

"Yeah and?" Luciano prompts. "Where is she?"

Mateo avoids my stare and looks directly at Luciano. "She doesn't work here anymore. She quit."

"*What?*" Luciano says, while everyone else on the team breaks out into chatter.

I can't even believe my ears.

"What?" I repeat, feeling the disbelief rising in my chest, swirling with anger. "What are you talking about, she *quit?*"

"I'm sorry," Mateo says, still avoiding looking at me. "But she's gone."

Avoiding my eyes for a reason, because he's fucking *guilty*.

“No, you’re not sorry!” I yell at him, the words coming out like an eruption. “You’re not sorry at all. She quit? Because you made her quit!”

“I didn’t make her quit,” Mateo says through gritted teeth, his face going red and I should know better than to provoke him, but he should know better than to provoke me.

“You made this happen! This is your fault, Mateo!”

He shakes his head, eyes flashing. “Oh no. Don’t throw this in my face. This was your fault Alejo, your fucking fault that she’s gone!”

The team lets out a collective gasp but I don’t have any time to reflect on how rare it is to have Mateo get personal with a player like this.

I don’t even think at all.

I just react.

I come at him, winding up, punching him in an uppercut right to his jaw.

The explosion rocks my knuckles but as Mateo stumbles back a few feet, holding his jaw, I don’t feel any pain at all. I just feel this raw, vengeful, vindictive anger that has no place to go.

“Alejo!” Luciano is yelling and he’s coming for me, but I’m trying to move out of his way. I want Mateo to fight me back, I want to let this all out, everything I’ve been keeping inside, letting it fester away, rotting me.

“You made her quit!” I yell at Mateo, coming for him again.

He moves back away from me, still holding his jaw, his eyes burning dangerously, and before I can get another punch

in, Luciano and Rene are holding me back, both their arms looped around mine, Luciano putting half his body in front of mine while an assistant coach gets in front of Mateo.

“You did this!” I’m yelling over Luciano, and I sound delusional but I don’t fucking care. “I loved her! I loved her and you made her choose between me and her job! You made her choose her job!”

Another gasp rolls amongst the team and even though they’re just a blur of heads to me, I know they’re staring at me with wide eyes. This would be the first they’ve heard of it.

“I didn’t make her choose her job,” Mateo seethes, rubbing at his jaw, wiggling it. His eyes bore into me, cutting deep. “She chose her job. She could have chosen you Alejo but she didn’t. She made the choice that was right for her.”

It’s like I was suckerpunched with a knife, right to the gut. If Luciano and Rene weren’t holding onto me, I’d be sinking to my knees. I cough, feeling like I’m bleeding dry in front of everyone.

“Then why did she quit?” I cry out softly. “Why did she leave?”

Mateo looks over the team. “Okay everyone, move along. Let’s call it quits and you go back inside.”

The team stares at him, then at me, and you know they don’t want to miss this.

“Now!” Mateo barks.

They all flinch and end up walking away, looking over their shoulder at us in disbelief. Only Rene and Luciano stay.

“Because,” Mateo says eventually, turning back to face me, “she couldn’t handle it. This wasn’t the job for her



anymore. And I know how much it must hurt you Alejo, but she's gone and there's nothing we can do about. Certainly nothing worth punching your coach and getting a suspension over. You're benched tomorrow night."

Fair enough, even if the team might suffer for it. Right now, all I can think about is my suffering.

"How could she just leave?" I ask no one in particular. I stare straight ahead at the turf, my heart collapsing on itself. I thought that by ignoring her I could make my pain go away but with her gone, the pain is unbearable. "How could she leave me again?"

"Shit, man, I'm sorry," Luciano says, his grip on me loosening. He puts his arm around me. "Honestly."

"Yeah, Alejo," Rene says, letting go. "I had no idea that you guys were even together."

"No one knew," I say absently and my eyes go up to meet Mateo's face.

He's staring at me, a little angry still. Maybe there's some pity.

He comes over to me and I stiffen, not sure what he's going to do.

He holds out his hand for me. "Come on," he says.

I put my hand in his and he raises it up like a high five, giving it a shake. "Now that it's out of your system, how about we put the blame game aside?"

I swallow uneasily, shame suddenly flooding my body. "Sorry. I shouldn't have hit you."

"No, you shouldn't have," he says, wincing as he strokes his jaw. "You pack quite the punch though."

“And you can take quite the punch.”

“I can,” he says. “And if you try that again, when I hit you back, you won’t be left standing.”

I gulp. I believe him.

“Well, well, well,” Luciano says. “Mateo turns out to be a lover *and* a fighter.”

Mateo cracks a smile at that then holds his face. “Ow.” When he composes himself, he looks to me. “Are you going to be okay? Sorry about the suspension tomorrow but, that is what you get for punching your coach for absolutely no reason. And before you say anything in response to that, know that you had *no* reason. I did not tell Thalia to do anything. I didn’t want her to quit.”

“But you wanted her to choose her career over me and she listened to you.”

“She listened to herself. I hate to play this card, Alejo, but you’re young. And when you get older, you’ll realize that love isn’t just black or white. It’s not simple. The feeling itself is simple. You either love someone or you don’t, there is no in-between. But the choices that comes along with love can get so tangled and so complicated that you don’t even know how to unravel it. Thalia ended it between you, not because she wanted to, but because she had to. She would have never asked you to give up your career for her. So, in her mind, there was only one way for it to go and that was it. It didn’t mean she didn’t love you anymore. It just meant that there was only one option in her mind, one path. She did what she felt was right. Whether that means she should have quit, well, that’s up to her to decide. Not us.”

I don’t say anything to that.

“You’ll get through this, Alejo,” he adds. “I promise you that.”

But he’s never been in my shoes. He never lost Vera. He’s never known what this feels like.

“How could she leave without even saying goodbye?” I ask.

Mateo and Luciano exchange a look above my head and Rene gives my shoulder a reassuring pat.

“Come on,” Mateo says. “Let’s go in for the day. I think we’re ready for tomorrow.”

But as everyone turns to go in, I don’t move.

I don’t want to head back inside.

I want to stay out here on the pitch, the only safe place I have left.

I want to stay out here as the rains come and I’ll keep running and shooting and keeping my eye on the ball, my focus on my feet.

In this tunnel vision, I don’t have to think about what I’m feeling.

“Alejo,” Luciano says as everyone disappears inside. “Come on. Let me take you out for a few beers tonight. You’re not playing tomorrow anyway, so I can get you good and properly drunk. You deserve to let loose, blow off a little steam, and not the punching your manager in the face variety.”

I stare at him blankly. “Can I get so drunk that I don’t feel my legs?”

He gives me a cautious smile. “Sure thing.”



EIGHT BEERS LATER AND I THINK I'VE FINALLY FORGOTTEN what my problem was.

Or is.

Is it still a problem?

It's hard to tell right now.

I'm sitting in the VIP lounge at The Last Resort with Luciano.

He's had one beer and has been drinking nothing but water and limes all night long. Captain of the team with a game tomorrow and all that.

I, on the other hand, do not have a game tomorrow since I've been suspended, so I'm just drinking my face off in hopes of obliterating whatever problem has been afflicting me.

So far, it's working.

I know there's something wrong, but it's off in the distance, behind a wall, and if I don't look over there, if I don't open a door and let it out, I won't think about it.

I won't think about her.

Shit.

*Don't think about her.*

*Don't think about Thalia.*

*Don't think about the fact that she's gone.*

I blink and Luciano waves his hand in front of my face.

"I don't know man, You seem pretty drunk," he says, as if I was just in a conversation with him about it.

"Thalia," I whisper.

“Yes, Thalia, I know,” he says. “We’re going around in circles man, and I don’t think it’s going to get any better. You’re supposed to drink to forget, not to remember.”

Okay, I guess I’m a lot more drunk than I thought I was.

“What time is it?” I ask him.

“It’s after midnight,” Luciano says, looking across the bar at a couple of girls who are giggling in the corner, stealing glances at us. I can’t really see what they look like clearly, they’re kind of blurry.

“Who are you looking at?” I ask him, slurring my words a little.

“Those two little hot numbers over there that are trying to work up the courage to approach the security and ask if they can have our autograph.”

“You figured out all that just by looking at them?”

“It’s a gift,” he says, leaning back on the sofa. “If you were up to it, I would entertain the idea. Have them come over. Give us some attention. Fuck, I can’t remember the last time I got laid.”

The idea of having sex has a soothing quality, like pouring liquid anesthesia over a wound.

But as much as having a one-night stand with a stranger would have appealed to me in the past, it has no appeal now.

I want sex, but not with whoever those girls are.

I just want Thalia.

I want that skin on skin contact, the connection, the easy feel of our limbs tangling with each other. I want to push inside her and feel that much closer to heaven, taste the

sweetness of her mouth and give myself over to her like a prayer.

I want her.

No one else but her.

And even with her gone, even though she left without saying goodbye, even though she has made it so very fucking clear that she doesn't want anything to do with me, I would rather sleep with her ghost every night than be with someone else.

Her ghost is all I have.

“You know what? Fuck it,” Luciano says. He gets up and goes over to the girls and starts talking to them. One of them looks over at me, obviously asking about me, obviously intrigued, but Luciano just waves me away. For all I know, he might be planning to bring both of them home with him. Wouldn't be the first time a football player has been able to do that.

Me, though, I've had enough.

With Luciano occupied, I leave the bar and get into an Uber, nearly passing out on the drive.

When I arrive at home, it's one a.m. and it's raining.

I take my ball and head out into the pitch in the backyard.

I dribble, kick a few balls, my aim still good even though I'm obliterated.

I play drunk until the sun starts to come up and the rain subsides and Thalia's ghost has been washed clean of me.

CHAPTER 29

THALIA

GREECE

*Three weeks later*

“E xcuse me, miss?” a woman says in a heavy Greek accent. “You forgot this in your room.”

I turn around to see the hotel maid holding something out for me.

The pocket watch necklace, dangling like a silver sun in the morning light.

My heart feels a little shredded at the sight of it, like it always does, even though I’m relieved she found it.

“Oh, thank you,” I tell her, profusely, my hand at my heart to show gratitude. “Thank you so much.”

I take the necklace from her and start to fish out some Euros in a tip but she’s already turned around and is walking away.

*I’ll leave it at the front desk.*

I sling my duffle bag over my shoulder and tuck the necklace into the front pocket of my jean shorts.

I have a bad habit with that necklace. It's like I'm subconsciously trying to lose it, or perhaps the necklace knows it doesn't belong with me anymore, so it's trying to find a new owner. I sleep with it under my pillow every night, the faint ticking sounding like a lullaby. I can't sleep without it. And I keep it there during the day, because I don't like to look at it, I don't like what it reminds me of.

The loss.

But over the last two weeks that I've been bumming around Greece, trying to figure out how to start my life over again for the second time, I've forgotten it under many pillows. Most of the time I feel a tug when I'm not too far from the hotel, like a magnet, and I'll come running back.

Other times the maid will find it.

I'm not sure how I'm going to feel if I end up losing it for good one day.

Maybe it will be a sign for me to finally move on.

Until then, I'm just as lost as they come.

I leave the tip with the young, eager front desk clerk, then I get my car and continue driving around with no place to go.

Today I'm on Crete. I've been here for a few days and it's big enough that I don't feel the need to island hop and the rental car, a fiat that looks like a squashed bug, is doing me just fine.

I haven't made any reservations at hotels either, I'm just driving around and seeing where I end up, trying to soak up the sun, eat a lot of cheap spanokapitas, and pour ice cold retsina down my throat, preferably with an ocean view.



This is not how I usually travel. I always have a plan after I've carefully researched each hotel, by star rating and by reviews, making sure the hotels hit all the right notes for me (paper-thin walls are a no-no, I don't like being on the ground floor, there must be a coffee maker in the room, a free welcome drink is always a bonus). I want it close to the action but not close to the noise. There's a checklist I always follow.

But this time, this time I'm literally just checking in to a place that looks good when I feel tired. I don't even have any luggage except for my duffel bag.

To put it another way, I'm not acting like myself at all. I just hope that if I keep doing this, maybe something will start to right itself. It doesn't feel like life is happening for me anymore and I'm waiting for that to start, moving through it all like the mist through trees.

I'm sure most people would say I'm running away from my problems and I suppose that would be the truth. After I quit, after the shock that I actually quit wore off, I moved out of my apartment, put my extra stuff that I had accumulated into a storage facility in Madrid, and then hit the road, or an airplane as it was. Conscious of the money in my bank account, I decided to go somewhere cheap but safe, with lots of much needed January sunshine.

Greece it was.

But it's not all been moping around beaches and drinking until I forget. I've been applying for jobs too. Going after all the teams, even the ones in North and South America. Hell, I'd go to Japan or Kazakhstan too. They have great teams and a thriving football culture.

But it's an odd time of year and no one is hiring and who knows how many teams will be as progressive as Galaxy,

United and Real have been.

Plus, what I had said about how therapists tend to keep their jobs for a long time and there's very low turnover? Well, that's still completely true, unless you're talking about me, having quit two great jobs in less than a year.

What's even worse, is the reason I left those jobs.

Because it became too unbearable to work with the person who broke my heart.

Because I was a big dumb idiot who made the same mistake twice.

I fell in love with someone that I worked with and when it fell apart, I couldn't stand to work with them anymore.

There is one big difference though, between leaving Manchester United and leaving Real Madrid.

When I left Man United, it was because working with Stewart made me uncomfortable. I wasn't still in love with him but I definitely felt it was no place for me to stay. If I wanted to start over again, I needed to leave.

When I left Real Madrid, it was because I was still in love with Alejo and that working with him would chop my heart up into even smaller pieces than it already was. Like taking an already broken heart and then putting it through the shredder.

And...I still love Alejo.

Of course I still love Alejo.

He had said that love couldn't be taken for granted but I don't see how my love for him could ever go away.

If anything, my love for him is getting worse, like a virus that starts off small and then grows to consume you, rendering

you heartsick and useless. Except there's no fix or cure for this. Not even time in Greece is helping.

Nothing helps except that pocket watch under my pillow, lulling me to sleep.

I see him in my dreams too, sometimes.

Sometimes he's just a shadowy figure I keep trying to catch a glimpse of, almost clear in my peripheral but fading when I look at him straight on.

Other times it's just us in my bed. He's reading from a book with those sexy glasses of his, reading it in Spanish while I try to comprehend his words. In my dream the only words he's saying are *Te amo*, over and over again.

Dreams like that have me waking up in tears.

And yet, the sun rises again and I have no choice but to keep going.

So here, am I...going.

Wondering.

*What have I done?*

I ask myself that all too often.

*What happens next?*

But I don't have the answer.

Today I'm driving further south. I stop at a beachside café to get watermelon juice, then I move down over the rocks until I sit facing the sea, the gorgeous colors of the waves a feast for the eyes.

I sit and stare there for a while, periodically checking my shoulders to see if I need to go back to the car and get more sunscreen, when my phone rings.

I bring it out of my straw crossbody bag and peer at it. The glare of the sun makes it hard to read—it almost looks as if it says Stewart—so I bring it under the shade that my hat provides.

*Oh my god.*

*It is Stewart.*

I haven't talked to him since...well, since I left Manchester.

Why is he calling me?

I know I should ignore it and not answer the phone, but honestly, whatever anger and sadness I used to carry with me because of him, it's kind of gone.

It's skin I've shed along the way.

I answer it. "Hello, Thalia speaking."

"Thalia, it's Stew," he says, clearing his throat. "We were married. *That* Stew."

He adds that trying to be funny, as if we're on those kind of terms.

"Hi Stewart," I say, not wanting to call him *Stew* right now. "I have to say this is a surprise. Why are you calling me? Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? Oh no, it's all brilliant over here. I just wanted to see how you were doing. I haven't talked to you in ages."

"How is the girlfriend?" I ask, going right for the jugular.

"She's great," he says. "We're getting married, actually. I proposed to her over Christmas."

He says this so matter-of-factly that it irks me. Honestly, I don't care if he marries again but he should at least show me

courtesy of broaching the subject lightly. But that's Stew, always blunt and expecting you to just get over it.

"That's great. Do you want my blessing or some shit like that?"

He laughs. "No. I'm sorry, that probably came out wrong. I'm sorry if it..."

"It's fine," I say quickly. "Honestly. It's fine. I'm glad the woman you screwed me over for ended up meaning something in the end. Or one of the women, anyway. Who knows how many of them there really were."

"Thalia..." he begins. He clears his throat again, an annoying tic. "Look, I know that I have a lot of apologizing to do."

My brows raise to the sky. This is new. "About what?"

"About being such bloody wanker. I treated you horribly and I'm sorry."

"Is this a sudden change of heart?"

"No, it's just. I've been doing a lot of thinking. Patty, that's her name, she's very much into forgiveness. She says it's something we all need to try and she's right."

"Stew, forgiveness is something you do because you want to, not because it's some trendy thing like mushroom coffee or hot yoga. And honestly, I'm the one who needs to work on that, not you. You have nothing to forgive me for, I have plenty."

"Right. I guess I'm just...I don't know. I'm going into this marriage with Patty reflecting on our marriage and the mistakes we made. Now before you get smart like you usually

do, not every mistake was on my shoulders. You had a part in it too, but that's neither here nor there right now."

I'm too tired to argue with him, even if he's a tiny bit right. "Okay..."

"But that's not really why I'm calling."

I sigh. "Why are you calling?"

"I heard you quit Real Madrid," he says.

*Oh.*

"Everyone is talking about it," he goes on.

My stomach twists. "Oh yeah? What are they saying?" I ask, my voice trembling at the possibilities. Do they know about Alejo?

"Actually no one knows anything. There's no mention of you on the Real Madrid website. Usually they give some sort of statement, but I supposed you're a therapist, not a player. But you know how we all talk."

*Do I ever.*

He continues, "And so all we know is that you quit. You didn't get fired or let go, but you quit. Why did you quit?"

Like hell I'm telling Stewart the truth.

"It just wasn't a good fit," I tell him.

"Really? Because when you came up to play us, you looked like you were completely at ease with the team."

Well that's good, because that's not how I felt that day at all.

"It's hard to explain," I say and while that part is true, I'm lying about the rest. "It just didn't feel right. You know,

sometimes you just need a job to feel right.”

“I heard you did an amazing job on Albarado’s knee.”

Oh god. Even the mention of his name has me wanting to collapse on myself.

“Uh huh,” I manage to say. “I just did what I had to do.”

“Word is that the doctor wanted him to have knee surgery and you saved him from that. Don’t sell yourself short Thalia, you’re always selling yourself short. People are saying great things about you. You’re in high demand.”

I laugh. “No I’m not. I’ve been applying to jobs everywhere and no one is hiring and I can’t even get them to save my resume. I shouldn’t have...”

“Shouldn’t have what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not left when I didn’t have another job lined up? I just left, impulsively, without thinking or planning.”

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“I know it doesn’t,” I say tiredly. “Spontaneity is not my forte.”

“So what are you doing for work then?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Maybe have to look into private practice, but it’s such a step down. I want the thrill of the game, the rush of working on the players at the championship level. It’s what I’ve spent my whole life working towards, I can’t let that career go, not after what I’ve sacrificed for it.”

I have to catch myself before I go on any longer. I forgot that I’m venting to Stewart, not a friend, and the last thing he needs to hear is about Alejo.

“What if I told you that I knew of a job opening?” he asks after a beat. “And that if you applied, you would have the job?”

“Where?” I ask, straightening up. I grip the phone in suspense.

“Would you take it?”

“Where, though?”

“Does it matter though? It’s your caliber. It’s as prestigious as they get.”

“What could be more prestigious than Real Madrid? Is it Barcelona? Bayern? Tottenham?”

“Manchester United.”

I hold the phone away from my ear and stare at it for a moment, just to make sure I am talking to Stewart. “What?”

“Man United, Thalia. You can come back.”

“But I don’t get it. How do you have a spot, I’ve been looking online and calling, I never saw that for you guys.”

“Let’s just say that the man we hired to replace you is a bit of a jackass and we’d rather have you back.”

“But why me? I’m not that special.”

“I owe you one.”

I narrow my eyes suspiciously. “You owe me one?”

“Look, Thalia. I fucked up with us and I was a monster to you. You left the team and you were a great part of it. The guy who replaced you is a grade A wanker. If you could take your job back...”



“You think things would be even between us. That this will take place of forgiveness?”

“Just think about it. You need a job. You know the job. It would be so easy.”

“Would it be? You’d be there and you’re why I quit in the first place.”

“Are you honestly telling me that I still have that much of a hold on you, Thalia?”

“No,” I say quietly. The truth is, he has no hold on me anymore.

That honor belongs to another man.

Another man on another team.

“Ugh, this could get so messy,” I say, my head in my hands.

“Football is messy,” he says. “That’s the way it is. Presidents, managers, trainers, therapists, doctors, players, we’re all being traded and transferred, back and forth, here and there. Many times going to one club only to go straight back to the one before. Allegiances change every season. It’s part of the life, Thalia. You know it is. This is the life you chose.”

He’s right about that.

“I’m going to really need to think about this.”

“You do that. And I’ll be here, waiting for your phone call. Just...promise me that when you think about it, you come by it honestly. About what you want in life and what you want your next steps to be. Think about what’s best for you and not about the past. Okay?”

“I’ll try.”

“Okay, well until then, take care. Where the hell are you anyway?”

“Greece.”

“Ah, well, don’t let the national team try and steal you.”

“I won’t,” I tell him absently, already hanging up.

I let the phone dangle between my fingers as I stare out at the sea.

My first thoughts go to Alejo.

If I accept the job, and Alejo finds out, is he going to know I had to do it because of work, or is he going to think I went back to Stewart romantically?

Is this an example of life happening to me or for me?

I guess I need to figure out which it is.



I’M IN MY NEW APARTMENT, STARING OUT THE WINDOW. Unlike my old apartment, it has a view, this time of the cathedral.

Manchester hasn’t changed at all, but I have.

It’s cold and wet and dreary, hovering between snow and sleet. February is in full force.

I look out this window and all I want to see are the tiled rooftops of Madrid. I want to smell the scent of *jamón* and *pescaíto frito* wafting up from the bar below. I want to have my apartment with the cactus on the windowsill and drawers full of forks and spoons, and a killer sangría recipe.

I want my life back in Madrid, and I want Alejo.

I want both of those things above all else.

I guess it took moving here to figure that all out.

But what can I do? The next day after Stewart called me, I had my answer.

I felt like life was presenting me with something that I needed to take. That things were aligning in a way I didn't quite understand but that this was the path I needed to go on.

And so I'm here.

I've been here for a month and yet it all feels very dream-like, and yes, a bit temporary.

I know deep down that this isn't my home and I also know that this job won't stay my job forever. It gives me the feeling of being constantly stuck in limbo but I think maybe limbo is where I need to be until everything is sorted out, whether that limbo is in Greece or in England.

It's been weird.

It's been very weird.

I feel a lot like a dog with a tail between its legs. The press have run amok with the news and I'm not sure what they're saying because I've learned to ignore them, but again it's probably not good. The team doesn't trust me at all because I've been with Real Madrid, in fact all of them have given me the cold-shoulder. Stewart has actually been the only nice part about all this, and that's saying a lot. It's not like I talk to him or socialize with him outside of work and not that I would want to either. But when I'm at work, he's going out of his way to treat me with a lot of respect, which makes things easier for me.

If this is his way to absolution for the things he's done, so be it.

I just don't know where my absolution is. Maybe it's the same for me.

Maybe going back is the only way to move forward.

There's a knock at my door, bringing me out of my thoughts.

I put down my cup of coffee and answer it.

Stewart is standing on the other side of the door, holding a pair of car keys.

"Got you a new Chevy," he says.

I laugh. "A Chevy? How are they even a sponsor when they literally don't sell their cars in the UK anymore."

He shrugs, dangling the keys. "You know every player gets a free Chevy and most players don't want it, so it's yours. It's some SUV, I don't know. I wouldn't drive it."

I take the keys, happy to have something. "Okay, well this is a surprise. Come in," I open the door wider for him.

"I just came by to drop them off," he says, walking inside and looking around the room. "It's a nice place, right? Step up from the old place you had."

"You never saw my old apartment," I remind him.

"Right. That's just what Helen said."

Ugh. *Helen.*

No, I haven't seen Helen since I've been here, thank god. That would be too weird and awkward and I really don't want to see her *I told you so* face since she would totally get why I'm back here in Manchester, crawling back to my ex-husband in some form or another.

“Let me guess, she picked this apartment for me?” I ask wryly, crossing my arms.

“She helped.” He chuckles. “Or I should say, she basically forced her opinions upon me. You know how she is.”

“I do. That’s why I’m not friends with her anymore.”

He frowns, looking at me like I have two heads. “You’re not?”

“You didn’t figure that out? I...broke up with her, I guess. However you put it, we’re done. It’s over.”

He studies me for a moment, then something dawns on his face. “This is making sense.”

“How?”

“Well I’ve been over to their place for dinner and drinks a few times and you’re never there. I figured with you being back, you would have been. I mean, knowing now that we’re okay with each other and you’re not avoiding me. You’re avoiding her.”

“I’m not *avoiding* her. I just don’t want anything to do with her.”

“What happened?”

I sigh, staring at the floor. “I...you know how sometimes you stay friends with someone because you feel like you have to? Like your shared history will go to waste? All that time spent together? And, well, you know that they have some good parts to them, so you try and overlook all the bad, even when it makes you feel like shit, even when it starts piling up? I guess I had a wake-up call and realized that her friendship did me more harm than good. She was jealous and possessive. She

walked all over me and I let her because, I don't know, that happens sometimes." I shrug.

"Thalia, I have to be honest with you, I don't think you're the type of person to let someone walk all over you."

"I do when there are complicated emotions involved. Certain people make you weak...until they don't. Anyway, it's done and I'm better off for it. Sorry if this is upsetting, I know you two are friends."

He shakes his head. "She's not my friend, Thalia. Frank is my friend. I can't stand Helen."

I stare at him, bug-eyed. "What? Really? I thought you guys got extra close after the divorce?"

"No, that was all her doing. She's clingy and strange and frankly I don't trust her worth shite. I don't know how Frank is married to her but she has him by the bollocks so I don't think he's ever going to leave." He chuckles. "He's too damn afraid."

I shouldn't be smiling, but I am. "Huh. All this time," I muse.

"You know you could have asked me and I would have told you the truth."

My smile fades. I shrug. "Yeah, well, we weren't exactly on speaking terms."

Stew lets out a heavy sigh, his expression somewhat vulnerable. "You know...I know that this job doesn't quite erase the things I've done and what a wanker I've been, but I just want you to know that I'm sorry."

"I know you're sorry Stewart," I say quietly. "It's fine. What's done is done. It's in the past. We both have moved on

and for the better.” I meet his eyes. “You and me, we just weren’t meant to be.”

A wash of sadness comes over his brow. “But it’s not that I didn’t want the world for us, Thalia. I did. When I married you, I believed it would be forever.”

I blink, my eyes watering. “I did too.” I rub my lips together, staring at him, about to leap into the hard part, the part that needs to be said. “It was the baby, wasn’t it? It was Grace.”

He swallows thickly, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Yes. And...Jesus, I am so bloody sorry that I wasn’t there for you during that. I didn’t...I didn’t know how to handle it. I wanted that baby more than anything in the world and...” he shakes his head, looking away, “I am so sorry to even admit this but, I blamed you. I blamed you, Thalia. I blamed you, and then I blamed myself because you weren’t so sure about kids to begin with and I feel like I pressured you into it and maybe that’s why you lost the baby. Why *we* lost the baby.”

My chin starts to tremble, my nose burning, an old wound inside me re-opening. His words don’t shock me because I knew they were the truth, but they still hurt to hear. All of it hurts, but maybe this is a pain we need to share with each other, since we never shared it before.

“I wanted Grace,” I tell him, coming over to him and putting my hand in his, holding it tight. It feels familiar in a good way. “I wanted her and I loved her and I know you did too. It broke the both of us and sent us in different directions. We *were* meant to be, but only up until that point, and then after that...”

“I was a fool, Thalia,” he says to me. “A bloody fool. I was scared and angry and hurt. So hurt. I should have opened up to

you but I didn't. It was simpler to blame you, to hate you. To push you away because anger and resentment is a much easier tool to wield than sadness is. Grief is all-consuming. I didn't want to feel it. I did everything I could not to feel it."

"But you've been feeling it lately, haven't you? Now that you're marrying Patty. You're worried about the future. About children. About losing them." I sniff back some tears. "That's why you reached out to me, even if you didn't know it."

He nods slowly. "I guess so."

I give his hand another squeeze. "Then I'm glad you did. I'm glad I'm here. I'm glad that this is where my life has led me because I hadn't realized how badly I needed to hear you say those words, say her name. To know you cared, to know you hurt. To know that we suffered the same, even if we suffered separately."

"Thalia." He puts his arms around me and hugs me and I hug him right back. This feels right. Not in the sense that I belong with him, but that I belong to this moment.

Life is happening for me.

We're both being set free.

"I am so sorry I broke your heart," he says to me.

I give him one last squeeze and pull back. "Stewart, you might have broken my heart, but you fixed my vision." I wipe away a tear.

He does the same. It doesn't make me happy to see such sadness in Stew but it does make my heart feel full. Like whatever cracks I had there are slowly healing.

Closure.



“Well,” he says, straightening up and clearing his throat. “I certainly wasn’t expecting that when I came to drop these keys off.”

“Neither was I. But I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too,” he says. “Listen I, better go. Patty is waiting in the car. By the way, I parked yours just outside the front door. It’s grey. You’ll see it.”

I nod. “Okay. And thank you. I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

“See you at work,” he says and then he gives me a quick smile before he leaves.

I turn around and let out a deep and shaking breath, leaning against the counter.

I close my eyes and think of Grace.

It doesn’t hurt as much.

## CHAPTER 30

### THALIA



“**Y**ou ready?” Stewart asks me as we’re about to board the plane.

*No.*

*No.*

*Fuck no, I’m not.*

“Of course,” I tell him, faking a smile.

He narrows his eyes, watching me closely. “You sure? I mean, it’s Madrid.”

“I’m very aware of that,” I tell him, giving him a look that tells him to drop it.

Because if he observes me any longer, he’s going to see the fear in my eyes.

Manchester United and Real Madrid are meeting again.

We’re bound for Spain.

I’m going back to my dear Madrid.

I’m going back into Santiago Bernabéu Stadium.

I’m going to have to step out onto that pitch and see my old team again.

I’m going to see my beloved again.

Alejo.

It’s been three months since I quit Real Madrid.

Got a little lost. Found a new path.

Still not sure where it’s taking me but I know I have to follow it and see where I end up.

Today, I’m ending up in Madrid.

A place my heart wants to call home.

God, I’m so fucking terrified.

I pull an Alejo and put on noise-cancelling headphones the moment I board the plane, having a playlist ready that will get me pumped and positive.

It doesn’t really work.

Sure it drowns out everyone around me, but it finetunes my focus until the game is all I can think about, more specifically, who I'll see during the game.

All I can think about is Alejo.

How will I feel when I see him?

How will he feel when he sees me?

Does he still hate me? He must. He never contacted me after I left. Not that I expected him to, not that I'm upset that he didn't. It was my own doing and he probably harbors even greater resentment after I left without saying goodbye and ended up back in Manchester.

Or maybe he was grateful. Maybe me leaving was like the Band-aid being pulled off all at once. It forced him to forget me and move on.

I wish I could say it did the same for me.

The man still holds my heart in his hands, a very crucial part of me, making it impossible to forget him. What we shared together can't be erased, not with time, not with anything.

Instinctively I reach for the pocket watch I keep around my neck. I've been wearing it these days, it gives me comfort to open it up and see that time is still ticking, to pretend his words *Thalia Te Amo* will withstand the seconds, minutes, hours, days.

I'm still sleeping with it under my pillow.

Maybe it's kind of pathetic to still be pining for someone like this. Maybe I should start moving on, but I can't.

Not yet. I'm not ready.

*Maybe after tonight, you will be.*

I swallow the thought down. My nerves are on fire, stomach in a thousand tiny knots. Am I even going to survive this?

As the plane starts its descent, I catch a glimpse of Valdebebas out the window and my anxiety really starts to kick into high gear, melding with the sadness.

*That's my home. Right there below us, that's my home.*

The thought won't go away. It lives in me, growing like a weed.

My home, those pitches, that building.

My heart lives there with that club. The chances of them actually being inside right now and eating lunch are high. I should be there with them. I should be sitting with Alejo and Rene and Luciano and even the Slovakian. Luciano should be telling me some Portuguese saying that makes no sense, Rene should be talking about some girl he scored over the weekend. Mateo should be there in the distance, trying to ignore everyone and think strategy.

And Alejo...I would be glancing up at Alejo from time to time, giving him a secret smile. His eyes would tell me a story. They would tell me that I was his and that I belonged to him and that we have nothing but time on our side.

How wrong he was. We had so little time together.

And yet I could have spent the rest of my life with him.

*It's not too late. It's never too late.*

I close my eyes as the plane touches down and I keep on breathing.

A bus takes us into Madrid, down the familiar streets, past the gorgeous squares. The city looks like it's coming alive, having already shed its winter skin. The sun is shining softly, there are buds on the trees and white cherry blossoms blowing in the air. It nearly brings tears to my eyes, afflicting me with acute homesickness that feels painful.

*How am I even going to get through this game if I can't get through the bus ride to the stadium?*

But somehow I do.

The stadium looms before me, thousands upon thousands of *Madridistas* on the street around it, wearing white, waving flags and banners. Their energy is so infectious that it makes the chatter on the bus come to a hush.

"This must be weird for you," Jim, one of the therapists, says from in front of me.

"A bit," I tell him, hoping no one else presses me.

But they don't. They're all concentrating on the game, on the strategy.

That is until we get off the bus, past the photographers, and a Man United defender, Mark York, pulls me aside.

"Hey," he says to me. "You got real close to Real, didn't you?"

"I guess," I say slowly, not sure what he's getting at.

"How is Albarado's knee?"

Oh the irony.

I narrow my eyes. "What about his knee?"

He gives me a pointed look. "Just want to know if it's completely fixed or not. You were his therapist, weren't you?"

“I was but that doesn’t mean I’m going to talk to you about his ailment.”

“Why not?” he asks gruffly. “Fair is fair. You go there and come back, you have to pay the price.”

*Pay the price?*

“I’m not telling you shit,” I say, glaring at him. “Go out there and win the game the old-fashioned way.”

He studies me for a moment. “You’ve got your priorities mixed up, Blackwood. I don’t even think you know where your loyalty lies.”

Then he stalks off toward the locker room.

In a fair world, I would have told him about Alejo because I told Alejo about *his* ankle. But I would never do that to Alejo, never ever throw him under the bus.

And now that I’m here, back in this stadium, I know where my loyalties lie.

They lie with Real Madrid.

With the opposing team and not the one that hired me.

*How the fuck did you get yourself into this mess?* I ask myself.

Love. Love got me in this mess.

Maybe love can get me out of it.

I wait outside the locker room until the warm-up begins and then Stewart looks at me as he’s leaving to the pitch, trailing after the team.

“How are you holding up?” he asks me. “You ready?”

I give him a quick smile. “The better question is, are you ready?”

“I think we are. Come on.”

I hesitate. I don’t think it matters much if I walk outside onto the pitch alongside Stewart, but I’d have to be pretty oblivious to think it wouldn’t cause a stir. If I’m ever seen around Stewart during our home games, the press always goes crazy, talking about a reconciliation, or that Patty and Stew’s marriage is on the rocks, or that I can’t handle the job and I’ve turned into a crazy loon. Take your pick. Even when I ignore the headlines, they still find their way to me.

But the last thing I want is for anyone at Real Madrid, especially Alejo, thinking that Stew and I are back together. Even if Alejo couldn’t give a shit about me anymore, I don’t want that impression to be out there in the world.

So I hang back a little, with Stewart looking over his shoulder at me, curious.

Then he nods.

I think he might just get it.

He walks onto the pitch after the players to watch them warm-up.

I walk out a few seconds later.

I don’t know where to look first, it’s just *so* much,

But my eyes are brought to the famous “white wall” at the south stand of the stadium, where the die-hard fans have taken over. All you see is a sea of white with one hundred foot long banners. In fact, on this game, even though it’s just the warm-up, it feels like everyone in Madrid is here and the wall of



white stretches all around the stadium. It's like being in a snow globe.

And the singing. It's not just "Hala Madrid" being chanted over and over, but this song that I've heard a few times before.

*"Real Madrid te quiero  
Siempre te animaré  
El alma yo me dejo  
Cuando te vengo a ver  
No importa lo que pase  
Contigo yo estaré  
En los buenos momentos  
En los malos también  
Tenía 4 años  
Mi padre me llevó  
A ver al Bernabéu  
A ver al campeón  
El día que yo muera  
Quiero ver mi cajón  
Pinta'o de blanco entero  
Como mi corazón."*

Or in other words:

*"Real Madrid, I love you,  
I'll always support you.  
The soul is leaving me,  
When I come to see you.*

*No matter, how much time passes by,*

*I'll be here,*

*In the good moments, or even in the bad!*

*I was 4 years old...*

*My father took me along...*

*To look at the Bernabeu, to see the Champions!*

*For the day of my death, I want my grave to be coloured in white, just like my own heart!"*

It's definitely overly dramatic, but hearing it now especially, I'm getting fucking chills throughout my body, with nearly one hundred thousand people singing it, filling the stadium with so much devotion and so much hope.

I stand there, dazed, in awe, and then snap out of it when I realize I need to get to my side of the technical area.

*Don't look down the pitch, I tell myself.*

But I do.

My eyes are drawn there and I'm powerless to stop it.

I see the boys practicing.

*My boys.*

Real Madrid.

Mateo is watching them, his back to me.

Beyond him is Luciano and Rene and the rest of them.

I see a glimpse of who I think is Alejo but Mateo is blocking most of the view.

It's probably for the best.

I look away before my heart swells.

I keep my head down, take out my phone and try to immerse myself in another world, when really I'm dying to be a part of this one, the world I gave up.

I keep my eyes down until the warm-up is over and the players go back inside, and only then do I steal another glance at the stadium, wowed by the crowd once again.

There's something in the air tonight, something that's not just in my head. There's just so much energy and passion that it almost makes the space crackle, like right before a thunderstorm.

And then...

The teams come back out, *Los Blancos* on one side, Man United on the other, each player holding the hand of one of the child team mascots as they walk out onto the pitch.

Stewart comes to our area.

Mateo goes to his.

Right beside us.

And that's when Mateo sees me, maybe not for the first time tonight, but it's the first time our eyes have met.

He holds my gaze and though his look is intense, he's completely unreadable.

I stare right back and give him a faint smile, to show him I'm not the enemy.

I'm not sure he knows that.

I'm pretty sure he thinks I am an enemy, a traitor to have quit and then come right back to the team before.

He looks away, his attention going back to the team.

I do the same, but not the team I'm supposed to.

The national anthems are sung – Spain’s is a deafening roar with passion you can feel in your bones – and then the coin is tossed.

The game begins.

Somehow, it feels like the most important game of my life.

My eyes are glued to number twenty-eight, I can’t look anywhere else.

Looking at Alejo is a lot like looking at the sun. He’s radiant, glorious, burning with this incomparable energy. It feels dicey to keep watching him, like I might get burned, but I can’t help it. He moves with beautiful synergy, his legs moving at a breakneck pace, all his muscles in his calves, his thighs, reacting like a well-oiled machine.

I marvel at him. He’s breathtaking.

*He’s the man you love.*

*He’s the man who owns your heart.*

I can’t even feel the sadness right now, or the loss of him. How can I when he’s right in front of me, living the life that God put him on this earth to do? Making the fans cheer and the opposition cower, handling the ball like it’s physically attached to his cleats, doing it all with that intensity in his eyes that shows just how committed to the game he is. I know he has tunnel vision right now, he only sees the ball and nothing else.

And I can only see him.

As if the stakes of the game aren’t high enough, both teams are playing at their absolute best. It’s thrilling to watch and nearly flawless as Real Madrid takes control of the ball and Man United takes it back. The ball goes back and forth,

down one end, down the other, the crowd's chants and calls rising and falling with the movement. It's like watching a very fast and brutal ballet.

At one point Luciano runs past me and catches my eyes.

He raises both eyebrows in response as if to say, *this is weird, right?*

I give him a nod in response.

But it's not weird, not right now while the game is going.

Maybe because I know who I'm cheering for. It feels like I'm back in the past and I pull the nostalgia around me like a cloak.

Now Rene has the ball and he's running toward the goal with Alejo just up ahead of him, Mark York coming right behind him, trying to get in Alejo's way, but Alejo sidesteps him and then Rene passes to Alejo, which Alejo receives with ease.

He's about to shoot and then York gets in front, deflecting it.

But the ball bounces right back to Alejo, even though there's no way through to the goal and he manages to do a sliding kick which punts the ball up over York, snagging the goal with inches to spare.

“GOOOOOOOOOALLLLLL!”

“Yesssss!!” I shriek out loud, clapping my hands together softly.

The stadium erupts like a white volcano and Alejo is screaming and showboating, running around the end of the pitch with his arms in the air, kissing his badge.

I'm bouncing in my seat with excitement and the therapist next to me, Jim, gives me a derisive look. "Whose team are you on?" he hisses.

"*His*," I tell him.

It's his.

I've always been on Alejo's team.

And Alejo is still joyous and beaming with exhilaration and pride, now running to get back into the game.

He runs past me and it's like he moves in slow motion.

He's beaming at the crowd as he passes them, his smile bright and beautiful, and I can't help but smile back, tears in my eyes. Tears of joy, for him, for this moment, tears of grief because I'm staring at the man I've lost.

And then his eyes meet mine.

He doesn't stop but it feels like time does.

Time comes to a standstill and it's just his gorgeous, soul-sweeping eyes held captive with mine.

I'm still smiling.

I can't stop.

Alejo looks like he's seen a ghost.

He keeps running and I watch him go and I wonder if that moment really happened.

The game plays on.

It seems to grow even more intense, United doubling down and trying even harder to keep the ball down at Madrid's end. There are a few shots on goal that go too high or bounce off the top of the posts. Too close for comfort, but they stay out.

The pressure is building.

Real Madrid score again, this time Benzema.

Everyone goes crazy.

I don't even bother to keep my clapping quiet. I cheer too.

*Hala Madrid.*

It's at that moment that I know I'm going to get in shit for this. Stewart is out there yelling at the players but the medical team and assistant coaches are definitely noticing my behaviour.

It's not that I'm purposely sabotaging myself.

It's just that I can't help myself.

All the roads lead to this moment, to this place.

All the roads lead to Alejo.

Back to the game, Luciano now has the ball.

Alejo is in position.

Man United is coming down hard.

Alejo is surrounded, there's no way for the ball to get through to him.

But he's tall.

And he knows how to use his head.

Luciano punts the ball up high and the ball arcs through the air like it's a heat-seeking missile right on target.

Alejo leaps straight up, a magnificent feat of power.

And then it all happens so fast, it's almost a blur.

Half a second later after Alejo leaps and makes contact with the ball, Mark York does the same, vying for control, his

shoulder slamming up into Alejo.

The impact causes the ball to head off in another direction.

And just as Alejo comes back down, York is still going up.

His shoulder slams into Alejo's head with brute force.

Alejo crumbles before my eyes and falls face first on the ground, knocked out cold.

He's unconscious.

He's not moving.

I stand up, my hand at my mouth, gasping for air.

People in the crowd scream and whistle for York to have a penalty and there are hushed murmurs around me and people are starting to freak out and all I know, all I can see, is Alejo lying there motionless, face down on the turf, the players standing over him, trying to talk to him, their faces pale and scared.

Someone tries to move him.

I don't even think.

I just run.

I leap off of my seat and I'm running across the pitch as fast as I can, running all the way across it, navigating between players. I know that the commentators must be going crazy with this, the sight of Manchester United's physical therapist running over through the middle of the game. And I'm not going to check on York, who is standing off to the side and holding his shoulder, the ref talking to him along with our goalie, and some other players, arguing the play.

No, I'm running right to Alejo.



“Don’t move him!” I yell at the players who are starting to crowd around him, not just Real Madrid but a few Manchester United players too. At times like this, people put the game aside and tend to unite. “He might have a broken neck!”

I stop in front of Alejo and stare down at him, trying not to panic.

I’m not a doctor, I’m not a medic, I’m not trained to be cool and collected in these types of emergencies, but he’s unconscious, his eyes are shut, and I don’t even know if he’s breathing.

Oh my god, what if he’s not breathing?

“Stay back,” I tell everyone, dropping to my knees beside him.

I feel for his pulse and *thank god* it’s still there. I pull back his eyelids, trying to check if his pupils are dilating but I don’t have a flashlight and it’s hard to tell from the stadium lights.

My beautiful boy, my magnificent man. The light has been knocked out of him, a light that might not come back.

Then I feel hands grabbing my arms from behind, pulling me up and away from him as I see David and Dr. Costa and the rest of the team arrive to take care of their situation.

Mateo is holding me back.

“Thalia,” he says gruffly, trying to remove me.

“No!” I cry out. “He’s got to be okay, he’s got to be okay!”

“I know,” he says and he pulls me back a couple of feet to let the team work on him. He doesn’t let go of me, his fingers a tight hold on my biceps.

I know he doesn't want me to get involved, that I have no business in being here, but he doesn't make me leave either. We both watch as Dr. Costa starts examining him, trying to talk to Alejo, but there's no response.

The doctor glances up at Mateo, his expression grim.

"We need to get him out of here," Dr. Costa says and I'm so grateful I've kept up with my Spanish. "We need a stretcher."

"Oh fuck," I whimper. I look over at Luciano who is standing across from me, he's looking down at Alejo, shaking his head.

"It's a concussion right? It's just a concussion," Luciano says, hand at his mouth.

"That was a brutal hit," Rene says, glaring at York and the ref over his shoulder. "Why doesn't he have a red card yet?"

I can only stare at Alejo, feeling my knees start to shake as the magnitude of what just happened breaks over me.

*What if he's not okay?*

*What if what we had is all we'll ever have?*

I can't bear to think of it.

I can't stand to see him like this, to not know.

Tears start to run down my face. "I love him," I say softly, to no one at all, no one except Alejo. "I love him."

Luciano and the others look at me, their faces even more heartbroken.

The stretcher arrives. The medics lean over him, attempting to roll him on his back.

"Come on," Mateo says, pulling me back.

And then Alejo moves, just a bit, his eyes flutter open and his jaw moves.

“He’s awake!” Luciano cries out.

Alejo’s eye rolls up to look at us, confused, in pain. I’m not sure he knows where he even is.

His eye meets mine.

Those beautiful, broken eyes.

And instead of the way he looked at me earlier, like he saw a ghost, I swear I see recognition flood through his expression, a hint of a smile.

He sees me.

He *sees* me.

Then his eyes close and he’s out again.

My heart free falls in my chest, the connection between us severed.

Mateo pulls me away and spins me around so that I’m looking at him.

“*You* have to go back to your side,” he says to me, nodding at the Man United area. “We have to take care of him.”

“That isn’t my side,” I tell him. I point to Alejo, feeling panic rip through me at the thought of letting Alejo go off to the hospital, the thought of me staying behind, forever closed off from him. “*He’s* my side.”

Mateo gives me a steady look. “Do you even know what you’re saying? If you go with Alejo into our locker room, our examining room, do you know how that looks? You’re picking a side. You’re not going to be able to work for Man U. You know that, don’t you?”

“I just want to be with him,” I plead. “I made a mistake.”

Mateo sighs. “You do what you want Thalia, I really don’t care. The repercussions are up to you. I care about Alejo. That’s really all that matters right now.”

“I care about him too. And he’s all that matters to me.”

He winces, like he’s being shot with incredible pain and I realize how close Mateo really is to Alejo. I’m not the only one who is hurting right now, I’m not the only one laden with hopes and prayers and drowning in fear.

Then Mateo turns around and we watch as Alejo is lifted off the pitch, carried out on the stretcher.

The ref calls a red card for York.

The crowd whistles.

The game is going to go on.

Mateo has to stay.

“Go with him,” Mateo says to me. “If you’ve made your choice, go with him. Please.”

I nod, shooting a glance at Luciano, who looks equally distraught, and I wonder how the hell they can keep on playing like this when Alejo is a question mark.

But that’s the game, I guess.

There’s always too much at stake to stop.

So I follow the stretcher, walking alongside David who gives me a tight but welcoming smile, and we head all the way back to the tunnels underneath the stadium.

I pass right by Stewart and the team.

Our eyes meet.

I know I should say something to my ex-husband, but perhaps my running across the field already said enough.

Stewart just gives me a nod.

He knows my choice.

I nod right back, more than grateful that he gave me another chance, because that chance led me to this road, right here.

And from here, I'm taking another path.

I follow Alejo.

## CHAPTER 31



“How is my favorite player doing today?” Dr. Valdez asks me as he bustles into the room. “Hope you’re feeling better, it’s a beautiful day. How can you not feel better when it’s a beautiful day? Look at that sunshine, spring is already here. Summer will be here before you know it.”

Short and robust, with John Lennon glasses, Dr. Valdez is a rolling ball of energy, always talking a mile a minute, which doesn't help my brain, which struggles to keep up. He does tend to keep me awake for more than ten minutes, though.

"I'm doing okay," I tell him. My words come slow to me. "Just kind of hard to be in here when it does look like that outside. Would be a beautiful day on the pitch."

"Tut tut tut," he says, bringing out my chart and peering it over. "We don't talk about the things we can't control. You can't be on the pitch but it doesn't mean it's not a nice day, does it? Here, those blinds should be open more, you need some more sunshine to get your brainwaves going nicely."

He hurries over to the curtains and opens them, the sun flooding in.

"There," he says, dusting off his hands. "Where were we? Oh yes. So I've been going over the tests you did yesterday and, to no one's surprise, you still have a concussion. Tricky bastards, aren't they? They're like my son, took a long time for him to leave the house but when he finally did, boy did his mother and I party."

I blink at him, wondering if the doctor himself is some sort of a comprehension test.

He goes on. "But the good news is, you're being discharged from the hospital tomorrow. We'll run a few more tests in the morning, of course, basic ones, you'll be awake and cognitive for all of them. But you should be good to go home."

"And back to the game?" I ask hopefully.

"That will take time. Hopefully for your sake, and for my sake, because I always have a lot of money riding on *Los*

*Blancos*. But don't get frustrated when it doesn't happen right away. You don't want to be put back in the game too soon. That's where the real damage comes from."

I know I should be more grateful that I'm alive. Grateful that when Mark York's shoulder connected with my head, and caused me to lose consciousness, that serious brain damage didn't occur. It easily could have. Concussions during football are rarely talked about, but it is a full-contact sport where we don't wear helmets, and they are very common. In some cases, life-threatening.

I'm lucky to be in this hospital bed, awake and using my brain.

But all I can think of is the game.

Getting back to it.

When can I play again?

When can I train again?

It's March and there's not a lot of the season left. Things will wrap up in June and this is the most crucial part, where I'm needed the most. After spending so much of last year out with the knee injury, it would kill me to sit on the sidelines forever again.

At least last time, I had Thalia.

The thought of her stings, like a sliver in your finger that you thought you got rid of. It's small but it's still there, reminding you at the worst times that you might not ever be rid of it.

She's embedded deep.

"But I have some more good news," he says to me, clapping his hands together.



I glance up at him, brow raised. “This has been all a dream and I’m going to wake up soon?”

“No,” he says with a sigh. “Just that you have visitors. Your mother and your brother. They’ll be happy to know that you’re awake this time.”

Apparently my mother came by yesterday but I was half-asleep and barely coherent during it. I honestly don’t remember, so it would be nice to actually see the both of them, or just see anyone that doesn’t work at this hospital.

The last few days since the accident have been a complete blur. I don’t really remember any of it, especially not the game. I wouldn’t have even known exactly what happened to me if a nurse (and a die-hard *Madridista*) hadn’t given me the play-by-play of the accident this morning, using a plastic knife and fork from the cafeteria in a re-enactment.

It sounded pretty violent and insane, (I mean, she broke the neck of the fork), so naturally, once I get out of here, the first thing I’m doing is watching is the slow-motion replay.

The doctor looks me over one last time and then leaves the room.

In his place, my mother and brother come in.

My mother’s face looks pale and gaunt and the same goes for my brother, even though he’s trying to play it cool by chewing gum.

“Alejo?” she says softly as they approach me, staying close to each other, almost afraid to leave each other’s side.

“Hi mama,” I say to her, my voice coming out hoarse and weak. I smile at Armando, overjoyed to see them. “Armando.”

“Oh Alejo,” my mother cries out and immediately bursts into tears.

I can't tell you the last time I saw my mother cry.

Oh wait, I can.

Sneaking in through the house, passing by the living room where my mother had her face in her hands, sobbing, the team of police officers around her, my parents' bedroom down the hall, beckoning me.

That's the last time I saw her cry, the night of my father's death.

And here she's crying again, for me.

She practically throws herself on top of me, her hands wrapping around my hands, her head in my chest as she sobs, her back heaving.

“Mama,” Armando says, trying to lift her off of me. “Please. Give him room.”

She lifts up a little and Armando gets her a chair to sit on, standing behind her with his hand on her shoulder, trying to console her.

I'm starting to get choked up, not expecting this emotion from her. I know my mother loves me, of course she does, but she's such a hard-ass most of the time that I'm never really sure what gets through to her.

Apparently this will do it.

“Mama,” I tell her, squeezing her hand. “It's okay. I'm here. I'm awake. I'm alive. I'm going to be okay. It's just a concussion.”

She just shakes her head and cries onto my hands that she holds up to her chest, like I'm part of her prayer.

"She hasn't been doing well," Armando says quietly. "She's been like this ever since the accident." He glances down at her and now my little brother's face is starting to crumble. "She thought she lost you. She was afraid she lost you, just like Papa."

Fuck.

Now I'm feeling it. I squeeze her hand tighter. "Mama, you didn't lose me. Okay. I'm here. I'm here."

"I know," she cries out, raising her head to look at me, tears rolling down her cheeks. "You're here. But I thought I lost you. I couldn't stand the pain of losing you, not after losing your father. You and Armando are all I have left. My boys, my family." She breaks down again.

Armando leans over and gives my mother a hug and now he's crying too.

And now I understand.

This isn't just for me.

This is for my father.

The death they swept under the rug, the grief they denied themselves. It's all coming out now, finally, for them to realize and grasp and process.

For them to finally heal.

"I miss him too," I tell them, because I know it's what they can't put into words. "I wish so badly I could go back in time and change that night. I wish Armando and I hadn't left the house. I wish we hadn't gone to the beach. I wish we had stayed with you. I could have stopped him. I could have

stopped him.” My heart sinks in my chest, down into the invisible fathoms, where I can’t see it anymore. “If only he had seen me, maybe he wouldn’t have done it. Maybe we’d still have him.”

“No, Alejo,” my mother says adamantly. “No, there is nothing you could have done. Nothing I could have done. I didn’t know what he was going to do. He...he came home and he was drunk and upset but I really thought he would be angry. I thought he would yell and break things. He didn’t...” she breaks off, licking her lips, staring into space as her face contorts into the kind of horror that breaks me.

“He didn’t seem to be all there and I thought, I thought, isn’t this lucky? I thought he would be more upset about losing his job. I really thought it was all going to blow up but it didn’t and he...he went to his room. And...and,” she lets out a deafening sob. “He closed the door. He closed the door and I was happy because I thought he was going to sleep.”

She bows her head and shakes as the grief rolls through her and Armando and I are trying to hold onto her, hold onto each other.

“I opened the door to check on him,” she sobs. “I opened the door and I saw...I saw...”

“I know,” I manage to say, choking on the sorrow. “I know because I saw him, too.”

“I miss him,” she cries. “I miss him. I wish you had your father. I wish he was here, he would have been so proud of the both of you, to see what men you’ve become.”

“I love you,” I tell them. “I love you both so much.”

We hold on to each other, sharing the grief for the first time.



AFTER MY MOTHER AND BROTHER VISITED, I ENDED UP falling back asleep. To be opened so raw like that, to relive *that* night, to experience the loss through their eyes, really took it out of me. It was about as much as my bruised brain could handle, let alone my aching heart.

But when I'm awake enough later to force down some shitty hospital food for dinner, the *Madridista* nurse comes by with a big, excited smile on her face.

"One more visitor, is it okay?" she asks.

I push the food away. "Anything to distract me from the dinner."

She giggles and scampers out of the room and I'm not too surprised to see Mateo and Luciano stroll inside, both of them in suits this time.

"Well boys, what's the occasion?" I tell them, breaking into a grin. "This isn't my funeral, you know."

Luciano comes over and gives me one of our special handshakes and a hearty pat on the shoulder, "Good to see you brother," he says to me. He straightens up and looks me over. "I fucking hate how good you look even with a concussion. It's just not fair, pretty boy."

I grin at him and turn my attention to Mateo, standing at the foot of the bed, his hands shoved in his pockets, head down. He eyes me and nods. "It sure is good to see you."

I return the nod. "Same to you."

Mateo and I have had a fairly strained relationship for the last while. It probably has everything to do with me blaming him for Thalia, and then also punching him in the face. We've

made up and it hasn't affected our working relationship, which I am sure is the one that counts, but we're still a little wary around each other. Which hurts, because Mateo is someone I look up to, basically the person I want to be when I'm older. I want, need his respect and I'm not sure that I have it anymore.

"I talked to the doctor," Mateo says. "He says you're probably going home tomorrow."

"Yeah but who knows when I can get back to the game."

"You'll get there," Luciano says. "I mean...Jesus, Alejo if you had seen what we saw..."

"I know, the nurse gave me a play-by-play in graphic detail. She broke a fork. What happened to York?"

"He got suspended for the game but I think that's it," Mateo says. "Hard to tell if it was an accident."

"There are no accidents in football," Luciano says. "*Macaquinhos na cabeça.*"

I frown, trying to pick up on his Portuguese.

"I have little monkeys in my brain," he explains. "I'm suspicious. York is the same player you trampled the last game. He was out for revenge."

"We don't know that," Mateo says.

My thoughts go to where I don't want them to go, somewhere dark.

Thalia was the one who gave me the information about York.

Is it...possible that she gave York information about me? Granted, he could have gone for my knee and he didn't.

“Hey,” Mateo says to me, his eyes dark and knowing. “It was an accident. I know what you’re thinking. We should all just be grateful it didn’t get worse.”

“You fell like a sack of bricks,” Luciano says. “I didn’t know if you’d ever wake up, man. Scariest fucking thing.” He pauses and exchanges a glance with Mateo before looking back to me. “Do you want to see it? I know you’re supposed to avoid electronics and the like following a concussion but I think this can’t hurt.”

I nod, slowly, trying not to reassemble my brain. “I want to see it.”

“It might be hard to watch,” Mateo warns. “For more reasons than you think.”

“I can handle it,” I tell them, eager to see what happened. “Come on, I want to see what the rest of the world saw.”

Mateo nods at Luciano who brings out his phone.

He taps away and then gives it to me.

I stare down at the screen, at the freeze frame of the stadium from high up above, and I tap the play icon.

The game comes alive.

So far, I remember all of this, which I guess is a good sign for all that long and short term memory junk.

Then comes the play.

Luciano has the ball.

I’m completely surrounded.

There looks like there’s no way out.

But I remember knowing that Luciano was going to kick it high.

Our eyes met before it happened and there was a split second of understanding, an almost telekinetic way of communicating that seems to happen between you and your teammates, and then the ball went high and I jumped.

I watch as my head makes contact with the ball and that's the last thing that I actually remember.

I then watch as York plows up and into me, causing the ball to go soaring above the goal post.

His shoulder slams into my head.

I really do fall like a sack of bricks. It doesn't even look like me. I don't even look human, just some ragdoll dropped from above.

The camera then cuts to the crowd, everyone standing, the horror on their faces.

Then it cuts to a close up of me, my eyes closed, mouth open, not moving.

And then it pans back to the whole pitch.

Someone starts running across the turf toward me, just one person, all on their own, slipping between the players on the field.

Ponytail flowing behind her.

*Thalia?*

I watch as she runs right to me and yells at the players who have gathered, her hands out and ready to stop them from moving me. She drops to her knees, looking at me with a face full of anguish.

The same face she had the day we broke up.

I can feel her pain, even from this video, the utter fear.



What is she even doing?

The video stays on her, trying to talk to me, and even without hearing what she's saying, from the way her lips, her beautiful lips, are coming together, I know they're saying my name over and over.

*Alejo.*

*Alejo.*

*Please, Alejo.*

And then the Real Madrid medical team arrives and Mateo appears, grabbing her from behind and holding her back. Thalia struggles like a wild animal until he finally calms her.

When I'm put on the stretcher and lifted off the field, she follows.

No hesitation.

She just gives one last glance at Stewart and then follows me off the field.

Effectively choosing a side.

Choosing me.

I gently turn the phone off and hand it back to Luciano without looking at him, staring ahead at the wall while my brain struggles to catch up.

I'm not sure how I should feel.

"What does this mean?" I say, eventually finding the words. I look up at them. "I don't understand."

"It means that..." Mateo begins. "If you still want her, Alejo, you have her."

“No,” I say, trying to keep the anger and frustration from rising through my throat. “No, I don’t. She left. She left me, she left the team. She fucking went to the other side. Back to her ex, back to Man U. She left me, she left all of us!”

“Easy now,” Luciano says, putting his hand on my shoulder. He looks at Mateo. “Maybe we should have waited.”

“No!” I cry out. “No, I don’t...I don’t want to be kept in the dark, I just...none of it makes sense.”

“Love often doesn’t make sense,” Mateo says.

“Are you sticking up for her?” I ask him. “After she left you high and dry?”

“Alejo, you know she was doing what she thought was right. And I’m sure going back to her old team wouldn’t have been easy for her but she did what she had to do.”

I close my eyes, trying to think but my thoughts come up dry.

All I can do is *feel*.

That heart inside me, the one that wants to beat for her, the one I’ve trained not to.

It’s starting to stir.

For the last three months, I’ve done everything I can to put Thalia past me. I’ve turned her into a game in itself. First it started small. If I could go an hour without thinking about her, I won. Then it turned into a couple of hours. Then half a day. Then a whole day.

But I could never go the whole night.

Because she lives in my dreams. She stays there with me all night long, her ghost in my bed, and when I wake up, she’s

the first thing I think of.

I miss her. I've missed her more than words can say, more than I dare admit to myself, because she shouldn't have this hold on me anymore. She didn't want me, why should I let her control how I use my heart?

But it's been a futile fight.

She's in me, deeper than my skin, living in my veins.

No matter what I do, I can't shake her.

Can't erase her.

She is still the sun of my heart.

Only now that sun hasn't risen for a long time. I've been living in darkness.

"So what am I supposed to do?" I say after the silence has settled upon us like dust.

Mateo shrugs. "I don't know. But I can tell you she's not with Manchester United anymore."

That's a relief. "Then where is she?"

Mateo looks to Luciano who then gives me a small smile. "She'll be ready when you are."

"Gentlemen," the nurse says as she pokes her head in the door, smiling big at the both of them. "I'm afraid we're going to have to let Alejo rest for the night. I'm sure you'll see him tomorrow."

Mateo comes over and shakes my hand, leaning in for a hug. "You have her, Alejo. If you want her," he says to me. "Now get better soon. We need you. We all do."

Luciano gives me a wave and the two of them leave.

I sink back into the bed, trying to make heads or tails of all of this.

I have so many questions, and I'm so hurt, and I'm so fucking tired, too. Nothing makes sense and it's just too much for me to handle, even if I wasn't concussed.

I fall asleep, knowing who I'll be dreaming of.



THE NEXT MORNING, THE DOCTOR PERFORMS A FEW TESTS ON me, just to get a rating of my concussion, and then he sends me home.

Mateo has sent Manuel to get me, as well as David, the physical therapist. With Thalia gone, David has been doing a lot of her work. In fact, Mateo never actually hired another therapist, saying we could get by with the ones we had and that he'd look into it in the summer when all the trades are going on anyway.

“You happy to get out of the hospital?” David asks me as I step in to the sunshine.

From the way I'm breathing in deep, face to the sun, I'd say he has his answer. You'd think I'd been inside that hospital for years, not for a few days.

“Fuck yeah.”

He and Manuel lead me to the car and I get in the back, relishing my freedom. I am a little dizzy, I have to admit, but the doctor said this would be normal for a while. The most important thing is just for me to rest, which I hate to do. Even though my energy reserves are low at the moment, I know myself and soon I'm going to have all this excess fuel and no place for it to go.

Thank god for the pitch in the backyard. I can take it easy, shooting some balls there to start and then over time I'm sure I'll be allowed to start training at Valdebebas. At the very least I'll watch practice, but I find it so frustrating when I can't just run out there and join in. And most likely, do it right.

On the way to my house, I make David fill me in on what I've missed the last few days.

He doesn't give me much. He's always been quiet. I suppose the team has been doing okay without me. Even with my injury, we ended up winning the game against Man United, which is a nice consolation.

Then I ask if there was any fallout after the game. Meaning, between York and United and...well, of course, I'm digging for information on Thalia. I want to know what people have been saying about her. That run across the field, that would have had everyone talking. That's never happened before, to have a member of one club basically crossing party lines during a game. If she had gone to York's side, fine (and that bastard was fine, not even a dislocated shoulder), but she went to *my* side.

And with everyone knowing she worked for Real Madrid before, and has volleyed back and forth between them and us, I'm sure the press is going nuts.

I'd look if I could but the doctor wasn't joking about staying off of phones and computers and the like for a few more days. I just hope that whatever is being thrown Thalia's way, she's weathering it.

*You have her if you want her.*

Mateo's words ring through my head.

*How do I have her?*

*Where is she?*

And then two memories come flooding back, two memories I suppose were erased or maybe just buried.

After I had scored my first goal at the game and I was running around, doing my thing, I ran past their benches and I saw her.

I saw her sitting there, watching me.

She was smiling.

Smiling for me with tears in her eyes.

She held my gaze, her smile never wavering.

I thought I'd seen that ghost of mine, the sight of her was too unreal and too beautiful to be real. Her smile sent shockwaves through me, the kind that would have threatened my reality.

So I kept running, thinking it couldn't have been her. I knew she was at the game, I knew she was back with Man U, I knew that this game was going to be all sorts of awful if I let myself think about her for even one second. But even so.

I pushed that vision, that dream, away, and I kept playing.

Then the other memory...

It's not as clear.

It comes to me in fragments.

I remember looking at the grass, close up. The tiny blades, bright green, and then legs and feet beyond that.

I was looking at a pair of running shoes that were too small to be a man's and there was something familiar about the way they looked, it was hard to explain but I *knew* them.

I looked up.

I saw her face.

I saw Thalia.

Everything else was blurred but she was clear as day, staring at me.

Like a fucking angel.

She was there with me.

And then it all went black again.

The next thing I would remember would be waking up in the hospital with a massive headache.

“We’re here,” David says as Manuel enters the code into the gate and it opens.

We pull into the driveway and he helps me out of the car. I can walk well enough on my own but I appreciate the gesture.

We go inside my home and I’m met with...silence.

Odd. I thought my mother would at least be home. She could be in her own unit, but I’d think if she knew I was coming, she’d be doting on me already. Armando should be at school but he’s often skipping class anyway, so I kind of expected him to be here too, at least as an excuse.

“Hello?” I call out and for a second I’m afraid there’s some sort of surprise party for me again—honestly not sure my brain could take that—but I peer behind the couch and there’s no hidden goalie.

“Everything okay?” David asks. He and Manuel are standing in the doorway, watching me.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” I tell them. “No one is home.”

They exchange a look I can't quite read and David says, "Okay, well, doctor's orders is that you take it easy. I'm sure I'll see you back at Valdebebas soon."

I raise my hand to wave goodbye.

They look again at each other with some weird energy and then they leave.

The door shuts and I can't say I like the feeling of the house without anyone in it.

It's the kind of emptiness and silence that leaves you alone with your thoughts.

I wander into the kitchen, look around absently, not sure of what to do with myself, and then head into the living room, my eyes going to the glass doors that lead to the sunny backyard.

There's someone out there.

I blink a few times, trying to focus and then start walking over to the doors.

I stare through the glass.

There, on the football pitch between the house and Armando's abode, is Thalia.

Wearing jeans and a white t-shirt, her back to me, her hair cascading loose down her shoulders.

This can't be real.

This can't be her.

My concussion has brought her into my life.

I almost turn around and forget about it, wave her off as a hallucination.



But I feel a pull in my gut, a magnet searching for its counterpart, a heart searching for a home.

I slide open the door, letting the fresh air wake me up, and she slowly turns around.

“*Hola,*” Thalia says to me in a small voice.

The sun radiates behind her.

Her smile is soft and shy.

Her eyes are full of everything I’d seen in my dreams.

I swallow, leaning against the doorframe, trying to make sense of this, shaking my head.

“Are you really here?” I whisper.

And she nods, her chin starting to tremble. “I’m here.”

I’ve played this moment before in my head, maybe not quite like this but the moment when I might see her again. The things I would tell her. How hurt I was, how angry I was. I would push her away, I would try to punish her, I would shut her out and give her the cold shoulder, I’d turn away whatever she was trying to offer me.

In my head, if she ever came back, I wouldn’t let her in easily, if at all.

My pride was as fragile as the rest of me.

But now, here, with her in front of me, my eyes sinking into her eyes, none of that really matters anymore. It’s still all so complicated but what I feel for her isn’t complicated in the slightest.

You either love someone or you don’t.

And I love her.

I love her more than anything.

I don't even think, I just move.

I cross the pitch in seconds flat.

My hands slide into her hair.

My mouth presses against hers.

She's in my arms, in my life, in my heart.

I taste her tears, my tears, her pain, my pain.

I feel everything that we are and everything that we ever were swirling around us like a hurricane, the force unstoppable, the feeling strong enough to bring us both to our knees.

There are no words between us, only our mouths and our lips as they beg for absolution, hands holding tight, hoping for forgiveness.

"You're here," I say, pulling back just enough to breathe. I grab her face, pressing my fingers over her cheekbone, her jaw, her lips, marveling at the fact that I'm touching her again.

She closes her eyes, tears streaming down. "I'm so sorry, Alejo. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," I tell her, trying to calm her, kissing her lips, the corner of her mouth. "We don't have to talk, I just need...I need this. To just have you with me." I kiss her again, her lips opening against mine, pulling her in deep, like I can't get enough, like I have to devour her right here in case she runs away again.

"Alejo," she whimpers against my mouth. I bring my head back to stare at her, her eyes searching mine. How I've missed these eyes. "I love you. I still love you. I never stopped loving

you. I made...I made a mistake. I made a choice that I shouldn't have made. You were always my only choice and I was too blind, too afraid, to see it."

I bring her right against me, my arms wrapping around her and holding on as tight as I can as she buries her head against my chest. "What's done is done," I tell her, kissing the top of her head. "We can't change any of what happened. We can only change what we do going forward." I swallow hard, taking in a deep breath. "And I don't want to move forward without you."

"Even after everything I've done?" she says, staring up at me. "You still want me?"

I can't help but smile. It's like watching the sun rise. "I never stopped wanting you, Thalia. Ever. And I never will. My heart is your heart. Your heart is my home. Even when I was... so hurt, I thought I'd never get up on my feet again, I still had hope somewhere that I would see you again. Even when I heard you went back to Stewart."

"I never went back to Stewart," she says quickly, eyes full of panic. "I know what it must have looked like but it wasn't like that. I was so lost and afraid and he offered me my job back. I felt I didn't have a choice." She pauses. "Or maybe I did have a choice. And as much as I hate how it must have hurt you to see me do that, I don't regret it either. It brought me closure. It made me realize how much I've moved on and I moved on to you. I had to leave you to realize you're exactly where I belong. My path in life leads right into your arms. You're the home I never had and the life that's happening for me."

She sniffs and shakes her head. "I just wish I hadn't caused you so much pain."

“Hey,” I say softly, wiping her tears away. “I’m still here aren’t I? I survived it. You survived it. Not saying I would ever want to do that over again, but as long as you’re back, it really doesn’t matter.” I hold her face. “*Te amo*, Thalia. I love you in all the languages.”

We kiss and I feel like the world is becoming bright again, becoming *right*.

It’s then I notice something hard pressing against my chest. I look down and realize she’s wearing the pocket watch necklace.

“You still have that?” I whisper.

She gives me a soft, beautiful smile that makes my stomach dip. She places her fingers around it, grasping tightly. “It gave me strength when I didn’t know how to be strong.”

“Thank you for keeping it safe.” I look her over, still marveling at the fact that she’s here. “So are you really here? Are you staying?”

“Of course I’m staying,” she says.

“Never say *of course*, I can never take you for granted,” I remind her.

“I’m staying,” she repeats. “I mean, fuck, I’ve still got all my things in a storage space somewhere, if I can just remember the code.” She laughs and the sound, the feeling, is so infectious that I kiss her forehead in joy. “I just need to find a place to live and figure out where the hell I’m going to work.”

“Real Madrid has to take you back,” I tell her.

“I highly doubt that. First of all, Jose must think I’m a total flake and probably a bit of a traitor for doing what I did.

Second of all, I'm with you now. I'm not hiding it. And I know the rules."

I study her carefully. "Are you sure you want to go public with this?"

She gives me a wry smile. "Alejo, I've had more shit thrown my way these last few days than I have had my whole career. Everyone already fucking knows, there's no other explanation for what I did the other day, running across the pitch like that. I mean, there are fucking *memes* about me, Alejo. Memes!"

"That means you've made it."

"Maybe for you, though all the memes I've seen of you have something to do with the size of your dick."

I grin. "I appreciate the rumors."

"And I appreciate how those rumors are true. Anyway, I'm just going to own up to it, to whatever everyone is saying. People are calling me a cougar, saying that I'm old, that you're too young, that it's scandalous, that it's a rebound, that I've lost my damn mind. I don't care. I really don't. The only thing that matters is you, the rest of the world can say whatever the fuck they want to."

"Have I ever told you that your swearing turns me on?" I murmur, smiling from ear-to-ear.

"A few times," she says, biting her lip.

"And what did I tell you about biting your lip?"

"That it drives you crazy."

"You know, I think you should live with me," I tell her bluntly.

She blinks at me. “Alejo...”

“I’m serious.” I gesture to the house. “Look at how much fucking space I have. If you want to get an apartment in Madrid, that’s fine, I won’t be insulted if you leave but until then, you should stay here. With me. Where you belong.”

“You don’t think...I mean, it’s not too soon?”

“Too soon for what? I lost you once, I’m not losing you again. I love you. You belong with me, in my bed, every morning and every night. I want you to live with me.” I pause, realizing I might be coming on too strong and too fast, even though it’s hard for me not to. “Again, if you end up still wanting to live on your own downtown, close to the action, I don’t mind at all. Maybe we could even get a second place together. I have the money, you know.”

She laughs, pressing her hands on my chest. “I’m very aware of that, Alejo. And thank you.”

“Thank you, you’ll live with me?”

“You’re still persistent, aren’t you?”

“Gotta run that animal down.”

Thalia sighs, shaking her head in disbelief. “Well, I guess you’ve run that animal down.”

I laugh, so happy, so overjoyed, I can’t even believe that this is my life right now. “The squirrel is back.”

She smacks me across the chest playfully. “You said I was a rare bird.”

“You’re all the things, Thalia. You’re everything.”

And right now, we have everything.

## CHAPTER 32

ALEJO

THREE MONTHS LATER

Istanbul, Turkey



I don't even know how it happens, but it does.

One minute we were up by one goal, courtesy of Benzema, then we were down by two, Juventus scoring

two in a row and leaving us to play a frantic game of catch up.

It's the final game for the UEFA Champions League and we're facing a team we've won against before. Juventus has Ronaldo now, which makes this match tricky, and the fact that the last time they played us in the final (back when *we* had Ronaldo), they lost, so they are out for vengeance, and to prove themselves again. They aren't a team to be trifled with and Ronaldo keeps scoring on us, probably because he knows how we play, and he's a fucking genius.

But he's not getting any younger, and at the moment, I've got nothing but time on my side. I'm the younger man, here.

I ignore the massive crowd gathered around us at this stadium in Istanbul, the cheering, the chanting, and I dig deeper into my tunnel vision. I know Thalia is out there on the sidelines, watching my every move, and somewhere up in that dark sky above, my father is looking down on me.

I need to make them both proud.

I need to make the team proud.

I need to make myself proud.

I double down, drown out the world, and connect to the game.

It takes a bit, a lot of back and forth, a lot of pressure building on both goalies.

Then I get the ball, getting it past the defender just in time to pass it to Luka, who then kicks to Rene, who appears at the right place at the right time.

My heart is in my throat as he kicks it in.

**GOOAAALLLL!**



I leap up, fist pumping before running across the pitch and jumping onto Rene's back, hamming it up, playing up the crowd who is going wild.

Getting there.

We're still getting there.

We keep going, buoyed by the goal and I'm buoyed by the idea of winning and what that exactly means for me tonight.

It means more than anyone can know.

Juventus get the ball but our goalie makes a great save, nearly soaring higher than the net itself, and then it's back to us.

Luciano passes me the ball and I start running faster, whipping past the defenders, using my arm to brush them off and hoping the ref doesn't make note of it.

I kick it to the goal.

It bounces off the post.

I don't even have time to react because it bounces back toward Luciano who is running to it, just as a Juventus player runs right into him, pushing him down.

Luciano tumbles, rolling over and holding his shoulder, and everyone in the crowd gasps, half of the crowd whistling for the penalty.

Thankfully, Luciano gets to his knees and gets back up, shrugging his shoulder, while the ref starts reprimanding the player who pushed him.

We get a penalty kick.

In these cases, Luciano is the one who usually takes them.

I walk over to my place, exchanging a look with him, wondering if he's okay to do this, if I should take his place this time, but he just nods, looking more determined than I've ever seen him.

He's got this.

The ball is placed in front of him.

I watch him line it up with his eyes and I know what kind of kick he's going to do.

He pulls back and strikes, going for a "Panenka" kick, the ball lofting up in the air, arcing over Juventus' defense who jump up in vain, but it's not high enough to stop the ball.

At the last second, just before the ball hits the top rim of the net, it starts its descent, like a bird coming in for landing.

It skims the bottom of the top of the net, over the goalie's outstretched hands, and soars to the back.

GOOOOAAAALLLL!

All I hear is screaming, probably my own screaming, as we all start running after Luciano as he does his victory dance (always entertaining), launching ourselves on top of him.

Tied!

Three-Three.

Twenty minutes left.

This cup will be ours.

The intensity is ramped up to the max now. Both teams are playing hard, taking risks, some of those risks paying off, others ending in penalties for both sides. Players are substituted on both teams, twice.

We're all giving it all we have.

Mateo is pacing so much, I think he's actually worn a path in the turf.

I feel like the stakes have never been higher.

This season, of all seasons, the stakes have kept on rising. First my knee injury, then losing Thalia, then my head injury, and getting Thalia back. We've gone up and we've gone down and now we're here, at the end, and we're ready to win this.

We need this.

I need this for more reasons than just winning.

Kroos gets a corner kick for us and goes to the corner of the pitch.

The clock is ticking down.

If we miss this, we won't get another. There's not enough time to build up another goal.

I get in position.

I know my height comes as an advantage here and I know I'm good with my head, no matter my past injury.

I know that ball is coming to me.

Kroos takes the kick.

The ball comes soaring through the air in a wide arc, looping back toward us.

But the angle isn't right for a direct header.

I manage to leap up and to the side, catching the tip of it, pushing it straight up in the air, enough to make it stall, and in the time it takes to come back down, I'm spinning around to face the net.

The ball lands just as my foot strikes forward to make contact.

I watch in slow-motion as the ball shoots through the legs of a Juventus player, toward their goalie who is making a leap for it.

The ball misses his gloves by mere millimetres.

It slams into the back of the net.

Goal.

Goal!

GOOOOOAALLLLLLL!!!

I just scored the motherfucking winning goal!

My world just...*explodes*.

I'm yelling, screaming, running like crazy, high-fiving players as I go before sliding on my knees a few feet, the burn never feeling so good. I rip my shirt off my head, kiss the badge and throw it on the ground, arms out, head back, yelling up at the sky.

*This is for you, dad.*

And this is for me and Thalia.

The future starts here.

Then everyone is piling on top of me, the whole damn team, and I'm crying tears of joy and they're all crying, and I can't fucking believe it.

We won the cup.

It's ours again, back where it belongs, with Madrid.

Eventually the dog pile lifts and I get to my feet, and now everyone is running onto the field, cheering, hugging each

other. Mateo and Jose and the medical team, and Thalia, of course, Thalia.

I pull her into my arms as she's jumping up and down like a lunatic, and I'm holding on to her and I'm jumping up and down too. I kiss her deeply, knowing that the press is absolutely going wild for us right now, all the flashbulbs going off.

They're here for the right moment.

This moment.

It's not just for the club.

It's for us.

Ever since Thalia and I went public with our relationship, we've been hounded by the press. Now, this isn't anything new to me and I guess not for her either, but people became obsessed with the romance between the sexy physical therapist and the (obviously also sexy) younger man. Once the outlets and gossip rags stopped slandering us (and her in particular) about our age difference, they kind of warmed up to us.

It helped that Thalia got her job back at Real Madrid.

After she quit Manchester United in the most dramatic fashion and rumors about us spread, Mateo and I decided to build a case for her so she could get hired back to the team. Dr. Costa was really the only person opposed, and he left Real Madrid after he wasn't offered enough money to stay. So the only thing standing in our way was Jose.

The President.

So Mateo and I took the issue to him on why Thalia should be hired back, despite being with me in a very public way. We

had all of our reasons lined up, prepared to go to bat for her every way we could.

But Jose didn't seem impressed by all of that.

"Are you serious about her?" Jose asked me.

"More than you know."

"Do you plan on marrying her?" he asked.

And I told him the truth.

I had already bought her a ring.

At that moment, Mateo didn't know about it, so the announcement was a surprise to him too. Mateo offered his deepest congratulations and I knew in that moment, he and I were back on track.

"But she hasn't said yes yet," I told him.

"But you know she will," he said.

I was going to tell him there were no guarantees in love but it didn't matter because Jose not only gave us his blessing but said she was free to come back.

"As long as it doesn't affect her work or your game, I really don't care what you do," Jose said in that mild way of his.

Mateo and I exchanged a look. If only we had known from the beginning.

And so after that, Thalia came back, welcomed with open arms.

She got her apartment back, same one as before, an apartment I'm secretly trying to buy for her. She lived with me for about a month, but preferred downtown Madrid to the

suburbs, so we're currently splitting our time between both places (and sometimes Valdebebas, of course).

As for the ring?

Well, it's currently burning a hole in my ankle.

I know Thalia had wondered why I didn't want her wrapping my ankles before the game tonight, something she usually does for me. I had David do it instead. I played it off as some silly Spanish superstition about not letting a loved one wrap your ankles before a game, and I think she may have actually believed me.

And so David was able to stick that ring in there tight.

And now, now is the time to let it out, while there is so much joy in the air, pure poetry and chaos, while the world is watching.

So they know just how serious I am about her.

And how my love won't die.

I pull back from Thalia, kissing her softly on the lips, aware of both David and Mateo watching me out of the corners of their eyes as they continue on celebrating.

I drop down on one knee and start pull down my sock, start to undo the ankle wrap.

Thalia watches me, concerned.

"Did you hurt your ankle?" she yells at me over the din of the celebration.

I smile to myself and find the ring.

I pull it out of the wrap.

I look back up to her and take her hand.

I bring the ring between us, the sparkle of the massive, ten-carat square-cut diamond ring glittering under the stadium lights, nearly blinding me.

“Thalia,” I say to her, projecting my voice so she can hear it.

She stares down at me in complete shock, hand at her chest, mouth open, her beautiful eyes big and round as she takes me and that iceberg-sized ring in.

Suddenly, the world around us fades away. I’m vaguely aware that some people are watching this scene unfold, while others are still celebrating, jumping into the stands, tearing off shirts, shaking hands with the other team, and all of that.

But that doesn’t matter right now.

It’s only her.

Only me.

Only us.

“Oh my god,” I see her mouth the words. “Alejo.”

I had a whole speech planned. There are so many things I wanted to say to her, to let her know just what she means to me and how I feel about her, even though I tell her such things every day.

But now, I realize, she probably won’t hear half of it with all this noise.

And when it comes down to it, there’s only one thing I need to say, one question that needs answering.

“*Mi corazón,*” I tell her, trying not to yell but the words are powered by my heart and the adrenaline of the game, the fact that I’m doing this right now, right here. “I may have won the



cup but you have won my heart. You've had it all this time. And now all I need, all I want, is you, with me, forever. Thalia, *te amo*, will you become Mrs. Albarado? Will you be my wife? Will you marry me?"

"Yes!" she cries out, tears at the corners of her eyes, her smile brighter than the sun. "*Sí, sí, sí*. I will Alejo, I will."

I laugh because my heart might just explode from love. I slip the ring on her finger, letting her admire it for a moment, and then I'm getting up, pulling her into me, holding the back of her head and kissing her with everything I've got.

The cheers around us get even louder, deafening, as flashbulbs go off and people start clapping.

I pull back and we look around to see Mateo, Luciano and David, and everyone else applauding, cheering, smiling, and I realize just how much I've won and how lucky I am.

"Oh my god," she says as realization dawns on her. "What would you have done if you had lost?"

"I still would have asked you and it still would have been the happiest day of my life." I lean in and whisper in her ear. "Thank you for saying yes."

She murmurs back. "Thank you for asking me. Thank you for loving me and never giving up on me."

I kiss her again, whispering against her lips. "I'll never give up on us."

As much as I want to stay in her arms though, there's some more celebrating to do.

First, I'm pulled toward the stage they've set up, and while Thalia, and the assistant coaches, and the medical team, and

the player's wives, all look on, we're presented with the cup, that Luciano gets to hold.

We pose for photos, fireworks shooting into the sky and confetti cannons going off until the world is painted white and gold.

*Hala Madrid!*

And while I'm screaming and cheering for our win, for the team, for the club, I'm also doing it for Thalia.

Because now she's really and truly mine.

Then the whole team runs off the stage and we grab Mateo. All of us gather together and hoist Mateo up so he's surfing on our outstretched hands and then we start tossing him up in the air. He's laughing, we're laughing, and I don't want the night to ever end.

But I know it will have to end.

And it makes it all that much sweeter knowing it will end with the future Mrs. Alejo Albarado in my arms.



THAT NIGHT, THE CELEBRATIONS GO ON AND ON. DRESSED TO the nines, the team heads out into the streets of Istanbul, drunk with glory, fueled by adrenaline, intoxicated by the foreign city streets and the copious amounts of champagne. We give it our all, knowing that when we get back to Madrid, the same thing will happen again, this time with a parade, and a ceremony inside the stadium.

But I call it quits early, going back to the hotel room to be with my fiancée.

Our bodies have a lot to say to each other.

Giggling and tipsy, we stumble into the room and start tearing off each other's clothes. I keep glancing at the ring on her finger as she starts undoing my belt buckle, unzipping my pants, helping to take off my shirt.

The ring shines like the sun, like the stars, like the moon, like it symbolizes the whole fucking universe.

She said *yes*.

We fall backward, naked, onto the bed and in the darkness of the room, we writhe around beneath the sheets, finding each other, slipping together like pieces in a puzzle.

I roll on top of her, pinning her down, my lips exploring her lips, her cheek, her neck.

She shivers beneath me, her hands tangled in my hair. "I love you," she says softly, so soft that I have to pull back and see if she's alright.

She's staring up at me with glistening eyes, a gentle smile on her face curling up the corner of her mouth. Her hands come out of my hair and trail down over my face, running over my features as if she's trying to memorize me by touch. "I love you so much, Alejo. I don't even think you know."

I swallow, feeling like I'm falling even deeper in love with her, so deep that there is no way out, and I don't ever want there to be. I'll be buried in this love for her.

"I know," I whisper to her, "because I can feel you here." I put her hand to my heart. Then I put it to her heart. "And I know you made room for me here."

I lean in and kiss her again, my hand trailing down between her legs where she's wet and wanting, and slowly I push my cock up into her.

She moans, making those breathless little sounds I love so much, as I start rocking into her, feeling everything wash over me as I push in deep.

And I'm falling deeper and deeper into her, into us, into our love.

We come together, our soft cries filling the room.

Breathing together.

Hearts pounding as one.



EPILOGUE

Thalia

*Three Years Later*

“Happy anniversary,” I tell Alejo, raising my glass of sparkling sangría, a new recipe I perfected that I think might be the next best thing.

“Happy anniversary, *mi corazón*,” Alejo says to me, his eyes cutting me deep, making a few butterflies float through my stomach. I don’t think he’ll ever stop having that power over me.

“Happy anniversary!” Vera and Mateo say in unison as they raise their glasses. Vera quickly adds, “Are you sure Mateo and I should be here for this?”

“Of course,” I tell her as we all toast across the dinner table. “Why not have our friends here to share the celebration?”

“I don’t know,” she muses, her eyes dancing, “probably because the proper way to celebrate a two-year anniversary is to be alone. You know, *fucking* and all that.”

“Vera,” Mateo chides with a groan, “please don’t put images in my head.”

“Why not? Look at how hot they are! Who wouldn’t want to picture them?” She pauses. “Oh, I’m making this awkward now, aren’t I?”

Alejo laughs. “No, not at all. Please keep going, I love to hear how hot I am.”

I kick him under the table. “You mean how hot *we* are.”

“*Sí, sí, sí,*” he says. “We.”

I laugh and have a sip of my drink, my wedding and engagement rings catching the light of the chandelier, causing my heart to grow warm.

Three years ago, Alejo proposed and gave me the biggest honking engagement ring I’d ever seen, with the whole world watching.

Two years ago, he slipped the wedding band on my finger as I promised to be his wife, until death do us part.

Now today, we’re gathered in our townhouse in downtown Madrid, in the Salamanca neighborhood, not too far from where Vera and Mateo live, having our closest friends over to celebrate us. Because, in some ways, without Vera and Mateo, especially Mateo, there would be no us.

It had been Mateo who contacted me right after that now very infamous Champions League game of Real Madrid versus Manchester United and told me to go after Alejo. It was his idea to drive me to Alejo’s house while Alejo was collected from the hospital, and I was welcomed back into Alejo’s arms, into his utterly pure and loving and forgiving heart.

Mateo also helped me get my job back.

And most of all, he's the one who took a chance on me to begin with and hired me.

Without Mateo, I would have never found the right path in life. I would have never found myself, and most importantly, would have never found Alejo.

Besides, Mateo and Vera have become my closest friends, and I can't imagine not celebrating without them here, especially since it's the summer and things have finally slowed down. We're in between seasons, so there's some time to have fun and think and just *be*.

A lot of things have changed in the last three years. In some ways, things feel the same and in others, it's hard to look back and see where the journey has taken us.

After I moved back to Madrid, got my job back, and got engaged, things were fairly stable. Alejo ended up buying me my apartment above Esteban, which we still own, and now my mom and dad stay there when they come over to visit.

Then he bought this townhouse and the two of us moved in here, giving his big mansion to Armando and his mother, along with Yaya who moved from Tenerife to the mainland and is living with them now. We still see them for dinner every Sunday.

Then came our wedding.

The event of the century, or at least that's what it felt like.

It was like I was marrying Spanish royalty, and I guess that's kind of what it was since the King of Spain was actually there. As was the whole team, and every single notable football player or Spanish celebrity under the sun. I didn't even know half these people, and apparently Alejo didn't know either.

But we made headlines. And for once, not the negative ones. It seems like most of the press really fell in love with our unconventional love story, and even the shitty British media has eased up a little bit. Oh, they'll still point out our age difference, and I've learned to get a strong backbone to deal with the rumors they keep spreading about Alejo being with younger women, or that I'm undergoing plastic surgery, or some utter nonsense like that.

Thankfully, my trust and love in Alejo is unshakable and nothing they can say can damage me, because I know him more than I even know myself. I know that man would do absolutely anything for me, just as I would make any sacrifice for him.

There's only been one real snag in our relationship. Of course, I have moments of self-doubt, maybe about the way I look or aging, just superficial silly things like that, and Alejo is always my rock, always making me realize how unnecessary those doubts are.

But the biggest one, the one that hurts, is that we both want children. I'm not getting any younger and Alejo has always expressed his want for a big family. Ever since we got married, hell, even before we got married, I had that IUD taken out and we started trying in earnest. He knew about my fertility struggles, and I knew it might take a long time before anything happened.

And nothing happened.

Believe me, we have a lot of sex, it's one thing that has never slowed down between us, but that doesn't seem to make a difference.

All the check-ups we've both been having, visits to the fertility clinics, haven't resulted in anything. As far as the



doctors are concerned, I'm just not fertile enough and it might be something I've always had, considering what happened with Grace, or it could just be that I'm forty-three now and getting older, and the older I get, the harder it's going to be.

Even IVF treatments haven't taken and it got to a point where it was too hard on my body, and to be honest, on my heart. Each time there was so much hope on the line, that I would come crashing down under depression when it failed. I started to see a doctor to help deal with the mental aspect of it, and Alejo helped to pull me out of it too, even though he was suffering as well.

So now, well now things have taken another route.

We've decided to adopt.

It wasn't something to be taken lightly. It's a big decision to decide not to continue to try and have your own, essentially give up on that dream, and instead open your heart to a child out there. It's not for everyone and it's stressful too. The process is difficult, trying and tiring. Over the last eight months, we've had one application fall through at the last minute and we're currently waiting to hear about another one, a baby boy in Mali, knowing it could happen again, knowing that it might not ever happen.

But I have faith that we'll end up where we're supposed to end up.

As long as we're going there together.

"Did you hear from Luciano?" Mateo asks. "I missed a call from him the other day."

"I did," Alejo says. "He said he's coming to Lisbon in a few weeks and if we had time to meet him there. He'll probably end up in Madrid anyway."

Luciano lasted two more years as Real Madrid's captain before his age (and his shoulder) forced him to retire. Now he's ridiculously loaded and living the good life on some Portuguese island in the Atlantic. He still comes back to the continent every now and then, and we always do our best to meet up with him.

Alejo has now taken his place as captain. He's young and he's still trying to find his footing as a leader, but he's so good on the pitch, so dedicated to the game, and so perfect at uniting everyone, getting them motivated and pumped on his passion, his emotions really driving them to wins. I don't think there could be anyone better to take Luciano's place.

"I would love to go to Lisbon again," Vera says, and I'm not surprised to see she's finished her glass of sparkling sangría. She drinks like a fish and I did say my sangría was the best. She looks at me. "If they go, we should go too. Get some shopping done. Stuff our faces with pastel de nata. Fuck that stuff is good."

I'm about to tell Vera that it's on when Alejo's cell phone rings.

"Sorry," he mumbles, knowing that we try and have a no cell phones at the table rule, just to give ourselves a break from the go, go, go world out there and take time to be present.

I roll my eyes and he answers.

"Hello?"

I look back at Vera, figuring the call can't be that important since it's seven at night. "Anyway," I tell her, "I would love to do a couples trip. That sounds like fun."

"But Luciano would be the fifth wheel," Mateo points out.

“Didn’t you say that he was seeing someone or...” Vera asks.

“Oh my god,” Alejo says excitedly into the phone, putting his hand to his mouth, his eyes open wide. “Oh my god.”

I furrow my brow, looking at Mateo and Vera, who seem equally confused.

I lean across the table, trying to catch his eye. “What is it?” I ask.

He just stares at me, blinking, and watching his face is like watching someone come alive for the first time. “He’s ours,” he says faintly.

“¿*Que?*” I ask but even as I say the word, the realization is dawning on me and hope is building in my chest, a fire that grows higher and higher.

This can’t be...

“Alejo,” I whisper urgently. “What is it?”

He just nods, mouth agape, listening to someone on the phone. He begins to smile, wider and wider. “Okay,” he says into the phone. “Okay, thank you. Thank you so much!”

He hangs up, stares at the phone for a second, and then yells at the top of his lungs, “Yesssssssss!”

He literally kicks back his chair and leaps on top of the fucking table. He’s stepping in the food, everyone’s drinks are knocked over, sangría spilling everywhere, and he pulls the same pose as he would if he scored a goal, arms out to the side, fists curled, neck corded as he yells at the ceiling in pure, unadulterated joy.

“He’s ours!” he yells, and then he drops down to his knees and crawls across the table, grabbing my face and kissing me

harder and deeper than I've ever been kissed before, a kiss that promises me that my world is changing again.

For the better.

"He's ours," he cries out as he pulls away, squeezing my face, tears in his eyes. "Our baby. We're getting our baby! We're going to have our son!"

The news slams into me like a brick.

Every single heartache, every disappointment, all the shame and the grief and the sorrow that we've both had to navigate. My loss. All of it comes barreling through me at once and out the other side of my soul, like it's been cleansed and made pure.

Our baby.

We have our baby.

I immediately break down, crying into Alejo's arms as the two of us hold on, just as we've held onto each other for so long, knowing that soon we'll be holding on to one more little soul.

"*Te amo*, Thalia," he whispers to me.

"*Te amo*, Alejo."

We kiss and I hear Vera crying and Mateo is wishing us a congratulations and I know that every single moment we've gone through, every single choice we've made, and every single path we've followed has led us right here to this moment.

Life has been happening for us this whole time.

Now it will happen for the three of us.

## THE END

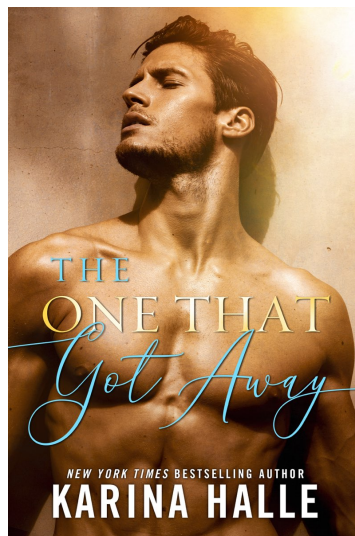
THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING THE FORBIDDEN MAN. IF you enjoyed Thalia and Alejo's epic romance, consider leaving a review (on any retailer or social media site etc). I would appreciate it SO much!

GOOD NEWS: YOU CAN NOW READ ABOUT THE CHARMING, sexy, funny Real Madrid captain LUCIANO RIBEIRO and his steamy, emotional, romance in The One That Got Away

WHILE THE FORBIDDEN MAN IS A STANDALONE NOVEL, IT does feature two beloved characters of mine - Vera & Mateo - and if you wish to read their own epic love story, please keep flipping the page <3

## WHAT TO READ AFTER THE FORBIDDEN MAN

Want more of this world? Read about Luciano Ribeiro in *The One That Got Away* (where you will see Alejo and Thalia again). It's emotional, forbidden, full of steam and angst and unrequited love as Luciano navigates his beginnings at Sporting Lisbon FC, all the way to his time as Captain of Real Madrid and beyond.



If you're curious about Mateo and Vera's love story, pick up *Love*, in English (the ultimate forbidden romance, set in Spain).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a ton of people I need to thank in regards to this book but first of all, I have to thank THE READERS.

This book was a long time coming and the release date was pushed back and back, and people were so damn patient and understanding. It's been a challenging year for me, health and mental health-wise, so writing took a backseat. I wanted to write Alejo and Thalia's story and do it justice and I didn't want to rush it or write it when I wasn't feeling it.

So, I waited. I waited until I knew these characters inside and out and was completely in love and immersed in their world (going back to Spain definitely helped!)

I am SO glad that I took the time to wait until I was ready for them because this book might just be my favorite one that I've written (I know, I say that a lot, but it's true) and I'm proud of every word in these nearly 500 pages. I hope that it was worth the wait.

Okay, onto all the unsung heroes of this book: Nina Grinstead, you are my rock, plain and simple, I could not have done this without you. Brittany, you are the absolute best. Kara, thank you for being you and hauling ass with this book (no more love making). Laura, I'm sad I didn't make you cry but I'm beyond happy to have you as a friend. Becky Barney,

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Last but not least, Scott and Bruce. *Te amo*. Always.

Life is happening *for* us!



**ALBARADO**

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## CONNECT WITH THE AUTHOR

If you want to connect with me, you can always find me on [Instagram](#) (where I post travel photos, fashion, teasers, etc, IG IS MY LIFE and the easiest place to find me online)

-> or in my [Facebook Group](#) (we're a fun bunch and would love to have you join)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karina Halle, a former travel writer and music journalist, is the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Pact*, *A Nordic King*, and *Sins & Needles*, as well as fifty other wild and romantic reads. She, her husband, and their adopted pit bull live in a rain forest on an island off British Columbia, where they operate a B&B that's perfect for writers' retreats. In the winter, you can often find them in California or on their beloved island of Kauai, soaking up as much sun (and getting as much inspiration) as possible. For more information, visit [www.authorkarinahalle.com/books](http://www.authorkarinahalle.com/books).