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Love, in English

Love, in English

A Novel

by Karina Halle

Also by Karina Halle

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Love, in English

Coming Soon

Dirty Angels
Dirty Deeds
Dirty Promises

First edition published by
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Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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A Note from the Author

Thank you for wanting to read Love, in English. I should make note of two things here. One is that this book is a contemporary romance. It is very different from my previous books, so please do not go into it expecting action, suspense or horror because this book does not contain any of that. Love, in English is a character-driven love story about two different people who find solace in each other under unlikely circumstances. It contains some hot-button issues, such as adultery, however I tried to handle it in a respectful and realistic way, so please don't let that deter you from enjoying Vera and Mateo's heartbreaking story.

The other note is that the book contains the first chapter of my upcoming dark romantic suspense novel Dirty Angels (featuring Javier Bernal from The Artists Trilogy, though you don't need knowledge of the series to read it) and so the percentage in your e-reader may be off by a percent or two.

Happy reading!

Karina Halle

Dedication

For anyone who has ever taken a chance on uncertainty

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Love knows not distance; it hath no continent; its eyes are for the stars

—Gilbert Parker

Prologue

My name is Vera Miles.

And in the story of my life, I am the villain.

How could I not be?

Wild hair.

Wild heart.

Tattoos and piercings.

I love food too much.

I love sex too much.

And I've had part in breaking up a marriage.

But I'm starting to think that most villains aren't evil—they are just misunderstood.

Or victims of that most manipulative force: love.

Love causes war and causes death, breaks souls and breaks lives. It runs people into the ground, makes them behave like moronic, immoral beasts, before it dances off, leaving only destruction in its wake—hearts blown wide open for the whole world to see.

Love puts the blame on the poor souls who succumb to it.

Love, that ultimate villainess. She makes examples of us all.

And yet we still come back for more.

We keep playing the role she gives us.

For one more chance to feel alive.

Love has made me a villain. But at least now, I don't have to be misunderstood.

This is my story...

Part One

Acantilado

Chapter One

“**A**í, assim meu amor!”

I had no idea what the hell the guy (was it Cristiano? Cristo?) was grunting loudly in my ear but given that my head was inches from smashing into the dorm room wall, I didn't really care. He obviously liked what I was giving him and I couldn't complain.

Smash. He thrust into me just a tad too hard and my head smacked into the greasy stucco.

Okay, I couldn't complain *much*.

I shifted back a bit, careful not to interrupt his flow all while not losing my balance and toppling over the side of the bunk. It was bad enough that I kept glancing over at the door every five seconds, afraid that the other backpackers would come back at any moment. I was a bit of an exhibitionist but I still didn't want the people I was sharing a room with to see me naked with my ass up in the air and some sexy Portuguese guy doing me doggy-style. Cristo, Cristiano, whatever his name was, was staying in the room next door and wouldn't have to put up with them.

Unfortunately, though he was one sexy beast and we'd spent the night flirting with each other over greasy pub food, that didn't translate so well into sexual prowess. His dick was big but he didn't really know what to do with it except try and brain me into the wall, so I finished myself off as he came.

He pulled out and I heard the squishy snap as he unrolled the condom off of him, followed by a smack as he hit me across my ass.

“You Canadian girls are good, yes?” he said with the smirk that made me get naked in the first place. Well that, and copious amounts of Newcastle Brown Ale.

I rolled over, careful not to send us both to the floor. “Well,” I said, trying vainly to cover up my breasts and failing, the bunk shuddering beneath us. “I can't speak for all of us. But yeah, I'm pretty good.”

“Eh!” he said, his smile looking more idiotic. “Right? *Eh?*”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes. I'm pretty good...eh.”

“I knew you all said that,” he said gleefully. I tried to move past him, knowing I couldn't but hoping that he'd at least go down the bunk bed

ladder, but he just sat there, his rapidly deflating penis in full view. They were certainly right about the Europeans being relaxed about sex and nudity. It's like the mothership had finally called me home.

He nodded at my body. "Why so many tattoos? Is that a Canadian thing?"

I smiled and looked down at my chest, arms and legs where my ink was display. "It's a fun person thing."

"I don't have any tattoos."

"I can tell. You're naked."

"How many do you have?"

"Ten," I said off the bat. "No, wait. Eleven." I had gotten one from my favorite artist on Main Street right before I left Vancouver for London. I turned over the inside of my right arm, the ink still vibrant. It was yet another constellation, this one of the archer, or the symbol for Sagittarius. Now, I was actually an Aquarius but I loved the stars that made up the bow, the idea of shooting for something. Instead of plain stars like so many of my tats were, I incorporated skulls into them. My arm looked like skeletons flying through space. I was super proud of it.

"So many stars," he commented, his eyes lingering all over my body.

"I study astronomy."

He turned wide-eyed. "You're joking? You study? In school?"

And here we go—I couldn't possibly have eleven tattoos, multiple earrings and a nose ring and tongue ring *and* go to university, earning a science degree. I heard it all the damn time, I just thought Europe was more progressive in that area, too. I guess you could find morons in every country.

"Does it surprise you that I'm smart?" I asked pointedly while I considered pushing him off the bunk.

He nodded. "Of course. Usually, uh, girls who are...who..." I narrowed my eyes as he fumbled to continue, "have tattoos and, um, like the sex. Usually they aren't so smart."

I breathed in and put on a stiff smile. "I can tell that the girls who sleep with you have to be stupid. I'm starting to feel a bit stupid myself. I'll blame London, though." I motioned for him to move. "Now are you going to get off the bunk bed or do I have to make you?"

His eyes grew round yet again. If he thought my tats made me hardcore, I wasn't going to convince him otherwise. He got down off the ladder

and quickly slipped on his clothes while I did the awkward climb of shame. I had a healthy body image but getting my curvy ass down a narrow ladder couldn't be a pretty sight.

He headed for the door while I fastened on my bra, then paused and shot me an anxious glance over his shoulder. "Did you want to go back out? I think people are still drinking."

I shook my head. "No thanks, you go."

He looked relieved. "Okay. Well thank you for...have a nice night Vilma."

He shut the door after him and I yelled, "It's Vera!" after him. I sighed and shrugged. I guess it was only fair. I couldn't remember his name properly either.

I quickly slipped on my matching underwear and stared at the dress that Portuguese boy had taken off me earlier. It was my last night in London and incredibly tempting to head back out to the pubs and have some more fun but that's all I'd been doing for the last week. Sure, I took in a lot of the sights—the natural history museum, the London eye, Tate Modern, Tower of London. I rode the cute cabs and the underground and double decker buses and ate food that ranged from awesome (deep fried Mars bars!) to nasty (don't order fish and chips from a Chinese restaurant).

But even though I came to the UK by myself, I hadn't had a moment alone. That was something I hadn't realized about the backpacking culture, especially when you're in your early twenties and can speak English—it's so easy to meet people. I'd never been so social in my entire life and never had so much fun.

And seeing for the next month I'd be in Spain, being nothing *but* social, I had to take advantage of some "me" time.

I slipped on my dress and a pair of leggings, thinking that the constant cold drizzle hadn't let up yet, and quickly ran a brush through my unruly hair that I had just dyed strawberry blonde before I left. The rain was going to make it even wavier but I didn't care. What was London without rain, even though the temperatures were slightly below average for it being almost June.

I grabbed my sweater coat and leather purse and headed out of the dorm room, stopping by the bathroom on the way outside. I ran into a few familiar faces in the hallways and could hear a raucous game of pool going

on in the common room but I kept my head down and headed out into the grey night.

Even though the sun had gone down a few hours ago, I was relieved to see there were still crowds milling along the Thames. I kept to the well-lit parts—I wasn't about to get mugged my first week traveling overseas—as I scuttled across the Victoria Embankment, stopping at Cleopatra's Needle. The rain had tapered off and there was a spring freshness in the air. I leaned against one of the bronze sphinxes and stared at the lights of the nearest bridge as it sparkled on the dark river.

I let my mind wander. That's what it did best.

I still couldn't really grasp that I was here. It took a few days to get over my horrendous jet lag, then after that I was on the go, taking a million photos and drinking a lot of beer. Now, it still didn't feel real, even with the lights of London all around me. Maybe I just couldn't believe that something that I planned actually went through and happened. I know that the minute I saw the travel blog post about the language program (help Spaniards with their conversational English and stay in Spain for free!) and told my family I was doing it this summer, forgoing my astronomy internship, none of them believed I'd actually follow through.

Well, my brother Josh believed me, as he always did, and my dad thought it was fine as long as I was careful. It was my sister Mercy and my mother who thought it was another harebrained and totally irresponsible scheme of mine that would never ever happen and I was better off hunkered down in an observation station deep in the BC Rockies, charting the heavens.

In hindsight, I should have made a few bets with them and won some travel money. After all, London wasn't cheap and if it wasn't for the fact that I'd be heading to Madrid tomorrow and embarking on a program that would take care of all my expenses until July 1st, I'd be shit out of luck in the money department. Working at a coffee shop part-time while I studied only let me save up so much. Fucking hipsters were terrible tippers.

There was a niggling feeling in the back of my head about the next month. I couldn't tell if it was fear, excitement or nerves. Or all three combined. In some ways, the program "Casa de las Palabras" sounded too good to be true; I would be spending a month in an exclusive resort at the base of a mountain just a few hours outside of Madrid. During that month I would have all my food and lodging and excursion expenses taken care of.

The catch? I have to speak English with a bunch of Spaniards. Not teach—just speak. Apparently that’s the beauty of the program. The “students” are usually business men and women who have a basic understanding of the language and just need to brush up on their conversational skills. My job as one of the twenty English-speakers was to be paired with different people throughout the day and just...talk. The only rule was there was no Spanish allowed for the entire time.

Which was fine with me since I didn’t know a word of Spanish. I just hoped that wouldn’t be a problem once I arrived in Madrid.

I watched the boats putter up and down the Thames, lost in my thoughts and dreams and the possibilities that the next month held. I didn’t even know what I wanted or expected. I just wanted the next month to give me something new.

I let out a small laugh. Well, I did just have sex with a Portuguese guy in a dorm room in London. In terms of new, I was already on my way.



“Metro. I need to take the metro. You know, the train, goes underground?” I made a digging motion like I was stuck in an awful game of charades, a game I’d been playing since I stepped out of the Madrid airport.

The man stared at me blankly.

This just in: A lot of Spaniards don’t speak English.

I gave up and waved at him, smiling even though I was frustrated. It wasn’t his fault I was so ill-prepared.

He said something to me, sorry, I think, and with a shrug he turned and left. I brushed my hair off of my sticky forehead and sighed, trying to look like I didn’t need help while taking in my surroundings at the same time.

You see, I thought I’d written down the instructions on how to get to the Las Palabras office on my notepad on my phone but it turns out I wrote down all the songs I wanted to download before the plane ride instead. Now I was totally lost, somewhere in Madrid, with only an address and sweat stains. My god it was fucking hot here. At least I had good music.

I wasn’t normally this shy but I hated asking for directions in general and I’d never been in the situation of being around people and totally unable to communicate with them. There was a whole city bustling around

me in the sunshine, heading in and out of the metro, and yet I felt completely invisible.

I sighed and adjusted the heavy backpack on my shoulders before fishing out my phone again. It was time for me to bite the bullet and Google Map the shit out of this place, insanely high data roaming charges be damned.

Turns out the Casa de las Palabras office was on the other side of the city and that meant more sweaty negotiating while I tried to ride various Metro lines, one of which was packed to the doors, with me pressed against the wall and an old man groping my ass. I turned to snarl at him but he merely looked away like he was innocent.

By the time I got to my stop and back out into the blinding sunshine, my first impressions of Madrid were tanking and one glance at the clock tied my stomach in knots. Thank god I could actually spot the blue and white sign of Palabras close by. I hurried across the square, hoping, swearing internally, that I wasn't too late. Here was another problem with my planning (and my cheapness)—I was supposed to check in with the company and just hop on the bus. I didn't want to spend money on a hotel room if I didn't have to. Little did I know the plane leaving Gatwick would be a late, which, when combined with the fact that I didn't have directions and I didn't speak Spanish, put a major damper on my plans.

What made my heart lurch around worse than trying to run in the oppressive heat with a heavy backpack on, was the fact that there was no bus waiting outside.

But...it couldn't have left without me. Could it?

I fished out my phone. It was 2:16PM.

I didn't like the way the time looked, staring at me with those cold digital numbers.

I thought the orientation had started at two. There was no way they could go through everyone in sixteen minutes.

I flung open the glass doors to the office and stumbled into it, my hair flying around my face.

"Am I too late!?" I screeched, looking around wildly.

There was no one in the office. It had neat wood desks with glass tops, sterile filling cabinets with baby pictures pinned up with cheap magnets, and blue walls with posters about Spain, featuring white people with cheesy smiles talking to Spanish men with nineties Ross Gellar hair. One the end of

one desk, one of those perpetual motion birds dipped its wooden beak up and down, as if someone had just set it off.

“Hola?” I heard someone say from beyond a door at the back of the office. It was open a crack and I could hear shuffling. I made a quick prayer that this person spoke English.

To my surprise a young woman with brown hair piled on top of her head poked her head through the door. The minute she saw me, her eyes widened and she came hustling out, a stack of papers in her skinny hands.

“Miss Miles!” she exclaimed in a British accent.

I frowned. “Yes?” As if I didn’t know who I was.

“Oh my god,” she went on, her forehead furrowing with concern. “The bus just left.”

“What?!” I threw my head back and groaned loudly. It was actually quite loud. I probably sounded like a lion in heat. “Fuck.”

“Don’t worry,” the woman said, throwing the papers on the desk and picking up the phone. “I’ll call the bus, I can stop him for you.”

Oh god. This was just what I needed. Everyone is already on the bus, getting to know each other and making friends and small talk and whatever the fuck, then I show up and slow everything down. Vera Miles with her tattoos and crazy hair, here to make things more difficult.

The woman held the receiver to her ear and continued to talk to me. She was pale with big round eyes, a gaunt face and some freckles. “Don’t worry, they haven’t gotten far.”

“I thought the orientation was at two,” I said, trying vainly to defend myself. God damn it my backpack was heavy. I took it off and placed it on the floor with a thunk. My shoulders screamed with the freedom.

“The orientation is at the resort,” the woman said, her eyes seeking the ceiling as the phone rang audibly on the other end. “The bus pick-up was at two.”

“And you boarded the bus that fast?” I asked, as if they were the ones at fault. “What about waiting around for me? I mean, didn’t you know you were missing someone?”

She nodded, mouth open. “We did. We called your cell. There was no answer.”

“I was in the metro,” I said feebly. “You see, my flight was late and then I didn’t have the right directions because I downloaded the new Nine Inch Nails instead and then it was really hot and I got confused...”

She wasn't listening to me. "Yes, Manolo, hola, hello. We have Vera Miles here, she just showed up." I could barely hear Manolo's *Peanuts*-type squawking on the other end. The woman nodded. "Yes, but she's here. Hold the bus and I'll come meet you."

Oh god, this was even worse than I thought.

She hung up the phone and snatched her keys off of her desk. "Come on, I'll give you a ride."

"Oh, that's okay," I said breezily, as if she was just dropping me off at my house when I normally walked instead. Suddenly I felt like maybe this whole thing was a bad idea after all. Maybe instead of spending a month at an all-paid for resort, I could just slum it in Madrid, hiding my tail between my legs until I got home. Of course, I'd probably end up working the streets...

"Forget it, it's fine," the girl said. It was only then that I realized she never smiled. It wasn't that she was angry but that her skinny face seemed always frozen in a state of perpetual shock—eyes wide, mouth open. She reminded me of Shelly Duvall in *The Shining*.

"How did you know my name?" I asked, bending down to pick up my backpack. I looked at my chest and realized I was giving her quite the cleavage shot. I wiped my hair out of my face before I swung it up on my shoulders. "You know, when I first came in."

"I recognized the profile picture you submitted," she said, marching over to the front door. "And you were the only person who didn't show up. So, there's that."

Ugh. What a fucking start.

I cleared my throat. "So what's your name?"

"Gabby," she said as we exited the building back into the sweltering sunshine. She locked the door and motioned for me to follow her over to a two-door vehicle.

"Gabby, the person I've been in contact with for the last three months?" I asked as I tossed my bag on the backseat. Gabby the person I kept bugging in email after email about mundane stupid shit?

"That's me," she said, though from her default surprised expression she looked like she was unsure of that herself. Just gestured for me to get in the passenger side while she trotted around to hers and hopped in.

Inside the car it was sauna hot and I immediately started questioning if I had put on enough deodorant. While Gabby peeled the vehicle out onto a

busy road, nearly taking out a few sightseers, she threw a stack of papers on my lap. “You better fill those out now.”

Before I had a chance to ask for a pen, she thrust one in my hands. I’d been annoying Gabby remotely for so long, it was strange to finally annoy her in person.

I looked over the papers. Most of them were photocopies of stuff I had already filled out online months ago but some were accident waivers and the like. I was grateful for something to do, to both keep our talk to a minimum and prevent me from watching the scene of impending doom as our car rushed through the traffic, nearly sideswiping, well, everything in our direction.

“So, Vera Miles?” Gabby questioned, between blaring the horn. “Are you named after the actress? I’m a big Hitchcock fan.”

I got this question all the time, usually from film buffs or old people. “No, my great-grandmother’s name was Vera. My mother said she never cared for the actress anyway, so she thought she could do better, I guess. Of course, she was totally wrong.” Even though I hadn’t been named after the fifties screen star, having her name definitely got me into a love of classic films. I even had an appreciation for the often overlooked actress, maybe because it pissed my mom off. Lord knows she probably thought I’d turn out to be a well-behaved beauty queen instead of a, well, *me*. Me and other Vera, we were underdogs.

With that thought in mind, I paused at the last question I had to fill out on the form: who was my emergency contact if something should happen to me. That was a bit of a tough one. I’d put my dad over my mother, just because we got along better, but my parents divorced when I was thirteen and he was a pilot, which meant he was more in the air than he was on the ground. Both my mother and Mercy seemed too busy with their own lives to give me much thought, which left Joshua. My dear brother was the only one who truly had my back. Unfortunately, he was high all the time, which was also kind of my fault.

I sighed and wrote down my mother’s information.

“There’s the bus,” Gabby said.

I looked up to see the bus pulled over to the side of the road, the engine running. We were on the outskirts of the city center where the tall business buildings started to peter out into wide boulevards framed by flowering trees.

“Thank you so much,” I said to her as she pulled up right behind it. “I am so sorry I was late.”

She finally smiled. It was quick but it was there. “It happens every program, don’t worry about it.”

I opened the door and got out. As I reached into the back to retrieve my pack I asked, “Any last minute advice?”

She raised a brow. “Try not to fall in love with anyone,” she said dryly.

I slowly closed the door and she sped off, honking at the bus as she drove past it.

Phfff, I thought to myself. Try not to fall in love with anyone? She obviously doesn’t know me at all.

I shrugged on my heavy bag and hauled it over to the bus in time to see a short and rotund looking driver come hopping out of it. Though I was afraid he was going to reprimand me, his mustache and smile were miles wide.

“So you’re Vera!” he said in a thick accent. He went for my shoulders. “I’m Manolo. Come, come, give me your bag.”

I awkwardly spun around so he could take it off. He then said, “Go, go on board and take an empty seat.” He started to lift up the compartment at the side of the bus.

I thanked him and shrugged, adjusted my purse on my shoulder as I walked up to the bus. I knew people were looking down at me from their window seats and already making their judgements. But fuck it.

I took in a deep breath and climbed up the stairwell.

Everyone was staring at me as I stood in the middle of the aisle, quickly scanning the rows for an empty seat. I thought I saw one at the back.

Luckily, no one looked mad or upset at the interruption. Most were smiling. Some of the grey-haired folk eyed my tattoos and even my tiny nose ring stud with disdain, but that was normal.

Well, might as well introduce myself.

I raised my hand and waved it. “I’m Vera Miles,” I announced sheepishly. “And I’m the one who was late. Lo siento,” I added, the only Spanish I knew.

Everyone laughed and a few people applauded.

A cheery middle-aged man in a cowboy hat and checkered shirt nodded at me. “No more Spanish for these folks, they said it’s English only from

here on in,” he said in a boisterous drawl, shooting me an apple-cheeked grin. “Didn’t you get the memo?”

“No, I was late,” I joked just as Manolo came back on board.

“Vera, sit please,” he said. “There’s a seat down there.” He quickly pointed down the aisle then climbed back into the driver’s seat, closing the hydraulic door.

The bus lurched forward and I steadied myself on the backs of people’s chairs. I made my way down the aisle as he pulled out into the road, giving everyone the shy “hey, I’m sorry” smile as I walked past. There really were people from all walks of life here. Even though it was hard at first to tell who was a native English speaker and who was Spanish, I started to pick up on the fact that every English person was seated beside a Spaniard and making awkward small talk. The Texan was right—the program had already begun.

I kept going until the second to last row where I had seen an empty seat. Actually, it was the only empty seat on the bus.

It was beside a man who was staring out the window, chin resting thoughtfully on his fist. I only had a good moment to take him in unabashedly before I had to sit down. After that, staring at him would become really awkward.

And for some reason, I wanted to stare at him.

Okay, maybe it wasn’t *some* reason. He was handsome. Like, wow, that’s a handsome guy, and then you nudge your friend and get her to take a look as well. *That* kind of handsome. Though I couldn’t see him straight on, he had a nice, strong face, broad nose with a bump on the bridge, and just the right amount of stubble on his cheeks and jaw. His deep-set eyes looked rich brown, his longish, thick hair a shade darker than that and his brows even more so. I couldn’t tell how tall he was, he was *at least* a few inches taller than I was, but his body was fit and lean. His stomach looked washboard flat under his white dress shirt and his forearms that peeked out from the rolled up sleeves were muscular, the same color as wet sand, a beach in the afternoon light.

He was the stereotype of what I thought a Spanish man would look like, all dark looks and mysterious ways, and judging by his neatly pressed dark grey pants and the size of his Rolex on his wrist, he was a successful one at that.

Handsome business men were so not my type—I liked them roughed up and edgy and fun—but there was something about him that got me a little hot under the collar. I sat down as close to him as possible and, once again, hoped I didn't stink.

He turned to look at me and offered me a smile that made me glad I was already sitting down, my joints feeling weak. It was stunning, genuine and charming all at once.

“Hello,” he said, in beautifully accented English. “I'm Mateo.”

He offered me his hand and that's when I saw the wedding ring on his left hand, glinting from the sun that snuck in through the tinted window.

Married? Okay, definitely *not* my type.

Chapter Two

I shook Mateo's hand, surprised at his warm, firm grip. "I'm Vera, nice to meet you," I said before I ever so subtly adjusted myself so that there was a good amount of space between us. It was just as well that he was a married businessman. I hadn't come here to sleep with the first Spanish man I'd met. Otherwise I'd end up in bed with the man I was miming to on the street.

"Vera," Mateo repeated, his voice smooth and polished as glass. "You have just arrived and already you have made me feel better about myself."

I frowned at him, curious and finding his carefully pronounced English adorable. "How so?"

"I was late also. I thought I would spend the whole ride alone." He smiled warmly. "So. Tell me about yourself."

I flipped my hair over my shoulder and grinned. "Oh, okay. How long is the bus ride?"

"Three hours, he said." He nodded up the aisle at Manolo. "We're supposed to talk the whole ride." He gave me a one-shouldered shrug. "More or less."

He was right. Everyone on the bus was murmuring to each other in a forced and kind of awkward way, a range of accents and tones filling the space.

"All right," I said, feeling immediately comfortable around him. Then again, it was often that way when you were with married men. There were no expectations or misunderstandings—you could just relax and be yourself. "How about we ask each other questions? Take turns. You know, I go first and you go second." I hadn't meant to be patronizing but his English was so good that I'd forgotten why he was here.

"I know what taking turns means," he said good-naturedly.

"Well then that brings me to my first question," I said. Normally I would have slapped his leg in flirty good fun but I decided against it. Okay, so maybe I couldn't be *exactly* like myself. "Why are you here? You speak really good English."

"My company," he said. "My English is good, yes, but not so when compared to you. In an international market, those who are fluent in

English remain at the top. If you don't speak so well," he waved his hand back and forth and winced, "eh, then you are looked at as being dumb."

"You're definitely not dumb," I told him.

He smiled faintly. He had nice lips. "You don't know me after some beer."

"A lightweight, I see."

He frowned. "Light...weight?"

Well he certainly wasn't dumb but I could see he didn't know everything. Time to try out my non-existing teaching skills. Lord knew that's all I'd be doing for the next month. I could only hope that it would feel as easy as it did with Mateo—a stranger up until a few minutes ago—but I knew I wouldn't be that lucky.

I sat back in my seat. "Yeah, lightweight. It means that you can't handle your liquor very well. One drink gets you buzzed, the next gets you drunk."

"Buzzed?" he asked. "Like a bee? I do not understand." His brows furrowed, his expression endearing. He had really striking eyebrows.

I had to stop thinking like that.

"Kinda," I said. Actually no, it was better not to confuse him. "Okay, buzzed is like when you're feeling good. Loosey goosesy," I waved my arms up and down like a spaced-out hippie. "Tipsy. Almost drunk. You know, you're like..."

"Happy," he filled in.

"Yes," I said. Well, unless you were drinking and in a shitty mood, then that first drink just makes the tears fall. But that was neither here nor there.

"Do you get...happy, Vera?" he asked. His voice was lower and leaned into me ever so slightly. I caught a whiff of fresh-smelling cologne, something expensive that probably came in a turquoise bottle. The cologne made *me* happy.

I gave him a small smile, suddenly self-conscious. I had expected his eyes to be resting on my cleavage, this damn black tank top kept falling down so low, but he was staring forward at the seat in front of us, waiting patiently for my answer.

"Um," I said rather eloquently. "I've been known to get happy."

He nodded as if he were pleased with that answer and relaxed back in his seat, the space between us widening again. "In Spanish there are many words I could use, but Manolo said there would be, how you say, consequences if we not speaking English. I admit, I did not realize that we

won't be able to speak a word of Spanish. I can't imagine I will survive three weeks."

I felt a strange pang of disappointment. "Only three weeks?" I asked. "I'm here for four."

"I bet you're going to get tired of talking," he smirked. "And I will get tired of having to think. Perhaps I shall end up dumb in the end."

"Ah, but if you have enough beer, you can be dumb and happy."

"Buzzed," he corrected, grinning impetuously. He brought his phone out from his pant pocket. "I must write that down. Buzzed." He made the z vibrate as he said the word and I couldn't help but smile. When he was done he put the phone away and steadied his gaze at me.

"Now," he said slowly, "it is my turn to ask you."

"Wait, I was going to ask you where you worked."

He cocked his head to the side, his smirk deepening. "Those aren't the rules. Next turn. Now, Vera, tell me what you want to...achieve...when you leave Spain?"

I pursed my lips. "I'm not sure I understand."

He ran his hand through his hair as he tried to gather his thoughts. It really was thick and shiny and artfully messy, the color of this dark brown desk that was always in the display at my favorite antique shop. Coffee with threads of gold. A few grey hairs teased his temples and for the first time I started wondering how old he was. Not that it mattered, but he had such an easy, jovial way about him that it never occurred to me that he'd be much older than his early thirties.

He cleared his throat. "Sorry, my English...okay." He waved his hand at me. "Why did you sign up for this? We all have because of our jobs or our companies. But why did you? What do you hope to gain?"

I blinked a few times at his question. "Wow," I remarked. "That's pretty deep. What happened to where are you from? Or what do you do for a living?"

Mateo wasn't fazed. "I can tell you are either Canadian or American, yes? Where you are from is not important. What you do is not important. Why you are here? Yes, that is important."

To tell you the truth, I was the one feeling a bit dumb. I wasn't sure what to say except what I always said.

"I wanted to meet new people, have new experiences."

He watched me closely, his eyes burning with an intensity that wasn't there a few moments before. It's like he was searching for the truth, like he knew I was lying. It made my skin prickle, electric and alive.

Still, he didn't say anything. He just studied me. Even though he hadn't moved, he felt closer.

I took in a short breath and looked away. "I know it's not important, but I'm an astronomy student. I study the stars. I study light that died billions of years ago, planets and stars in other galaxies, millions of miles away. All that time and space. And I hadn't even fucking been to Europe. I was beginning to feel like a chump."

There was slough of silence between us. I eyed him gingerly.

His lips twitched into a smile and with that I felt like I could breathe again.

"A chump?" he said. "This is a bad thing?"

"Yes," I said, my heart beat slowing down. "It's a bad thing. I felt like I had no business studying the universe if I couldn't even go overseas and study people there. And yes, I do actually want to meet new people and have new experiences, too, as cliché as that sounds."

"So you want to study me?" he asked. His tone was innocent but the sparkle in his eye said otherwise. Thank goodness he kept putting out this jokey vibe—most of the time, anyway—or things would get... inappropriate.

"Yes," I said. "I want to study all the Spaniards and find out their deepest, darkest secrets. Starting with you." I wagged my eyebrows at him in an exaggerated motion to let him know I wasn't serious.

"But you never answered what you hoped to gain from all of this."

I wasn't done yet? I sighed. "A better understanding of the universe?"

He tapped my arm briefly and I swallowed hard at his warm fingertips on my skin. He smiled. "You know what Vera, I believe you. But I believe that after spending a month with a bunch of Spaniards in the country, you're going to understand the universe even less."

I had a feeling he was right.



The bus ride flew right by as Mateo and I got to know each other.

He learned, as unimportant as it was, about my interest in astronomy and where I lived and whether I preferred white wine or red wine (I told him I wasn't much of a wine drinker but he only laughed in response, as if I had just said the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard).

He turned out to be a lot more interesting than I had originally suspected. He had a five-year daughter named Chloe Ann. You could tell he adored her from the way his eyes sparkled when he mentioned her name. He showed me her picture from his wallet—she was a pretty little thing with light brown hair and cupid bow lips—but made no mention of his wife. I found that odd and started entertaining the idea that maybe he was separated before I stopped myself. I couldn't go down that path either.

As for his line of work, it was kind of impressive. He co-owned several restaurants in Madrid, Barcelona and Seville and was hoping to expand to the UK or the US at some point, hence why his business partner thought he should brush up on his skills with the program. He mentioned that he was sent because he was the one who was always dealing with the media because of “you know.” Of course, I *didn't* know but by the time I had the chance to ask, the people sitting in front of us turned around in their seats and invited us to chat with them.

I really didn't want to—I felt like Mateo and I were having our own private thing. Plus, the English speaker of the two was a girl who usually hated girls like me. I could just tell, call it gut instinct. She was rather small, brunette, hair swept back into a ponytail, wearing glitter-framed glasses and a t-shirt that said España on it that was a size too large for her. She had this expression in her eyes that was both judgmental and calculating, like she was already plotting my demise, which, on her make-up free and child-like face, made her look like a female version of Damien from *The Omen*.

Luckily, the Spanish girl she was sitting with looked a lot more amiable. She had big brown eyes, a friendly smile and a round face with a bit too much blush on her cheeks. She was probably mid-twenties or older and from the slightly desperate sheen to her eyes, I could tell she *really* wanted to talk to us. It took me half a second to realize it was because of her bespeckled seatmate.

In the Cliffnotes version of our conversation, the Spanish girl ended up being Claudia, who worked in advertising in Madrid, was jonesing for the bus to stop so she could have a cigarette, loved Jared Leto and Thirty Seconds to Mars, was single but had a cat called Rocco, and laughed a lot.

In contrast, her seatmate was named Lauren, who was studying to be a film critic at NYU's film program, wrote for the university paper picking apart what was wrong with today's films, lived with her roommate in the Village, was an only child and a vegan. She was also against American Apparel. I learned this because at one point during our conversation she was eyeing my shirt (I kept pulling it up to make sure I wasn't flashing too much boob) and asked me point blank what I was wearing.

I exchanged a quick look with Claudia, who looked wide-eyed and helpless, and said, "I don't know. I think I got it at American Apparel."

Which, was true. I totally stocked up on the basics there before I came.

The look of disgust on Lauren's face was like I just told her I eat dirty diapers for breakfast. "American Apparel is a horrible company that demeans women by making their employees pose in overtly sexualized ways."

"Well," I said slowly, noticing that a vein on her left temple was throbbing, "I gathered that from their ads. But hey, at least they aren't exploiting children in China."

She narrowed her eyes. "There have been many sexual harassment cases. I don't understand how any woman could support a company that perpetrates rape culture."

I frowned, totally lost at her train of reasoning. "I'm sorry?"

"I must interrupt," Mateo spoke up innocently. "I think the shirt looks very nice on her."

Lauren's beady eyes darted to his wedding ring. "You shouldn't."

I felt a flush of embarrassment but Mateo shrugged and said, "No? Is that an English rule, it is bad to compliment another?" Though the look in his eyes was completely innocent, I caught an edge to his tone. I could imagine him as a businessman, trying to be polite but ruthless at the same time.

Lauren's eyes were now snake-like slits. She slowly took them off of us and turned around in the chair in a huff.

Jeez, what was up her ass? I looked at Mateo and raised my brows. He gave me a similar look back. Lauren definitely wasn't a fan of us. Fortunately, Claudia turned out to be more than cool and the three of us chatted about movies for the rest of the ride. I kept talking about what a genius Michael Bay was, which was a total lie, of course, but it was fun to

see Lauren get worked up. Finally she stuck in earbuds and listened to her music, tuning us out.

After we had a quick pit stop at a gas station, where we all descended on refrigerated sandwiches like vultures and Claudia was able to smoke her brains out, it was a short hop to the town of Acantilado.

According to Mateo, Acantilado meant “Cliff” in Spanish, although I couldn’t figure out if he meant like a sharp rock face or the name of some dude who was always at a bar. Soon, though, I got the meaning. We descended into a small valley in Sierra de Francia, where rugged rusty and grey cliffsides rose out of green foliage. The village of Acantilado was very small and very quaint, like something from a storybook. I wanted to take out my digital SLR camera and capture every detail but the scenery moved too fast and I knew the blurry photos would do nothing to convey what I was experiencing.

To my surprise we didn’t stop and the bus went around the outer rim of the village where we barely fit through the narrow passages between stone buildings, the wheels trundling on the cobblestone, until we were coasting slowly down an open country road.

“Where are we going?” I asked Mateo.

He shrugged. “I do not know. Perhaps they mean to murder us?” He said this in all sincerity though I caught a wicked gleam in his eyes.

I grinned at his humor, so similar to mine. It almost made me...giddy. God, *giddy*. What a dumb feeling. And yet I felt like I was infinitely cooler by sitting on this bus and joking with this man I’d just met. I felt giddy that I was part of something, a team of strangers who were all being driven to some place to get murdered.

I was wriggling in my seat like a puppy, my hands gripping the back of Claudia’s seat while we all craned our necks forward to see where Manolo was taking us.

We finally pulled up in front of a long windy driveway up a hill. Farmer’s fields surrounded us, rolling on with the hills until it met the hazy line of mountains.

Manolo ordered us off the bus. As we got up, Mateo nudged me gently in the side with his elbow and with his warm breath close to my ear said, “It was nice knowing you.”

I giggled which drew a look of ire from Lauren. Oh right, she was still here.

Once we were off the bus, we huddled around as Manolo started bringing out the bags, explaining that the hill was too steep for the bus to go up. Though it was still warm, there was a nip in the air and you could tell that we were at a higher elevation.

Soon we were joined by a skinny, scrubby man in cargo shorts coming down the hill toward us. His receding hairline took the focus off his pale and sweaty face.

“Hola folks!” he cried out in a thick Irish accent, waving at all of us and then wiping his hands on the front of his shirt. “I’m Jerry.”

He looked like a Jerry.

“And that *hola* will be the last Spanish any of you will ever hear,” he went on, putting his hands on his hips. He came across like he was really involved in what he was saying even though I was sure he’d had to do this speech a million times before. “For the next two weeks to one month, all of you will be speaking English. Not a problem for the English-speakers, though I assure you your English will greatly deteriorate as time goes on. The Spaniards will speak better English than *you*.” From the way he smiled and paused, I could tell he expected more than just a few titters from the crowd but that’s all he got. He shook his hand and clapped his hands together once, loud. “But for the Spaniards, this means no business calls unless absolutely necessary. No talking to your family. You may email them and write them in Spanish to your heart’s wee desire but no speaking Spanish, you all understand?”

I heard Mateo murmur “puta” something to himself. I leaned in, catching another whiff of his cologne. “What was that?”

“I was cursing in Spanish,” he said. He lifted a well-manicured finger to his lips to shush me. “Don’t tell anyone.”

“What were you saying?” I said in a whisper, like we were conspiring.

“I’ll have to teach you when the program is over,” he said. Then he straightened up, hands folded at his front. Jerry was still talking, trying to engage each of us with load of eye contact.

“So I hope you’re all prepared for this,” Jerry went on saying, “because this isn’t going to be easy. But, if you’re anything like the one hundred and twenty six other groups I’ve overseen, then you’ll get through it just fine.” Jesus. One hundred and twenty six? Did this guy never take a day off? “There are twenty Anglos and twenty Spaniards and you’re going to get to know each other really well. Up there,” he turned and pointed at the roofs

that were just peeking over the crest of the hill, “is your home for the next while. That is where you will be interacting with each other, Anglo and Spaniard, for six hours a day.”

Mateo grunted and leaned in close to me. “You English don’t understand siestas.”

“Well,” I said, keeping my eyes on Jerry in case he felt like calling on us, “I can’t speak for every other English-speaker here, but I am a huge fan of naps. Totally underrated activity.”

“A nap is very American,” he whispered.

“Canadian,” I scolded him from the side of my mouth.

“You’ll find out what a siesta is. I’ll show you.”

“You’re going to show me how to nap?” I asked warily.

“*Siesta*,” he repeated and I wished the word didn’t sound so sexy coming from his lips. “There is a difference.”

Jerry continued, oblivious to our conversation, “There will be schedules posted every night about the next day’s routine, telling you who you’ll be paired up for the day’s activities. You will have three separate one-on-one sessions in the morning before lunch, and three business situations after lunch. You’ll get an hour of spare time before dinner. After dinner the dramatics will begin.”

Dramatics? I exchanged a look with Mateo but now he was being the poster child for learning and pretending to be attentive.

“This is a fun session, where we learn about both cultures by using immersive techniques and activities.”

I still didn’t know what he meant. Were we all going to start Flamenco dancing?

“There will be flamenco dancing lessons and performances,” he said. I smirked to myself. “Skits, games and excursions to the town for food and drinks. These sessions are when we really let our hair down and get wild.”

Jerry made the motion like he was a 90’s supermodel shaking out her hair. It made everyone uncomfortable.

“Now,” he said, oblivious to how much of a dork he was, “let’s all grab our bags and head up to the lobby. We’ve taken over this whole resort so the lobby and bar now will be our main meeting area. I’ve got some ice-breaker games for us to play and me and my assistant Janet will be assigning your room and room keys.”

“Ice breaker?” Mateo said to me. The sun broke through a few high clouds and bathed his face in light, showcasing his eyes. I could see that brown was an understated way of describing their color—they gleamed like a dark teak wood deck on a sailing ship. They were rich and layered and oh so deep.

I needed to look away but I didn’t. I brushed my unruly hair behind my ears and shrugged. “You know, like getting to know you.”

“But I already know you,” he said with an easy smile. “Why do I have to know anyone else?”

My heart did a funny little flip. Damn his accent. And eyes. And everything.

“This is yours,” Manolo suddenly interrupted us, thrusting my overgrown backpack at my feet before tossing a leather suitcase in front of Mateo. I expected Mateo to tell Manolo off for manhandling his stuff—it looked like a really pricey, custom-made suitcase—but Mateo just brushed it to the side with his foot and picked up my backpack instead. His arms barely strained under the weight but the muscles flexed just enough for my insides to flip again.

“Do you want to wear it or can I carry it up the hill?”

Wow. Chivalrous, too.

I stuck out my hand to take it. “I’m good. But thank you.”

“You are good?”

I sighed. I really was going to have to try and speak more coherently and less colloquial for the next month, or I was going to have a lot of confused and slang-slinging Spaniards on my hands.

“I can carry my own bag,” I explained patiently, “but thank you for offering.”

“Ah,” he said with a nod. I wondered how he was taking it, a young girl like myself schooling him on his language every two seconds. I supposed he’d just have to get used to it just as I would. I wasn’t even used to hanging out with men who were over thirty.

He picked up his suitcase with ease. “I thought you were saying you were good, like a good girl.”

An involuntary smile spread across my lips. “Oh, I am definitely *not* a good girl.”

“I knew there was a reason I liked you.” He wagged his finger at me, eyes glittering.

He *liked* me? I knew he didn't really mean anything by it but still. Butterflies tickled my chest and suddenly I was transported back to kindergarten all over again. I knew I needed to get a grip but I honestly hadn't had a genuine crush on anyone in a very long time. Sex was one thing—I fucked when I was horny—but getting giddy like a schoolgirl because a guy said he liked me was another.

Of course, a crush would do me no good in this situation since he was not just a guy, but a man and a married one at that. And I had literally *just* got here.

“Want to go?” he asked. I blinked and realized that I had been standing there waging some eternal war with myself while everyone else had started lugging their bags up the hill. Only Mateo and I remained behind because *I'd* suddenly turned into a hormonal moron over someone I had just met.

“Yes,” I said, giving him a lopsided smile. I swung the bag up on my back, my shoulders burning with the weight, and started walking quickly up the hill. I wanted it to seem like I was just trying to catch up but in all reality, I wanted to leave the whole “like me” thing behind, back near the bus, where it belonged.

Chapter Three

Once we reached the crest of the hill, we finally got a good look at what would be our home for the next month or so. It was amazing and not at all what I expected. Instead of one big hotel-like building like I had imagined, there were numerous houses scattered about landscaped grounds. Most of them looked like two-story cottages, although some looked like duplexes. They all had their own patios and balconies and little plots of green grass lined with lavender. The houses had a similar look to the buildings I saw in town—whitewashed stone with dark brown wood trim and brick-colored shingles on the roofs.

In the middle of it all was one big brick and stone building that said “Reception” on it. There was a terra-cotta patio in front that lead into a wide, groomed lawn with small tables, wicker and lawn chairs dotted about. The occasional small oak tree provided shade. It was beautiful and I immediately saw myself soaking up the sun. I was pale as anything thanks to the endless rain of a Vancouver winter and spring and the little stint in London didn’t help either. I wanted my limbs, my hair, my *everything* to be golden.

I could overhear Jerry telling everyone that each cottage housed two apartments. All Anglos would be sharing an apartment with a Spaniard though we would each have our bedroom and bathroom. I’d be lying if I secretly didn’t start hoping that Mateo would be my roommate. At least I knew I couldn’t be paired up with Lauren.

All of us left our suitcases and backpacks on the patio while we crammed ourselves into the reception building to get our room keys and the apparent rules to the icebreaker game. The building was grandiose inside, in contrast to its humble exterior. Smooth orange tiles, faded brick that covered the walls and arched over the doorways in a defiance of gravity. Everything I remembered about flying buttresses and the like from my history classes were all coming back to me. However I could have described it though, it was very European, very ancient and very cool.

The reception desk was manned by two bustling, smiling women and across from it, where we had all gathered to line up, was a common area with a few computer stations, comfy chairs and antique looking coffee

tables, as well as a bar made out of a solid piece of wood and layered with copper that complimented the green bottles of Heineken lined up on the bricks behind it. A spiral iron staircase at the end of the room led up to the second floor. Through the main archway I could see a large dining hall with impossibly high ceilings and large white table-clothed tables with four chairs at each one.

Mateo didn't seem the slightest bit impressed—maybe this kind of architecture was common here. He was, however, frowning at a little man in the line in front of us who kept turning around and giving him the eye. My gaydar wasn't going off so it was more of a “do I know you from somewhere?” kind of look to which Mateo responded with a “you talkin’ to me?” stare. This was all done non-verbally, of course.

Finally we got up to one of the receptionists. I gave her my name and was handed a thick pamphlet and was asked if I had a credit card I wanted to put down for bar charges. It sounded like a dangerous proposition—so I did it.

While she took my Visa, Mateo read the writing on the envelope, “Vera Miles.”

“That’s me,” I said. Jerry had been yelling at us to take out our name tags and wear the lanyards around our neck for the entire program. I took it out and put it on. There was another smaller package inside the main one and Jerry had warned us not to look inside those yet. My room keys were also inside.

“There’s an actress called Vera Miles,” Mateo remarked. “She was in Psycho. Good film.”

I nodded, trying to make sure my name tag didn't get stuck between my boobs. It was hard to do with Mateo watching me so closely. “Yup. But I’m named after my grandmother.”

“I’m named after my grandfather,” Mateo said with an easy smile. The receptionist handed me back my Visa card and looked to Mateo, her lips teasing into a smile when she got a good look at him. So, I wasn't the only one who thought he was handsome as all hell. I could tell she also noticed his ring when he placed his hands on the counter, because her eyes flashed with disappointment.

She looked at me and I stuck my lower lip out, as if to say, “such a shame.”

She snapped out of it and looked at him. “Your name please?”

“Mateo Casalles,” he replied.

Damn. I was hoping it was something less sexy than something that not only rolled off his tongue but made it sound like he could use that tongue in many interesting ways.

Perhaps I needed to cancel my bar tab.

“Mateo Casalles?” she repeated, a weird sort of recognition in her eyes.

He gave her a quick smile but that was it. She reached underneath the counter for the envelope and gave it to him. He opened it up with deft fingers and stuck the nametag and lanyard so it was hanging out of his pant pocket.

I wanted to ask him if he was trying to draw attention to his crotch, but I had a vision of that going horribly wrong in translation so I just said, “You’re supposed to wear that around your neck, I think.”

He gave me a steady gaze as we moved out of the line. “This is good.” Then he brought out his room key and peered at it. “Room numero tres.” He waved his hand like he was erasing the Spanish from the air. “Sorry, sorry. Three. Building five.”

I looked at mine and hid my disappointment. “Room two, building one.”

“At least we are close to each other, no?”

I grinned up at him. Everything he said was so disarming, how casually he treated this, like there was an *us*, like we’d been friends for a long time. He made me feel like I was the only person in the room.

Until Claudia joined our side.

“Hey, Claudia, how are you?” he greeted joyfully as if he hadn’t seen in her in a long time. My smile diminished slightly. He treated her the same way, like she was an old friend, too. Mateo was just a really personable, gregarious man. There was no *us*. There was just Mateo.

I took in a deep, steady breath and suddenly I was okay with that. I was just really grateful to have friends, to have people to be comfortable with and to talk to.

Especially when I noticed someone standing in the corner of the room, someone I’d only briefly gazed over early. He was an Anglo, it seemed, it was hard to hear his voice from where I was, and judging on looks alone he was, well, right up my alley. Whereas Mateo was fit, muscular and athletic, sporting a body he carried around with ease, this guy was thin and wiry. Lean but sexy in that rocker heroin chic kind of way. He had black hair that

spiked up around his forehead, a hoop nose ring and a lip ring. Pale as an albino ghost, wearing tight black jeans, mean boots, and a black thermal shirt from an ISIS concert, the print so faded I could barely read it.

The guy looked over, scanning the room, perhaps to escape from conversation from the overly-tanned, blonde woman he was with and I smiled at him, hoping to catch his attention. I knew to a man like *him*, I was totally attractive.

His eyes lit up and he gave me the cool nod of acknowledgement that guys like him were so good at. Perfect. Someone to already distract me from Mateo. I hoped he wasn't married, either, or I was going to have to give up on men this trip. Perhaps this could be my twelve-step, no sex program. At least I had remembered to pack one of my vibrators.

"I knew it!" a thickly accented voice said at my ear.

I turned in surprise, expecting to see someone talking to me. Instead it was the short man who was in line earlier, the one who kept giving Mateo the eye. Up close his eyes were bulging, like a cartoon frog and he had the goofiest smile on his face. He pointed at Mateo's face, then down at his crotch. Well, at his name tag.

"I knew it, you are Mateo Casalles," the man said. "I thought you looked familiar."

Mateo nodded and gave the man a polite smile, the kind that politicians gave.

So...who the hell was Mateo Casalles?

Claudia picked up on my confusion for she lay a hand on Mateo's chest—something I had wanted to do—and tapped him there. "Of course, you don't watch football do you?" she addressed me.

I grimaced. "Canadian football or American?"

"No, *football*," she said. "Soccer."

Oh right. Football was called soccer here, which makes more sense when you think of it.

I shook my head. "I don't really know a lot about sports. I played soccer as a kid but I got in trouble for kicking shins instead." True story. My coach was so upset with me that banned me from taking part in any games. Eventually my mom put me into gymnastics, which wasn't much better since I have the coordination of a severely untalented monkey.

"Casalles was part of our team," the frog-eyed man said. I peered closer at him. His name tag said Jose Carlos. Froggy Carlos was more apt.

I tried to think about what I knew about Spain and soccer. Suddenly it hit me. “Oh my god,” I cried out. “You were on the same team as David Beckham!”

Mateo gave me a chuckle, his eyes softening. “No,” he explained. “There are two teams for Madrid. I was part of Atletico de Madrid. It’s... not the team *you* would have heard of.”

Aw. No Beckham. Though to be honest, the dude did have a higher voice than I did. Still, if Mateo had been on a soccer team—one important enough for someone to recognize him—that meant he might have a body like David Beckham, something I had suspected anyway.

Oh boy. His wife was one lucky bitch.

“He was the best centre-back we ever had,” Froggy Carlos said excitedly, pride practically pouring out of him. “He could stop everyone.”

Mateo’s smile faltered slightly. “More or less.”

Froggy Carlos’s expression faded to somberness. “Yes. More or less.”

Okay, so there was some story here that I wanted to know. What had happened to Mateo? Why was he in the restaurant business now and not being the best centre-back they ever had? Just how old was he? And did he wear David Beckham underwear, because those boxer briefs were sexy as fuck.

My thoughts—probably everyone’s thoughts—were interrupted by the screechy call of Jerry.

“Listen up, mates,” he said, climbing on top of the antique coffee table in the middle of the room. I wondered if he was going to damage it in some way, but he seemed so sickly and frail that it was deemed impossible. “We’re going to play the icebreaker game. It’s simple, it’s easy. And it’s fun! So don’t worry.”

I was worried.

He went on, as if we were all eight-year olds at our first day of camp, “You’ll take the card out of the little envelope that’s inside the big envelope and—without looking at it,” he jabbed his finger at us like we’d already made a mistake, “you put it up on your forehead. Your goal is to go to each person and ask them one question to try and figure out who you are. No cheating! I’ll be watching you.”

Well, what else *would* he do?

He clapped his hands together and told us to commence the game. With a sigh, I exchanged a caustic glance with Claudia and fished the card out. I

immediately put it on my forehead and held it there and turned to look at her.

She was holding a card that said Napoleon on it. I was already smiling.

“Do you want to go first?” I asked her.

“Okay,” she said, her eyes darting up to the ceiling in thought. “Am I... a man?”

Good question. “Yes, you are.”

She nodded, knowing that didn’t really narrow it down.

My turn. “Am I a man?”

She shook her head vehemently. “No. you’re a woman.”

Okay, so quite a feminine woman and probably not a girl or a child. I was putting my deduction skills to good use.

An older Spanish man with the name Pablo and the card of Steve Jobs tapped her on the shoulder, sequestering her attention. I turned around and looked at Mateo who had just finished asking Froggy Carlos something. His face broke out into a huge, panty-melting grin the moment he saw me. Meanwhile he was holding a card to his forehead that said Muhammad Ali. Floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee. Seemed about right.

Froggy Carlos cleared his throat and I looked over at him. His pick was Albert Einstein. Hmmm.

“Who am I?” Froggy asked me. Always so exuberant.

“Um, that’s not how this works,” I told him. Damn, it had been one minute already and my arm was getting tired of keeping this at my forehead.

“Who are you?” he asked.

Oh dear. Drowning in translation.

“Yes. Who am *I*,” I said slowly. “Am I a movie star?”

A dawn of understanding came over his face and I could hear Mateo chuckle softly beside me.

“Oh,” Froggy said. “Yes! You are a big movie star. You were. You’re dead.”

I raised my hand. “I think we’re only supposed to do one question at a time.”

“Lo siento,” he said, then clamped his hands over his mouth in shock over his contraband Spanish. Then dropped the card so it landed face up and just ruined the game for himself. What a noob.

“Oh no,” he said softly, bending down to pick it up. “Oh no, I was Alberto Einstein.”

I swiftly turned to Mateo, trying to suck up all of his attention.

“Okay, you ask me something about yourself,” I said, making sure he hadn’t gotten sidetracked by Froggy’s version of the game.

As he kept the card to his forehead I started noting the largeness of his hands, the details of his forearm, the way his dark hair complimented his bronze skin but never overtook it.

“I think I am a male,” he said slowly, a gleam in his eye. “In fact, I know I am. How could I not be?”

Good question. Seemed impossible.

“So,” he mused, “I have to ask then, am I dead or alive?”

I had to think about that for a second? “You’re alive,” I told him. “Though I don’t think you’re doing too well, which is a shame since you’re such a trailblazer.”

Okay, so I said more than I was supposed to but I wanted to help him out. Besides, he looked puzzled over the word trailblazer anyway.

“Okay, do me,” I said excitedly. And then my whole body flushed hot from my words. My god, I was losing my edge here.

I had hoped the little phrase had gone over his head, but he just gave me a look that told me he knew. He seemed to pick up on the things I didn’t want him to.

“Yes, I will,” he said with a smirk. He straightened up and seemed much taller. “What do you want to know?”

“Oh, right,” I said, forgetting how the game worked for a second. I pursed my lips, thinking, my arm growing more strained. I had a feeling I knew who I could be, someone I hoped I could be.

“Am I sexy?” I asked, almost whispering, as if this was a secret. “Beautiful?” I added, in case he didn’t understand the sexy part.

His eyes looked me up and down and the slowest, wickedest smile tugged on his lips. “Yes. You are very beautiful. And very, very sexy.”

I raised my brow. “Not me, the person I’m trying to figure out.”

“Yes,” he said smoothly, eyeing me through his long lashes. “That is what I meant.”

We stared at each other for much longer than two almost strangers should, the room feeling like it had emptied out, like it was just us here and

we weren't surrounded by thirty-eight other people tripping on their words and laughing at their mistakes.

But we weren't alone. Claudia was squeezing Mateo's arm and saying something to him and he was tearing his eyes away from mine and breaking the spell. If there even had been a spell. Things of this nature were usually in my head.

With his attention on her now, I scanned the room looking for someone, anyone, to continue the game with. I wasn't used to feeling attracted to guys I couldn't have and it was throwing me off-kilter.

I spied the rocker dude making his way through the crowd, heading to the bar. There was no bartender there, though with the nervousness of the Spaniards and the lameness of the game, you'd think there would be one, just handing everyone free shots.

I squeezed through the people until I was at his side.

"Hey," I said to the guy as he peered over the copper-topped bar in frustration. He turned around and I looked to his name tag. "Dave," I said slowly. Damn, I thought he would have had a cooler name than that, like Jet or Bones or Styxx.

"Hi," he said brightly with a North American accent. He had really nice deep blue eyes, though slightly bloodshot. He looked at my tag. "Vera," he read thoughtfully. Then he looked at the one on my forehead. "You're still playing that?"

I shrugged. "I've almost figured it out. Thought you could help me."

He folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the bar, resting one black boot up on his toe. His arms were covered in tattoos, nothing too pretty or interesting though, just the generic snakes and symbols and shit.

"Sure, ask away," he said.

I purse my lips in thought, hoping they looked poutier than usual and asked, "Am I a blonde?"

He nodded.

I smiled. "I'm Marilyn Monroe, aren't I?"

I took the nametag off of my head and looked at it. Sure enough, I was Marilyn. I totally knew it. I had a bit of a Marilyn obsession and was convinced she was my sad yet sexual spirit animal.

"Not bad," he said. "I'd buy you a drink to celebrate but..."

As if he sensed we were contemplating going behind the bar and taking a warm bottle of beer off the wall, Jerry appeared. He had a bit of Froggy

Carlos's bug-eyed thing going on too, coupled with bad teeth and a nose that wouldn't stop twitching. I wanted to make a bunny comparison, but Jerry just wasn't cute enough for that.

"The bar will be open after dinner," Jerry said in his Irish brogue. He eyed the card in my hand. "Oh Marilyn, she was my favorite. Why do the beautiful ones always have to die?" I opened my mouth to say something but he went on, "I'm glad you enjoyed the game Vera and Dave." He smiled at our name tags. "You're free to go take your bags to your room and relax before dinner. It's at seven, so make sure you come back here a few minutes before and don't be late!"

He wagged his finger at us and then scampered off to the next person.

I looked to Dave who was rolling his eyes. "So," I said. "What building are you in?"

"Eight," he said, dangling his keys in front of me. "Want to go check it out?"

I gave him a wary look. He smiled—cute dimples—and said, "Let's go." He jerked his head over to the door and started walking. He had quite the swagger, shaking his little butt that was half the size of mine. I kind of wanted to bite it.

I followed him out, looking for Mateo and Claudia but not seeing them in the chattering crowd, and he picked up his duffel bag. I decided to go back for mine later.

As we walked up the road to his cottage, he brought out a pack of cigarettes and shook it in my face.

"You want?"

I shook my head. I smoked sometimes but usually when I was drinking or feeling down. Right now I was sober and delightfully optimistic, something I just realized I hadn't been in a really long time.

I watched him light up with a gold zippo and studied his hands. I liked men's hands, obviously. His fingers were skinny and slender and looked just calloused enough that I could tell he played guitar. Maybe bass. He had tattoos across them, Asian symbols or scripture of some sort.

"What do those mean?" I nodded at them.

He glanced at his hands as if he was surprised to see them. "I don't know. I got them in Thailand. I was drunk."

I laughed. "Good story."

"Better than waking up with a young boy you thought was a woman."

I grimaced and he shot me a smile. He had crooked teeth but it suited him. “That didn’t happen to me, don’t worry.”

“I wasn’t,” I said. “I can tell you know the difference between a man and a woman.”

He cocked his brow but said nothing until we got to his cottage. He was in a duplex style one, single story and very charming.

“Wow,” I said as we stepped inside. There was a really small kitchenette off to the side but what was impressive was the gleaming wooden floors, the iron chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and the cream colored couches complete with plush woven throws. The white stone walls had Spanish tapestry hanging from it. I didn’t follow him into the bedroom where he put down his bag, but I assumed it was just as nice.

The fact was I hit a wall and my body was suddenly exhausted. I guess waking up early in London and all the traveling, plus leftover jet lag, was starting to affect me. I was about to tell Dave I was going to head back to my room to get settled and have a nap when his roommate showed up.

She looked to be in her late twenties, maybe older. She was tall, almost as tall as Dave, and just as thin, though her skin had a nice healthy glow to it, the kind that came from lots of yoga and coconut water. Her name tag said she was Beatriz. She eyed our tattoos and piercings and gave us a shy smile, probably thinking we were a couple and she’d interrupted something.

We quickly made introductions and after Beatriz put her bag away, Dave had brought out a bottle of grappa liquor he’d bought a few days ago. The two new roommates settled on the couch and I perched on the armrest and we all raised our glasses before taking back the foul-tasting poison.

The shot was a bad idea. I’d only learned that Dave was from Ann Arbor, Michigan and was a guitarist in an “ironic punk” band (whatever the fuck that meant) and Beatriz was from San Sebastian and was a local news anchor who wanted to try going international, before the room was spinning and I could barely keep my eyes open.

I excused myself and said I needed to unpack and I’d see them at dinner. I left them behind in the warm glow of their living room, feeling the slightest bit lonely all of a sudden. I shrugged it off and gathered just enough energy to make it back to the reception area and pick up my bag.

Again, I didn’t see Mateo or Claudia, even though there weren’t many people mingling anymore. With great effort, I swung up my backpack on my shoulders. I was so looking forward to putting it down in my room,

unpacking and never having to see it for a month. I loved the idea of backpacking but after struggling with mine for one day, I wasn't too sure how cut out for it I was. It was probably my fault for taking so many pairs of shoes. Narrowing them down to five pairs had taken up an entire day and was a traumatic experience.

My building was right across from the reception/dining hall and at the edge of the property. A bucolic low-stone wall, crumbling and spliced with dried moss, lined it on one side, bordering a barren field as it swept down the hill to the narrow road below. It was early evening now, around five o'clock or so, and the air was growing colder and the sun was starting to dip toward the mountains.

My first night in Spain was upon me.

And I all I wanted to do was just to crash onto my bed and sleep. I couldn't even fathom unpacking. Even the idea of food seemed overwhelming.

My apartment was on the upper level of the cottage, so I staggered up the wooden steps to the second floor and stuck my key into the door. The apartment looked more or less the same as Dave and Beatriz's, except that there was a balcony that ran all along the front with French doors that led out from the common area onto it. Two iron wrought chairs and a tiny round table beckoned you to sit for a spell.

I beelined it to my room and had just enough energy to appreciate the white bedspread complete with Spanish embroidery, the dark wood floors and furnishings and the wonderful dying light that streamed in through the large, gauze curtained windows, before I dropped my bag to the floor and collapsed onto the bed.

Just five minutes, I thought to myself.

Thirty seconds later, I was out.

Chapter Four

Here's the thing about me—I've never been very good at fitting in. I know that goes without saying in some respects but when you think about it, there's no reason why I shouldn't have found my tribe/gang/group/family over the years. Sure, in high school I hung out with the "skids" but only because I liked to smoke pot and get tattoos and listen to punk and metal. But I was smart too—I liked to learn, I wanted to attend a good university, whereas they did not and wouldn't even go onto community college. So while I was accepted and had made some friends, none of them were the best of friends, those people that had your back, that made you feel like you could be yourself. I was part of my peers and yet apart from them at the same time.

Same went for university. People were far more tolerant and they were less cliquey but for whatever reason, I still had problems finding the right "team." My closest friend was Jocelyn, who I met during my first year, but she moved back to Saskatchewan (no idea why you'd willingly go back there) and so we only saw each other once a year if lucky. Our interactions were reduced to emails and Facebook messages, which is how most relationships operate these days anyway, but still. I missed the face-to-face interaction, the laughs over watching stupid skits on YouTube or getting drunk at local dive bars and betting on who would hook up with who.

Yet, the moment that I stepped off the bus in Acantilado yesterday, I felt like if I hadn't found my place, I was at least halfway there.

Not everyone was immediately likeable or even friendly, but for the most part, people were pretty fucking cool. At least, all of the Spaniards were. Though they took the program very seriously, they also wanted to have fun—my kind of people.

It probably helped that I'd already made a friend or two. It was nice feeling as if Mateo and Claudia and I kind of all knew each other, even if only in the most superficial ways. I could see a few people had bonded with their seatmates during the bus ride, too, something that seemed stupid at first but now I could see the point. Even knowing Dave, Beatriz and Froggy Carlos seemed to go a long way with me.

Unfortunately, I missed out on crucial bonding time because I ended up sleeping all the way through dinner. I was so tired, I passed right out and woke up only briefly when my new roommate—a tiny, cute little thing named Sara—knocked on my door. I think I yelled at her to go away (which I later apologized for) and that was that.

It was six am when I woke up by my own natural clock. I groaned and sneered at the room that was flooding with natural light before I dragged myself off to the bathroom to shower. I felt like I'd been hit by a freight train but I certainly didn't want to look it. There was Dave to impress and perhaps some other people I hadn't met yet. After all there were forty of us there and I think I'd only gotten a good look at a handful.

Of course, if I was being really honest with myself, I wanted to impress Mateo, too. I knew it was really stupid and inappropriate how he kept on crowding my thoughts—I mean, why was my brain and body wasting impulses on someone that I could obviously never have and who wasn't even my type? I didn't understand it and yet the fact remained: I wanted to look pretty for him. I wanted him to look at me and think that I was “very beautiful and very sexy” like the way he had described Marilyn Monroe.

And that was oh so fucking wrong. He was married, with a kid. I shouldn't want him to think I was attractive. I should want him to think I was ugly but just funny enough to want around as a friend.

Sometimes I thought I was a terrible person.

I looked at my phone. It was probably too early—or too late, I was never sure how the time difference worked—to call home and speak to Josh or see if I could get Jocelyn on Facebook messenger. Though I never made it a habit to talk about my love life with my brother, he was adept at making me feel like I was a good person. And Jocelyn, well, she heard about every exploit with every boy, enough that she called me her little slut. I'd call her a whore back and that's just how things went.

My finger hovered above the screen to turn on the data roaming and cellular coverage—I was being so strict with the phone, I couldn't even receive texts. I took in a deep breath and waited, then put it away. There was no wireless internet in this place so if I really wanted to contact someone I'd have to either use the payphones or the computers near the reception. They really, really wanted to make you feel isolated here.

I got ready, spending some extra time on my face. I knew I was a good-looking girl—I was blessed with smooth skin, slightly exotic-looking hazel

eyes and a great pair of lips. Some people said I looked a bit like Nicole Kidman but I just joked that I was her scarier, fatter twin sister. I had an hourglass figure with a small waist but everything else had a bit of extra padding that was hard to shed, no matter how much I dieted. And the fact was, I liked food way too much to try and really slim down. Luckily, that never hurt my chances with men. They liked having something to hold on to and I liked it when they did.

I wasn't sure what the weather was going to be like—I recalled someone saying it was dry and hot in the summer and cold and miserable in the winter—so I slipped on a pair of black skinny jeans, cool black buckled boots and a dark blue flowy top with tiny cherry prints on it. I stroked some styling crème into my hair, tousled it, and headed out the door. Sara was already up and ready to go, sitting on the balcony with a cup of instant coffee.

I apologized for being so rude in my half-asleep state and she just waved it off with a big smile. She seemed to be in her late thirties but didn't speak English all that well. I understood she was married with no kids, from Madrid and worked for a magazine but that's all I got. She had a bright, educated look about her though—maybe it was her shiny, greying blonde hair or her smart sweater and slacks—and I had a feeling that by the end of her time here, she was going to be absolutely fluent. I mean, how could you not be when you were forced to speak another language all day long for weeks?

We left the cottage together, which was nice, kind like an act of solidarity even though we were right across from the dining hall. I suppose she was as unsure and awkward about the program as I was. The air was nippy but the sun had just begun its ascent in the east, casting everything in the color you could never duplicate. It was special here, I could feel that, and just by being a part of it, you felt special too.

There was only one table occupied in the dining room, so I guess we were earlier than I had thought. It was made up of four men, all whispering to each other in hushed Spanish.

“Bad men,” Sara said jokingly as we took a table by the windows. “Big trouble.”

I nodded and smiled. It was funny how sneaky they thought they were being, how trying to speak their own language was going to get them in shit.

We'd only been sitting for a minute when Jerry came into the room, his shoes echoing on the tiles, and cried out, "Alto!" Sara and I watched in amused silence as he marched right over to the table and rested his hands on it. "That means stop, and you know it. No Spanish! What did I tell you?"

It was funny to see Jerry, with his frail frame and wonky face and George Costanza hairline, yelling at a bunch of macho Spanish businessmen, but he did and they responded like disobedient dogs, sulking with their tails between their legs.

They all offered apologies, in English, and Jerry waved his arms in an exaggerated motion, telling them to disperse and go sit elsewhere—only two Spaniards to a table. That was the rule from now until the end of time, or at least until the end of the program. Whichever came first.

One of the men—an opportunist if I ever saw one—came straight over to me and Sara with an eager smile on his face. He was portly, with a handlebar mustache and hair that was as dense and black as a lick of matte paint. His jowls and lined skin put him in his fifties, which made the bad hair dye job stand out even more.

"May I sit down?" he asked politely, smiling like he'd won the lottery.

Sara and I both nodded and told him it was okay, though in the pit of my stomach I felt a peppering of despair. With him sitting here, the chances of Mateo or Claudia joining us were blotted out.

Still, I nodded at the man, who pointed gleefully to his tag and announced himself as Antonio.

"Wow," he said as he sat down, the tip of his belly hitting the edge of the table and jiggling the plates. "You have a lot of tattoos!"

Sometimes I took offence to this, usually because whoever was saying it was saying it in a really disparaging manner but Antonio looked impressed. I cocked my head and peered down at myself. "Thank you."

He made the "OK" sign with his fingers, winked, and said, "Very cool." He then turned to Sara and started asking her basic questions. I watched them for a few moments, both of them thinking hard and trying not to slip into their native tongue. I admired them. I'd only been in Madrid for an hour yesterday with no one understanding a word I'd said and that was hell.

I decided I liked the both of them. I also decided I needed coffee.

I looked around, wondering if it was time to get up and serve ourselves. There was a waiter who was slowly going around and bringing carafes of coffee to each table but it seemed everything else was on a long table,

served buffet style. People were coming in now, some already in groups and taking over the tables.

Claudia came in by herself, sporting a chic, cropped leather jacket, her cherubic face looking cute but wary as she scanned the room. The minute she saw me, she smiled and started my way only to stop herself when she noticed I was already with two Spaniards. I gave her a truly apologetic look but she just shrugged and asked to join the table she was closest to.

Dave, with his hair extra stiff and spiky, came in with Beatriz and managed to get the last empty table by the door. Seconds later a sleek-looking Mateo was joining them. Beatriz actually got out of her chair and I had a split-second to admire her tapered legs, yellow strapless dress and cardigan set before she wrapped her arms around Mateo and hugged him like she'd known him her whole life. The embrace was quickly followed by the traditional "beso beso"—quick pecks on each cheek—and he happily joined their table.

Ugh. Now I really felt disappointed. I started cursing at myself, feeling so stupid for sleeping through dinner. Who knew what had happened after Dave and Beatriz's? Perhaps they went to dinner, made friends with everyone, Mateo included, and dragged everyone back to their place to party. I felt like I was in high school all over again, opting to spend many nights at home by myself yet always regretting it on Monday when I heard about all the awesome parties I missed and all the boys I could have kissed.

To make matters worse, the Anglo who sat down at our table was Lauren. There were a ton of other people left, Anglos I hadn't even had a chance to meet, and yet Lauren was the one who pulled out her chair like she was the Queen of fucking England and sat down.

"I hope they didn't forget my vegan breakfast," she said, not even bothering to say hello to Antonio or Sara.

"Your name is Vegan?" Sara asked, peering at her name tag in confusion.

Lauren pulled off her glitter glasses and squeezed the bridge of her nose. "No," she said, as if speaking was a huge effort. "My name is Lauren. *I am* a vegan. It's a life choice."

Antonio scrunched up his nose. "You are vegetarian?"

Before she could lecture him, I turned to her and said, "I don't think they bring it to your table. I think it's a help yourself type of thing."

"We'll see about that," she said and stalked off toward Jerry.

I gave Antonio and Sara an apologetic look. “Most vegans are nice,” I explained feebly. I picked up my plate and headed toward the buffet. As soon as I got there, standing in line behind a really tall Spanish dude with the name Ricardo, I had to giggle to myself.

The entire buffet was just meat and cheese. That’s it. There was a bowl of fruit salad and some whole grain bread that you toasted yourself, but literally everything else was a vegan’s nightmare. Salami, pastrami, prosciutto and ham sliced thinner than paper, followed by a million different hard cheeses, soft cheeses, cottage cheese. Finally there was a large platter of churros and some cups of bread pudding, most definitely un-vegan as well.

If she didn’t get her own private menu, Lauren was going to flip her lid. It was probably really wrong of me to rejoice in that, but what can you do.

“How are you, Vera?” A silken voice interrupted my evil musings.

I turned to see Mateo standing right behind me. He looked great, fresh even. It was a novelty to see him for the second time, the second day. A new look, a new Mateo. Today, he was wearing a full on suit; dark blue pants and blazer, light blue shirt, no tie. It fit him perfectly and looked very smooth, very expensive, silk and wool. His hair was still skirting the line between groomed and messy and I still wanted nothing more than to tug at the ends of it to feel how soft and strong it was. His strong jaw and lean cheeks had a darker shade of stubble going on, a ten o’clock shadow.

I ignored the pulse of heat between my legs and managed to give him a smile. “Oh, hello. Good morning. I am fine, how are you?”

I know I sounded completely formal but I was trying to err on the side of the fact that we weren’t really friends per se and I did need to speak proper English. Or maybe I was trying to save face over the fact that the last time I’d seen him I had the words Marilyn Monroe stuck to my forehead.

“I am well. I missed you last night,” he said, his words causing my stomach to tumble momentarily. I needed to eat something. “Where were you?”

I tried to speak but he squeezed against me, the air filling with his bracing ocean scent, as he reached past to scoop up a mound of ham with the tongs. He plopped some of the ham on my empty plate before putting the rest on his.

I licked my lips, watching as he put a few slices of cheese on our plates as well. Either he was really chivalrous and wanted to feed me, or he

wanted me to hurry my ass along so everyone else in line could eat.

"I didn't mean to miss dinner," I said, scooting over to give him room. "I don't know what happened. I just fell asleep."

"Oh yes," he said. His eyes glittered like golden brown topaz. "I heard you had some grappa and then never woke up again."

My mouth dropped and I angled my neck around him so I could see Dave and Beatriz at their table. "I had one shot and then I went back to unpack. I was tired to begin with."

He shook two pieces of toast at me before he put them in the toaster. "If you knew how to take siestas, then you wouldn't be so tired that you miss dinner," he lectured teasingly.

"Hey," I said in a faux-authoritative voice. "Siesta is Spanish for little sleep. No Spanish allowed. I just saw a bunch of guys get in trouble for speaking it."

Mateo raised a brow. "Well, I am not a fool. I came here to learn, not to waste time or money. You, Vera, you need to have a little sleep today so that you can stay up tonight. Tonight there is a party."

"Oh? There wasn't a party last night?" I asked, hinting around for clues as to what happened when I was dreaming away. "Everyone seems really close this morning," I added.

He studied me for a moment before he said. "No party. We all had dinner, lots of wine and then Dave and Beatriz brought everyone into their house for more drinks. I had one and then left, so I don't know anything else. I had to call my wife. She speaks fluent English you know, so we didn't speak Spanish, don't worry."

The W word. Wife. There it was. There, he said it. Proof that the ring wasn't a stylistic choice, proof that he wasn't separated. Wife. She existed. And I had to stop caring what he thought about me. I looked down at a pot of steaming scrambled eggs that a cook just placed down and entertained the thought of turning it over on my head. That would be a good start.

The toast popped out of the toaster and I nearly jumped out of my boots.

"It's funny," he mused, putting the slices of toast on our plates. He nudged my arm gently with his elbow, getting me to move along. "You say that everyone seemed really close. I have known Beatriz before."

I resisted the urge to look at her sitting at the table. I remembered what she looked like: long sheet of black hair, poker straight, tanned, glowing skin, perfect white teeth and a model body clad in a buttercream shift.

“How so?” I asked, not really caring.

“She is a reporter, on television. She used to cover some of our games. She interviewed me, many times. When you’re on the national team, you get to know every...personality.”

I had no idea what that meant and I wasn’t about to ask. I was at the end of the line anyway and finished my plate with a churro that I picked up with my hands. I waved it at Mateo. “See you later,” I said, trying to sound cool and cheery and all that jazz, even though the churro was still hot and the sugared grease was burning a hole into my fingers.

He frowned at my sudden departure, but nodded.

I threw the churro down on my plate and hurried back to my table. It was empty now, with Sara, Antonio and Lauren all at the buffet, and there was a large carafe of hot coffee waiting. I poured myself some. While I took a deliciously rich sip, I told myself I’d never speak to anyone before I had my first cup. Mateo was just being nice, nice like a decent human being, and I got so weirded out by the idea of his wife and his relationship with Beatriz that I just said adios with a churro. I needed to get a grip. This wasn’t like me. Well, not when it came to guys, anyway.

Soon Antonio and Sara joined us and we started chatting away. I was suddenly eager to really prove myself, as if I just remembered why I was here. To meet new people and to help them with their English. Oh, and get a better understanding of the universe but I was pretty sure that Mateo was going to right about that one.

Lauren eventually came back, her cheeks blotchy red with anger from having apparently yelled at Jerry over the food. Turns out there was no specific menu, there was just a bowl of fruit. I would have felt bad for her but the way she was treating the rest of us—all the people who didn’t have anything to do with her lifestyle choice—I couldn’t.

When plates started being cleared and everyone was almost done, Jerry made an announcement that the schedule for the day was now at reception. Having wolfed down my meat and cheese and churro, much to the annoyance of my stomach, I bid farewell to my table and went straight to the schedule. I brought out my phone from my jean pocket and started writing my day down on a virtual notepad.

9:00 – 10:00 one-on-one with Jorge

10:00 – 11:00 one-on-one with Francisco

11:00 – 12:00 one-on-one with Jose Carlos (Froggy)

12:00 – 1:00 Lunch

Break (nap time?)

2:00 – 3:00 business session with Mateo (oh god)

3:00 – 4:00 business session with Antonio

4:00 – 5:00 business session with Nerea

Break

6:00 – 8:00 Dinner (two hours?)

8:00 – Evening festivities

And that was to be my first official day at Las Palabras. Day one of thirty.

And that's when it hit me: just what in the fuck did I sign up for?

Chapter Five

By the time lunch time rolled around, my head was spinning with a new kind of exhaustion. It felt tired, spent, rolling the squeaky, rusty wheels in my brain. My jaw was tired like I'd been giving a blow job for hours and my throat was hoarse and parched. Aside from the times that me and my brother would go to the park and get high, I don't think I'd *ever* talked for three hours straight. Because that was the thing about the program so far—the Spaniards struggled with their words, they fought to be heard and understood, so you wanted to help them out. You wanted to supply words for them and you wanted to teach them and when you couldn't, you had no choice but to just talk.

And so I talked like I'd never talked before. I told the kindly psychologist Jorge all about growing up in Vancouver and my tumultuous relationship with my sister, I told stoic, city worker Francisco (who insisted I call him Paco) all about my interest in the universe and what I was studying, and I told software designer Froggy about my tattoos and what most of them meant and how I felt like I never fit in. I talked about things I'd normally never ever talk about and all because they spoke another language. They both understood English and yet didn't and in some weird, scary way, it felt like I could tell them anything.

By the time I stumbled into the dining hall for lunch, my face greasy with sweat and my lips desert dry, I started wondering if this program was going to be my new therapy. I'd certainly said more about myself in the last three hours than I ever did to the shrink I used to see.

I looked around for a table and saw nothing but similarly dazed faces. I also saw Claudia who was waving me over. I staggered to the table and plunked myself down.

"You look tired," she said. "I am tired as well. It hurts to think." She tapped the side of her head.

I raised my face off of the table and saw her pour wine from a bottle into a glass nearest me. I tried to focus and noticed that every table had two bottles of red wine. Red wine? At lunch? What kind of sorcery was this?

"Here have some," Claudia said. "You drink wine, yes?"

I shook my head. "Not really. I mean I have had it, but I prefer beer."

She laughed in the way that Mateo had at the same answer and quickly poured some for herself. “You will love wine in a few days, I promise. This is good. You will like it.”

“Do you always drink wine during lunch?” I asked, mustering enough strength to bring the glass to my lips.

“Not that way.”

I turned my head to see Mateo pulling out a chair. He looked to us in utter sincerity, brows raised. “May I?”

“Of course, yes,” Claudia said.

He looked at me and sat down. I raised the glass at him. “Not what way?” I asked, for some reason not surprised to see him here.

He quickly poured himself a glass of the garnet liquid then held it away from him. With the smooth twitch of his wrist, he moved the glass so that the wine swirled around and around.

“You take your time,” he said, eyes burning into me, as if I were the wine. “You give it time to breathe. You don’t rush it. Let it be what it is. Wine. Nothing else. Just wine. Let it interact with the world, with the air. Let it live. Just watch it, pay attention, appreciate.” He raised the glass to his face and stuck his nose in it. He breathed in sharply a few times before he pulled away. “Then you smell it. You take it in. Pay attention. Every wine is different, they are all trying to say different things, yes? This wine says it is calm. It is nice. It gets along with everyone.”

He got all that from the wine? I was kinda fascinated.

He then put the glass to his mouth and placed his full lips on either side of thin rim, wet and delicate. I swallowed hard, aware that I was watching him too intently and yet I couldn’t look away. He tilted the glass and the ruby streams slid toward his mouth. He opened his lips slightly and took it in. My god, I’d never seen something so mundane look so damn sexual. His cheeks moved in and out subtly as he let the wine sit in his mouth. He closed his eyes, lashes dark against his skin, and then slowly swallowed his Adam’s apple bobbing against his strong neck.

He kept his eyes closed even after he took the glass away. Then he opened them and grinned at me with a red-stained mouth. “This wine tastes like shit.”

If I had wine in my mouth, I would have spit it out. I laughed, loudly, like I was drunk but I was just drunk on him.

“Mateo,” Claudia scolded but she was giggling too. She took a sip. “It isn’t so bad. Vera, have some.”

“I don’t know,” I said warily, still smiling. I tried to do what Mateo did, albeit a speeded up version—swirl, smell, sip. It was very dry and a bit bitter, but then again that’s what most wine tasted like to me.

It also went straight to my head. I really should have waited but by the time the waiter put our lunch of rice and pork chops on the table (it wasn’t buffet-style this time), I’d had one glass and was grinning to myself. Shit, Spanish wine was strong.

“Are you buzzzzzzed?” Mateo teased, leaning in close.

“No,” I said defensively and I picked up my knife and fork to cut into the pork chop. My eyes flitted across the table at Claudia and our new seatmate, Wayne. He was the man I’d first seen when I got on the bus, and though he wasn’t wearing a cowboy hat at the moment, he was an obvious Texan through and through. His bulbous nose was tinged with red and I wondered if he was feeling “buzzed” too or if he was just an alcoholic.

“You’ve got some interesting tattoos,” he said, eyeing my chest and arms. “I ain’t used to see a girl with so many.”

“You *do* happen to have a lot of tattoos,” Mateo mused, pretending to study me for the first time. “I am sure they all tell a story about you.”

“Do you have any?” I said, turning the question around on him.

He gave me a sheepish, adorable smile and shook his head. “I am not so good with needles.”

Claudia snorted. “Centre back for Atletico and you are afraid of needles?”

“What’s Atletico?” Wayne asked.

Mateo narrowed his eyes playfully at Claudia. “I did not say I was afraid, I said I am not good. We don’t...get along.” He looked to Wayne. “Atletico is a football—er, soccer, yes? A soccer team in Madrid.”

“He used to play for them,” Claudia said. “He was very good.”

“Was?” Wayne repeated. “What do you do now?”

“Me and my partner own a few restaurants.”

Wayne grinned. “No shit, Sherlock!” he said, pounding his fist on the table and making the wine splash around in the glasses. “I own bars in San Antonio and Austin, Texas.”

Mateo’s eyes lit up. “That is very intriguing. If we get a session together, I’m afraid I am going to—how do you say, pick your brain? Yes,

pick your brain about that. I would like to expand the business overseas. I am very curious about the US market.”

“I look forward to it. How long have you been in the restaurant business?”

“Six years,” he said automatically, as if were counting the days.

“I remember when you left the team,” Claudia said between bites of her food. “And no one could understand why you were opening a restaurant. But, it was very good food. Still is. Better than this.” She waved her fork in small circles.

As she was saying this, I watched Mateo closely. His body stiffened just enough for me to know that the subject was a delicate one. Once again I wondered what had happened to him but I didn’t want to ask.

Wayne, on the other hand, wasn’t so good at reading people. “Why did you leave the team?”

Mateo sucked on his lower lip for a moment before he spoke, his voice measured. “I became injured. Tore my ACL. My knee. I’m fine now, but it was time for me to leave the game and do something else.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Eight years.” Another automatic answer. “I was thirty when it happened.”

Thirty-eight? Did I just count that right? Mateo was thirty-eight?

“You do not look thirty-eight,” I couldn’t help but say.

He gave me a smile that looked borderline grateful and focused his bewitching eyes on me. “What do I look like to you, Vera?”

A gorgeous, sensual, Spanish god. That’s what he looked like to me.

I crammed some rice in my mouth—so ladylike—and hoped I wasn’t blushing. When I swallowed, he was still waiting for an answer, his eyes never having left my face.

I dabbed the corners of my mouth with the napkin, my leftover lipstick staining it coral, and said, “You just look very young. That’s all. Like, thirty-two, maybe.”

“And how old are you?”

“Twenty-three,” I said slowly and in that moment I was suddenly aware that I was probably the youngest person in the program. Even Lauren seemed a year or two older than me, maybe because her bitterness and glitter glasses aged her.

“You got all those tattoos in twenty-three years?” Wayne exclaimed, as if it just blew his damn mind. “That is dedication.”

“That is dedication,” Mateo repeated in agreement, his eyes now raking over my arms and chest before they slowly made their way up to my face. He gazed at me intently like I was one of life’s greatest mysteries, as if I were utterly mesmerizing. I’d never seen anyone look at me that way and it glued me to my seat.

When I finally remembered to breathe, I poured myself another glass of wine and gulped it down. Luckily, Claudia had spoken up, telling us about a time she got a tattoo on her ass of her ex-boyfriend’s name and how she was trying to figure out how to into something funny, like Johnny Depp did with turning Winona Forever into *Wino* Forever.

While my brain got happily stuck on a tangent about Winona and Johnny and how weird it was that they dated and if it ever got awkward when they ran into each other, I finished my meal and another glass of wine. By the time we were all done, all the bottles at our table were empty and I was more than ready for a nap.

Seeing me yawn, Mateo pounced into action. “Come on, I’ll show you how to have a siesta. Sorry, little sleep. A nap.”

I looked at Claudia for her response but she just smiled coyly and shrugged before she got up with Wayne and said goodbye to us, leaving Mateo and I alone.

“Oh, don’t look so worried,” he said. He got out of his chair and held his hand out for me.

I eyed it with trepidation and gingerly placed my hand in his.

His fingers closed over mine, sealing us together with heat and heartbeat. He brought me up to my feet, flashed me a self-assuring smile, then gently let go of my hand. He pointed out the door. “Follow me.”

We walked out and as I passed by the reception I noted that one of the computers was free, though with the other four occupied by Anglos, it didn’t seem like it would stay free for long. This was the rare moment of the day where we could have free time and I really wanted to talk to Josh and let him know I was alright. And let’s be honest, I wanted to update my Facebook to say “Having a blast in Spain, bitchiez! #notsohumblebrag”. But ex-soccer star turned restaurateur turned someone I wanted to keep being around was walking out the door and into the bright Spanish sun and my body was begging me to follow him and his fancy suit.

I'd made the right choice. The minute I stepped out onto the patio and was hit with the strength of the sun, my whole body tingled and relaxed. I fished a pair of sunglasses out of my purse and put them on while Mateo reached over two wicker chairs and plucked the cushions from them. Curiously, I followed him as he walked out onto the shorn lawn with the cushions in tow and threw them down near the shade of a small oak tree.

"I'm napping here?" I asked him, folding my arms.

He gestured to the cushions with an exaggerated motion. "We are napping here."

"On the ground?"

The corner of his mouth ticked up while he started to shed off his blazer. "Oh, Vera. You've taught me so many interesting words, the least I can do is teach you how to have a proper nap. All of Spain is counting on me."

I was barely listening. My mind was caught up in the sight of him taking off the jacket, the sky blue dress shirt underneath stretched across the fluidity of his muscles. How the hell was this guy thirty-eight? Granted, I knew that men aged slower than women did and that half the celebrity men I thought were sexy were in their late thirties and early forties. Hell, Johnny Depp was in his fifties! But Mateo's age caught me by surprise.

The funny was, I thought it would make me relate to him differently. I thought it would make things awkward—at least in my mind—or make me feel like I was hanging out with my beloved Uncle George or someone like that. But it didn't, not at all.

He took off the blazer and turned it around so that the back of the jacket was to the grass. Then he placed it on the ground, just below one of the cushions. He looked to me expectantly, brows raised. "There. For you."

I scoffed in surprise. "You can't do that, you'll get grass stains on it."

He merely shrugged. "So?"

"So? That can't be a cheap suit."

Another shrug, his head cocked to the side. "I don't care." He must have noticed the dubious expression on my face, that I was thinking he would just buy another one. "Clothes don't have a life until they get dirty," he explained. "A little dirt is good."

A valid statement—one my mother would have hated—though it was kind of an odd one coming from a man who, so far, had looked one hundred per cent put together. From his wing tipped shoes, to his Rolex, to his leather suitcase and tailored suit, everything about Mateo screamed "rich,

discerning business man” and yet here he was telling me clothes were meant to live dirty lives.

“Okay,” I said, still perplexed. I dropped to my knees, all too aware of what this could look like to a passerby, in fact I tried really hard not to stare at his crotch. I hastily flipped around so I was lying with my head on the cushion and my upper body on the jacket.

Mateo stood over me, his body blocking out the sun. “Very good. You comfortable?”

I stared up at him, seeing only shadows on his face. I felt totally vulnerable, just lying in front of him like this. “This seems like a lot of work for a nap.”

I couldn’t tell if he smiled or not. He got down to the ground and lay down beside me, his head on his cushion and just inches away. I wanted to say something about how he was now getting the back of his nice silk shirt all dirty but I knew what he’d say, that he didn’t care.

“So,” I said as I lay there, so totally conscious of how close he was to me. Was this silly? Inappropriately intimate? What was *this*?

“Do you often talk in your sleep?” he asked casually.

“Huh? I’m not sleeping.”

“But you should be. It’s a called a *little sleep*.”

So we really were just going to nap? No English lessons? No questions?

“Rest your brain, Vera,” he said in a low voice that raised the hair on my arms.

Easier said than done, I thought to myself. I adjusted my sunglasses so they weren’t digging in behind my ears and rolled my head slightly toward the left and away from him. I really did feel silly doing this, trying to take a communal nap in the broad sunshine, with chattering Anglos and Spaniards around me, with a man I’d only known for about twenty-four hours.

But the sun really did feel good on my limbs and there was a sweet-smelling breeze in the air, a mixture of running water and fresh grass and some kind of flower. Before I knew it I was sinking in further and further into the soft ground and the comfortable satin of his jacket lining, the warm sunshine my blanket. I heard Mateo snoring softly and I grinned to myself like a total cheeseball.

Then, I too was sleeping.



“Vera,” I heard Mateo say, his voice cutting through the dark. Everything slowly turned blinding white beneath my fluttering lids. I opened my eyes and saw him sitting up and leaning forward, knees drawn, arms resting on them. He had rolled up his sleeves again, showing those tanned, thick-veined forearms that I now knew belonged to a total athlete. Even if Mateo no longer played soccer, his body still acted like it did.

I grunted and licked my lips. “What? What time is it?”

“Time for us to get down to business,” he said.

I slowly straightened up, feeling tired and well-rested at once. I could have sworn only a few minutes had passed but I took out my phone and peered at it. Yup, it was five minutes to two. I’d been asleep for at least forty-five minutes.

I looked at him shyly, suddenly glad for my shades. I’d never just slept with a guy without any of that other stuff involved. Even though we had napped apart and never once touched—and we had been lying down in public for all the world to see—the air between us felt fragile. New. It was like the morning after, but without all the guilt and shame.

I cleared my throat, aware that I had just been staring at him. “Well that was fun.”

He ran a hand through his hair and smiled up at the sun with his eyes closed. “Good. Now you’ll be able to stick around for the rest of the day. And next time you want to nap, you come find me.”

I chewed on my lip for a few beats. As innocent as it had been between us, I wasn’t sure how innocent it looked. Again, we weren’t doing anything that kids didn’t do during nap time in kindergarten. But I had to wonder, just a bit, if anyone else here thought it was somewhat...wrong. I mean, though he didn’t look it and in some ways, didn’t act it, he *was* in his late thirties. He was a respected athlete and business owner. And I was a twenty-three year old astronomy brat with tats and an old movie star’s name. Everyone was probably wondering what he was doing.

I wondered if Mateo Casalles knew what he was doing. Judging by his easy-going attitude, and his philosophy on clothes, he probably didn’t care what people thought. I think he was just a flirtatious man with his own ideas of fun. Damn if that didn’t make him more endearing.

I think I needed to take up his philosophy. I thought that’s how I approached life too. But maybe not. Mine had too many cracks in it, where people could get to me.

Minutes later, I was brushing the grass off of me while Mateo and I discussed where to have our business meeting. According to Jerry, this part of the day was less conversational and more about actual business situations and how to handle them in English. At breakfast we had been given a small loose leaf booklet that was full of scripts we could follow. All in all, it seemed like a pretty serious ordeal. There was the phone call, where he would go into his room and I would go into mine and we would call each other and go over a script. Mateo didn't seem too sold on that, I guess because without visual clues, it was harder to speak.

There was also a business group meeting and we'd have to find another pair to do that, or we could do a faux job interview, which could pretty much turn into any employer trying to hire someone or any company trying to sell.

To my surprise though, Mateo eventually settled on the business call.

"I fear it, so I should do it," he said. I admired his reasoning. I took my script and went to my apartment. Sara wasn't there, so I took a seat on the couch beside the phone and waited for him to call me. The booklet had everyone's extension, which was kind of nice if you got bored and felt like wanting to talk to someone. Unfortunately, we were blocked from making long distance calls and I was pretty sure a collect call to my house would get refused. I told myself to run to the computers on my pre-dinner break so I could finally get in touch with my family.

While I waited for the phone to ring, feeling like I was back in high school all over again, I poured myself a cup of clean-tasting water from the tap and looked around the silence of the room. Aside from my early bedtime the night before, I really hadn't had a place to myself in a week, not since I left for London. I was quite a private person, despite what most people would say, and really cherished my time alone. I liked having my own personal space to think and to dream. Perhaps that's why I'd never made any really close friends over the years—I never felt I needed them.

And yet standing in the kitchenette of the foreign apartment, surveying the cream couch and the iron chandeliers and the dark-wooded floors of the sparse room, I felt this strange gnawing in the pit of my chest. It was like I didn't want the alone time, the time to think. I wanted to go back outside and be around people, soak up their personalities and their essence, like a dull-toothed vampire. This was very unlike me—one day at Las Palabras and I was changing. I wasn't sure if I liked it.

The phone rang, jolting me out of my thoughts. I ran over to it and snatched it up. "Hello?"

"Vera?" Mateo said over the line. His voice sounded higher on the phone, crisp and professional.

"Yup," I said and immediately started toying with the phone line, wrapping it around my finger.

A thick silence permeated the line. He cleared his throat. "You are supposed to go first. It says so."

Oh, right, the script. I flipped open the pages, feeling a bit nervous all of a sudden. There was something quite serious about Mateo's tone, as if we'd stopped being friendly for a moment.

The script was fairly straightforward. I was an investor who was calling about the business. My job was to ask Mateo the questions and he only had a brief word or two telling him what he should talk about without supplying him the actual script. He had to make that up on his own, pulling from his real life.

It went okay, at first, but when it called for me to ask him "what are the advantages of investing in your company" he started to stumble over his words. He was saying them wrong, drawing a blank.

"Merde," he swore harshly into the phone. "Fuck. Fuck!"

I was taken aback by his change in tune. I swallowed hard and said, "It's okay. We can just start over. It's a hard question."

"It's a question I can't even answer in Spanish," he said bitterly. "How the fuck do I answer in English?"

I wasn't sure what to say. I continued to coil the phone line around my finger. I heard him sigh.

"Sorry," he said. "I am sorry, Vera."

"It's okay," I said in a small voice.

"It is not okay," he said. "But it has nothing to do with you." He paused. "I will try and think of something to say about my company for next time. Do you mind...do you mind if we just talk instead?"

"What about?" I asked.

"You. Let's talk about you. Vera Miles."

"I'm not very interesting."

"You say that, but I have many questions."

I smiled, my heart starting to beat a bit faster. "Okay...but if I tell you all my secrets, you're going to find me boring."

“You? Boring?” he chuckled warmly. “Impossible. I only have twenty questions for you, like the game. You know the game, yes?”

“Yes,” I slowly said. But I seriously didn’t feel like playing it with him. Now, if the game were reversed, that would be another story.

“Well, I shall ask you one question a day. I am here for only twenty-one days, so on the last day you can ask me a question.”

“That hardly seems fair,” I said. Still, if he had to ask me a question every day, that meant he had to talk to me every day. I couldn’t say no to that.

“It is fair, to me,” he said simply. “First question is...did it hurt when you got that hole put in your tongue?”

I laughed. “What? My tongue ring?”

“Yes. Did it hurt? It looks like it would hurt.”

Funny, I’d never seen him eyeing my tongue ring before. Usually it was quite noticeable when someone finally spies the silver inside your mouth. It’s not like I went around all day doing the Julia Roberts laugh.

“Yeah, it hurt,” I said. “But I don’t mind a bit of pain.”

“I see,” he said. “It suits you.”

“Really?” All I’d heard from my mother and sister was that it made me look like a cheap tramp. I was sure to someone like Mateo, it was looked at as being gross and immature.

“Yes,” he said. “When I was younger, I thought it was a cool look. I wanted one.”

I couldn’t picture Mateo with a tongue ring—or any kind of ring, other than his wedding one. “I have to say, I can’t really imagine you with a tongue ring,” I admitted. “It’s not really your style.”

“Oh, I was a fun person, when I was younger,” he said. “Now, I just get buzzzzzzed. That’s it.”

That was the second time he had said when he was “younger.” I wondered if being around him was like reliving the past. “You’re not old, Mateo,” I told him. “You’re not even forty.”

“But I will be forty before you will be forty. You will only be twenty-five.” He sighed. “You will see. Sometimes you are stuck being the person you are and not the person you were. Or could be.”

The somber quality to his voice filled the air around me, making the apartment seem shades darker, like the curtains had been pulled closed. It

was scary how I totally understood what he was talking about, no matter what age I was.

He cleared his throat and went on, his voice louder. “Well if you do not mind, Vera, I think I will need to make a phone call or too, a real one. I will see you tonight at the party, yes?”

“Yes,” I said softly. The receiver on his end clicked off and I stared at the phone for a few moments before hanging it up. Through the littlest lapses in character, I was beginning to think there was more to Mateo than what met the eye. Though he’d be playing twenty questions with me, I was going to make sure I unravelled him first, silken thread by silken thread.

Chapter Six

“I’ll give you ten euros if you do it.”

I put down my drink and gave Eduardo a steady look. “Are you serious?”

“Of course,” he exclaimed and patted Angel on the back, hard. “Isn’t that right, Angel?”

Angel, who probably spoke the least English out of everyone at Las Palabras, nodded. Like his namesake, he had a round face and a mop of curly brown hair. His thick-framed glasses and geek chic outfit made it hard for me to determine if he was a young hipster or a nerd in his mid-thirties. He worked for a software company in Madrid, which didn’t help.

I plucked the cherry out of my screwdriver and held it in front of my mouth. I looked to Eduardo who was eyeing me with a big fat grin on his face.

He and Angel were among the first people to show up at the party. I had gotten there early, not wanting to pull the same thing I did at dinner and get there late. I had gotten so wrapped up with catching up on Facebook and writing long emails to Josh and Jocelyn that I barely noticed everyone piling past me into the dining room. By the time I logged off, all the tables were taken and I had to sit with Edna, a retired teacher from Manchester who *really* didn’t seem to like me. She was here with her husband Nick and I recognized them as the people who had given me dirty looks on the bus.

Luckily, the Spaniards I sat with were nice. There was quiet Cristina who barely talked and Yolanda, a hippie-ish woman with a toothy grin and really dark skin that looked like beef jerky. Yolanda loved to talk and show off the English she picked up from some yoga guru in Nepal. I don’t know what she was talking about, actually, but it prevented me from having to contribute to the conversation. I just concentrated on the wine and the food the whole meal, occasionally looking over at Mateo who was sitting with Wayne, Beatriz and a pretty blonde I think was named Polly. He had seemed to be chipper over dinner, laughing loudly at whatever Wayne was saying.

“Well, do it,” Eduardo coaxed to me, bringing my attention to the task at hand. He was a cute guy, late twenties, kind of short and on the preppy side

but he had flawless golden skin and really nice smile. He was also a bit of a pervert. Then again, so was I.

“All right,” I said. I placed the cherry in my mouth and bit it off seductively. This part was for the show. Eduardo eyed my lips eagerly as I sucked on it for a moment and Angel seemed to blush right up to his roots. Then I smiled and swallowed it down. Time for the party trick.

I placed the stem into my mouth and with deft concentration I slowly worked the two ends together with my tongue, trying to tie it into a knot. As sexy as it was supposed to be, it’s actually impossible to look good while doing this and I knew my face was contorted.

It took a few seconds longer than I would have liked but eventually I opened my mouth and stuck out my tongue, the knotted stem displayed proudly.

Eduardo pulled an impressed face.

“Showing off your ring?” I heard Mateo say. A deliciously fresh ocean smell filled my nose and Mateo came into view, walking behind Eduardo and peering at me in curiosity. I promptly stuck my tongue back in my mouth and watched as his mouth curved up in a wicked smile.

Angel nudged Eduardo. “Give her money.”

I tore my eyes off of Mateo as Eduardo groaned and fished out his wallet. He slapped ten euros down into my hand and winked at me. “It was worth it.” He and Angel turned and walked off to the bar, which now had a line of people at it, the two women from reception now back there and popping off bottle caps.

Mateo folded his muscled arms across his chest. Though he was still wearing his sleek blue dress pants from earlier, now he had a white linen shirt that was unbuttoned just enough to give a hint of groomed chest hair. Something about that made a lusty thrill run through me. Every guy I’d been with had been smooth and hair free as a baby. Mateo was one hundred percent the opposite of that, one hundred percent man.

One hundred percent taken, I quickly reminded myself before the screwdriver went to my head.

“You got a job?” he asked in a smooth voice.

“What?”

He nodded at the ten euro note in my hand.

“Oh,” I said, shoving it in my small purse. I smiled. “No, I’m just taking bets. Tying a cherry stem with just your tongue, it’s a classic.”

He grinned at me with his white, polished teeth. I noticed there was one on the bottom that was kind of crooked. I liked that. It gave him character—not that he needed any more. “I wouldn’t know,” he said, in a way that let me know he did. His eyes left my mouth and then traveled down my body. “You look very nice.”

There was nothing smarmy or inappropriately sexual about the remark but my body didn’t know that. A shiver went down my spine and my nipples hardened. I cursed myself for not wearing a bra, even though the flowery maxi dress I was wearing did a good job of keeping the girls up.

“Thank you,” I said, trying not to beam too much. I was about to say the same thing to him when Claudia appeared at our side, reeking like a cloud of cigarette smoke. Man, she had the *worst* timing.

With her she had Becca, who looked a bit older than me, pixie red hair, pale as snow skin with freckles, and Sammy, a tiny, plump Australian chick in a too-tight shift dress, topped with frizzing blonde hair and gap-toothed grin. Sammy had sat next to me at the computer terminal when I was waxing on to Jocelyn about the program so far (I had been too paranoid to mention Mateo) and she’d come across like a chatterbox, talking to everyone who came through. Now she seemed drunk, swaying on her high heeled pumps, but she was smiling and anyone who smiled was good in my books.

“Vera,” Claudia reprimanded, “I missed you at dinner. I sat with these two, do you know Becca and Sammy?”

I caught Mateo’s eye briefly as he gave me a sly nod and then moved over to the bar to go talk to Antonio. Damn it. I suppose being around four women was probably too much for him.

I turned my attention back to Claudia, said hi to Sammy again and nodded at Becca.

“I saw you earlier,” Sammy slurred in her Aussie accent. Since the bar hadn’t been open for long, I wondered what she had been drinking. “I was going to tell you I liked your boots, the ones you had earlier, but you seemed to be writing up a storm.”

“I was getting my friends caught up,” I said, even though I really only had one friend.

She pointed a finger at me. “You know what you should do. Becca here, she has a blog. She blogs about her travel adventures and such. You should have a blog. Did you know this is her third time doing the program?”

Now I was intrigued. I looked at her with raised brows. “Really?”

Becca nodded shyly. “Yeah, three years in a row,” she said in quiet Scottish accent.

“Then you must like it,” I said. Captain Obvious, reporting for duty here.

She blushed but didn’t say anything, which made me think there was more to her story. Unfortunately, this was the time that Jerry appeared, climbing on top of the coffee table again, with a microphone he just whipped out of nowhere. I made a mental note to talk to Becca later and affixed my attention on Jerry before he yelled at me.

“Greetings, Anglos and Spaniards,” he said, his crackled voice coming out through a speaker in the corner. Totally unnecessary considering how small the room was. “I hope you’ve all enjoyed your official first day at Casa de Las Palabras!”

People clapped at that, a few hollered. I had the impression that everyone had gotten drunk at dinner because that’s the only way I could imagine anyone tolerating Jerry’s embarrassing enthusiasm.

“So,” he said, “I wanted to kick off the week with a party just for you guys. There are no rules, except for speaking English. Have fun and make sure you tip the bartenders! Every other night after dinner, we will be participating in the extracurricular activities, so enjoy this night while you can! Ole!” He then jumped off the coffee table, took a bit of a stumble and went falling into Angel who was the one closest to him.

I groaned and shook my head, looking back at the girls. Sammy was pulling a flask out of her bling bling purse and passing it to Claudia. So, that’s how they were doing it.

Claudia took a sneaky sip back and then, after an inquisitive glance to Sammy, passed it on to me.

I took a gulp of the burning, stinging liquid.

And that was that.



When my alarm went off at seven am the next morning, I could have sworn I had died at some point during my sleep and gone straight to hell. It was impossible for anyone to feel *this* horrible. My stomach burned with

firewater, my hair smelled like an ashtray and the room was spinning slowly, in beat with the pounding in my head.

I moaned and tried to roll over but my head was in a vice and every time I moved, it tightened until I could feel my pulse in my temple. If I was back home, I would have taken some Gravol, drank a litre of Gatorade, taken a few B vitamins and prayed for sleep to take me away again.

But I wasn't at home. I was in Spain. I was at a program that I was technically working for and there was no such thing as sleeping off a hangover. I had to get up. I had to get on with the day.

I had to try really, really hard not to vomit everywhere.

I practically crawled into the shower and sat on the tiles, letting the warm water hit my face, trying to knock some sense into me.

Dear god, what the hell happened last night?

Everything came back, sifting into my brain like shards of glass.

After Claudia, Sammy, Becca and I finished the flask of grappa—aka firewater, aka burning liquid of death—our party of four got moved upstairs. The dangerously narrow iron staircase led up to a large room where we'd be having all of our "extracurricular activities." I don't know who designed the building and thought putting the bar downstairs would be a bright idea, but there you go. From the amount of people who tripped on the small steps, we quickly nicknamed it the staircase of doom.

Once up there, it turned into a full-on dance party. Mustached Antonio started doing the hustle. Sammy was trying to grind up on Ricardo who was trying to grind up on Claudia. A massive conga line formed and I got stuck between Dave and Eduardo. Yolanda started making out with an Anglo guy I hadn't met with. I was telling crude jokes with Dave and the English girl Polly. At some point during the night, I thought it would be funny to do Jaegerbombs with Beatriz.

Then a slow song came on, like a fucking high school dance, and drunken Beatriz went and asked Mateo to dance with her. And just like in high school, I felt a sickening bout of jealousy as Mateo said yes and they were the first ones out on the floor, her sleek, honeyed limbs wrapped around his. It was all very innocent but it didn't stop me from feeling drunkenly outraged.

People were cheering, and to save face, I had to cheer too. Soon, everyone was slow dancing and, again, just as in high school, I found

myself gravitating toward a back-up plan. I grabbed Dave, took him out into the middle of the floor and wrapped my hands around his skinny waist.

The last thing I remembered was going outside with Dave to have a cigarette and...and...

I kissed him. The image flashed in my head, the feeling of his lips on mine, the taste of tar and nicotine, my hands stuck in his greasy hair.

I'd fucking kissed a guy and on my first day of the program.

I grimaced at the memory. It wasn't that Dave was a bad kisser or that I didn't like him, but we were both drunk and anytime I did something drunk that I probably wouldn't do when I was sober, I felt uneasy and a bit ashamed. I mean, don't get me wrong, usually when I slept with guys I was sober—and horny as hell. But there have always been a few situations where I should have had a clearer head.

In this case, I couldn't really remember how the night ended, how we parted, if anyone invited anyone else back to their room and why that didn't end up happening. It ended at us making out but not having sex and I wasn't sure why. Bravo to me if I chose celibacy for the night. I was also unsure of how to approach Dave when I saw him and I didn't know if anyone else had seen us or how fast gossip traveled around a place like this.

Ugh.

I wanted to sit in that shower all day long, but eventually I found the will to get to my feet and work shampoo into my hair. After I let the conditioner sit for ten minutes, remembering the strawberry blonde color was fragile (my natural color was dark blonde), I rinsed and got out. I could barely look at myself in the mirror. Not only was my reflection moving from the spins, but I looked absolutely wretched.

With a deep sigh, I brought out my arsenal of make-up and went after my face with a heavy hand. Going overboard was the only way out of this. If I didn't look like myself, that was good.

I'd just managed to put on a single coat of mascara when there was a knock at the door. I staggered over to it and opened it to see Becca standing on the other side. For some reason she looked as fresh as a daisy with her bright eyes and cute red hair. I wanted to punch her.

"You don't remember inviting me, do you?" she asked cautiously, an impish smile on her lips.

I looked down at myself. I was just wearing a thin Banksy t-shirt and boy shorts. Whoops.

I raised my finger. “Uh, just a minute.”

I quickly ran back to my room and threw on the same skinny jeans and boots as yesterday and an aqua tank top that was probably too boobilicious but what the fuck ever, it was better than a see-through shirt. I gathered my hair back into a top knot, plucked up my purse and ran back over to her. Sara was nowhere to be seen and I wondered if she had left already. Perhaps she was also suffering from the mother of all hangovers. I recalled her doing shots of tequila with Angel.

Becca, on the other hand, was annoyingly bushy-tailed.

“Hi,” I said to her. “Sorry about that.”

“I’m surprised you’re awake,” she said in her lilting accent. “I was hesitant to come by.”

I groaned internally, feeling a wash of shame. “I was pretty drunk last night, wasn’t I?” I asked as I stepped outside and closed the door. Better to bite the bullet and get it over with.

It was chilly outside and my skin erupted into goosebumps. I embraced it. It slapped some sense into my foggy head.

“Oh you were fine,” she said. “Granted, I don’t know you but you didn’t make a fool of yourself, if that’s what you’re worried about. I’ve seen a lot of these first night parties, well, three so far, and I know what to expect now. Last night was fairly tame compared to others.” She studied me. “You did tell me though, after you stopped sucking Davey’s face, that you wanted to talk to me about my experience with the program.”

Oh, busted. I shot her a sheepish look. “So you saw that. Did anyone else?”

She shook her head. “I was heading home to my flat and happened upon you two outside. I didn’t want to interrupt but you saw me and left Davey with an acute case of blue balls. I said I’d come by and get you in the morning, before breakfast. So, here I am.”

I massaged the heel of my palm into my forehead. I couldn’t remember why I had wanted to talk to Becca last night, while I was so-called “sucking face” but I did know that sober me wanted to know more about her time in the program. God, every time I heard that word—the program—I started thinking I was in some sci-fi dystopian book.

It was still early, so we grabbed some cheap cappuccinos to go from the vending machine in reception and went for a walk down the hill toward the

country road. Now the sun was higher and the birds were chirping. A dog barked from behind a neighboring stone house.

“So, why have you come back here three times?” I asked her as we leaned against a low wall and watched a few black hogs root around for acorns in their pen across the street. “I can’t believe I even got through the first day.”

“It is exhausting,” she said before taking a sip of her drink. She had very long pale eyelashes that contrasted with her striking storm-colored eyes. “But you’ll get used to it. My first time, I only did a week. This was back when the program was just starting and they weren’t sure if it was going to be a success or not.” She looked at me in earnest. “It was seriously the best week of my life. I’d bonded with everyone—Anglos and Spaniards—like they were my long lost family. Have you ever been to a camp as a child and bonded so well with your mates that you never wanted to leave?”

I shook my head. I had wanted to go to this riding camp that had haflinger ponies when I was young but my parents said they couldn’t afford it. The truth was, I just wanted to get away from their fighting, but having my own pony for a week would have been the icing on the cake.

“Neither had I,” she said with a smile. “But I imagine that’s what it’s like. I made amazing friends during that time, people I am still close with. I...” she looked down at her coffee cup like it was fascinating, “I even fell in love.”

In a week? I nearly laughed until I studied her elf-like face. Oh, she was serious.

She shot me a sideways glance. “I know what you’re thinking, but this place will change you and change the way you think. For someone like me—I’m an only child to a single mum—this made me feel like I belonged.”

“So you fell in love,” I mused. “With who? Are you still...together?”

She laughed. “Oh, heavens, no. This place will make you bond but in the end, it’s never really to be. It’s rare to meet someone that’s from around where you live. The man I fell in love with was from New Zealand. When our week was up, I went back to Edinburgh and he went back to Auckland. Nothing we could do about it. We still keep in touch, through Facebook. He had a girlfriend for a while. I miss him and in some ways, I think we’ve grown closer. But that’s life.”

She chewed on her rosy lips. “Anyhoo, all is well that ends well. I signed up for two weeks the next year. Fell in love all over again.”

“New guy?” I asked, surprised at this soft-spoken girl.

“A Spaniard this time,” she said. A dreamy look passed over her eyes for a split second. It was enough to make me smile. “His name was Xavier, he was from a town called Tarragona. He had a girlfriend but...she was forgotten fairly soon.” She caught the frown on my face. “I know, that sounds callous. But this place does things to you. Believe me, you’ve already been caught up in it.”

Mateo? I thought for a moment. *No, she meant Dave. Of course.*

She went on, “You’ll see. End of this week, you’ll learn who has hooked up with who. It’s like...you isolate a bunch of adults in the middle of the Spanish countryside and all the rules get thrown out the window.”

I finished my coffee down. For some reason the conversation was making me uncomfortable. “Sounds like it gets messy.”

She nodded slowly. “It can. But most people try and protect their hearts. I think that’s only natural. No one expects anything when they come to one of these places and if they do, they learn from it. I know I did after Blair—that was my Kiwi love. Xavi was just for fun. And this time? Well, I don’t know. After everything I’ve said, I don’t actually come here to find love. It just happens.”

“Why do you come here?”

She turned so the sun was at her back and her face gazed at me through shadow. “To belong.” She looked back to the crest of the hill. “Shall we head back? Don’t want to miss breakfast. That’s one thing I’ve learned as well. Always eat as much as you can. You’ll need your strength. And drink lots of water. And when all else fails, talk about music. Everyone loves to talk about music.”

I kept that—and everything else she’d said—in mind as we walked back up the hill.

Chapter Seven

Misery loves company.

To my pleasant surprise, almost every other person at Las Palabras was hungover. If this was what belonging felt like, then I was feeling it full-throttle.

Becca and I had sat down at a table with a green-looking Angel and a quiet Eduardo. It was Becca's choice of tables and the more I watched her over breakfast and her interactions with Eduardo, the more I started to get an idea that she was setting her fairy dust on him.

I saw Mateo come in but he barely acknowledged me before going to sit with Beatriz, Polly and some bearded man called Skip. I wondered if Mateo was hungover too—if he was, he was making it work for him. He hadn't shaved again, so the stubble was rough and dark and, combined with his tousled, messy hair, it made me want to do bad things to him. He was wearing another suit—a light grey one this time that complimented his dark skin. I wondered if all he had packed was suits. Surely he knew that this place would have been more casual than that.

I heard Becca clear her throat from beside me. I looked up in time to see Dave entering. He saw me and broke into a crooked grin which then quickly evolved into the casual head nod. Typical.

When breakfast was over and I was managing to keep the fruit I had consumed down (no way was a meal of meat and cheese going to cut it) I took a look at my schedule for the day. My first one-on-one was with Mateo. I barely looked at the rest. My smile could have broken my face in two.

I waited in reception by checking my emails, while Mateo finished up his breakfast. Jocelyn hadn't sent me anything yet but Josh did. It was short and sweet. He was glad I was having fun. He'd just drawn something that he thought was good enough to enter into a contest (he's an illustrator, like, an awesome one, and hopes to illustrate a graphic novel or comic book one day) and he said it's been hard with me gone, mainly because our mother has taken to harassing him twenty-four seven about getting a better job than the line order cook one he already has.

I sighed, feeling bad for Josh. Ever since Mercy moved out and got engaged to her self-righteous prick of a fiancé, Charles (but you have to say it with a nasally English accent), my mother has been focusing her efforts on me and Josh. The thing is, housing prices and rent is so expensive in Vancouver that both Josh and I have nowhere to go but home. Part of me always entertained the idea of Josh and I moving out together, but since I'm a student with a shitty part-time job, that idea never gets very far.

"Who is Josh?"

I spun around in my seat to see Mateo standing behind me, scrutinizing my computer screen. Thank god I hadn't written anything to my brother about him.

"He's my brother," I said quickly, heart racing and head still thumping. Why was I so nervous all of a sudden?

"Did you say anything nice about me?" he asked.

What? I frowned.

He shook his head, the grin spreading across his face. "I am just making fun. Come, let's go talk. Where do you want to do it?"

Um, on the floor, against the sink, in the bed?

I shrugged and got out of my seat. "It doesn't matter. Somewhere quiet. And with access to water. Or a toilet in case I vomit."

Smooth, Vera, real smooth.

"You don't feel so well also?" he asked. He put his hand on my lower back and gently guided me out of the room. It was crazy, the heat I felt from that, imagined or not. I never wanted him to take his hand away.

He took me back outside and pointed to two wicker chairs in the shade of the building. "How about here?"

We weren't the only ones outside. Lauren and Sara were on the other side of the patio, trying to have a conversation. I smiled at Sara—she also looked worse for wear—but avoided Lauren's eyes. I knew they wouldn't be friendly.

I collapsed into a chair, nestling in the cushions and trying to get in a comfortable position without the wicker imprinting lines on my face. Mateo did the opposite. He sat down, legs splayed, arms resting on the sides, the picture of total elegance. He stared at me, eyes lazy and subdued, like he was panther sizing up his prey.

I hadn't been anyone's prey in a long time. And, despite how my body felt about it, it wouldn't be a good time to start.

I cleared my throat. "So."

"So," he said right back, still staring. "Did you have fun last night?"

I nodded, wondering how much he knew. "Too much fun, maybe."

"I didn't see you leave," he said.

Good.

"Though, I heard you did," he added.

Shit.

I didn't bother looking at him. Instead I brought out my sunglasses from my bag and slipped them on. Ah, much better. The world was less bright and headache-inducing and Mateo couldn't see my eyes.

When I didn't say anything he said, "You should have come say goodbye."

"You looked busy," I said, a little too quickly. "Dancing."

"That was nothing. You should have seen me dancing like Justin Timberlake."

I gave him a look he couldn't see.

He gave me a shit-eating grin. "That's what I assume I look like when I dance. I could be wrong."

"I had too much grappa," I managed to say. "What about you?"

"Even a little bit is too much but perhaps that is why we drink it. Perhaps this is why I think I dance like Justin Timberlake."

This Mateo was like all Mateos—unflappable, calm and smooth. In charge of the ride. But for a moment I remembered the Mateo on the phone yesterday, the business man who freaked out because he didn't know what he was doing—in either language. That Mateo intrigued me more than most.

I wondered how to start pulling on the threads.

"So, what shall we discuss," I said.

He smiled. "We're already discussing. There is no script here. Let us just talk."

"Okay," I said. He was right, of course. When you were with someone you liked during your one-on-ones, it was different. You were just hanging out. It was kind of genius when you think of it. I wondered if that's why Jerry had the drunken party on the first night, so that people would break down the language barriers and get comfortable with each other.

"Vera," Mateo said. "Tell me, hour by the hour, what you did Tuesday last week."

I straightened up slightly in surprise. "Last Tuesday? Why?"

"It is one of my twenty questions."

"I was in London..."

"How long were you in London for?"

"I think that's more than one question."

"Do not be so literal," he chided me. "Tell me about the last Tuesday when you were at home, in Vancouver. Tell me about that day."

I scrunched up my nose. "Why?"

"Because," he said, "I want to know what the average day of Vera Miles is like."

"Well, it won't be that average because I wasn't in school."

"Tell me anyway."

He was persistent, I'll give him that.

I wracked my brain, trying to think back. I left on the Thursday, so what was I doing on Tuesday?

"I got up," I said. Good start.

"Where did you get up?"

"In my bed?"

"Who do you live with?"

I raised a brow. I was getting good at that. "Is this question an excuse to ask other questions?"

He only smiled. "Go on."

I sighed and tried to get comfortable again. I closed my eyes and ran through that day. "I live with my brother and my mom. I woke up, around my usual time when I'm not at school. Like, ten am."

"That is quiet late, no?"

"I like to sleep in." I shrugged. "Anyway, I got up at ten and then I made myself breakfast...and then I did some research online about London, last minute shit."

"You took a last minute shit?"

I burst out laughing. "No!" I yelled at him. "Sorry. I should stop swearing and using slang, it's getting confusing."

"I like it when you swear."

"Well, it doesn't do me any favors when you get it confused with the literal sense."

He stroked his chin in mock contemplation. I could hear the roughness of his beard on his fingers. "So, when you say things like 'fuck me' or 'fuck

you', you aren't really wanted to be fucked or to fuck another?"

My god, the word *fuck* sounded so beautifully dirty coming from his mouth, especially when he pronounced with such soft emphasis.

I breathed in deeply, trying to quell my raging hormones. "Do you mean it in that sense when *you* swear?"

Mateo smiled carefully. "I don't take fucking lightly."

Okay, so what the hell were we *really* talking about here? I stared at him, hoping my face was blank.

"So then what did you do after you...looked up shit?" he abruptly continued on with the conversation, as if that weird moment had never happened.

"Uh," I fumbled for words. "I, uh, went on the drive for lunch."

"The drive?"

"Commercial Drive," I explained. "It's a popular street near my house. Lots of artsy types, hipsters, hippies, bums. Good places to eat, and there's an Italian section too."

"You met someone there?"

I shook my head and looked down at my chipped fingernails. "No. I went to eat by myself. My brother was working."

I could feel his eyes on me but I avoided looking up at him. "Hmmm," he said. "No friends to meet? No boyfriend?"

I sucked in my breath, the questions grating me raw. "I have friends," I said, quietly defensive. "I just don't see them often. School is over. And my best friend, she's in another province."

"And the boyfriend?"

Finally, I had to look at him. "Obviously I don't have a boyfriend."

He frowned, wearing a face of genuine puzzlement. "Why is that obvious?"

I bit my lip for a moment. "I don't know. I just thought it was. I don't think I'd be here if I had one. I don't think I'd be...me...acting the way I do."

What the hell was I saying? This hangover was making me talk way too much.

"Very honest," he said after a beat. "Do you like to be alone?"

I shrugged. "I think so. It's easy."

"Easy to be you?"

"No. Easy to only worry about yourself."

He nodded and I could see his dark eyes churning with my words. "You are close with your brother, yes?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's pretty lame but I think he's the closest person to me. Do you have any siblings?" I asked him, hoping to turn this onto him.

"A sister," he said simply. "Lucia." He pulled the chair closer to me and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, the Rolex glinting in the weak sun. "Is it just your brother?"

Back to me again. I exhaled noisily, to let him know that this wasn't a fun subject. "No, I have an older sister."

"But you don't get along."

"No, we don't," I said. "I mean, I'm nice to her and I make an effort. She's just a bitch."

His forehead wrinkled. "That doesn't sound like a nice thing to say about your family." He seemed genuinely shocked by that.

"Well, she is," I said. "She's always been that way but it got worse after...it's a long story. My family is fucked up, that's all you need to know, and I don't care how that sounds. Every family needs a black sheep to call them out on their bullshit."

"And Vera Miles is the black sheep," he commented. He leaned back. "But I don't like that name for you."

"Vera?"

"The black sheep. You seem more like a red sheep. Maybe a bright color, like your shirt." His eyes traveled down to my chest, focusing there for just a moment, just long enough for me to feel a heat deep inside, melting the ice that had built up over the last few minutes.

"I'm definitely not a sheep at all," I said. "Black cat is more like it, I think. Maybe even a black hole."

"A black hole," he said carefully. "That is in space, yes?"

I nodded, relieved that the conversation was heading in astronomy's direction. Now, this I could talk about and not feel weird about. I straightened up and shoved my sunglasses on top of my head, blinking at the sunlight. "A black hole is a star. Or, it was a star that collapsed onto itself. It's a lot more, um, scientific than that but basically it keeps collapsing, eventually absorbing all light and other stars and matter around it. It's fascinating, really, because we don't know all that much about it. And it's kind of scary, to me, anyway. And invisible."

“I learned about that in school, when I was a child,” he said, “though I knew it as agujero negro. But no, you are not a black hole, Vera. You are fascinating, but you are not scary and you are not *invisible*.” He said that with subdued passion, like it was a fallacy to even suggest it. “You are the opposite. What is the opposite? Estrella?”

I raised my finger. “No more Spanish.”

“A star, then.” He gestured to my tattoos, the shooting stars on my chest, the constellation on my arm. “You are a star. That’s what I shall call you. Star.”

My heart flipped. “In that case, I think Estrella sounds better.”

He fixed me with a satisfied smile. “Good. Then it is settled. *Estrella*,” he said, voice lower over the word.

The world seemed to still.

Our eyes stayed locked together, silence settling on us like silk, trapping in the heat between us. It couldn’t all be in my head, could it? This was a moment that had to be happening for him too. The look in his eyes was intense, practically carnal. They glittered darkly, searching me. People didn’t just stare at each other like this without meaning to.

You’re hungover and delusional, my inner critic said, trying to muffle the butterflies.

“May we join you?” a thickly accented voice broke through our connection. I looked away from Mateo, reality snapping me into place, and up to see Sara and Lauren peering down at us hesitantly.

Well, Sara looked hesitant. Lauren had her arms folded and an accusatory twist to her lips.

“Sure?” I said, trying to act nonchalant, like I hadn’t been ensnared in a heady, strange, moment with Mateo. I quickly made my face as impassive as possible and pointed at the chairs closest to us. “Pull up a seat,” I added breezily.

“We thought it would be fun for the four of us to talk,” Lauren said, dragging her chair over, the sound on the tiles scraping the inside of my ears. Today she was wearing short shorts, a polo shirt and had attached a length of faux-pearls to her glitter glasses. She didn’t look like she could have any fun, period.

My eyes quickly darted over to Mateo but he seemed as impassive as ever. He got up and pulled his chair closer to mine and pulled out his phone, seeming to scroll through things.

Lauren narrowed her eyes at him. "What are you doing?"

I sucked in my breath and glanced nervously at Mateo. As casual as this place was, he was still an older man, a professional and a stranger and she was talking to him like she was his teacher. I mean, she kind was, so was I, when you thought about it. But fuck her and her stupid fucking glasses. Where did she get the nerve?

Mateo's eyes slid over to her, appraising her coolly. "The dictionary on my phone helps me with my English." He went back to the screen, not expecting her to argue with that.

"So," Sara said, a forced smile on her face. "I asked Lauren questions and she asked me questions and then she said we should talk to you and ask questions."

Oh great, more questions. Can we please talk about my crappy family and what a loner I am, a black hole?

No, I corrected myself, steeling my doubts with Mateo's warm words. *You're Estrella.*

"I'll go first," Lauren said, crossing her pale legs. She eyed Mateo and cleared her throat until he reluctantly met her gaze. "Tell us about your wife."

My chest constricted at the peculiar bluntness of the question. Mateo squinted his eyes at her and then passed me his phone for some reason. I gingerly took it in my hands and looked down at it, confused. The notepad was open and on it he had written *Does this girl have a problem in her head?*

I nearly choked out laughing. Lauren was looking at me like she was about to demand we "share with the rest of the class" but Mateo brought back her attention.

"My wife is a very lovely woman," he said and though he was polite about it, there was that edge again to his voice. "She is very pretty, very smart and a very good mother." Was I disappointed to hear that? Probably not. Then again, I was good at lying to myself.

Lauren didn't seem satisfied with that. "What is her name?"

"Isabel," he said and the name did funny things to me. Things like, making me feel the lightest lashes of guilt for fawning over the husband of Isabel Casalles.

From the way Lauren was watching me now, I could tell that had been her intention with the question. She had noticed us together, our

interactions, the way I stared at him without realizing it. She wanted to let me know that she knew and to remind me that he was married.

Like I fucking needed her to remind me of that.

While Mateo went on to tell her about his daughter Chloe Ann, I took the moment to quickly write under his message, that she was just a bitch. I handed it back to him without looking. I ignored the tingly feeling I got when our fingers brushed against each other.

He grasped the phone in his hand and looked over at Sara, asking her to tell us about her husband. While Sara tried to find the right words, he looked down at the message I wrote and his brows furrowed. He looked back at me, as if to say *what?*

I leaned over his seat and looked down at the notepad. Thanks to the wonders of autocorrect, instead of writing *Lauren is a bitch* I had actually written down *Lauren is a bicycle*. A guffaw escaped my lips and more giggles threatened to spill. The thought that Mateo had been eying Lauren and trying to picture her as a banana-seat cruiser with pearl streamers and made me feel like I had just ingested a crate of the sillies.

“What is so funny?” Lauren asked haughtily. Mateo and I were both laughing now. His laughter was rich and reverberated through me, remedying me like a tonic.

“It’s something that got lost in translation,” I managed to say.

“Right,” Lauren said with a narrow-eyed smile. “Well, then let me ask you a question, Vera.” The way she said my name was accusatory, as if I were using an alias.

I stared back at her expectantly, knowing that whatever was coming I probably wasn’t going to like.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” she asked innocently. Too innocently.

“Actually,” I said, with a wide fake smile, “I was just discussing that with Mateo. I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Not even Dave?”

My face fell. “What are you talking about? Dave? From here? No.” I tried to laugh but it felt hollow.

“I saw you kissing him last night, that’s all,” she said, taking off her glasses and wiping the lenses on her shorts. “Thought he was your boyfriend.”

The fuck. The fuck!

I felt absolutely mortified, like she was instigating that I was some slut, and not in some funny ha ha way, but as in I was a terrible, unclean, easy person with no respect for herself. I didn't even have the words to say anything back, all the snappy retorts I would normally have used had slipped away somewhere and I was slack-jawed and fumbling.

"Is this your business to know if she has a boyfriend?" Mateo asked, leaning forward. The polite tone to his voice was totally gone.

Lauren looked surprised but quickly covered it up with a lift of her chin. "I was just curious. Just trying to make conversation. That is our job here, isn't it? I had seen Vera kissing him last night, so, naturally, I assumed they were together. I mean, why else should I think otherwise?" Her pitch went up at the end, as if to once again make it seem like an innocent question.

"You must come from a very strange country," Mateo said, "where women are not allowed to kiss men for their own pleasure."

Was Mateo sticking up for me, for the fact that I had kissed Dave?

Lauren looked appalled. "I am from America. Women are better than men in America and we are allowed to do whatever we want. Frankly, I think you and your country is a little bit backwards, with your politically incorrect machismo and caveman mentality. Not to mention how racist and repressive you are toward the Moors and anyone else who emigrates from Africa."

He shrugged and ran his hand through his hair. Though his face was neutral and pose relaxed, I could see his chest heaving slightly, as if this was getting him angry. I couldn't fucking blame him.

"Lauren, please," he started. "With all respect, I do not think you know what you are talking about. Every country has bad, it doesn't make the people bad and you can not fully understand something else, whether it is another person or a whole country, without being in the shoes. You, being an American, should at least relate to that." He spoke in a calm and measured voice and a small part of me found myself falling for him. This wasn't just a physical thing anymore. The man had strength of self and character and damn if I didn't love it.

"I don't understand how being an American has anything to do with it," she stated. Meanwhile, Sara's eyes were volleying back and forth between the two and she was sitting on the edge of her seat like it was a tennis match.

“Well,” Mateo said, getting to his feet so his tall frame was towering over her, “you are coming across as rude and arrogant. It would be wrong of me to say that all Americans are rude and arrogant. Of course, that is not true. It is only you. You, Lauren, are a bicycle. Vete a la mierda. In English, that means go to the shit.”

With that he got up and held out his hand for me. “We have fifteen minutes left to talk, you and I.”

I couldn’t argue with that. I put my hand in his, shot Sara an apologetic glance and let him bring me to my feet. We walked away from the building and up the path, not heading anywhere in particular. It wasn’t until we were a safe distance away that he dropped my hand. Had it been an act of solidarity or one of affection? All I knew was that my hand now felt empty without his.

I looked over my shoulder at the reception and dining hall where we could still see the shadowy figures of Sara and Lauren. Poor Sara had totally got roped into Lauren’s weirdo agenda, using something as fun and innocent as our one-on-one sessions and turning them into a self-serving platform for her PC issues.

“That woman is fucked to shit,” Mateo said under his breath.

“No kidding.”

He turned to face me, scrutinizing my face. “I thought it was your first time meeting her on the bus. Do you know her?”

I shook my head. “No. But I’ve dealt with chicks like her before. By the way, they really hate it if you call them chicks. They take politically correctness and feminism to a whole new hateful place.”

“Ah, these are these *haters*,” he said. “The English word has come over here to Spain.”

“Yeah, haters is one way to describe them. They take anything—feminism, religion, lifestyle choices, art—and they ruin them. They go so extreme that they lose sight of the original goal. Lauren...she’s just bitter and angry and probably hates the fact that I like sex or something. She’s a slut-shaming super femme. I bet you a hundred bucks that her vagina is covered in cobwebs.”

Mateo burst out laughing again. It was the sweetest sound to my ears. I grinned at him, relishing his joy, and blushing a bit at my words. Sometimes I forgot that I wasn’t always appropriate.

“You are special, Estrella,” Mateo said, his eyes softening as he gazed at me. I started sucking on my lip, wondering what the hell to say to that. “But,” he went on, looking back to the view, “I do not want to take your bet. I have no doubt that you are right but I do not wish to be the one who... verifies it.”

“Me neither,” I said with a smile.

The rest of the day went quite well despite the hangovers and the fact that Lauren was a bicycle. For some reason I had thought that it would have reflected badly on me for having had a drunken makeout session with Dave, but it hadn't, at least not with Mateo or Becca.

In fact, as the evening rolled around and I had the rest of my one-on-one and business sessions under my belt, I'd actually bumped into Dave as I waited for a free computer. It was awkward for a second and then it intensified when I said, “Sorry about kissing you last night.”

Luckily, Dave pretty much took it in stride. And by that, I mean he shrugged and said, “It's cool.”

And it was cool. After dinner and our activities, which consisted of a very silly, very immature game of forty-person charades, I went to bed early with a smile on my face. I'd survived my second day and I did so feeling like I had people who had my back.

Chapter Eight

The next four days rolled on together as one. You would think that because I was speaking to different people each day, that each day, hey, each hour, would stand out. But it didn't. There were a few Spaniards who I really liked, who made an impression on me: Eduardo and his cute ways, Angel and his innocence, tall, young Ricardo in his earnest enthusiasm, long-haired rocker Manuel, and sexy Nerea with her blue hair, who seemed like me in ten years. But everyone else was just normal, just okay enough, just ordinary people whom I didn't really have a connection with. So those sessions, well they just kind of blended into one.

Of course, there was Claudia and Becca and Sammy and occasionally Polly or Beatriz but we pretty much did the same things every night. Eat dinner, take part in the activities, then drink at the bar. I did have to say, that our behaviour—especially the behaviour of the Spaniards—totally loosened up over the days. It became more flagrant, more perverse. I loved it. This was the true side of the Spaniards—they were just finally finding the skill to express their naughty selves in English.

The only thing that really stood out about the four days was my interaction with Mateo. Once I had him for a business meeting and twice I had him on a one-on-one. Most nights we tried to have a meal together. It wasn't like a thing we agreed upon, but if he wasn't looking for me, I was looking for him. I liked that. I liked it a lot, to know that someone was seeking me out.

On each of those four days, Mateo had asked his questions.

His first question he asked me was why I studied astronomy. We went for a walk down the country lane, past the oak trees and lavender fields, indulging in this sun-drenched early summer. I told him how I'd fallen in love with the stars at a young age, all because of a book. *The Little Prince*. I became obsessed with the infinite possibilities of the twinkling lights in the sky. Oddly enough, I had a fear of space—I knew I'd be the last person to ever get on a space shuttle. Space was cold and scary and lonely. But the planets and the stars and the cosmos of forever, they were my own exploration. I could study them, peer through a telescope, map their ever

evolving status, putting a piece of myself out there on a journey without ever fully investing myself.

The next day he asked me what music I listened to. I had a feeling he'd had a one-on-one with Becca before that one came up. As we lay down on the grass in the ever deepening sunshine and I told him I listened to pretty much anything with an edge. The first concert I ever went to was when I was twelve to see the Deftones touring on their self-titled album, stealing Mercy's ID to get into the show. I liked metal, I liked punk, I liked classic rock—anything with guts and a beat and anything that hummed with sincerity.

In turn, Mateo gave me snippets of himself. He told me that not only did space scare him too, but his first concert was Aerosmith—I didn't ask how long ago that was. Since then he'd turned to rock with a singer songwriter slant. He loved Paul Simon, Bruce Springsteen, Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan and Tom Waits, all the peeps I could totally get behind.

The day after that, during another one of our phone calls—this one, he had greatly improved his business sales speech—he asked me how I thought the world would end. It wasn't exactly the kind of conversation I thought I'd have with him over the phone but it definitely made me think. I ended up stating that we'd all be wiped out by an asteroid, because it was just fitting that something I was interested in would end up killing me.

Then it was time for question number four. While we were lazing over our last glass of wine at dinner, Mateo asked me about my family, again. Tyler, an uptight ginger from Seattle who had a My Little Pony wallet in a totally non-ironic way, and Paco, had long-cleared the table, leaving just the two of us as the waiters made the rounds to collect the empty plates.

"Tell me, Estrella," he said slowly, his long, elegant fingers toying with the stem of his wine glass. Oh, he'd also been calling me Estrella for the last few days, something I was enjoying more and more. He gave me a pointed look. "Why don't you get along with your older sister?"

I laughed into my glass. "Wow, from the end of the world to family matters again."

He gave me the one-shouldered shrug. "I have fourteen days left, I figured why not. The closer we get to goodbye, the harder this will get."

Goodbye. I'd first seen him a week ago today, when I got on that bus. Now, goodbye seemed like such a foreign concept. Becca had been totally right about the program and the way people bonded. I couldn't imagine a

life where I wasn't with all these people, drinking my wine and speaking overly-enunciated English. If this was how I felt after a week, how would I feel after a month?

"You can ask me anything," he added, as if that would help. Well, it helped a little.

I took a large gulp of wine, really starting to appreciate the effect the alcohol had on me. I exhaled. "Fine. It's not every interesting though, it's just stupid family stuff."

"Everything about you is interesting," he said sincerely.

I shot him a shy smile, blushing inwardly at the compliment. "My sister's name is Mercedes but we call her Mercy. As in, Lord have Mercy on our souls because she's a..." I remembered his shock when I insulted her before and I had to switch up my language. It seemed that the Spaniards had a more respectful view of family than I did. "She's a *handful*. Anyway. We used to get along. She's three years older so I was always the baby to her. And Josh is two years younger than me. I guess Josh and I were closer, even from the start. So, when I was thirteen, we discovered that my dad was having an affair."

Mateo's eyebrows quirked up with the new information but said nothing.

I went on, my eyes glued to the ruby wine as it made trails down the inside of the glass. "He was a pilot—still is. She was a flight attendant. Her name is Jude. Apparently this had been going on for years. My parents fought for as long as I could remember, so there wasn't much love lost between them. But my mother is a very proud person and it humiliated her to know that it had been going on. They got a divorce and my life became very miserable. I was really close with my dad, daddy's girl...you know? But Jude wasn't ready for teenagers so my dad and her moved to Calgary. My mother got the house and the kids."

I took a sip of the wine. The glass was empty now and Mateo immediately refilled it. I had to admit, as scary as it was to talk about the past, even something that was probably quite mundane to him, it felt good. "I started doing drugs and hanging with the wrong crowd, even though they were my crowd. I made stupid choices, mainly with boys, but I was still a good student, straight Bs in everything, so it's not like I was a major fuck-up. But, you know, I liked tattoos and piercings and I started dying my hair every single Crayola color and my mother hated that. And in support of my

mother, Mercy started hating that too. Then, when I was a senior in high school, I invited Josh to come hang out with me and my friends. At the time he had this stutter that other kids made fun of and he was tall and skinny and totally awkward. But my friends were the kind that didn't care. Every lunch hour, skipped class, before school and after school, the big group of us would take over these steps behind the school gym and just be social delinquents."

And so, Josh started going down the same path that I did. Smoking, drinking, drugs...sex." I briefly met Mateo's eye. He was listening as if he were totally enraptured. I cleared my throat. "And unfortunately he didn't care so much about school or his future, not like I did. So he just kind of became a slacker. An artist, he liked to draw, but still a slacker. My mother, and Mercy, they both blamed me for his demise, that I ruined all his potential with sex, drugs and rock and roll. So, I became the villain."

"The black sheep," he said softly. "Which we know is not true."

I took another gulp of wine and wiped my lips with the back of my hand. My red lipstick was smeared all over it but I was too comfortable to care. "So that is why my sister and I don't get along. It doesn't matter that I'm doing a science degree, or that I'm naturally smart. What matters is that I supposedly ruined my brother and that I'm not the perfect daughter that Mercy is. Especially now. Mercy is marrying a rich jerk and her upcoming wedding is the be all to end all event. I'm not even part of the bridal party! I mean, Jesus, how is that for family. I guess I would embarrass her, ugly up her whole event."

"Ugly?" Mateo said in fervent disbelief. "No. You are terribly beautiful, Vera. So beautiful that it hurts. You would outshine her like the star you are."

Whoa.

I felt like lava had been poured down my spine.

I slowly lifted my eyes to meet his and was taken aback by what I saw in them. The last four days I'd felt this *thing* building between us, always so subtle, so hard to place my finger on it. Even calling me beautiful was just a compliment, albeit a wonderful one. At least, it would have been. Now there was something in his eyes that I'd only seen hints of before. Now, his gaze, his brows, those strong, wide cheekbones, they smoldered with what could only be described as lust.

Lusty Mateo. This was a new side of him.

The most dangerous side of all.

Because I was certain I'd been nothing but Lusty Vera from the moment I saw him. Never acting, always thinking, always feeling. I did not need the temptation from him to make what we had—which was just friendship—into something more.

And yet the carnal way he was looking at me, it seemed inevitable.

Even after *everything* I had just told him.

I had to look away. I gave him a tight smile and pushed my glass of wine away. “I think we need to get going for the skits we have to do.” Two days ago we'd been broken up into teams of five and had to create our own plays based on things that are “lost in translation.” Tonight were the performances.

I got up before he could say something and started to walk.

He was fast though, his body moving out of his seat with grace. He grabbed my hand, lightly and pulled me to a stop.

“Hey, Vera,” he said in a throaty, low voice that made my body tremble. “Wait.”

I turned to look at him, my expression blank. “Hmm?”

He squeezed my hand softly. “Did...did I say something wrong?” He truly looked puzzled and I felt a pang of warmth deep in my chest. No, it wasn't anything he said. It was how he looked at me, how he should never look at me and how much I wanted him to keep doing it. But how the hell was I supposed to say that to him? That wouldn't fly in any language. Even I had trouble translating it to myself.

“No,” I said, keeping my tone airy and hoping my cheeks weren't betraying me with my scandalous thoughts. “I just remembered that we're cutting it a bit close. To the time,” I quickly added.

He was still holding my hand. As if he read my thoughts, he dropped it and casually eased his hands into his pant pockets. He was still wearing a suit, though, lo and behold, today he had worn a plain white tee under his stone-colored blazer. He'd also let his stubble flourish into a light beard. It was incredibly sexy.

“Of course,” he conceded. “I had nearly forgotten about it.”

Mateo wasn't in my group, which was a shame because it meant I couldn't rehearse with him but at the same it meant I'd get to see him acting. He'd loosened up a bit over the last few days—if his t-shirt was any indication—so I was curious to see him in a play.

Going to find our respective groups we parted ways like we usually did. A quick smile and a wave. Very civil and professional and oddly enough, completely the opposite when compared to how I said goodbye to everyone else. With Eduardo, Antonio, even Froggy Carlos—there was a lot of hugging and the double kisses on each cheek, regardless of if they were married or single. It was just the way things were, the way they greeted me and, in turn, the way I greeted them. I did this to the girls too.

But with Mateo, there was this strained politeness between us. I felt closer to him than anyone else here, but despite from the occasional times he'd grab my hand, there was always an acute physical distance between us. I knew that was probably a good thing. If I did the beso beso cheek kiss with him I'd probably head straight for his mouth.

While I walked over to Antonio's cottage where my group was meeting, my mind kept going back to that thought. His mouth. I wondered what it would be like to kiss him, even though I knew it would be heaven. He had that perpetual smirk that only good kissers had, like he knew how to use his mouth in every way, everywhere. His sensual lips didn't hurt either. His stubble would scratch you up perfectly, a bit of pain with the pleasure.

Plus he was hot, thirty-eight and an ex-athlete. That amounted to the type of experience that most men didn't get.

Before I got started on what he'd think about the feeling of the tongue ring he'd admired so much, I cut myself off. This crush was getting out of control and I needed to just...

Fuck. I don't know what I needed. I needed to go home and bring out my vibrator, that's what I needed.

When I walked into Antonio's cottage that he shared with Ed, an elementary school teacher from New York, I knew my crush on Mateo wasn't the only thing out of control. The group—Antonio, Polly, Beatriz and Ricardo—were all listening to Faithless and dancing around the room like they were at a rave, bottles of beer spilling from their hands.

"What the hell?" I said loudly, closing the door behind me. They raised their beers at me but kept dancing. "Aren't we supposed to be practicing for the play?"

"Oh don't be such a wet blanket, Vera," Polly said as her blonde pigtails and fake boobs bounced around her. "We know what we're doing."

Wet blanket? Since when was *I* ever considered the wet blanket?

Beatriz smiled at me, coyly. “We didn’t think you would show up,” she said, her English practically fluent now. “Since you were with Mateo.”

Hold up. Her comment practically floored me. I had half a mind to storm over to the iPod dock and pause the music and ask her just what the hell she meant by that.

I suppose it was all too obvious on my face.

Antonio stopped to take a sip of his beer, his chest heaving from the activity, his mustache covered in droplets of sweat. He grinned at me. “It is all good.”

I frowned. “Nothing is good. What are you guys talking about?”

“Hey, we’re all here to have fun,” Ricardo said in such an easy, cheesy way that I had to wonder who the hell he was fucking while he was here.

That’s not why your company spent money to send you here, I thought. It’s not why we’re all talking all day long until our throats are raw.

Perhaps I was being a wet blanket. Usually Vera Miles was a warm, comfortable blanket—the purveyor of wet dreams. Now I was annoyed and irritated and slightly embarrassed.

“I have no idea what you guys are talking about,” I said staunchly.

Polly and Beatriz exchanged a look.

“It is fine, Vera,” Antonio tried to reassure me with his big grin. “No one cares. We’re all friends.” He went over to the iPod dock and turned it off. The silence sounded odd. “We should do some practice now, yes?”

No. I didn’t want to practice anymore. I wanted to talk about what they were all being so damn coy about.

“You know Mateo is married,” I told them, making sure to look them all in the eye. “We are just friends. That is possible between a man and a woman.”

“Okay,” Beatriz shrugged. “I couldn’t blame you though. He is a very charming man....very...exciting.” She said the last word like it was made of candy. Like she knew him on a level I had only suspected.

I had no choice but to ignore it. If I defended our relationship more, it would seem like I had something to hide. And I had nothing to hide except my feelings for him. They weren’t so important. They were something that I could keep locked deep inside and no one would ever have to see them—not him, not me, not anyone.

It was *just* a crush.

We managed to spend ten minutes going over our play once. I was just going through the motions, not even finding the humor in it. It was some stupid skit that Polly and Ricardo basically took over and wrote. It was slightly funny but overall just dumb, about an American mugger (played by me, of course) and the Spanish family traveling in America. I asked them to hand over their money, they heard something else, and that was that. In the end I got shot though, so at least I got to fake an epic death scene.

With beers in tow, my group headed off down toward the reception and up the rickety iron staircase to the large room where we had the party and every after dinner event since then. Everyone seemed to be a barrel of nerves, even the usually confident ones like Nerea and Eduardo.

We all sat down in the rows of fold-out chairs and waited for Jerry to call out our group's names. First up was a group that Angel and Claudia were in, a spoof on Monty Python's parrot sketch. Claudia did really well, even sporting a fake mustache that kept falling off, much to everyone's delight. After that went two more groups and then my group was called.

By now I didn't care how stupid we might look. Everyone was being supportive, even when things weren't entertaining or funny. I went with my group to the front of the room. Mateo was in the front row, smiling at me. I gave him quick smile back, all too aware that my group was probably watching my interaction.

As we got ready and placed ourselves, Beatriz stuck a toque over my head for my part. Jerry had a basket full of props for us and by luck that could pass as a robber's ski mask.

Of course when you pulled a toque down over your face, you couldn't see anything. I had to act the whole skit blind, which was hilarious—to everyone else, especially when I was delivering muffled dialogue to the wall. I then fucked up on my cue to die, which had me stumbling a bit into the audience and falling on poor Angel. This was the second time this program that someone had fallen right into him, and the both of us went tumbling to the ground with a thump.

More laughter ensued and eventually mystery hands pulled me up off the floor and took the toque off my head. When I finally was able to see, I saw Angel being helped up by Antonio and I was in Mateo's hands.

Everyone was laughing but in his eyes I saw genuine concern.

"Are you all right?" he asked, inspecting me closely. His hand went to my lower back and I nearly froze at the contact. I felt like everyone's eyes

were on me.

I told him I was fine and apologized to Angel before I went scampering to the back row to sit with my group. Luckily, no one said anything about the fact that I nearly took out the entire first row of the audience. Or anything *other* than that.

As the next group went up, I tried to gain control of my racing heart. I felt totally out of sorts and I was ready for this day to be over. I hated that there really was nothing going on between Mateo and I, yet I was spooked and acting like there was. It didn't help that people were fucking commenting on it, like it was so damn obvious. There was nothing to be obvious about.

I buried my head in my hands. I needed to get a grip. I really would have thought my crush would have worn itself off after a week but it was only growing, like a bloodthirsty monster and now it was crawling out of my head and heart and taking swipes at other people, letting them know it existed.

"Are you okay?" I heard Beatriz say from beside me, putting a light hand on my shoulder. "Did you get hurt?"

Not yet, I thought. But I will.

I looked up at her and managed a weak smile. "I'm fine. Just tired." I liked Beatriz enough but I didn't want to discuss anything personal with her. That said, it did get me thinking that I should discuss something with someone. I'd talked to Josh briefly on the phone already and I'd been back and forth with Jocelyn on Facebook but the way the computers were set-up, I felt like I couldn't really type anything without people looking over my shoulder. There was always my phone, but I spent a gazillion dollars already on receiving that phone call from Josh.

Claudia or Becca. I needed to talk to one of them. They would understand. Becca was probably head over heels for someone, given her track record, and I could have sworn something was going on with Claudia and Eduardo.

I laughed internally, thinking how unlike me it was to seek council on a guy, let alone have actual *feelings* for them. That was not my style. Then again, none of this was. The minute I stepped on that bus, everything I knew about myself seemed to be left behind in Madrid.

Chapter Nine

The next day—day seven of the program—was the first rainy day of the program and the end of the first official week. Only two people had been scheduled just for one week, Yolanda and Enrique, so two more Spaniards were supposed to join us after they left on the morning bus back home.

It was weird to see Las Palabras under a thick layer of soot-colored cloud, to have shallow puddles at your feet. It dampened everything and put my thoughts on a melancholy spin. For the first time, I kind of missed home. Well, actually that was an exaggeration. I didn't miss home, the rain just reminded me of home. Home meant a place where I couldn't be myself, where I had to walk on eggshells around my mother. But I missed Josh. And there was part of me that missed being free from...emotional turmoil. Was that the right word? How about sexual frustration and the threat of impending heartache? I couldn't tell. The rain had dampened my mood.

I had a mostly Mateo-free day—I didn't have any sessions with him and I didn't sit with him at any of the meals. Jerry had started cracking down on groups, noticing that the same people kept sitting together and insisted we all start rotating. It was fine with me, except lunch time had me sitting with Tyler, who I realized had some kind of *thing* with Lauren. I couldn't really figure out his sexuality—his “Vote for Hilary” shirt and My Little Pony obsession didn't help—but I knew he and her shared very similar disdain for me.

After lunch, which pretty much consisted of shoving ham in my mouth and getting the fuck out of there, two more Spaniards arrived—Mario the small business owner and Alfonso the financial consultant—and we all welcomed them in. It couldn't have been easy coming into a program a week in, when everyone already seemed extremely close and cliquey. The passage of time only made me realize that Mateo would be gone in two weeks.

The tiniest part of me felt relief at that, that I could just be me, have fun, and not have my feelings occupied by another. But the larger part, the one that consisted of my skin and bones, it felt sunken in at the thought, eaten away. I felt like my life without him would definitely start lacking vitality,

that the spring in my step would disappear, that the butterflies in my stomach would vanish. That I wouldn't feel...whole.

And that was such a fucked up feeling.

I tried to find Claudia or Becca after dinner. I needed to speak to them. The wine, which I had grown to love, was coursing through my veins, making my mouth loose and my heart pound. I wanted to tell them, to just get it off my chest, to feel like I wasn't crazy, that I wasn't a terrible person for crushing on a married man, that I wasn't a villain.

I ended up finding Mateo instead. There were a group of people outside on the patio, sitting on the wicker chairs and playing cards. The extracurricular activities were called off for the night because the plays had taken so much planning, so the bar was open and everyone was pretty much free to their own devices.

Mateo was there, laughing loudly with Wayne. Both of their cheeks were spotted with red. They were drunk already, and I remembered during dinner that both of them had gone around to all the tables and collected the bottles of wine that weren't empty, like hooligans at a wedding reception.

Angel, Sammy, Becca, Eduardo, Manuel, Ricardo, Polly and Froggy Carlos were all there, drinks in hand. The rain had stopped and the air had turned wet with humidity rising off of the grass. The sky was growing clearer by the moment, the clouds skirting past the bright gibbous moon.

"Vera!" Wayne shouted at me. "You Canadians play soccer, right?"

I couldn't help but eye Mateo with suspicion. "Yes, some do. Why?"

"We're going to have a soccer match next week, the Anglos versus the Spaniards." He jerked a fat thumb at Mateo. "I'm going to pretend to be a Spaniard, just to be on his team."

I pulled up a wicker chair and hunkered down. "Sounds like fun, but count me out."

"Aw, come on Vera," Sammy complained loudly. "If I'm doing it, you're doing it. Your legs are so much longer than mine."

That may have been true but having longer legs just meant more opportunities to trip over them.

"Your legs are as long," Froggy Carlos said to her with a lusty wink, "if you play with those sexy heels on."

Sammy laughed and squealed at his remark and I had to keep myself from rolling my eyes. I very briefly caught Mateo's gaze.

He got up and stopped by my chair, resting his fingertips on my shoulder. "Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

"I just sat down," I moaned.

"You have to work for it."

I wanted to say no. But I couldn't. I looked up at him, at his dark, glittering eyes and felt myself rise out of my seat and follow him into the bar. I guessed talking to Claudia or Becca could wait another day. It was a nice idea, anyway.

We walked past a few people who were on the computers and over to the bar. I leaned against it, my fingers resting on the cool copper top while Mateo ordered us two beers. His body was pressed right to the side of mine and I could feel the heat between us, the firmness of his waist and hips against me.

Deep breaths, I told myself.

"Did you think you'd get away with it?" he asked in a low, gravelly voice.

Shit. What now?

I swallowed and looked up at him reluctantly. His face was so close, I knew he could count the freckles that had sprouted over on my nose over the last week. His scent teased me, making me feel gooey inside, a melting pot of tingling lust.

"Get away with what?" I whispered.

He gave me a slow, sexy smile. "The day is almost over and I have not asked you my question."

Oh. *That*. Oh, god, seriously? After what happened yesterday?

"I promise it will be more...fun," he said, reading me. He was good at that.

"Fine," I said, pretending I wasn't thrilled that he had sought me out to ask me something. That it didn't make me all kinds of floating on the clouds happy that he had been thinking about me.

While he paid for our drinks—I'd barely added any to my tab since I got there—I leaned in closer to him, taking advantage of the moment. Tonight he was wearing a black silk shirt and black pants that fit his body perfectly. That panther analogy I had a while ago, well, that was back in full swing. He was sleek, dark and dripping with slinky self-assurance.

"You did a great job last night," I told him. "Your skit was the funniest."

Mateo's group ended up being all male, so they decided to do a faux Miss Spain contest. Which meant they all dressed up in drag. Mateo, was, by far, the most masculine of them all, even with a blonde wig, lipstick and a feather boa.

"Did you think I made an attractive woman?" he asked, handing me my beer.

I thanked him for it and then said, "No. You were the hairiest woman I have ever seen."

He gave me a crooked smile and clinked the neck of his beer against mine. "I don't think I could handle being a woman. You are far too... complicated."

"We are?" I asked dubiously.

He nodded and put his hand on the small of my back, something he'd been doing more and more. I felt myself momentarily melt into him before I straightened up and let him lead me out of the bar and outside. Instead of stopping by the drinking game that was now taking place, he kept his hand there and took us out toward the path that sloped between the cottages.

The night now was dark, the stars clear and shining. I put my head back and could see Draco, Arcturus and Ursa Major, strings of diamonds in this velvet night.

"I was hoping we would see the stars tonight," Mateo said. "Come, let us get away from the lights."

Get away from the lights? Why?

My body shivered with the unknown and I immediately started to have a minor freakout in my head. What if Mateo wanted to kiss me? What would I do? I mean I couldn't kiss him back, it would be wrong. But fuck if it would feel anything but right.

I was never very good at any battles that pit my body against my mind. My body almost always won.

He took me away from the patio, where Angel was drunkenly yelling "shithead!" during the drinking game, and over toward my cottage. For a split second I thought he was going to take me upstairs, to my room, to my bed, but he pulled me to a stop beside the low stone wall and patted the top of it with his hand.

I couldn't tell if I was relieved or disappointed. Either way, it was for the best. From the light upstairs I could see Sara was home and spotted the

shadows of Jorge and his roommate in the level below. Nothing was ever secret here.

I gingerly hopped up onto the wall and he sat down right beside me, his long, soccer-player legs dangling over the side. He swung them, the backs of his heels gently hitting the wall. I'd forgotten he was a little bit drunk.

"So how was your first week?" he asked me before taking a swig of his beer.

"Good," I said, so utterly conscious of how close we were sitting, our thighs touching each other. Every time his leg swung, it shook mine. "Yours?"

"I am tired of talking," he said. "My throat hurts. I have been having honey tea before I go to bed every night, like an old man."

I nudged him playfully with my elbow. "You are an old man."

He nudged me right back. "This is a new thing."

I tilted my head and eyed him curiously. "What is?"

"You, touching me," he said.

"Touching you?"

"Yes," he said earnestly. "Like you touch everyone else."

I felt my cheeks flush but I still had no idea what he was talking about.

"Angel, Eduardo, Ricardo," he listed off. "You touch them, kiss them, hello and goodbye and when they make you laugh. Like this." He placed his large hand on my thigh. My eyes widened in response. I couldn't move. "Or like this," he said as he put the same hand on my shoulder. His warmth seared through my bare shoulders, spreading throughout my body.

Oh, Jesus.

I sucked in a breath and tried to keep my voice steady. "I do that to everyone. That's just how I am. It's automatic." Honestly, I don't even realize it half the time, but I'm often touching someone if they're close to me, man or woman, young or old.

He had a sip of his beer and looked down at the bottle in his hands. "You do not touch me."

So, he noticed.

"Well...you're married," I said unevenly, wishing my heart would slow the fuck down, feeling completely exposed even in the dark of night.

"And so are many of them."

"It would be inappropriate..."

"How do you know? Is this inappropriate?"

He took his hand and every so slowly, ever so gently, brushed a strand of loose hair from my face, tucking it behind my ears. His fingertips felt like whispers, telling my skin secrets. I closed my eyes at the touch, feeling it travel down my spine, bathing me in starshine.

I couldn't remember how to speak. I felt like I was on beautiful drugs, the shivery feel of warm sun on a cold day. "No," I managed to say, my voice no more than a wisp. I could practically see it float away.

"Then you do it to me," he said, his voice even lower. "And let me decide."

I opened my eyes and stared at him in trepidation. His features were so dark and mysterious in the shadow of the moon, the tension between us mounting.

"This is getting weird," I said, trying to lighten the mood. "This is why I don't touch you."

He grinned. "Maybe the more you touch me, the less weird it will get. You can start, maybe, with my toes."

I let out a small laugh, grateful for it. "You are such a freak."

He shrugged and finished the rest of his beer. A weird, thick silence wrapped itself around us. I started wondering if he felt hurt that I wouldn't touch him. I started wondering if he had expected me to. I started wondering why I wasn't, why I was so afraid.

I reached over and delicately touched my fingers to his temple. I slid them along his smooth skin, catching his silky strands and pushing them behind his ears. The tips of his lobes felt so soft, I had to fight every single instinct to not wrap my lips and tongue around them. I wanted to bite them, feel them between my teeth. I kept my fingers there, now gently nestled in the luxurious feeling of his hair.

His eyes slid to mine, burning, smoldering, like they were lit on fire and my gaze back only stoked the flames. I couldn't look away, couldn't take my hand away. I felt like I was drowning.

His full lips parted slightly, enough for me to catch a glimpse of his pink tongue. The heat inside me pooled between my legs, demanding I pay attention to my needs, to my wants, to my desires. I wanted to straddle him, right there and then, right on that stone wall, and feel his wide shoulders beneath my palms, his firm waist between my thighs.

There was only one way out of this. The moral police that I had never known existed had apparently taken up some real estate in my brain. They

reminded me that he was married, and a bit drunk, and I should know better than to act on a damn crush.

Without warning, I suddenly blurted out, "I hope you'll be satisfied with that. There is no way I'm touching your toes." I then burst out laughing, a crazy, hyena-type laugh that was half-fake, half assfuck insane.

Mateo blinked a few times, shocked by my apparent descent into Crazyville. With the spell broken, he chuckled and gave me his patented shrug again. "It was worth a shot, yes?"

"Yes," I agreed, giving him a wan smile. "So." I cleared my throat and shifted my focus to the field in front of us. "Was that the question?"

"Oh, no," he said. "My question for the day, my dear Estrella, is about your tattoos. What are they, what do each of them mean?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. I was used to this question. I started with my ankles. I pulled up my leg and rolled up the hem of my jeans. "This was my first tattoo," I told him. "It's a tattoo of the moon from the Little Prince. I got it when I was fourteen."

"So young," Mateo remarked.

"Yeah," I said but offered no further comment. I rolled up the other leg and showed him the dots going around the ankle. "This is the constellation Auriga." Knowing he could barely see it, I looked up at the sky and nodded to the horizon. "It's right there. That bright star, that's Capella. It's part of it."

"Are all of your tattoos of stars?" he asked, his eyes following my gaze.

"Most of them. I have the solar system on my back. I have Pegasus on my neck, Scorpius on my hip, Gemini on my ribs, Cassiopeia as a tramp stamp."

"Tramp stamp?"

"Um, it's what you get when you're young and stupid." I pushed at my lower back. "Right here."

I showed him my newest tattoo on the inside of my right arm. "I got this done before I came here, Sagittarius...with skulls, to mix it up. Then I have the shooting stars on my shoulders and on my chest, plus a quote I like by Oscar Wilde right below it. I have a mermaid and ship on my bicep." I flexed my arm for him. "And a maple leaf on my ass." I quickly took a gulp of my beer and let him process that.

He laughed, his brows raised to the heavens. "Really?"

"Yup."

“Did that hurt?”

“Nah. I have a lot of fat there. The stuff on the back of my neck hurt, ribs too. But my ass was fine.”

“I see. But, must be weird to have your ass in someone’s face, yes?”

I gave him a cheeky grin. “Not really. I have a nice ass.”

He stared at me for a few beats, then smiled and looked away. “As I said before, you are fascinating.”

I started peeling the label off my beer bottle. I knew what that meant—that I had sexual frustration—but I didn’t stop until the label was sticking to my fingers. I rolled it up and then flicked it off onto the grass. “I wish more people found me as fascinating as you do,” I said quietly.

“I am sure they do,” he said thickly. “It would be impossible to not be... enamoured with you.”

My heart seemed to pause, mid-beat. I wanted so badly to ask him point blank if *he* was enamoured with me. But I was afraid of the answer. It would be bad if he said yes and bad if he said no.

“You said I could ask you a question,” I reminded him gently.

He nodded. “Yes, I did. I am—how you say—all ears.”

I listened to the crickets for a few seconds. “Do you miss your family?”

His chin jerked down slightly and he gave me a funny look. “Do I miss my family? Of course I do. Why you ask?”

“I’m just curious,” I said. “Because I don’t miss mine. I don’t know what’s normal.”

“You miss your brother,” he assumed.

I nodded. “I do. I wish he was here with me, though.”

“You can miss people without wanting to be home. I wish my daughter was here.”

My face softened. “Oh yeah? Chloe Ann?”

“Yes,” he said warmly. “She would love it here very much. She loves animals. She would love the fields and the fat pigs and the horses down the road there. You would like her very much. And she would like you. You have the same sense of adventure.”

And now came the time for the question I could have ignored. “What about your wife. Do you miss her? Do you wish she was here?”

A hesitant look came into his eyes and he chewed on his lip. Finally he put the beer bottle down beside him and stared at his hands, blankly. “I could give you the good answer and tell you yes. But I would be lying and I

don't wish to lie to you, Vera." He sighed while I was left wondering if it was he didn't miss her or didn't want her here...or if they were both the same thing. "As I said to before, women are complicated. My relationship with Isabel is...complicated."

"Well," I said somewhat awkwardly, trying to pave over it, "what relationships aren't complicated?"

He gave me a sharp look. "The good ones."

The thing is, I had to agree with him. That's why I wasn't even in relationships. Wham, bam, thank you dude, was way easier than getting your heart trampled on. The last relationship I was in nearly broke me to pieces. There was no way I'd ever go down that route again. And so, I hadn't.

I kept all of that to myself though and only said, "I understand." I could sense that he wanted to know more but so far my love life was not even close to being on the table.

"Vera, Mateo!" Angel's slurred English interrupted us.

We both twisted around to see him stumbling toward us with a glass of wine in his hands and a stupid smile on his face. His white shirt was stained with purple red.

"Angel," Mateo acknowledged him, pronouncing the "g" softly, like an "h."

"I was sent here to tell you something," Angel said, swaying a bit on his feet, his expression absolutely exuberant. It was only then that I was aware of the loud voices, music and laughter coming from the patio area. Their drinking game must have accelerated while I was in my own little world.

Our own little world.

"Yes, what is it?" Mateo asked him impatiently. He didn't seem to appreciate the interruption either.

Angel's eyes rolled back in thought and he rapidly tapped his fingernail against the wine glass. "Sammy...", he paused. "Sammy told me to tell you 'cunt.' And if I said it, she would show me hers!"

Then he collapsed into a fit of impish giggles, turned on his heel and ran all the way back to the patio, his wine continuing to spill everywhere. A chorus of laughter erupted in the distance, everyone finding Angel's dare hilarious.

I looked back at Mateo, my brow cocked. "Wow, you Spaniards are being corrupted more and more each day. Have you picked up any English

that isn't a bad word?"

Mateo chuckled and eased himself off the wall. "Wait until we have a chance to speak Spanish, I will teach you all the bad words."

My face fell a little. "We'll have to find the time before you leave. It probably won't be tolerated until your last day."

His smile was sad. He held out his palm, waiting for my hand. "Less than two weeks," he noted softly.

I put my hand in his and let him help me off of the wall. Together we walked hand in hand until we were out of the dark and into the light. He then let go, but not before giving my hand a squeeze.

Chapter Ten

“Vera, get your butt over here!”

I opened my eyes and stared at the dark wood paneled ceiling. Sun streamed in through the open French doors, as did the shouts of whoever the hell was interrupting my nap.

I blinked a few times and slowly sat up. I’d passed out on the couch, my SLR camera on my stomach as I’d been reviewing all the photos I’d taken of the trip so far. I had no idea what time it was, but I had left lunch a little early, hoping to sneak in extra shut-eye.

After Mateo and I went back to join the makeshift party, I only stayed for about twenty minutes before I wanted to go back to my place. I was horny as hell and staring at Mateo as he drank another beer, knowing how soft his hair felt to my hands, was absolute torture for me. I went straight back to my room, locked the door, and brought out my vibrator. Normally my hands would have done the trick, but not for what I was envisioning.

Unfortunately, even after five orgasms in a row, imagining Mateo thrusting into me, jerking off, going down on me, I still hadn’t found the peace I so desperately craved. I tossed and turned all night and practically sleepwalked through the morning sessions.

After the nap, I still wasn’t that refreshed, probably because some hooligan was outside yelling at me. I growled in frustration and then got up. I flung myself at the iron railing and screamed, “WHAT?!” my hair blowing around me like a lion’s mane.

Down and across from me on the lawn of the dining hall a ragtag group of people had gathered, maybe a dozen.

I could see Mateo standing on the side of the group, wearing what looked to be jeans, a t-shirt and running shoes. My god, not a slick suit in sight!

At the front of the group was Eduardo who was wearing ridiculously tight shorts, knee-high socks and had a soccer ball under his arm. “We need another Anglo to make this even!” he yelled right back.

Didn’t these people realize that not only did I need some alone time each day, but I hated most sports. Give me tennis, give me skiing, give me my horseback riding but never sign me up for a god damn team sport.

Plus, Mateo was there and his forest green t-shirt showed off the V shape of his upper body, the strength of his tanned arms and his jeans looked really worn in, in that sexy mechanic kind of way. I couldn't see his ass but I knew it looked amazing.

Maybe you'll burn off your crazy libido, I thought to myself as I was getting hot and bothered all over again. It was either going to help or make it worse. Seemed I couldn't really win while I was here.

I grumbled to myself and retreated to my room where I slipped on a pair of jean shorts that I knew made *my* ass look fine and my Chuck Taylors. Not the best soccer shoe but it would have to do. I quickly gulped down a glass of water at the sink and then ran down the stairs to join them.

"Okay," I announced, waving my hands in the air. "I'm here, I'm here."

I briefly made eye contact with Mateo before I was immediately sequestered over to the Anglo's side. At least I got to see him turn around and join his team, proving that yes, his firm ass looked deliciously biteable in those jeans. Damn it.

"Vera!" Lauren snapped.

Oh great, she was here. I slowly turned around and glared at her.

She was already glaring at me through her glitter glasses, eyeing my boobs angrily. Was it because I was wearing an American Apparel top again? I thought we already went over this.

"Shouldn't you be wearing a sports bra," she said, "or something more appropriate for the sport?"

I somehow both raised my brows *and* narrowed my eyes. "Excuse me?"

Sure this top showed skin, but most of my shirts did. When did she become the cleavage police? Wasn't she supposed to be a feminist?

Wayne stepped forward, dressed head to toe in Nike gear that looked like it was being used for the first time. He was trying really hard not to look at my boobs. "As team captain here, I say that what Vera is wearing is fine."

"You too?" Lauren scoffed, turning to look at him, which kind of reminded me of Linda Blair in *The Exorcist* when her head goes all the way around. "What is it with you married men? Does the sanctity of marriage vows mean nothing anymore?"

Wayne's expression turned into that of a scolded child. "I'm sorry?"

"I have to agree with Lauren," Tyler said, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Your top is distracting."

“Shut up, you Brony,” I said. He looked appalled while I heard Wayne whisper, “What’s a Brony?”

“Come on, you guys,” Polly admonished, bouncing back and forth on each leg. Though she was wearing a tight t-shirt, her fake boobs still jostled around and yet Lauren wasn’t signalling her out. “It’s just a stupid football match. Let’s just play. Who gives a rat’s arse what anyone is wearing, I want that damn dinner.”

Apparently whatever team was going to win the match next week was going to get treated to a dinner in a fancy restaurant out in town, like we were episode winners on a reality show or something. The thing was, I didn’t want to spend yet another dinner with some of these people. If I won a dinner by myself, then yes, *that* would be a prize.

“Let’s hear it for dinner!” Wayne yelled and clapped his hands together, happy to have a segue off of whatever the fuck was going on with Lauren. “Okay team. Let’s go, let’s go.” While he waved everyone over to him to huddle and pick positions, I reached out and grabbed Lauren’s shoulder.

Kind of hard.

“What the hell is your problem with me?” I whispered as I spun her around to face me. Seriously, I had enough of her and her snarky, hateful attitude. She was pretty much the one thing that was putting a damper on Las Palabras.

She leaned in close. She smelled...not good. “I don’t like you,” she seethed, eyes wide and bright, like she was about to go apeshit on me.

“Why?” I asked. “I haven’t done anything to you.”

“Yes you have. You’ve done something to the whole female gender.”

Oh my god, what the fuck.

“I don’t like women who use sex to achieve what they want. Women are better than that.”

“What sex?” I asked, befuddled, pissed-off and a whole bunch of things. “I’m not having sex.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know his wife could find out everything.”

“There’s nothing to find out!” I yelled at her. By now it was quite apparent that we were having a little war on the corner of the lawn and the rest of our team was watching us impatiently. Thank goodness the Spaniards were further away and Mateo wasn’t picking up on any of this.

“You keep telling yourself that,” she said. “But I know girls like you. You make my life harder every single day.”

“Do you ever stop and think,” I said, waving my finger in her face, “that *you* make your life harder on yourself?”

She put her hands on her hips. “You have no clue, do you?”

“No,” I said just as I looked past Lauren’s shoulder and saw Sammy kick the soccer ball in our direction. I took a step back from Lauren and watched as the soccer ball slammed into the back of her head. “*You* have no clue.”

Lauren cried out, her glasses falling off her face and onto the grass.

“Heads up!” Sammy yelled with a smirk on her face.

I left Lauren to pick up her glasses and ran along to join the team, cleavage be damned.



After the little kerfuffle with Lauren, the rest of the game went pretty smoothly. Even though it was just supposed to be a practice match, Jerry was acting as ref and he was so into the game that he decided to cancel everyone’s first business session of the day and continue with the game instead. Everyone that wasn’t playing got to pull up the wicker chairs and watch from the sidelines.

I wished that’s what I could have done, instead I was running back and forth and pretty much fucking things up until Wayne put me in as goalie. Which would have been an okay gig if you were on the Spanish side, because none of the Anglos were even coming close to the net.

And the Spanish team had Mateo.

And Mateo was a fucking soccer god.

The one good thing about being in goal was that I had a very clear shot of the field (well, lawn), and the ball and wherever the ball was, Mateo was.

Even though we were playing on a lawn like bunch of grade-schoolers and the goal posts were nothing more than two orange traffic cones and Mateo was playing in jeans, he moved with the grace of a dancer, executed kicks and plays like he was in the stadium playing for Madrid. Everyone was kind of in awe, more watching him than actually playing seriously. And no one cared, because this was something you didn’t get to see every day.

The most amazing thing about the whole experience was the look on Mateo’s face. It was constantly lit up, like a spectacular sunrise that you never expected to catch. I sometimes caught glimpses of that look when I

was talking to him but for the most part, Mateo came across as charming, witty, relaxed—and distant. There was always some edge, some darkness to him just rolling beneath the businessman exterior. But here, on the field, the way the ball danced with his feet, the way his supple body moved like he was in an intricate dance, it was like he'd come alive again.

And, perhaps inappropriately, my heart squeezed a bit for him. It couldn't have been easy to give up what you loved doing for something else that didn't give you joy.

Ironically, though Mateo was always considerate and thoughtful, he didn't show any of that on the field. He moved through people, bowling them over with no apologies, all so the ball could be at his feet again. And, as goalie, he showed zero compromise with me. He kicked that ball at me like he was trying to take my head off.

As such, I spent a lot of time leaping for the ball but making sure my timing was just a bit off, so the ball never collided with me. I looked like I was putting in an effort, but really I was just letting Mateo make every single goal on purpose. His smile was so blinding after each goal that it warmed me inside and out, and besides, there was no way I was going to get bruised up in exchange for that. I couldn't stop him, even if I was trying.

Naturally, the Spaniards won the game (so much for a practice match) and Jerry promised us all that next week we could probably have the official match on the field of the school in Acantilado. At least the goal posts would be bigger.

I wanted to talk to Mateo when it was all over, but he had a crowd of people around him now. I wondered if it made him feel like he was back in the day, back in the glory.

It was just as well. The game did nothing to clear my head or get out my sexual ya-yas. I had a business session with Claudia next and I knew for sure we weren't having any kind of meeting.

"Great game," Claudia said, coming up to me with the binder in her hands. She had opted to sit and watch, which was the wiser choice. "Do you want to do the interview or the phone call?"

"I have a better idea," I said. "Do you have any beer at your apartment? Or wine?"

She frowned. "I have wine."

"That will do. Let's go."

Minutes later we were sitting on her couch, a glass of wine white each. She kept flipping through the binder until I told her to put it away, we wouldn't be needing it.

"I just want to talk," I said. "Not about business."

"Okay, yes." She looked a bit relieved—the sessions were the hardest parts of the day. "What about? Are you okay?"

I nodded and craned my head around to look at her roommate, Polly's, door. It was open, room empty.

"She's not here," Claudia said. "What is wrong, Vera?"

I sighed and swirled the wine around in the glass. "Nothing really. I just need to talk to someone and you seem so open-minded, maybe you would understand."

"I am not Lauren," she said seriously.

"No, you aren't." I folded my leg under me, my thighs sticking to the couch. Each day here it was growing warmer and warmer, my skin more and more tanned. "I talked to Becca last week and she said that this place has a way of...making people fall in love. Or at least fall into bed together."

A knowing smirk came across her face, her brown eyes dancing. "Oh, yes, I can see that is true."

"Really?" I asked, intrigued. "Has this happened to you so far?"

Her face turned red and she smiled sheepishly, looking down. Oh, how very interesting.

"Who?" I goaded.

She bit her lip and shyly met my eyes. "Ricardo."

"Ricardo!" I exclaimed. Ricardo was very tall, mid-twenties, with a large roman nose and a buzz cut, but he was very cute. Still, it surprised me. "I would have thought Eduardo," I told her.

The color in her cheeks deepened. "It was Eduardo. The second night. We just kissed, so...But he is with Polly now."

"I thought he'd go with Becca. Doesn't Polly have a boyfriend?"

Claudia shrugged and pulled down at her yellow tee. "Not my problem. Eduardo is nice but Ricardo is *really* nice."

"How did it happen?" I asked, kinda wanting the sordid details.

She was coy. "The way it usually happens."

"Did you make the first move?"

Another shrug. "Why not?"

I swear, a shrug and a “why not?” were the Spaniard’s go-to answer for everything.

“Well, then I guess it seems safe—and a little boring now—to tell you that I have a crush on someone.”

Her brows quirked up. “Other than Mateo?”

“What?”

“You are sleeping with Mateo, no?”

“WHAT?!”

“No?”

“No!” I exclaimed, appalled. “Why does everyone keep thinking that?”

“Because you are always together,” she said simply. She took a sip of wine. “The attraction is very obvious. So, I figure you must be sleeping together.”

“He’s married!”

“Yes, but you are not.”

I shook my head adamantly. “It’s wrong. I don’t want to be the other woman. I’ve seen my dad go for the other woman, I can’t put his daughter through that,” I said. “Or his wife,” I quickly added.

“That doesn’t mean that you can’t have feelings for anyone else.”

“Yes, it *does* mean that.”

“Maybe you are meant to be together.”

“We’re not! There isn’t even a together. We’re just friends. I haven’t done anything about it and so far my feelings are totally one-sided.”

Claudia got up off the couch and brought a pack of cigarettes out of her front jean pocket. “If you think it is on the one-side, you have not seen the way that he looks at you.”

She walked over to her small patio and pulled up a chair. I got up and stormed after her, my nerves dancing excitedly.

“What do you mean, the way he looks at me?” I asked, lowering my voice in case there were people around, listening. I felt like bouncing off the walls.

She slid the ashtray toward her as I sat down. “You do not see it. But I do. I think everyone does. He looks at you like...like you’re his favorite food.”

“Favorite *food*?”

She lit her cigarette. “Yes. You’re like his favorite food in the whole world. He wants to have you, eat you, devour you. He thinks about you all

the time, craves you. But, he cannot have you for one reason or another. Perhaps you upset his stomach. Maybe he is on a diet, yes? All he wants is a taste but he cannot even have that. That is how he looks at you.”

I sat there, stunned, as some of her smoke blew in my face. That’s how Mateo looked at me? Like he wanted to eat me? I was pretty sure that’s how I looked at him. Just last night I was contemplating nibbling on his ear lobes.

“And yes,” she said, leaning closer to me, a small smile on her lips, “that is also how you look at him.” Great, a mind reader. “But you are more subtle about it. You try not to let everyone know. But, we know.”

“There is nothing to know,” I reminded her, poking the table with my finger for emphasis. “We are not sleeping together. He is married. I have a crush. That is it. The end of the story.”

“A crush?” she questioned. “Vera, I think you’re in love with him.”

No fucking way. Not love. That did not happen with me, not ever and not now.

“You can’t fall in love in a week,” I told her heatedly.

“You can fall in love in a second,” she said with a snap of her fingers. “The heart has no regard for time.”

With that sobering thought, Claudia told me about her ex-boyfriend and how they fell in love at first sight then took the conversation back onto Ricardo and their exploits. I envied her so badly right there and then. She could fawn over Ricardo, kiss him, fuck him and no one would ever bat an eye. It was okay for them to be together. It wasn’t forbidden.

I gulped the rest of the wine and left her apartment, heading back to reception to meet Cristina for my next one-on-one, my mind and heart and hormones all over the place. Lo and behold, Mateo was walking up the path toward me.

He was on the phone, smiling.

His shirt was off and slung over his shoulder, exposing his bare chest, abs and arms.

Holy fuck.

For a moment, I was sure that time had stopped. Or maybe every single nerve, cell, vein, bone, muscle in my body just slowed as I took him all in.

From his thick-veined forearms to his sculpted shoulders, broad chest peppered with neatly-trimmed chest hair, to his six-pack abs, he had, by far, the best body I’d ever seen on a man. He kept himself in fine ass shape,

looking more like a young athlete than anything else. Like, he and David Beckham had more in common than I thought, although David's skin tone wasn't as mesmerizing. Mateo's color was amazing, just beautiful, this dark golden bronze tan that covered him everywhere. I wanted so badly to just touch him, to lick the sheen of sweat of his skin. I bet he tasted like victory.

And to think, this was the man that Claudia said wanted to taste *me*.

I really, really wanted to believe her.

Meanwhile, I was just standing there like I was melting into a puddle of myself. I clamped my mouth shut as he walked past and I heard him say into the phone, "No, mi tesorito, it was easy, I didn't injure myself." He was beaming, talking about the game, to his wife. To his *tesorito*. And he called their relationship complicated? *This* was complicated.

He winked at me in acknowledgement, his smile becoming broader. I tried to smile back but it wouldn't come. I just stared at him, feeling stupid, foolish and strangely rejected. In a perfect world I may have been his favorite food, but it still wasn't what he got served every day. I turned around and walked down the hill, my heart feeling like a pin cushion.

"Vera!" I heard him call out from behind. I stopped and nervously glanced over my shoulder. He was holding the phone's receiver to his chest, grinning at me. "I need to ask you your question."

"What?" I answered, hoping it was quick.

"Who is your favorite Spaniard here?"

Seriously?

And yet I couldn't lie to him.

"You," I said, more to myself than to him. Then I turned around and walked away as quickly as I could.

Chapter Eleven

The verbal attacks from Lauren, my conversation with Claudia and my encounter with shirtless Mateo did a total number on my head and my heart. The next four days passed by like a blender, shaking me up, changing my feelings from moment to moment. It didn't help that a heat wave had suddenly gripped the region and the sweat diluted my thoughts.

The thing was, I didn't do love. That wasn't my thing. That was the reason why I didn't date, I only got laid when I needed to blow some steam or have some fun. I didn't have time to put up with complicated relationships or put my heart and soul out there for someone to step on. Love was scarier than deep space.

So that's why I knew I couldn't be in love. I was just *in lust* with Mateo, and that was usually fine, totally normal. But now, everything seemed so jumbled. I couldn't keep my head on straight and every time I tried to pick a new strategy to get through this, such as "from now on, I will not be attracted to him" or "from now on, I will not speak to him", something came along and shook things loose.

That something was usually Mateo. Avoiding him was really hard when you were forced to interact nearly every day and especially hard when he still sought you out for his daily question.

It was also hard because every time he asked me to go for a walk with him, to eat breakfast with him, to look through an English gossip magazine together with him, I couldn't say no. I didn't want to. I wanted to be around him as much as I could, even though I knew I shouldn't.

Really, I was just fucked. And not in the right way.

Like when he asked me to try napping with him again after we finished lunch. The temperature was sweltering, even with the fans inside going full blast, and everyone looked like they'd been hit by a truck carrying a flatbed of sweat. I hadn't been sleeping very well thanks to the heat and was extra tired. So, taking a nap felt like the smart thing to do even though it might have not been.

We walked outside onto the patio where he once again grabbed a few extra seat cushions and went over to the tree where we last had our siesta. Because of the heat, he was wearing his worn-in jeans, Keds and a fitted

black t-shirt with faded vintage designs, pretty much his uniform for the last few days. I wasn't complaining. I loved Mateo in his slick business suits but I also loved Mateo in his dressed down, rough style. I had a feeling that deep down, that was the style closer to him.

I loved Mateo in everything.

Except, I wasn't *in love* with him.

Of course.

"Ready for another siesta?" he asked as he got down on the ground, propping one of the cushions up under his head.

I looked around me to see if anyone was watching. There were a few people at the tables—Polly and Eduardo, Sara, Manuel and Nerea. The slut-shamer and the Brony were nowhere to be seen.

"You going to join me?"

I stared down at him, at his long body lying beneath me. What I really wanted to do was straddle him and put my hands down those jeans. But I shoved those lewd thoughts in a box somewhere.

I got down to the ground and made myself comfortable. We were lying closer to each other than we had been the first time. I felt like if I moved my arm even the slightest little bit, my hand would brush against his. I couldn't help but wonder if that was a coincidence or not.

"Are you going to the party tonight?" he asked casually.

"Why wouldn't I?" Tonight was the weekly party and this time we were supposed to get a flamenco dancing show, put on by Sara and Nerea, with Manuel playing classical guitar.

"You seem tired," he explained. "But so am I. It usually doesn't get this hot until August."

"I bet you wish you lived on the coast," I said. In Vancouver, it rarely got hot—or cold—because we were by the ocean.

"Yes," he said. "But I have an apartment in Barcelona, so I try to go on the weekends."

Wow. Now that would be cool. I bet it was a beautiful place too. My mind immediately began to envision a butter-colored Dali-esque exterior overlooking a wide expanse of golden beach. Mateo was there, standing by a balcony, the transparent curtains blowing past him. In my mind, he was wearing only boxer briefs, with a plush robe half-hanging off of him, the ocean breeze moving his hair.

“You should come see it one day,” he said, still a casual tone to his voice. It entered my dream and suddenly I was in the picture too.

I let out an uneasy laugh and the image vanished. “Yeah, I wish.”

Silence hummed between us. I could feel that Mateo wanted to say something more but I didn’t want him to say it.

“So,” I said, sliding over it. “In the last however many days, you’ve asked me who my favorite Spaniard is, my first pet as a child, my favorite childhood memory, what my thoughts are on global warming and why Justin Bieber exists.”

He raised his hand in the air and started ticking off his fingers. “And you’ve told me it was me, naturally, a hamster named Chubb-Chubb, a sailing trip on your parent’s friends boat when you were nine, you think the planet is angry and we are all fucked, and that Justin Bieber exists because he is the anti-Christ and no one would ever suspect the anti-Christ came from Canada. Correct?”

“Sounds right. So what is today’s question?”

“Hmmm,” he mused. He put his hand back down beside him and his pinky finger lay directly across my pinky finger. I held my breath, afraid to move, the sensation of his skin on mine felt heavier than lead. It was all I could think about. His finger on mine. Was he going to move it? Should I move mine? Were we going to just lie there, touching like that?

Oh my god, I was going insane.

“Vera?” he asked.

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“What are you thinking about?”

You, you, you, always you, I screamed inside.

“Sorry,” I quickly said. “I was thinking about Justin Bieber.”

“Is that so?”

“What were you saying?” I prodded, hoping he wouldn’t pry.

“I was saying I was hoping to ask you tonight.”

“Why tonight?”

“Because you would be drunk.”

My heart thudded in my chest. What did that mean?

I took in a careful breath. “How come you can’t ask me when I’m sober?”

He shrugged but his finger was still on mine, trapping me. “People speak the truth when they are drunk. More or less.”

“Well,” I said bravely. “Then ask me tonight when I am drunk.”

“I will.”

We didn’t say anything for a few moments. All I kept thinking about what he was going to ask me, why did he need me to be drunk and truthful? My mind started going fast, the hamster wheel spinning, as my heart sprinkled it with hope. Was he going to ask me to have an affair with him?

No. No, it was such a long shot. Despite what Claudia said, he didn’t see me as his favorite food and even if he didn’t, he wouldn’t take a bite.

Oh, god I hoped he wouldn’t because I didn’t think I’d be able to resist.

And then what?

Suddenly it felt like I choked up with fear, like it reached a hand in and took a good hold of my chest. I couldn’t go to the party tonight. I couldn’t be put in those circumstances. I didn’t trust myself this time, I didn’t trust that I wouldn’t do something that I would regret and I didn’t trust that I wouldn’t get hurt.

If the heart had no regard for time, mine wouldn’t have any for pain.

“Tell me about the stars, Estrella,” he said abruptly, clearing his throat, clearing my panicked thoughts from my head.

I stared up at the sky, at the sun that was trying to push through the clouds, clouds that pressed down the oppressive heat like an angry fist. “Uh, you can’t see the stars right now.”

“But let us pretend you can,” he said. “I know you are very good at pretending.”

I frowned and rolled my head to the side to look at him. He was facing the sky, his aviator shades on his eyes, the clouds reflected in them. I loved the slight bump on the bridge of his nose, like he’d gotten it head-butting someone in soccer. He probably did.

I watched him carefully for a moment before I told him constellations we’d see later that night, if it were clear.

“We saw those the other night,” he said. “I want to hear their stories. Tell me a story about the constellation Leo, the lion.”

“You mean the story with Hercules, or...”

“No,” he said. “Something you’ve made up.”

“Pretty sure the Hercules story was made up.”

“Play along now, Vera,” he said, his voice so silky smooth. “For me.”

I sighed and blew a strand of hair off my sticky face. “Fine.” And then I proceeded to make up some story about Leo, which ended up being eerily

similar to the Disney classic, *Lambert the Sheepish Lion*.

When I was finished the story, I looked over at him for his reaction. He was sleeping soundly, his chest rising and falling.

Did Mateo just use me as sleep-aid? Why did I find that somewhat endearing?

I smiled to myself and did the creepy stalker thing where I continued to watch him sleep, allowed to stare unabashedly at his beautiful, temporarily innocent face until he began to stir.

The siesta was over.



I tried not to go to the flamenco party, I really did. In fact, straight after dinner, I ran back to the apartment, took a shower and put my pajamas on, ready for a night in. I did not want to have my resolve tested. Even if Mateo was going to ask me something funny and completely innocent, it didn't matter. At this point in our relationship, I did not trust myself around him when I was drunk and it made me really nervous to even talk to him with everyone watching. For the last four or five days, ever since Claudia told me that she assumed I was sleeping with him, I felt everyone's eyes always on me, always judging. I knew this probably wasn't true—aside from Lauren—but even so, a party seemed too risky.

Lauren's words kept ringing in my head too, telling me his wife would find out. What happened when there was something to find out? I didn't know Isabel Casalles at all, especially since Mateo didn't seem to like to talk about her, but no woman wants to do that to another. No one wants someone to commit adultery.

I'd just settled down in my bed with my Kindle, still a bit buzzed from the wine at dinner, and ready to read the urban fantasy I'd been sucked into, when there was a knock at the front door. I ignored it but it persisted and finally I heard the knock at *my* door.

I really needed to start locking the apartment.

"What?" I yelled, not bothering to cover up my annoyance. When there was no response I went over to the door and opened it enough to stick my head out.

Claudia, Ricardo, Sammy, Becca and Dave were all huddled outside my door with devious smiles on their faces.

“The hell?” I said, now conscious of Dave’s eyes roaming over the slice of booty-short topped leg that was visible to everyone.

“What are you doing?”

“Get dressed!”

“Come to the party!”

“You can’t hide forever.”

I was suddenly bombarded by their drunken voices. Man, they must have gotten a head start.

“Guys!” I yelled, trying to shut them up. “I’m in my pajamas, can’t you see?”

“I can see that very well,” Dave commented with a lecherous smirk.

I glared at him. “Shut up.”

“Please Vera,” Sammy said. “You’re the life of the party.”

“No, I’m not,” I said. “I’m reading a really good book. And it’s really hot out,” I added feebly.

“And the beer is cold,” Claudia said, “and we are better company than a book.”

I gave them all a wary look. “I don’t know about that.”

“Come now, you twat,” Sammy said, waving at me. Tonight she looked like a tiny round blueberry: Blue camisole, short blue skirt and blue suede platform pumps. Jeez, she must have packed more shoes than I did. She plopped herself down on the couch and patted the seat. “Oy, everyone else sit your arse here. If Vera won’t come to the party, we’ll bring the party to Vera.”

And that’s pretty much how that started. I relented and slipped on a pair of drawstring lounge pants, though didn’t bother with a bra. Sure my tank top was pink and thin and you could see my headlights through it, but they were just girls. And Dave. Dave with his smarmy smirk and tattoos, who I’m pretty sure he’d at least gotten a feel of them the last time we were together. I wondered, briefly, whom *he* was fucking here.

Pretty soon the wine was flowing, the beers were being opened and the firewater we called grappa kept being passed around. Jerry had been giving Dave and a few others a ride into Acantilado over the weeks so they could stock up on supplies and alcohol. I should have felt bad for mooching, but hey, they were offering.

While Sammy and Dave had battle over what music would play on the iPod (Lana Del Rey VS The Clash), Becca, Claudia, Ricardo and I all sat on

the floor playing the drinking game “Kings” with a deck of cards. I felt like I was in college—which was funny, because I *was* in college. It’s just that I didn’t have that many friends there and never got invited to anything on the UBC campus. Being around this group made me realize I might have been missing out.

When we were sufficiently drunk enough, and The Clash had won out as the music on accounts of Lana’s music being too much of a bummer, we start dancing, just bopping all over the apartment.

And then the party grew. At first it was just Sara coming home with Nerea and Manuel in tow, wanting to celebrate after their flamenco performance. We quickly convinced them to join us, even though I was bare-faced and in my pajamas. Then Claudia texted Eduardo, who came over with Polly and Jorge, then Antonio, Wayne, Angel and Mateo showed up.

Yep. Mateo.

I don’t know why I thought my apartment was some impenetrable little fortress against the powers of the Spaniard but clearly I was an ill-prepared idiot. The minute I saw him walk in the door, back in his white linen shirt and black dress pants, the heat of the night glistening on his arms and collarbone, I knew it was game over. I was drunk and improperly dressed, he was here, and there was a damn good chance that I was in love with the man.

And considering he was married, living a life with someone else, in another country than the one I lived in, I knew that my heart would only get broken. I’d slept with my fair share of men, but I hadn’t really cared about any of them. This man, I cared for him, craved him, and if I slept with him, his predicament would destroy me and every defense I worked so hard to build.

He saw me immediately, too. As soon as he closed the doors, his eyes made a straight shot to mine and held me there. For the first time, I could see the want and need in them, terrifying me to the core. I had to get away. I had to make this stop. He started walking toward me, trying to get past Sammy, Polly and Claudia who were all grinding in a circle. He was coming to ask me his question, the one I needed to answer honestly.

I had to act fast.

I reached out and grabbed Dave, who happened to be standing by me. I gave him a squeeze on his arm, smiled up at him, batted my eyelashes.

Then I put my hand behind his head and pulled him into me, kissing him hard.

He hesitated for a moment, totally caught off guard, before he relented and started to kiss me back. He wasn't bad at all—he knew what he was doing—and splices of memories from the week before flooded my brain. I knew I wasn't as drunk this time around, which was good, because I needed be smart and in control. It's hard to get over someone when you can't remember what you did to get over them.

Eventually I caught my breath and pulled away. The party was still raging, people still laughing and talking and spilling their drinks. I could see Claudia over my shoulder, approaching us with a frown on her angelic face. I knew she wanted to have words with me, to tell me that Mateo was there. But I knew he was there—that's why I did it. If he saw and he cared, well, he was married and he shouldn't have cared. And if he didn't care, well, then the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else.

Or so I'd been told.

I turned away from Claudia, grabbed Dave's hand and led him towards my bedroom. I made the mistake of turning around to face the party before I opened the door. I told myself I wanted to see if anyone had noticed, if anyone cared, but the truth was, I was only looking for Mateo's reaction.

I was counting on it to set me free.

It didn't. All I saw was him, paused behind the couch. He stared at me with such disbelief, such simmering... anger. As if I'd pissed him off and then kicked him in the gut.

Well...I guess that answered that.

He did care.

And so, I had to be doing the right thing. Right?

I ushered Dave inside my bedroom and closed the door behind us. I pushed him back a few feet and slipped my tank top over my head, and pulled my pants and boy shorts out from under my feet, until I was standing in front of him completely naked. I could tell he was taking a moment to take in my tattoos and my body. Then I walked over to him and shoved him onto the bed. I pulled out a condom from the drawer.

He was naked in an instant, and though I could see the tats on his body, I didn't care enough about him to know what they were or what they meant. I thought about Mateo asking me to explain mine, I thought about the way

he listened to the way I told him my favorite childhood memory, I remembered how my story about Leo put him asleep.

I wanted more than anything to be touching Mateo instead of Dave. But that wasn't an option—it would never be an option. Not in this life of mine. So I had to make do.

Because Dave was on the drunk side, we had sex for longer than I anticipated. He was better than that Portuguese guy, I'll give him that. He momentarily filled the empty yearning inside of me, distracted me from my thoughts as I was coming. He wasn't by any means a bad guy. He just wasn't the guy I wanted.

After we were finally finished, we must have fallen asleep for a little bit because when we woke up, the whole apartment was silent. We gave each other the nervous, awkward after-sex look and slipped on our clothes before I cautiously opened the door.

The apartment was empty. Messy as all hell with empty beer cans and wine bottles everywhere, but empty.

"Damn," I said to Dave, keeping my voice down in case Sara was trying to sleep. "They must have gotten bored without us."

He smirked at me. "Ah, they knew what they were missing."

I decided to walk Dave to the door. I wasn't really sure how to treat this, didn't know if I wanted it to happen again, but at the same time I didn't feel like telling him to get out of my place because I was going to bed, even though there was no way he was staying the night.

I opened the door and he stood on the landing, staring at me with the kind of smile that told me he had fun, and fun was all it ever had to be. I appreciated that about him—in some ways, we were very much alike.

"Well, good night," I told him, hanging on the door. "See you tomorrow."

He grinned at me, boyishly cute, even with the edgy hair and piercings. "See you."

He ran down the stairs, the black spikes of his hair bouncing. I watched him and even when he turned the corner and I could hear his feet running on the pavement as he ran home, I still stood there, trying to take in the heat and the stars and the moon two nights away from becoming full.

I breathed in deep, the air full crickets and the starlight, then turned to go back inside.

"Vera," a quiet, emotionless voice said from below.

I froze, recognizing the voice and slowly turned to see Mateo out on the path, as if he was walking home from somewhere down the hill. Half his body was lit from the neon orange lights from the dining hall.

I didn't know what to say or do. I just stared down at him, feeling like I'd somehow made things more complicated than they were before.

That look in his dark eyes was like hit to the heart.

"You should treat yourself better than that," he said, his voice glinting with a steely quality.

Then he started walking again, quickly, and in seconds he was out of my view. Gone into the night.

I realized then that I'd been holding my breath the whole time, afraid to move or speak or do anything. Afraid to let myself feel. Because the number one feeling that was waiting to pummel me over the head was damned, dirty shame.

Chapter Twelve

I didn't talk to Mateo at all the next day. He wouldn't even meet my eye. He owed me two questions. I only felt guilt that I didn't understand.



On the morning of the grand soccer match, we found out all the day's activities were cancelled. We were to pack our soccer clothes with us in the vans and all of us would be driven out to Acantilado for a day of sightseeing with an English-speaking guide. After the tour around town, then we would walk over to the elementary school field where the soccer match would take place. Later, the winners would return to town for their victory dinner.

This should have pleased me, the fact that we were all getting out of Dodge for the day, but the truth was nothing was making me happy. My whole life felt strained and weird and uncomfortable, like a wet bathing suit. I wanted nothing more than to go back in time, listen to what Mateo was going to ask me and avoid sleeping with Dave.

But there was no such thing as a time machine. I couldn't undo any of my mistakes, because if I could, believe me, I wouldn't have started with Las Palabras. I would have gone back a very, very long time ago.

As we all piled into the three vans, I made sure I was sitting with Claudia, Eduardo, Becca and Sammy, and not in the same one as Dave or Mateo. The driver was this older Spanish man named Peter, whom we called Peter the Everything Man since you could find him working the bar sometimes, cooking the dinner, unclogging the toilets, and—according to Sammy—showing up at your apartment with a bottle of wine. I didn't want her to elaborate on that.

Once we got to the cobble-strewn town square of Acantilado, we sat around the edge of a fountain, waiting for the rest of the vans to show up—Peter drove like a madman. Claudia gently nudged me and leaned in. “Are you okay?”

I nodded and gave her a tight smile. I hadn't talked to her since the party, since she saw me with Dave. For a moment I wondered if she thought

of me as a big ol' slut, then I looked at Ricardo on the other side of her, his hand on her knee, and realized she was the one who wanted me to go for it.

Only, there was nothing to go for anymore. There never had been.

"It will be okay," she said softly so that the others didn't hear us. "You will see. Spanish men are very territorial."

I frowned, not sure what she was getting at. Before I could ask, the other two vans pulled up to the edge of the square, with Jerry hopping off and immediately launching into a story about the fountain we were sitting around, an apparent fountain of youth.

No thanks, I thought. I apparently had too much youth at the moment.

I stiffened when I saw Mateo step out and immediately turned to Claudia to busy myself as everyone gathered. Then the guide, whom Jerry introduced as Luiz, a supremely tall man in shorts with socks and sandals, waved us all over to follow him.

I lagged at the back of the group with Claudia and Ricardo. It was cute to see him hold her hand, even though there was a part of me that was raging with jealousy because I couldn't have that, not with the man I wanted.

I sighed to myself, totally despondent. Sleeping with Dave didn't help me get over Mateo at all. I wasn't sure at this point anything would—not his wife, not the age difference, not our citizenships. Nothing. The only good thing I had going for me was that he was leaving in a week. It was going to suck, but at least I'd start getting over him faster.

We walked through the winding streets of the town and I started snapping photos to take my mind off of things. It was so damn cool and so different from what I was used to. The streets were crooked with a line running through the middle of them that acted like a gutter during the Middle Ages, when people would just throw shit out their windows. Literal shit.

The buildings were mostly granite on the first floor, with dark wood beams and finishings on the floors above. I caught snippets of Luiz telling us that the buildings were all preserved as they were and all new buildings must match the look and not be higher than three stories. Upstairs it seemed more residential, with narrow iron balconies and potted plants. The occasional rusted gaslight lantern gave it a gothic quality. I started imagining what it would be like to live here, to go to the market each morning to buy vegetables, to spend nights on the patios of the tapas bars,

drinking sangria. Everything about Spain just seemed so much more real, so much more alive than back home.

As we walked along, we stopped by a few shops that had their doors open to the summer breeze. It was actually my first chance to buy some Spanish souvenirs. The choices were overwhelming—there was daintily painted pottery, large rustic barrels lined with burlap and overflowing with a million varieties of nuts and powdered spices, bottles of olive oil and jars of figs. Eduardo came running toward us with a t-shirt that said “Spanish Triathlon: Eating, Drinking, Fucking” with the corresponding stick figure pictures.

“You must buy this!” he said to me, his round cheeks red with amusement.

I managed to laugh. “I *do* like all those things. Glad I was the first person you thought of.”

Next, blue-haired Nerea came over to us with a bulging shopping bag and handed me a small bag filled with what looked like white chocolate bark.

“It is turrón,” she said with her heavy accent and graceful smile. “I buy for all the Anglos. It is special to a place like this.”

I thanked her profusely for her kind gesture and while she went to go distribute the rest, Claudia told me it was a Spanish delicacy made from egg whites, honey and almond. As much as I wanted to tear into it and started eating, I knew I had to save it as a memory of this place.

When we were done with the shopping, we continued following Luiz down the narrow street until it opened up at an ancient looking church. In front of it was a huge bronze statue of a pig with abnormally large balls. While Luiz led everyone inside the church, telling everyone it was built in 1300s (which was mind-blowing to me since we considered an “old” building in Vancouver to be 100 years old), Claudia, Ricardo, Eduardo, Polly and Sammy went over to the pig statue and started fondling it. Naturally I had to get out of my camera and snap away. I guess we overstayed our welcome when Eduardo slipped the Spanish Triathlon t-shirt on—I can’t believe he actually bought it—and started riding the pig like a cowboy. A disgruntled local came over and told all of us off. There were a lot of gestures involved.

Eduardo quickly apologized, then under his breath muttered “puta coña”, and we sheepishly scurried into the church.

Inside it was as still as a tomb, even with Luiz's hushed voice telling everyone about the 16th century granite pulpit and a gothic copper processional cross. With his six foot height, Mateo was easy to spot above the crowd. He was beside Luiz at the altar, listening intently and occasionally nodding. Since Spain was such a Catholic country, I wondered what Mateo's religious beliefs were. Not that it mattered to me, but I always loved the idea of faith and found people who had to it to be fascinating. It then got me thinking about Mateo growing up—what his sister was like, where he lived, if his parents were still around. I'd been talking about myself every day but the truth was I didn't really know a lot about him.

Was that why I found him so fascinating? Because he was mysterious? Or was there something else that pulled me to him like gravity gone wild?

I didn't realize I was staring so blatantly until Mateo's eyes were locked on mine. I froze like a deer in headlights, expecting to get a glare in return or the cold shoulder. But his eyes actually softened at the corners and he gave me a subtle smile.

I tried to return the same. Then I gulped and turned to my side, pretending to be enthralled with the colorful, sculpted carvings that adorned the support beams. It wasn't a stretch—they were fascinating. But I stayed that way until long after Luiz thanked everyone for being part of the tour and everyone gave him respectful applause. I pretended to be occupied until I thought the church was empty.

I turned around. And I was wrong.

Mateo was just a few feet away, standing in the middle of the faded red-carpeted aisle, his hands casually jammed into his pockets and looking at me with a most intense look in those smoky brown eyes.

"Vera," he said and my nerves squirmed at the throaty quality of his voice, "can I speak with you? Please?"

"Yeah," I said non-committal, even though I had a whole speech prepared in case he actually did end up lecturing me. It went something like "Why is it your business who I sleep with, you're married, you're not supposed to care?" Whether I ended up voicing that to him was unknown.

"I just wanted you to know," he said, taking a step forward and then stopping, "that I'm staying here an extra week."

Okaaaaay.

He read my expression. "My partner suggested it and I told him I could use the extra help with English."

Well, that last part was bullshit. Aside from needing help with a few phrases and words here and there, Mateo was nearly fluent. His confidence level during the business portions needed some work, but considering the only language I knew was a shoddy level of French, I would have been happy with that.

Mateo must have been a perfectionist. Or, maybe, he just didn't want to go home.

Or, maybe, it was something else.

Stop it, I told myself. Stop thinking that. The fact that he wants to be friends with you after all that means that he just sees you as a friend. After all, he's—

And that's when I cut my train of thought off. I wasn't going to remind myself that he was married anymore. I'd known that from the moment I first laid eyes on him. It was too late to pretend I didn't know what I was doing. I was in love, in lust, in *something* with him and all logic, all facts, all reality, none of that seemed to matter, not to my body and not to my heart.

"You look confused," he said, peering at me. He tilted his head from side to side. "More or less."

I managed a smile. I *was* more or less confused. "I'm fine. I'm happy you're staying."

"Are you?" he questioned, not convinced.

"Are *you* happy you're staying?"

He took another step my way. A waft of his delicious cologne teased me. "I'm sorry about the other night," he said, his head dipped slightly. "I was a bit drunk and a bit rude."

I stared at him. "You weren't rude."

He raised his brows, his forehead crinkling. "I have no business telling you how to...conduct yourself."

What came out of my mouth next surprised me. "Maybe I need to be told."

He seemed to suck in his breath. Chestnut eyes examined mine, framed by drawn, black brows. He was searching for some sort of truth in my eyes and I hoped he found it. I hadn't meant to say that, especially so bluntly, but that didn't make it untrue.

Our gazes locked onto each other as the seconds ticked by in that cold and empty church. What did he want from me? What did he think of me?

What did he expect?

"Maybe," he said slowly. "But it won't be my place to do so. Only a fool would tell *you* what to do."

I couldn't hide the smile on my face. There was a sense of relief between us, like some of the bad tension had lifted. The good tension though, well, that was still there. It became static in the air every time my eyes raked over him.

Thankfully, before that kind of tension could build into an electric cloud, the main doors opened behind us and two hunched over ladies with grey, flower-adorned hair came padding into the church. They shot Mateo and I a suspicious glance then continued down the aisle.

"Guess we better not interrupt their worship, huh?" I said as we turned to leave, grateful for a way out of this.

We had free time now, about an hour before the football game. Peter had already driven our stuff over to the field and Jerry had yelled some easy directions on how to get there. Everyone else had scattered around the town, except for Claudia and Ricardo, who were waiting for us outside of the church by the statue of the pig with the humungous balls.

"We were wondering if you wanted to get a drink with us before the game," Claudia said, a satisfied look on her face as she eyed us.

Mateo put his hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "You really trust Vera? We're all Spaniards. She could put drugs in our drinks and rig the game."

"Or take advantage of us," Ricardo put in, winking at me.

"Hey," I said, acting like it wasn't a huge detail that Mateo's hand was on me. "Even if I did drug you, there's no way the Anglos would win. You'd still have the rest of your team, and one Spanish football player is worth a million Anglo ones."

They seemed to be happy with that answer. Over the past few weeks I'd learned the quickest way to a Spaniard's heart is by feeding their football ego.

The four of us walked down the winding streets back to the main square. Along the way we ran into a few people from our program, but everyone seemed spread out, by themselves, or in groups like we were. We found a tapas bar with some outside seating and settled down, Claudia and Ricardo on one side of the metal table, Mateo and I on the other. Well, until Mateo got up to go buy us all drinks.

“Oh, you don’t have to,” I said, taking out my purse and rummaging for my wallet. It was weird needing it after being catered to for so long.

“Vera, shut your face,” Claudia said, leaning across the table and putting her hand on my arm to still me. She smiled. “He has money, let him.”

I looked up at Mateo but he had already started walking to the bar. The only thing that looked “rich” about him at the moment was the cut and fit of his brown blazer, which probably cost hundreds if not thousands of dollars. Otherwise, his vintage rock t-shirt and worn jeans and boots gave him the sexy casual, everyman look. Of course, everyone at the table knew that Mateo wasn’t like the rest of them.

I raised a brow and looked back at Claudia. “Wait, did you just tell me to shut my face?”

She laughed and raised her hands in the air. “You taught me that phrase! I only learn from the best.” She brought out her cigarette and jerked her chin at Ricardo. “Hey, you go help Mateo bring the drinks back.”

He rolled his eyes and got up, knowing when he wasn’t wanted. She lit her cigarette, blowing smoke away from us and then turned back to me with shining eyes. “I’m so glad you made up.”

“I’m not really sure we were fighting...”

“You were fighting,” she said confidently. “A day where you don’t see Mateo and Vera together means you are fighting.”

“Is that so?”

She nodded. “I told you they get very territorial.”

I pursed my lips. “I still don’t know what that has to do with anything.”

“Mateo,” she said knowingly, “is like most Spanish men. They are very passionate, very possessive. When they see you as theirs, they will make that known. Mateo is just better at hiding it than most. Maybe being a sports celebrity has helped with that. But I will tell you this.” She leaned in a bit closer. “When he was playing for Atletico, he was known for his temper. Hot-blooded, he is.”

I grumbled, not sure if I believed all that. Sure, I had seen a glimpse of him all “hot-blooded” when he was angry during our first business phone call together, but that seemed like nothing. Besides, how could you go from having a temper to acting all cool and collected like he usually did? If it was that easy to change your personality and who you are, maybe I would have done that a long time ago.

Before Claudia could elaborate anymore, Mateo and Ricardo came back with the beers and placed the perfectly poured ale on the table. Mateo then tossed down a plastic menu.

“In case you are hungry,” he said.

I picked it up and looked it over. There were English translations beneath the words in Spanish.

“What the hell is a nome-made mam and chess sandwich?” I asked as I read it over.

Claudia started giggling. “Sometimes our translation isn’t the best. Everyone should take the Las Palabras program.”

Mateo pressed a groomed finger to the menu. “Perhaps you should order the chorizo to hell? Or the sepia to the iron with ali smelt.” His eyes slid to my puzzled, somewhat disgusted face, and he grinned. “Flame-grilled chorizo or grilled cuttlefish with garlic mayonnaise. I have no idea what nome-made mam and chess is.”

I stared back at him, enjoying the little moment between us. It was hard for me to imagine him being all passionate and hot-blooded...or was it? When I imagined us in bed together, he wasn’t cool and collected then. He was extraordinarily physical and frenzied with lust. Perhaps I always figured there was a bit of an animal underneath the suit.

He cocked his head to the side and eyed me quizzically. “What are you staring at? Do I have something on my face?”

“Only your nose,” I said before turning away and having a sip of beer.

He rubbed his nose and made an adorably sad face.

Because we just had a bit of time before the game, we were only able to stay at the bar for one beer. But man, I wanted to just keep sitting and drinking, the sweet sunshine spilling over the tops of the red-roofed buildings and bathing us in it. Being with Claudia and Ricardo made it feel like we were on a double date with close friends. I felt like I was *dating* Mateo. We were just able to sit back and relax and laugh and enjoy each other’s company in a different way than we were used to.

But, as seemed to be the theme of things, there just wasn’t enough time.

We started off for the Acantilado school and eventually found it past some crumbling buildings outside of town, despite Jerry’s terrible directions. We were the last to arrive, and I was kind of buzzed thanks to *not* eating a mam and chess sandwich when I should have. Jerry was waving at us to “hurry our arses.”

“Have a good game,” I said to Mateo and Ricardo as Claudia walked off to the sidelines.

Mateo grabbed my hand, and I watched in shock as he raised it up to his mouth and quickly kissed it. He smiled against my knuckles. “I will try not to kill you,” he said devilishly. Then he turned and jogged across the field with Ricardo.

“Vera!” Wayne yelled. “Come on!”

Damn it! Couldn’t anyone just leave me in peace? That was the closest Mateo’s lips had ever come to my own and I needed a moment. Of course, I didn’t get a moment. More people started yelling.

I growled and ran off toward my stupid team.

After I quickly got changed into my shorts, and though I didn’t have a sports bra with me—obviously—I put on my most supportive bra and several tank tops just so I didn’t have to have the same conversation with Lauren again. I’m sure she was just waiting to shoot her mouth off about how inappropriate it was that he kissed my hand.

The field was the type of soccer field we had at home, which should have put me at ease but didn’t, because of course I didn’t play soccer. After a quick huddle with Wayne, which consisted of, “Vera, go for the ball. If he looks like he’s going left, go left,” and, “Sammy, when the ball comes to you, just get out of the way and let Ed take it,” I was sent to my goalpost.

Ugh. Standing there, with the huge distance between the posts, I knew this was going to be an impossible game, and even faking it, I was probably going to end up with shredded knees and turf up my nose. To make matters worse, spectators emerged out of nowhere and started lining up at the sides of the field. Suddenly it seemed like our game had turned into Acantilado’s hot-ticket event. Even Mateo had somehow changed into what looked like an actual soccer uniform: white shorts and a white jersey. I had to admit that was another good look for him. I wasn’t one to notice men’s legs, but his were dark bronze like the rest of him and sculpted with beautifully strong muscles.

Jerry managed to get a whistle and blew it to signal our start. The first period, playing for the regulated forty-five minutes, went by as well as you’d think it would. Mateo and the Spaniards (which kind of sounds like a band name) dominated the ball, and the Anglos tried their hardest to stop them. Unfortunately, that didn’t mean much and Mateo would always get the ball down toward me. In Atletico I guess his job would have been to

defend but because he was the best ball player here, he was the one who did everything.

Because I had to save face, every time he kicked, I went for it. Every time I missed. Anyone would have made me miss but he was *good*. He was on fire, on wings, on air. He was all confidence and bravado and physical fitness. He made it look easy. And maybe it was easy. But I didn't for a moment think that he didn't see me as a rival opponent. He went after the goals like he needed them to survive, and I did the best I could until the whistle blew signaling the period was over just as I was flying through the air after another ball.

I lay there for a moment, face in the grass and my boobs just aching. The last shot nearly took my face off—I guess I should have been happy that it was still intact.

“Are you okay?” I heard Mateo's accented voice ask softly from above me.

I waved him away with my hand and grunted into the grass.

I felt his palm on my lower back, pressing lightly. Sweaty. Wonderful. “You did really well, Estrella,” he said. “You impress me every day.”

I turned my head to the side and looked at his handsome face, the beads of perspiration dropping off his brow and nose, and into the grass. “Thanks.”

“Come on,” he said, picking up my hand and pulling me up until I was on my feet. He looked down at my grass-stained knees in concern. “You should have worn pads.”

“Apparently, I also should have worn a sports bra,” I said dryly. “I'll live.”

He gave my hand a squeeze before he jogged down the field, his step springy, always such an athlete.

There wasn't much time between periods. I was able to get a bottle of water into me and a deli sandwich that Sammy had pilfered from somewhere. Her blonde hair was sticking out like a mad scientist and she was sweating up a storm. Even though Wayne had warned her to let Ed take the ball if it came to her, she never listened and would try her hardest to kick the ball to someone. Usually though, it ended up being someone on the other team, and more often than not, it was Angel, which made me think she had some outrageous crush on the innocent nerd. I wondered if the whole “Sammy said she'd show me hers” thing actually happened after all.

I mused that over while I finished the sandwich (not bad, but needed more mam and chess), and then it was back to the second period. By now it seemed like the whole elementary school had just let out, so now there were oodles of children watching us, children who, no doubt, could play a better game than us Anglos.

We weren't far into the second period—the Spaniards obviously winning—when the impossible happened.

Tragedy struck.

Shit went down.

No bueno all over the place.

I couldn't really tell what happened from my distant keep, but from what it looked like, Mateo was storming towards Ed. Ed had the ball. Ed did a sudden fake out to the left, then a fake out to the right. Mateo followed in the same way, except when Ed went right, something in Mateo's left leg went *out*.

He went down to the ground with a terrible cry, a scream of agony, clutching his knee.

That was it for me. I started sprinting across the field, running as fast I could toward Mateo, grass torn up in my wake. I slid to a stop near him and dropped to my knees by his side, while everyone else stood around in a circle, looking on with shocked faces.

“Someone call a doctor!” I shrieked at them, not really sure what was wrong or if that was necessary, but Mateo was in pain and that's all I cared about.

I turned my attention back to him and the way he was holding himself. He was on the ground, his hands wrapped around the front of his knee and the back, his face contorted in pain. It cut me deep to see him like that, to feel the agony rolling off of him. I wanted to do everything for him and I couldn't do anything.

Chapter Thirteen

What happened next was a loud cry of expletives I couldn't even translate. Mateo totally lost it. He was bent over on the ground, cursing, yelling, crying out like a volcano of rage was coming out of him. His face was red, his skin sweaty, his expression one of anger and pain...and I felt like anger was winning.

It wasn't long before a heavysset woman bustled over to us, her blonde hair pulled back into a tight braid. She seemed to be a nurse from the school. Jerry came down beside me, saying shit so fast that I didn't really understand. It was only then that I realized he spoke Spanish. Of course he would have to, but his skill and fluidity surprised me.

I felt Claudia pulling me up from Mateo's side, as I probably should have been. It wasn't a tragic event—Mateo would be okay, it was just a bad knee, a bad move, an easy fix. Wasn't it?

I was only up into a crouch when Mateo suddenly reached across and grabbed my calf.

"Please," he said, raw desperation in his eyes, his voice choked. "Stay."

I stared down at him, feeling my heart twist, and nodded. Claudia let me go and Jerry told everyone to pack up and go with Peter back to the resort. I could hear Lauren say, "Well who won the game?" as if it was something she could contest.

Jerry turned to Mateo and patted his shoulder. "Spaniards won the game. Don't worry Mateo, you'll get your dinner."

Mateo did not give two shits. He was glaring at Jerry and grinding his teeth in pain, every so often muttering another curse word.

"What happened?" I asked Jerry, not wanting to put the pressure on Mateo to talk. The blonde-haired nurse had gone, presumably to get first aid supplies.

"He had a bad tear to his ACL when he was with Atletico," Jerry said. "I suppose it's the same thing. Too much strain reaggravated it. Same leg too, if I remember correctly. I just hope it's not severe." He looked at Mateo, who had his eyes closed. "Even with a small tear, the pain can be bad."

"You know a lot about his injury," I noted.

He smiled goofily. "I'm Irish," he said, as if that explained it. "We love football, though I cheer for Liverpool. I played pick-up games on the weekends and followed the leagues very closely. Mateo was one of the best on his team. I guess I was so enraptured with watching him play, I wasn't being a very good ref. He was playing hard, a little too hard."

"Vete a la mierda," Mateo swore at him, glaring again. "I was playing like I should have, like I do." He practically spat the words out. He closed his eyes and growled then started yelling again.

"What is he saying?" I said to Jerry.

A wash of pity came over his eyes. "He's angry. And he hates himself. The rest is very creative swearing."

It felt like ages but eventually the nurse came back, bringing with her another man, maybe a gym teacher. They got down beside him and I had to get out of the way. Mateo looked at me with pleading eyes but I just nodded to let him know that I wasn't going anywhere. I stood beside Jerry and watched as they made Mateo sit up and started asking him questions and doing things to his knee, giving him some pills to swallow with water. This went on for some time until they wrapped his knee, which was slowly starting to look darker and swollen, with a compression bandage and got out the ice packs. Then, with Jerry's help, they lifted Mateo up to his feet. He wasn't able to stand on his left leg for more than a few seconds before he winced, so they ushered him over to the parking lot where Peter had come back with the van.

There seemed to be a bit of confusion or disagreement about what would happen next. The blonde-haired woman kept saying something and Mateo kept saying, "No, no, no" and shaking his head, waving her away with his hand. Finally, she pushed a vial of pills into Jerry's hand and rolled her eyes. Then she and the other man went back to pack up their supplies.

"What's going on?" I asked Jerry as Peter helped Mateo into the backseat.

Jerry glanced at them over his shoulder. "He says he refuses to go to the hospital in Salamanca. He said he'd call his physician in Madrid and get a referral for a private appointment sometime this week."

"An appointment in Madrid?" I asked, my heart dropping like an elevator. Was he leaving?

He shook his head. "No, in Salamanca. It isn't too far. I told him Peter or I will take him. Athletes can be picky about getting a diagnosis or

treatment of their injuries. Also, he's Mateo Casalles. If he went to the emergency room, I guess that could become public news. Kind of humiliating for him, injuring it the way he did...with us."

I frowned. I guessed he was right. Getting injured again, while playing with Anglos on a kid's soccer field probably wasn't doing wonders for his ego, at least not in the right way. Still, as long as he wasn't leaving. How funny it was that I had gone from wanting him to leave to not being able to fathom it. I was suddenly so grateful he had extended his stay here an extra week.

Jerry climbed in the back with Mateo and I got in the passenger seat, though I really wanted to be back there, cradling his head in my lap. Luckily it was only a mile or two back to the resort, and soon we were helping him out of the van in front of a crowd of worried Anglos and Spaniards.

"Can you and Peter take him to his room? I've got to get some structure back to the day," Jerry said to me under his breath amid the concerned mumblings. "The minions need their leader."

Man, he was such a dork.

But of course I told him I would, especially since I was planning on it anyway. Mateo wanted me to stay and I was going to stay until he told me to go.

Jerry put the pills in my hand, and then turned to deal with his "minions" while I acted like a crutch under Mateo's right arm and Peter went under his left. I'd never been so physically close to him before, right under his arm like that. Even after half a soccer match, he still smelled really good, that ocean scent but muskier, like his own sweat was intoxicating. Too bad it couldn't have been under better circumstances.

Mateo's apartment was on the first floor, which made it easy for us to get him there. Every so often he would try to walk on his left leg. He was able to do it for a few steps, which I think was a good sign, but then the pain came on too much and he started shaking.

Peter and I took him over to his couch and got him to lie down on it. Peter then grabbed a bunch of pillows and put it under his knee, telling us that the instructions from the school nurse were to keep it elevated above the heart, to not move around much, to apply ice packs and take the painkillers. He said he had to go help with dinner for the Anglos but he would be back later.

And just like that, Peter left, closing the door behind him. Mateo and I were alone, and I realized I'd never been in his apartment before, his space. Though he shared it with some Anglo from California called Mark or Marty or something and didn't seem to be home, you could feel Mateo's presence here, this sophisticated calm. As I stood above the couch, I let my eyes drink in all the things I thought could be attributed to him: a pair of silver cufflinks on the coffee table beside a National Geographic magazine, a monogrammed white robe I could see hanging just inside the bathroom, a fancy half-empty bottle of Scotch on the kitchen counter.

"Are you going to be my nurse, Estrella?" Mateo asked, looking up at me. His smile was a little lopsided but it was good to see him feeling better, at least with his spirits.

"Every male's fantasy, of course," I said, taking a seat in the armchair across from him.

"You are, yes," he said, still smiling.

My stomach flipped a few times at that, warm and fluttery, even though I wasn't sure if he knew what he was saying. I pulled the pills out of my pocket. "Oxycodone and acetaminophen," I read out loud. "I used to take these in high school for fun. My mom takes Percocet for her migraines." I grinned at him. Mateo was slowly getting high.

"The school nurse is a drug dealer, yes," he said in mock seriousness. "Those poor children."

With him acting this way, it was easy to forget he'd been in horrible, humiliating pain until a few moments ago. I leaned forward in my chair. "Can I get you anything? Water? Something to read? Do you need to call... someone?" Your doctor, perhaps your wife...

"No," he said softly, licking his lips. "I just want you to stay here with me."

I nodded, my heart feeling a bit tenderized at the tone of his voice, the sincerity of his words. It kind of ached. "I can stay."

"You'll miss dinner."

"I can get it to go, I'm sure they'll let me bring it here. *You'll* miss your dinner," I told him, feeling a bout of shame for him. "You guys won the game. Jerry said he is taking the Spaniards out tonight."

His brows furrowed as he stared at me, eyes narrowing slightly at the corners. "Don't look at me this way."

I jerked my chin back into my neck. "In what way?"

“Like you are right now. With pity.”

I swallowed uneasily. “I’m sorry. I just...obviously I feel bad.”

He closed his eyes and turned his head away from me. “You shouldn’t. This was my fault. I wanted to prove I could still do it, that I could still play. You know? I wanted to be...the way I was. And, I suppose, I wanted to impress you very much.”

“Impress me?” A bit of Percocet in his system and suddenly the words were coming out, words I never thought he’d say. “Why would you want to impress me?”

And there went a question I never thought I’d have the nerve to ask. Maybe I was getting a residual high.

Though his eyes were still closed, I could see the corner of his lips quirk up into a soft smile. “Because you are *my* Estrella.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. The way he pronounced “my,” like I truly was his, was making me feel things I didn’t want to be feeling. Something felt like it was changing in the air between us, maybe because he was high on painkillers, or maybe it was just a matter of time. I didn’t know.

He seemed to notice it too because after a moment of silence, he opened his eyes and turned his head to look at me. There was a wash of sadness in them now. “Can I ask you that question I wanted to ask you?” His voice was low, a little hoarse.

Oh man. *That* question again. Now I wasn’t drunk but he more or less was.

“Sure,” I said, pretending I wasn’t a livewire of sizzling nerves on the inside. I held my breath, afraid to exhale.

“Are you happy?”

I exhaled. This wasn’t at all what I was expecting. “Am I happy?”

“Yes. Is Vera Miles happy?”

“Right here, right now or...?”

“In your life.”

I had to think about that. It wasn’t a simple question at all. Was I happy? I thought back to my day-to-day, my hopes and dreams—or, perhaps, the lack thereof.

It was hard for me to admit this because I liked to have people think I was happy-go-lucky, that I devoured life, that I got up every day feeling good and excited and hopeful. But I didn’t.

“No,” I told him, my gaze locking on his. “I am not happy.”

“Why?” he asked quietly.

“Because...” I looked down and started tracing the outline of my newest tattoo. “I am lonely.”

I’d never even admitted that to myself before. It felt bizarre. Surreal. Like I was suddenly realizing I wasn’t who I thought I was at all.

“You are lonely, but you say you like to be alone.”

I nodded. “I do. I prefer it. But...it doesn’t mean I don’t want someone to love me.” My eyes stung, as if tears were on their way. I bit my lip, debating if I should say more. “It doesn’t mean that I don’t have a lot of love in me to give someone.”

“Then why don’t you?” he asked keenly.

I shrugged. “It’s easier to not. It’s safer. I had a long-term boyfriend in high school. I know, it’s a long time ago but...I was in love with him, or so I thought. And he cheated on me. A lot. He was emotionally abusive too and made me think I deserved whatever he gave me. It really fucked me up. Fucked me up and broke me up. Bad enough that I had to go on medication.” To my surprise, I had to take in a deep breath. There was still a bit of a pinch with the memories. “I know it was just a right of passage, I guess, like what every girl goes through in high school but...the pain scared me. I’d already felt so alone because of my parents and sister that I put all my trust and heart in the wrong person and that just blew up in my face. It made me think that I’d never be loved and no one would ever want my love in return.”

My words sank into us. I felt completely raw, stripped to the bone. I’d never felt like that before, not even when naked and in a compromising position. I’d never been so honest with myself.

“You are wrong, you know,” Mateo finally said.

“About what?”

“That you will never be loved,” he said, voice slow and measured, “and that no one would want you to love them.”

I felt like there was a brick in my stomach. The charged way he was staring into me, the words he was saying...part of me wanted to run. Part of me wanted to absorb it deep inside, to hug it on nights I felt cold. Instead, I cleared my throat and asked, “Are you happy, Mateo?”

“No,” he gradually said, a delicate smile on his lips. “I am not happy, either.”

I was both surprised and not surprised at this admission. "But you have things. You have a career and a wife and a child. Money."

"And yet, I am not happy."

"I don't understand."

"And I hope you never will understand." He sighed and stared at the ceiling. "I love Chloe Ann, she is the bright star in my universe. I love Isabel, but...not the way that I should. Sometimes I wonder if I ever did and that makes me sad, to think of all the years being...what is the word? Oblivious. I don't like my job but I don't know what to do with myself. I am too old, I mean look at me and my fucking knee, too old to go back to the game again." He pressed his lips together for a moment. "All I know is that something has to change. I have to do something."

"What?" I whispered, finding myself leaning in closer to him.

His eyes slid to mine. "Create a new universe." He licked his lips again. "You could do the same."

My heart stilled. I opened my mouth to speak, then shut it again.

"It is scary, isn't it?" he asked.

I nodded. When I found my voice I said, "I told you. I was scared of deep space."

He grinned. "And I told you I was too. What can I say, Vera, you make me want to reach for the stars."

"That's almost cheesy," I said, trying to make light of the situation even though it didn't feel cheesy to me. It felt terrifyingly real.

"Yes. But it is true." He exhaled. "And now that we've managed to make each other depressed, I promise I will ask you no more questions for the rest of our time together."

For the rest of our time together. I didn't like the finality of that, the recognition that what we had would end, and soon.

"But I like your questions, even the hard ones."

I like that you seek me out, that you have an excuse to talk to me, I finished in my head.

"Then perhaps I will surprise you with another someday. For now though, I think I need to take a siesta. Will you take one with me?"

I looked over to the clock on the microwave. "Dinner is in an hour."

"Then sleep with me until dinner."

I raised my brow. "Do you know how that sounds?"

He nodded. "Of course, it is why I said it."

But where would I sleep? There was barely any room on the couch. I would be pressed up against him while he was in an extremely vulnerable state. I couldn't do that, get that close to him. I didn't trust myself.

I got to my feet. "It's not the same unless we are under a tree," I told him. "I need to go do a few things, take a shower and get out of these gross clothes. I'll come back with dinner."

"Leaving me so soon," he said dramatically.

I laughed and walked over to the door. "Hasta la vista, baby."

"No Spanish," he muttered from the couch.

I stepped outside and closed his apartment door behind me. It was only then that I felt like I could truly breathe. I stood there for a few moments, getting all the air in and out of my chest. I took off for my place, rubbing my hands up and down my arms as if the temperature suddenly dropped. It wasn't that, of course, but that some of my layers had started to peel away.



Later that night I went back to Mateo with dinner, a bundle of nerves as I held the plates of food. I didn't know what was happening between us, or if he was still going to be in an emotional and truth-telling mood or if he was back to his carefree self.

A self that might have been a lie.

But I didn't need to worry about that at all. When I came back with the food, Jerry was in there talking to him, as well as Marty or Mark. Mateo insisted that I stay with him and have dinner, so I did, but after that was done and Jerry started asking him about his time on Atletico, something that Mateo didn't seem to mind talking about when he was on drugs, I decided to leave them all be.

Mateo had asked me just as I was leaving if I'd go with him to the doctor in Salamanca in a few days but before I could say yes or no, Jerry reminded him that I needed to work and do my job and that Peter would be happy to take him.

I couldn't say I wasn't relieved.

Chapter Fourteen

It took three days for Mateo to be able to walk again without needing a person or a crutch to lean on, and another two days for him to be able to do it with less of a limp. The tear in his knee was a grade one, which meant his recovery would be fast, and it was amazing to see him go from on the ground, writhing in pain, to walking slowly, but easily, everywhere in a matter of five days. He told me the doctor said it was because he kept himself in great shape and was still “young,” something that pleased Mateo quite a bit.

Because he was stationary for a lot of the time, he was often parked out by the reception patio in the wicker chairs, and while I had a session or a chance to talk to him every day, we weren’t going off on our long walks down country lanes or chatting on my balcony. There were always people around, which was fine...nothing to hide here. And yet I felt like we were hiding.

The weather had also turned to shit for most of the days, pounding the area with torrential rain which flowed down the hill in rivers and made a mess of everyone’s shoes. Jerry said that once it stopped, it wouldn’t rain for the rest of the summer.

I was holed up in Claudia’s apartment on the night the rain stopped, lazing around on the couch with Polly and Beatriz as we drank wine and looked over women’s magazines. I had brought a whole bunch with me from home and from London, and earlier in the day had done a one-on-one session with Eduardo that consisted of doing all the quizzes. Turns out that, according to Cosmo UK, Eduardo is an “attention slut.”

“I can’t believe we won’t be here next week,” Polly moaned despondently as she tossed a Glamour magazine at Beatriz. Beatriz was so enamoured with her Spanish gossip magazine, Diez Minutos, that she didn’t even look up when it hit her.

It took me a second to realize what Polly said. “Wait, what?”

She brushed back her bangs and gave me a lazy-eyed look. “Yeah. Think about it. This time next week, we’ll all be home.”

“Wow, time has really flown fast,” Claudia commented. She looked around her at all of us, her lips twisting wistfully. “I am going to miss you

guys.”

I gave her an absent nod and murmured the same, but even though I really *was* going to miss them, miss everything about this place, I couldn’t quite handle the idea that I wouldn’t see Mateo again. This time next week, I would be on a plane back home. Home. I’d be back with my mom and Josh and Mercy and back to my own cold, dead universe, and I wouldn’t have Mateo to make me feel alive.

My chest constricted painfully. Just the thought of not seeing him ever again, not having this world that I clung to, was heartbreaking. All this time I had been keeping my distance because I didn’t want to get hurt, but it was already happening. The heart had no regard for time, no regard for pain.

I felt like I had to cling to every moment, every second, make it count. I feared it was already too late.

A gasp from Beatriz brought me out of my funk. I glanced over at her to see her reading her magazine with her mouth open. Her eyes immediately darted over to me.

“What?” I asked.

She made a clucking sound and showed whatever was in the magazine to Claudia and then to Polly. Polly made a little squeal but Claudia grimaced and then covered it up with an awkward smile.

“What is it?!” I asked again, louder. I started to reach across to snatch it from her but she handed it to me.

I took it in my hands, the front half of the magazine folded behind it, and stared. At first all I saw was a bunch of gibberish (aka Spanish) and a picture of pretty, smiling women eating food. But when my eyes fell to the bottom half of the page, I may have gasped too.

I may have nearly choked.

It was a picture of Mateo, taken at night with a flash. He was walking, an insincere smile on his startlingly clean-shaven face, wearing a slim silver-grey suit and tie. He was holding the hand of a woman. She was wearing a black sparkly shift dress that looked very expensive, had a wide toothy smile, great eyebrows, dark eyes, and short blonde hair.

Below them I recognized the word Mateo and Isabel Casalles and *Sin Horquillas*, which I knew was the name of his restaurant.

Just...*holy shit*. Kill me fucking now.

Not only was his wife very pretty, almost Scandinavian looking with her Mia Farrow haircut and high cheekbones, but...she really existed. She now

had a face. She was real.

I was in love with her husband. The same man who had told me that he wasn't in love with her.

The man who would be just a memory in less than a week.

"Are you okay?" Polly asked, sounding genuinely concerned. "You did know he was married, didn't you?"

I stared blankly at her and managed to nod. I looked to Beatriz. "Why the picture? What is the article about?"

Beatriz took the magazine back. I was glad. I never wanted to see it again.

She scanned it. "Nothing much. Just that his Barcelona restaurant celebrated a two-year anniversary last month and there was a big party. This magazine reports on everyone, especially old football stars. Plus Isabel comes from royalty."

"What the fuck?" I exclaimed.

"Holyyyyy," Polly said breathily.

A sly smile came across Beatriz's face. "You don't really talk about her very much, do you?"

"Mateo doesn't like to."

"Well, I don't blame him," she said.

I gave her a sharp look. "Why? Is she a bitch?" And suddenly I was super hopeful that she was some raging psycho bitch so that I'd feel better about having feelings for her husband.

"Not really," Beatriz said carefully. "People say she is quite nice and pleasant. Polite. Though she probably wouldn't be with you. Understandably."

Damn. "So she's royalty?"

"More or less," Beatriz said with a one-shouldered shrug. "Isabel's mother, Paloma, was in line to be heir or something, but then Paloma's mother, Penelope, renounced her claim to the Spanish throne. I can't remember why. Something political at the time. I do think her grandmother is still called a Duchess though, but it probably is just a formality."

"Wow," I said. Great. So she's pretty, polite, and quasi-royalty? I could never, ever compete with that.

"Yes," she said, studying me. "But there have always been rumors and talk about those two."

I didn't want to ask but my eyes did it for me.

Beatriz went on. “You see, Isabel is very nice and pretty, but she is not perfect. The rumor, according to Atletico’s owner, was that Mateo was fine to return to play. He was only thirty at the time—he was in great shape, at his peak, as you say. The tear wasn’t all that bad, the one in his knee. But Isabel convinced him to give it all up. To get away from the lifestyle she considered too wild.”

“Wild?”

She smirked. “Oh yes. Our players are known for being a little wild and crazy. Lots of sex and fights and drinking. Mateo was no different than the rest. And Isabel, with her Duchess grandmother and her socialite status, she didn’t want that. The team called her Yoko Ono, for stealing Mateo away from them.”

I had forgotten that Beatriz was a sports reporter, no wonder she knew so much. I looked down at my hands. “But he went along with it. He married her.”

“I know. Everyone found that to be a surprise. I think Mateo lost himself a little after the injury and didn’t know what to do. She showed up at the right time and told him what to do. Soon they were married, and then they had a child. She helped in investing the restaurants. Her brother is chef, so I feel like she had something to do with that.”

It all made sense with what Mateo had said, that he’d just been oblivious to the whole thing. Eight years of oblivion. No wonder that soccer match, his injury, had evoked such a response from him. I had just assumed that he was reliving the pain and humiliation of the injury, not the moment his whole life had changed and he had become something that he wasn’t.

I suddenly wanted nothing more than to go find him. I don’t know exactly what I would have said or done once I did so—I certainly wouldn’t have told him what Beatriz had told me. But I wanted him to know he wasn’t alone. That I knew who he was and that was more than okay. I liked the real Mateo with his jeans and boots, the businessman Mateo with his slick suits, the soccer star Mateo in his jersey and shorts. I liked the calm Mateo, the witty Mateo, the lusty Mateo, and the hot-tempered Mateo.

I liked all of him.

No. I *loved* all of him.

I loved Mateo Casalles.

With my eyes now brimming with tears, I slowly looked up at Beatriz, Claudia, and Polly, who had been watching me lapse into silence, their

faces bunched with concern.

I didn't have to say anything.

Claudia soothed, "Oh, honey," and came over to my side, embracing me in a hug while the other two girls did the same. I let a few tears fall in anticipation of losing a love, an opportunity that never had a chance to be realized, while Claudia and Polly both cried knowing that they'd have to say goodbye to Ricardo and Eduardo too.

The clock started ticking louder. The countdown to the end had begun.



"I don't want to go home," I wailed into the phone.

"You say that now, but you'll change your mind when you get back here," Josh said, apparently munching on an extra crinkly bag of chips. "Besides, if you don't come back soon, you'll sound even more stupid. I thought you were teaching English over there, not losing it."

"They warned us that would happen," I said, conscious of how I'd started pronouncing words since I started talking to him.

I took the phone away from my ear and checked the time. I was sitting in my bedroom and talking to Josh while wearing the nicest dress I had packed, which happened to be the boobalicious maxi dress with the smocked waist. It was the night after the gossip magazine incident and corresponding tears, and all of the Anglos and Spaniards were being treated to a dinner at a restaurant in Acantilado. I only meant to check in with my brother quickly since I hadn't all week and hadn't planned on the phone call going on for so long. I guess I had a lot to say. I wasn't even saying the half of it.

"When you come back," he said, "I'll pick you up at the airport."

"When you say pick me up, you mean I'm sitting on the handlebars of your bike, don't you?"

"Nope," he said proudly. "I'll pick you up in a three-year-old Volkswagen Golf."

"And where did you get that? Stealing cars on the east side?"

"Nope again. I bought it. I have a car now."

"What?" My brother had always wanted a car—sometimes it was crucial for our city—but he never managed to save up enough with his job.

"How did that happen?"

“That contest I entered?” he said smugly. “I won it.”

“Holy shit!” I cried out. “That’s amazing. And fast! And what the fuck, how much money did they give you?”

“One thousand dollars. And I had been saving some money, so I used that too.”

My smile faltered a bit at that. I knew he had some saved up, but I was about to suggest to him that he use that money to travel. I knew Josh felt as trapped and listless as I did, or at least close. I wanted to tell him to come here, do the program, or just backpack. Find life, inspiration. Even love, since all the picky, yoga pants-wearing girls in Vancouver didn’t seem to be impressed with his tattoos.

“Well I’m very happy for you,” I said. “This means I get a car too.”

“You don’t sound happy.”

“Because I don’t want to go home!”

“Aw, Vera...”

“I don’t! And you can’t make me!”

“You have no money.”

“I can turn tricks. Spanish men seem to like me.”

“Nasty. I don’t want to hear it.”

“I’m serious, Josh. I don’t want to go home. It will kill me to leave here.”

“You’re such a girl,” he chided me.

“I mean it.” I sighed and peered out my window at the glowing sunset. People had started to gather in front of reception. My heart twinged a bit at the sight of them all, my friends. “This place changes the way you think, the way you look at life, the way you look at people. It teaches you...that we’re all the same deep down. It doesn’t matter your age or where you’re from. We’re all human, suffering from the human condition.”

“I’m going to be honest with you, you sound like a loon right now. Who is this and what have you done with my sister?”

“I know I sound loony. A girl here, Becca, you’d like her—she told me the same thing during the first week and I didn’t believe her, not really. But everything she said would happen did. You bond with people here, like you never would otherwise. They become your life, your...universe.” I shivered over my last words.

“Okaaaaay,” he said slowly. “I think I’m going to hang up now.”

I grumbled, feeling like I was a foreigner speaking a strange language.
“Fine. Love you.”

“Yeah. See you Tuesday. I’ll be the hot guy in the fucktastic car.”

“Ew.”

I hung up, shoved my phone in my purse, and went running out the door.



This time instead of taking three vans, we all piled into a charter bus similar to the one that brought us here from Madrid. It couldn’t go all the way into the town, but the restaurant was supposed to be on the outskirts anyway. The lucky Spaniards (sans Mateo) were brought there last week for their football victory dinner and apparently the food had been very good.

I hadn’t gotten a chance to sit with Mateo on the bus because Mark or Marty was with him (I guess they’d grown closer since the whole injury thing), so I sat with Becca and endured the raucous atmosphere. I felt like I was going on a pub crawl and everyone else seemed to have a head start at drinking. Regardless, everyone was in an excellent mood, eager to get out of Las Palabras for the night and celebrate the program coming to a close. We only had two nights left after this.

I guess Mateo and I didn’t really get a good look at each other until he was slowly coming off the bus, being extra careful with his knee. I hadn’t really seen him all day, with the way things had panned out.

He looked...amazing.

For the occasion, he was back in one of his suits. Black, sleek, sharply cut. White shirt with first two buttons undone, no tie. Messy, wavy black hair and a neatly trimmed beard that bordered on stubble. I wanted to run my fingers down his face, down his chest, down his stomach until I was undoing his fly. I wanted to drop to my knees and give him something sweet to remember me by.

Of course, at that salacious thought, he looked up and saw me. My cheeks burned and I gave him a quick, giddy wave.

“Vera,” he said throatily, his face brightened in awe. “You look beautiful.”

He came toward me with his arms out, and for the first time ever, he grabbed me by the shoulders and leaned in, planting a kiss on each cheek. I

was overcome by desire and lust and gilded happiness just from his body being so close. His rough cheek pressed against mine, his scent making me weak, his lips so warm and soft on my skin that I closed my eyes and took it all in.

This wasn't like the greeting I got from the other Spaniards. This one *lingered*.

When he finally pulled away, I knew I was totally blushing. He squinted his eyes at me, smiling gracefully. He took his fingers and brushed my hair off my shoulders. "With the sunset, you look like you are on fire."

I pressed my legs together, squirming a bit. He had *no* idea.

It was then that I noticed Becca and Sammy were hanging around at the back of the crowd waiting for us. I cleared my throat and we quickly went to join them. Sammy, dressed in a too-tight purple bodycon dress that put my cleavage to shame, was watching us with a dazed smile on her face.

"Look at you two," she cooed. "What a lovely couple."

I gave her the stink-eye. "Hey, how are things with you and Peter the Everything Man?" I warned.

She drew her lips in a thin line and nodded, getting the point. We weren't a couple, and to even suggest it in front of Mateo wasn't really the best idea. However, I snuck a peek at his face and he was just staring at me, eyes lit up from the waning light and still kind. Maybe even more than kind...

We made our way through a block of the town, enjoying the look of it in the evening, the lanterns all lit and casting romantic shadows across the narrow streets. When we finally came to the restaurant, I felt that perhaps we were all a bit overdressed. The storefront looked like nothing special, and the name of the restaurant—Horno de Leña—was hanging from the neck of a creepy mannequin. Sammy immediately started giggling at the name and Becca told her to grow up.

Once all of us piled inside, however, my opinion changed. We were led down a staircase that seemed to be carved right out of the wall until we were underground in what appeared to be a dungeon, or at least a cellar. The whole area was just one room, with another staircase on the opposite wall. From floor to ceiling it was old stone, even the supporting arches were made from the same grey rock. At one end I could see what looked like an oven of sorts built right into the stone, and at the other was a bar. The tables

were all laid out in a square, with chairs on either side, tastefully decorated with white tablecloths and candelabra centerpieces.

Jerry, who was looking absurd tonight in a powder blue suit, told us that the other staircase led to the back patio if you needed air or wanted a cigarette. We were free to sit wherever we wanted.

At that I saw Claudia and Ricardo and a few other smokers make a beeline to the tables closest to the patio. She immediately started waving me over, gesturing that she saved some seats.

I looked up at Mateo. “Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?”

He grinned. “Can we pretend I’m paying?”

“Of course. And I’ll pretend I’m paying.”

We went and sat down with Sammy, Becca, Polly, Eduardo, Nerea, Manuel, Jorge, and Ed. I had Mateo on one side of me and Becca on the other, which was better than Sammy who I was sure would have kept badgering me.

The dinner was three courses and by the time we were on the second course—mouth-watering paella—I was brimming with emotion. I kept looking around at most of the Anglos and all of the Spaniards, and my chest just ached for the sort of affection I felt for them. I never in a million years thought I would have made all these friends, friends who felt real, genuine and true. And here they all were, my family for the last month. I wasn’t exaggerating much when I told Josh that it would kill me to have to leave. I just couldn’t fathom life without them. I couldn’t fathom the life I was living before.

From the looks of everyone else, their smiles on their lips but the sentimental sadness in their eyes, I knew they felt the same. This was one of the last nights to just enjoy each other before we all had to say goodbye.

I felt like I needed to start with the man next to me. We were sitting close to each, closer than we normally did at Las Palabras, and I could feel the heat coming off of him in the damp chill of the underground. Though we made conversation with everyone, whenever I had a chance I was looking at him, talking to him, soaking up his face like I’d never see it again.

I was also drinking quite a bit. Instead of Heineken, this place had Colombian beer—Aguila—which tasted like a rainbow. Mateo laughed when I told him that, telling me it tasted like piss and that my taste buds had been compromised. Then we moved on to the wine, which the ever-so-

picky Mateo admitted was a million times better than the wine we'd been drinking all month long back at the resort.

I couldn't tell you how many times I wanted to do more than just lightly touch my hand on his knee or whisper in his ear. I wanted to put my hand on his inner thigh and squeeze, I wanted to suck on his earlobe. I wanted to bring his face around to mine and kiss him with abandon like Ricardo and Claudia and Polly and Eduardo and so many other people were doing.

It was as if some alarm inside of me was going off, blaring, "You're running out of time, you're running out of time!" and I kept hitting snooze, over and over and over again. I started fidgeting in my seat, running the napkin through my hands, playing with my hair, trying to keep my thoughts distracted and my digits occupied.

It was a losing game. Eventually, after the dessert was finished and everyone was just drinking and talking, Mateo noticed.

He had been deep in a conversation with Jorge about something or other when he leaned in close and whispered in my ear, hot breath on my neck, "Are you okay?"

I swallowed the brick in my throat and nodded.

The next thing came out of nowhere.

"Are you afraid to be with me?" he asked softly, his lips now brushing my earlobes. Perhaps by accident. Perhaps not.

I stiffened. I knew what to say. I would say, "No" and leave it at that. But there was so much in his voice, so much want, sincerity, and emotion that I knew I couldn't lie to him.

"Right now I am," I admitted just loud enough for him to hear. But we were in a room full of people, their laughter and words bouncing off the stone grey walls, and that's all I was going to say.

I had to get some air.

I quickly got to my feet and pushed my chair back and went for the staircase. I breathed a giant sigh of relief when I pushed the door open at the top and saw that the patio was completely empty. It was also totally beautiful.

It was a brick courtyard with a tall wall around it lit up by fairy lights and covered in flowering vines. A small fountain with a cherub was in the center while in the corners there were giant terra-cotta pots filled with purple and blue flowers. There were a few tables and ashtrays, empty beer

bottles stacked on the end of one, as if someone was going to bring them all downstairs but just forgot.

I closed my eyes and breathed in the air. Though we were in the town, the air was pure and wonderful, balmy compared to the cellar. After all those days of rain, the warmth invigorated me, brought some clarity into my alcohol-infused, heart-frazzled, hormone-frenzied veins.

The clarity didn't last for long. I heard the patio screen door close and I immediately knew who was behind me.

"Vera," Mateo said hoarsely.

I slowly turned my head to glance at him over my shoulder. "Yeah?"

"Are you sure you're okay?"

What was I supposed to say to that? He knew how I felt; he had to. Everyone else knew how I felt, why couldn't he?

I sat down at the nearest picnic table and wished I had brought something with me to drink.

At that thought, the patio door opened again. I looked up to see Jorge holding Mateo's half-finished beer.

"Jerry is going to start giving out awards for the program soon," he said cautiously, knowing he wasn't wanted. "He wants everyone to be present."

I thought Mateo would have said something to that, but he didn't. He was still staring at me, waiting for an answer to *his* question. He ignored Jorge, and instead pulled up a chair, sitting his large frame down across from me.

The silence crackled above our heads like a live wire. I could feel Jorge's eyes on us as he reluctantly placed Mateo's drink on the table and walked away. Part of me wished for him to come back, to break up the tension and the startling intensity in Mateo's eyes. The other part was selfishly glad Jorge was leaving us in peace. Alone.

I broke away from Mateo, focusing instead on his bottle of Aguila and the condensation that ran down the sides, looking blissfully cool in the sticky night air. Through all the weeks of joking, talking, the innocent physical contact, now I was astutely nervous about being alone with him. It wasn't so much that I was afraid of him—I was afraid of me. Especially since that remark at dinner, I'd been afraid of what I'd do to him, how I'd break that moral code I promised for myself.

He's married, he's married, he's married, I told myself, watching a drop of water race down the beer to the table. *His wife is beautiful and lovely, his*

daughter is sweet, and you aren't either of those things.

But I could only tell myself that so many times.

"Vera," he said thickly. "Vera, look at me." His voice was commanding, reaching a depth I hadn't heard before.

My eyes slowly slid over to him. I tried to speak but could only suck in my lip, probably taking all my lipstick off.

"Show me the stars again," he said. His eyes speared me like nothing else, his face becoming dangerously handsome.

I looked up to the clear sky to see the stars, but he came over to me, reached out, and grabbed my hand. His touch was hot, like his fingers were searing into my skin, that feeling of entering a hot tub on a cold night. I couldn't help the shiver that ran gently down my spine.

"Not those stars," he said huskily, leaning forward. His lips were wet and slightly open. "Your stars. Why I call you Estrella."

I swallowed hard, my pulse burning. I turned around in my chair so my back was to him and lifted up my hair, gathering it on top of my head.

His chair scraped loudly on the ground as he got up, a sound that struck a new kind of fear in me.

No. Not fear.

Anticipation.

I heard him stop right behind me. I held my breath, wondering what he was going to do.

One rough finger pressed down against the back of my neck, right on the spine where the tattoo began. I closed my eyes to the feeling, the currents it caused, traveling all the way down, making me wet. Jesus, I needed to get a hold of myself.

"What star is this?" he asked, sounding like silk. I could wrap myself in his voice.

"Alpheratz," I whispered, as if I was letting him in on a secret. Maybe I was.

His finger slid diagonally down, a trail of fire across the Pegasus line. "And this one?"

"Markab."

"Why Pegasus?"

I paused, the truth on my lips. Fuck it. We'd been nothing but honest with each other. "Because I want to fly free. And there's no place higher than the stars."

He didn't say anything for a few beats. I was tempted to turn around, to look at him, but I didn't want him to take his finger off my neck. I was leaving in three days. He was going back to his family. This was all I had, his skin on my stars.

He leaned in, his hot breath at my neck. "Are you afraid that love will clip your wings?"

His words sank into me, making my blood buzz. Love. This was too hazardous a subject to discuss with him. Not now. Not ever. With my breath shaking, I inched my neck away from his mouth and turned to face him.

"No," I said, looking him straight in the eye. "I'm afraid that losing love will."

His expression softened. He looked at my lips, his beautifully long eyelashes casting shadows on his tawny skin.

"Then that makes two of us," he whispered softly, and for a long second I thought he was going to get it over with and finally kiss me, to put an end to this strain between us, the yearning that made me ache inside. But he straightened up, his gaze avoiding mine, and went to retrieve his beer from the table.

I watched him take a long sip and put the bottle back down. He started for the restaurant.

"You know, I can't pretend any longer," I blurted out, surprising myself. I had reached my limit.

He had stopped, standing absolutely still, his back to me. He was either going to start walking again or he was going to turn around. I held in my breath.

With his back to me he said, "No. We can't. I have one last question for you."

That wasn't what I expected. Questions were getting dangerous.

"What?" I asked softly.

He slowly turned around. "What is love? In English."

I raised my brows. "Love, in English, is love?"

"What is it in Spanish?"

I was so enthralled by his hypnotic eyes, I could barely remember. "Amore?"

He shook his head ever so slightly. "No. Love in Spanish is *you*."

Then he turned around, heading back.

This was bullshit.

I got out of my chair and ran for him. I grabbed him by the arm and pulled on him hard, turning him around so that he was facing me. I kept my fingers buried in his jacket sleeve and stared up at him.

“That’s it?” I cried out, my voice breaking with anger. “You tell me that I am *love* in your language? And then you leave me?!’

He gazed down at me like he was in a trance. “What would you rather I do?” he whispered.

I felt as if I were about to cry. My face contorted in pain and confusion. “I don’t know! Not that.”

“What about this,” he said huskily. He put one hand into my hair, his fingers moving through my strands, trailing along my scalp. My skin erupted in goosebumps. “Or this.” He took his other hand and did the same, until both were in my hair, holding the back of my head, his fingers pressing into me with a delicious amount of pressure.

Thoughts began to leave my head. They were replaced by emotions. Wants. Needs. All of them swirling around me like a galaxy.

He took a step so that he was right up against me, his firm stomach against mine, and what seemed to be an erection pressing into my hip. I felt like I couldn’t get any air at all. He tilted my head back so that I was looking up at his eyes, his lips just inches from mine.

“You can tell me stop,” he whispered. “And I will stop. But please, don’t tell me to stop.”

At that moment, I didn’t even know what the word meant.

I watched in slow motion as he brought his mouth down to mine. The minute our lips connected, my eyes closed, all my senses being redirected to the pleasure I was beginning to drown in. His kiss was sweet at first. Soft. Warm lips, wet mouth. Almost restrained, even with the way his lower lip cupped mine and held me, my mouth to his. It lit me up like a fucking firecracker, exploding in bombs along my limbs, until all of me was on fire, wanting, needing, craving more.

And he gave that to me. The pressure on my head increased, his fingers wrapping tighter in my hair while our kiss deepened. His tongue teased mine, soft as silk. It stirred the need for more inside of me, like I was just realizing how hungry I was. I wanted so much of him, all of him, every part of him. I wanted him to keep kissing me because it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever experienced. It was also the hottest thing I’d ever

experienced, and this was coming from a girl that had a threesome with two underwear models. Mateo's kiss blew my whole life out of the water.

I put my hands on his waist, feeling the silk of his clothes, the tautness of his stomach. The heat inside of me was growing to dangerous levels; every swirl of his tongue made me squirm, made me wet, made me want so much more than I could get right here.

"There you two are."

The grating sound of Jerry's voice broke us apart.

Mateo and I stared at each other, chests heaving from being breathless, his mouth open, eyes glazed with passion, trying to make sense of what had just happened, what line we had just crossed.

Then, together, we looked to Jerry. He was eyeing us down in exaggerated annoyance. "There is plenty of time for that back at the resort," Jerry scolded. "You're missing the awards ceremony. Vera, there may or may not be an award for you. But you won't know unless you come downstairs. Come on guys, it'll be good craic."

And with a gesture of his hand, he turned and left down the stairs. As if what he had just witnessed wasn't a catastrophic event, my life's version of the big bang.

My eyes trained on the door, too afraid now to look back at Mateo. What had we just done?

I cleared my throat and smoothed my hair down. "We better go back inside."

"Wait," Mateo said, grabbing my arm and pulling me close to him. I felt the world slip away at his touch and I was lost once again in the gleaming depths of his eyes. "That cannot be it."

"I don't think it can be anything else," I whispered. My heart was being put through a meat grinder.

"Yes, it can," he said. His voice was flinty with determination, brows knitted close together.

"You're married," I said helplessly, the words almost escaping as a sob.

"It is over."

I shook my head. "No. No, it's not. It's not over. Not for you. It was just a kiss, you can recover from this. You can tell yourself I came on to you. It wasn't your fault."

"I want you," he said, his grip becoming firmer. "I wanted you from the very beginning, I just never thought it would be possible."

“Because it’s not possible!” I cried out, pounding a fist on his chest.

“You don’t know that,” he hissed.

“You’re married!” I yelled. “I cannot be the other woman!”

“You already *are* the other woman!” he yelled right back. His words smashed into me, blowing me to smithereens. He cupped my face in his hands. “You already are, whether you want to be or not. You’ve bewitched me, Vera. You’ve blinded me. You’ve made me forget my vows. And all you had to do was shine.” He swallowed hard, his eyes piercing into me. “Do you not know how I feel about you?”

I had to go. I couldn’t let him tell me any more.

I turned on my heel and ran to the door, taking a moment once I was inside to compose myself. The alternative would have been to scale the brick wall and run all the way back to Las Palabras, but I had a feeling I’d probably injure myself doing that. I had to go downstairs, to the crowd, to where everyone was waiting for us.

My heart was beating so rapidly I was certain I was going to pass out and roll down the stairs. But somehow I made it down there, the chill of the cellar coasting over my bare skin. I expected to see everyone staring at me for the intrusion, but instead they were all looking at the center of the room where Jerry was standing, handing a piece of paper to Angel for “Most Improved English.”

While everyone was applauding and shouting words of congratulations, I snuck back into my seat. Becca looked at me and I gave her a nervous smile.

“What was that all about?” she asked quietly.

My head ticked back and forth, my lips shut together. I couldn’t talk. If I did, I would start...I don’t know what. But it would have been bad.

Moments later I felt Mateo’s presence behind me and he pulled out his chair. I swear, my lungs gave up and my heart decided to follow along. Just him sitting beside me was too much, especially after knowing what he tasted like. I could still feel his lips on mine, his body beneath my hands.

I could still hear, “You already are the other woman,” playing over and over in my head.

It was too much. Perhaps I needed to vomit.

“And the award for best laugh goes to, Vera Miles!”

The vomit went back down. What the fuck? I looked up from where I’d been blindly staring at my empty dessert dish to see Jerry holding up a

piece of paper and waving me over.

Best *laugh*? How could I win for best laugh? I felt like I'd never laughed a single day in my life.

"You've won," Mateo murmured in my ear as he clapped, the feel of his breath freezing me in place. "Go up there."

I don't know how, but I did as he said. I got out of my chair and made my way around the table to the middle of the room where Jerry quickly pulled me into a hug. He handed the paper to me and made me smile with him at Manuel who had started taking pictures. I think I smiled anyway. I couldn't even focus on the fact that my laugh, which I had been told was infectious, had gotten me an award.

I should have gotten an award for being a villain instead.

Chapter Fifteen

“Get up, sleepyhead.”

I groaned and opened one eye. The bedroom was filled with light. I slowly rolled over, hair in my face, to see Claudia sitting on the edge of the bed. I hadn’t even heard her come in.

“What time is it?” I asked, my throat raw as I reached for a glass of water from my bedside. My mouth tasted sour.

“It’s ten minutes before you are late for breakfast,” she said.

“Ugh,” I said after I drained the glass. “Can’t I just sleep all day? They know I’m sick.”

She gave me a look. “No, you can’t. It’s our second to last day. You felt fine when you went to bed.”

That was true. Seconds after I received the award for “best laugh” from Jerry, I was struck again by the need to vomit. I didn’t know if it was my nerves, the fear, or the food, but suddenly I was running for the bathroom and throwing up in the stall. After that, I wasn’t in the mood to hang around and party with everyone, and I really wasn’t in the mood to face Mateo, so Claudia took me home in Peter the Everything Man’s van. I went right to bed with a heart full of turmoil, tossing and turning for most of the night.

All I could think about was how hard I tried not to be the other woman. I couldn’t pretend anymore that I cared about Isabel’s well-being, because the honest bitchy truth was that I didn’t. I didn’t know her—all I knew was that she was wrong for him and he didn’t love her. But I did know what my parents’ divorce did to me, and I had no wish to do that to Chloe Ann.

But, as Mateo said, I didn’t seem to have a choice in it. My heart had fluttered when I thought about his words. That I had bewitched him. That I shone.

That I made him forget his vows.

How could such a thing make me both sick to my stomach and so extraordinarily blissful at the same time?

“Are you going to get up or do I need to get another glass of water and pour it on your head?” Claudia said, smacking my leg.

“Wow, you got mean,” I said. I slowly sat up and exhaled like I hadn’t let out a breath all night.

“How are you really feeling?” she asked me. She hadn’t said a word about Mateo last night, which I appreciated.

I shook my head sadly. “I don’t know. I don’t know how I feel.”

“What happened on the patio? I was dying for a cigarette but I didn’t want to interrupt.”

I crossed my legs under me and looked down at my hands pressed together. “He kissed me.”

I shot her a quick look to gauge her reaction. She was smiling broadly.

“Don’t smile,” I admonished her. “It’s not a good thing.”

“Not a good thing? Vera, what is wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with me?” Lord, where did I begin with that?

“Was it a bad kiss?”

“No,” I said, body trembling at the memory, my lips tingling with electricity. I lightly touched them with my fingertips. “It was the best kiss I ever had.”

“Then there is something wrong with you.”

“He’s married.”

“Is he?” she mocked, mouth open. “I had *no* idea. It’s like you never talk about that.”

I glared at her. “It doesn’t bother you?”

Her eyes roamed the room in thought. Finally she said, “No. Because I see you together and I know that there is something special there. It’s not silly or...what is the word...frivolous? It is real.”

“He said I made him forget his vows, that I’m already the other woman.”

Her eyes bugged out. “He said that? Wow. Mateo...he is really opening up.”

“Yeah, well, that’s why I don’t know how I feel. I just want to stay in my room here all day.”

“Away from him?”

“It would be safer.”

She smiled softly. “There is no safe anymore, Vera. You know that.”

“Then what do you propose I do?” I hated that she was right. The walls wouldn’t protect me, not the ones in this room, not the ones I had carefully built around my heart.

“You want my advice?” she asked. I nodded. She got off the bed and stared down at me. “I say, fuck it. Go for it. The damage is done. You’re

leaving in a few days. You might as well spend the little time you have left together. Don't regret anything. Go be with him. Soon, he will only be a memory."

My eyes started to water at that. I nodded and exhaled loudly. The damage was already done. I could hide from him, leave him, leave Spain feeling that I never quite touched the stars. Or I could go for it, risk the cold of deep space for a chance to feel alive. If he was going to be nothing but a memory to me, if he was going to go on with his life and I was to go on with mine, I wanted a memory that would change me, make me born anew.

I looked at her, feeling stripped again. "Is it wrong that it makes me so happy to think a man like him could ever want a girl like me?"

"I told you that the heart has no regard for time," she said, walking to the door. "The heart has no regard for what's right or what's wrong." She paused in the doorway. "Forget Jerry's table seating. I'm saving a seat for you so you better hurry up!"

She left the room, shutting the door. The walls crumbled around me.



At breakfast, everyone looked hung over. I tried to make eye contact with Mateo but he was sitting with Wayne, Eduardo, and Polly. I guess the whole seating rules went out the window and everyone was sitting with their friends.

True to her word, Claudia saved me a seat, and I sat with her, Ricardo, and Becca. Becca showed me pictures on her phone that explained why everyone looked so rough. After I left, the drinking and partying went on for a long time. A part of me was sad that I missed that, but I knew I made the right choice in leaving. I could have ended up like Sammy who, in one picture, was making out with Froggy Carlos, and in the next, she was making out with the mannequin outside of the restaurant, the sign now hanging around Froggy's neck.

I barely ate anything at breakfast, which was all due to nerves this time. My skin felt like it was vibrating and my knee kept bouncing beneath the table. From time to time I glanced over at Mateo, hoping to make eye contact but Wayne's big fat head was always in the way.

As soon as Jerry updated the schedule for the day, I was over there, looking it over in hopes that I had a session with Mateo.

I did. A business session after lunch, much like our first session together.

The *siesta*.

A shiver rolled down my back at the thought.

The next few hours ticked by like molasses, not to say I wasn't enjoying myself. I had one-on-ones with Sara, Manuel, and Paco, which went fine. With Sara we talked about her job, with Manuel we talked about music, with Paco we talked about immigration issues in Spain. It was an amazing improvement when you thought back to how they were at the start of the month. Now we were all able to converse fluently, and like old friends.

I didn't get to see Mateo at lunch either. He had come in late and taken the table closest to the door, unfortunately having to sit with Lauren. After a while I started to think that maybe he was ignoring me. Maybe he regretted what we did last night and decided he didn't want anything to do with me. I wouldn't have been surprised, considering the situation he was in, but I had to say the thought was slowly ripping me apart.

I was still thinking it, sitting outside in the sunshine, about to pull my Kindle out of my purse and catch up on my latest Game of Thrones novel, when Mateo appeared in front of me.

My heart slowed and I slowly looked up.

"I've been looking for you," he said, hands in his jean pockets. He was now wearing his casual garb again—grey fitted t-shirt, worn jeans. His hair was all messy black waves and hanging a bit in his face, begging to be touched. His eyes were luminous, like starlight.

"You were?" I asked.

"I was worried about you after last night."

I smiled awkwardly. "Yes, well...I am better now."

"Good." He held out his hand for me. I noticed he wasn't wearing his Rolex and there was a faint tan line where it had been. He was still, of course, wearing his wedding ring. "I noticed we have a session after our break. Would you like to go for a walk with me?"

I stared at the ring on his finger. I thought about what it meant. Then I thought about what he meant to me. Cautiously, I reached out and gave my hand to him. He pulled me up to my feet, my long skirt flowing around my legs like water.

"I'd love to go for a walk with you," I said. "Maybe we can find a tree to sleep under."

His eyes danced and he squeezed my hand, causing the nerves in my arm to quake. "Maybe."

He didn't keep holding my hand, however, not that I expected him to. But as we walked down the hill toward the country road, he kept moving closer to me, our hands brushing against each other. After knowing what his kiss was like, I was still surprised that the lightest bit of contact between us set my skin alight. The man was ruining me, bit by bit.

We strolled up the road away from Acantilado, not saying very much, just enjoying each other's company, the sweet-smelling breeze, and the heat that baked us between the sun and the hard earth. The air buzzed with cicadas and floated with butterflies. The fields shimmered with haze. Summer was officially here.

"Tell me, Vera," he said. "What are you going to miss the most about Spain?"

"You," I said automatically. It was the truth, there was no getting around it, not anymore.

He had such a beautiful smile. "I am glad for that. But you'll miss the country too, yes?"

I nodded. "Definitely. In fact, I think I belong here more than I do back at home. This place...makes you feel alive. It gives you, I don't know, spirit."

"Spain looks good on you," he said. "You can see it on your face. I think you could be happy here."

My smile shrank a little. "I think so too..."

"Sometimes your home isn't where you were born," he noted.

I wasn't sure what to say to that, though I knew what he said was true.

Mateo suddenly grabbed my hand. He took me to the side of the road and lifted up the top wire of a fence, about to lead me through it. I stepped under, careful not to trip, and we walked, hand in hand, across a golden field of tall grass and brilliant wildflowers. In the distance was a picturesque oak tree, its shimmering green canopy leaning over the tawny ground.

We went over to the tree, the grass tickling my bare legs as I held up my skirt and stood at the edge of the shade, looking at the field, at Mateo. The grass and the flowers practically swallowed the trunk of the tree, and there wasn't really a clear area to even sit.

"Not really the best tree to have a nap under," I said.

He shrugged, the sunlight dappled on him through the leaves above. “It looked better from far away.”

He was still holding my hand. As if we both noticed this at the same time, he went and grabbed my other hand and squeezed both. He dipped his chin and gazed intently at me. Whatever polite façade we were demonstrating a few moments ago was quickly disappearing. I could feel the change between us, the tension growing thicker, calling attention to it, to us. To what we were and what was unresolved.

It called attention to everything. And each moment that Mateo held onto me with his strong hands, every second that his deep eyes bore into mine, seeking and searching, the tension intensified.

“Vera.” He said my name like silk and I knew I would never grow tired of hearing it. I looked down, unable to bear the impassioned look on his face. “I never got a chance last night to tell you how I feel.”

The cicadas chirped, matching the rhythm of my skipping heart. A light breeze blew past, tousling his hair.

“I know.” I swallowed thickly. I took in a deep breath, trying to steady myself. “And I’m afraid to hear it.”

“Why?” he asked. “Because you don’t feel the same way?”

I looked up to see pain pinched on his brow as his eyes sought mine.

“No,” I told him, mustering a scared smile. “Because I do.”

I expected him to return the smile, but his frown only deepened, and the fire in his stare smoldered to hazardous levels. He put one hand at my cheek, cupping it, while the other gripped the back of my neck. He held me there, his gaze penetrating, and I didn’t dare move. I couldn’t. I was completely, totally, one hundred percent his for the taking.

“My life used to be chaotic,” he said quietly. “It used to be more of a life. Then the accident happened. And I met Isabel. She took the chaos that was my life and organized it. She trimmed it, separated it. and put it into these tiny boxes, boxes I was too scared to touch. You, *you*, Vera, you found those boxes and you opened them up. You ripped them apart. You let the chaos loose, filling my life with energy and stars again.” His lids drooped seductively, the grip on my neck becoming firmer. “You burn so brightly,” he said, his voice low and rough to raise the hair on my arms. “I would like to burn with you.”

I felt like my knees were about to give out.

Then he kissed me. Hard. Passionately. With so much intensity I could hardly breathe. His lips and tongue caused shockwaves from my mouth to my toes, flooding every part of me with bubbles and sunshine until I felt like I was soaring.

I grabbed on to his head to stay grounded, sinking my fingers into the smooth hair at the back of his head, gripping it tight. I gave his strands a tug which caused him to moan inside my mouth, a moan that only added to the heat that was combusting between us.

I felt like I was slipping away, becoming nothing but desire.

Desire was a python, wrapping itself around us, squeezing us to a radiant death.

“Estrella,” he said as he pulled his mouth away and began kissing along my jawbone to my neck. “I have never wanted anyone, anything, quite like I want you.”

I groaned as his lips went behind my ear, sucking on my sensitive skin. “I promise you, you can have me. I am yours,” I said, my breath hitching.

“You are my star,” he murmured. “You are my Estrella.” He trailed his lips down to my collarbone, nipping gently at the tattoos there. “I don’t think I can take much more of this. I’m afraid I am too impatient, too greedy now that I have you here, have you now.”

Before he could say anything else, I grabbed his shirt and pulled it up over his head, flinging it toward the tree. My fingers pressed against his firm, tanned pecs and I could feel how fast his heart was beating. I curled my fingers into the short hairs on his chest and tugged at those too, smiling when I got another moan out of him. My god, he was such a man, a man I had never had before, a new, beautiful breed of maturity and machismo. I almost felt like I was a virgin again.

But I certainly didn’t want to behave that way. I put my hands at his jeans and quickly undid the belt buckle and zipped down his fly. Instead of pulling them off right away, I slipped one hand down his pants and got myself a handful of him. If I was wearing underwear, they would have been soaked at the feel of his cock in my hands. He was hard as cement and big enough to get me very excited.

His eyes rolled back into his head and he said with a groan, “You are greedy too.”

I bit my lip then shot him a coy look as I started to pull his pants off. “You bet I am.” I looked down and immediately dropped to my knees,

pushing the grass out of the way. I pulled his pants off, then ran my fingers underneath the band of his underwear. I was right—they weren't David Beckham's, but they were black boxer briefs and showcased the hot little ridge of his hipbones. I quickly ran my tongue over one, tasting the salt on him.

"You are torturing me," he said in a hushed tone. "La tortura."

"Bueno." I grinned. I slowly peeled them off until his cock was in full view. It was impressive—beautifully cut, thick girth, nice length, his hair trimmed. I put my hands under his balls and felt the weight of them. I loved doing that. I also noticed that he had no tan lines. He must sunbathe in the nude.

Jesus, that image was almost as hot as the one in my hands.

Suddenly, I wanted nothing more than for him to be inside of me, and from his rigid length, I knew he felt the same. I started with my mouth. I took his cock in my hand and placed him through my moistened lips, my other hand grabbing onto the firm roundness of his ass. I dug my nails in as he twisted his hands into the thick of my hair and pulled gently. I loved the feel of him, the taste of him, too much. Before I realized it, I was moving fast, wanting nothing more for him to come in my mouth, that I almost forgot about myself.

"Alto," he hissed, regressing to his Spanish. I wasn't about to correct him. He could speak Spanish to me all he wanted. "Alto, por favor."

I slid him out of my lips and gazed up at him with a coquettish smile. "Is this turning you on?"

His eyes blazed as he stepped back and kicked off his pants, briefs, socks, and shoes until he was totally naked, so wonderfully sleek and bronzed, his well-trained muscles primed for vigorous activities. I remained on my knees, watching in awe as he stared down at me.

"I am used to being in charge," he said. Then he dropped to the ground, ripped my tank top over my head and undid my bra in seconds flat. His eyes feasted on my breasts for a long moment before he pushed me back, the long grass folding under my bare body, and he hiked up my skirt until it was around my hips. I watched as his eyes widened at the sight of me, my legs spread in the stark sunshine with no underwear and a Brazilian wax.

"Bella," he murmured huskily, sliding his hands down my thighs toward the inside. A pair of hands never felt so good, especially when they found my folds and began to ease themselves into me. "Bella Estrella."

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back into the grass, feeling so unbelievably turned on and free. And as scary as it was to be doing this with Mateo, to be so open, so exposed, so vulnerable in so many ways, I felt safe. I knew deep down it was just for the moment. I knew the aftermath would be painful. For now, in the grass, with his fingers fucking me deep inside, I was in his hands and I knew no hurt could come to me.

He made the come hither motion on the mound of my g-spot and I found myself clenching around his finger, begging for more, for all of him.

"Wait," I said with a breathy moan. I pointed over to my purse that I had tossed on the ground. I momentarily wondered if I had damaged my Kindle when I threw it but I didn't give a fuck. I only gave a fuck about fucking. "I have a condom in my purse."

His raised his brows in surprise. "I can assure you I am clean."

I gave him a promising smile. "And I am on the pill. But I like to be extra careful." And definitely at first, when I don't really know everything about a guy's past *and* when I'm leaving him forever in a few days. No one wants an STD or a baby as a souvenir.

Mateo nodded, understanding my concern, and in moments he was sliding the condom over his cock. God, it was beautiful; he was beautiful. Especially when he stroked himself, his eyes closed, his lip curled in pure pleasure. So fucking hot.

"Are you going to fuck me or what?" I asked, my fingers rubbing at my clit, my patience running thin as I swelled thick.

His eyes snapped open, his smile deliciously devious. "I told you I was in charge," he growled. He removed my hand and placed it behind his ass and leaned over me, guiding his cock inside me. I expanded for him as he slowly, deliciously, plunged in to the hilt.

His tongue lapped and teased at my nipples as one hand squeezed and kneaded my breasts, the other hand back behind my neck, holding me in place. I didn't know it was possible for me to almost come from nipple stimulation, but I was gasping and moaning until his hand went down to my clit and his lips came up to mine. Our kiss built with the pace of his thrusts, slow at first, then faster, wetter, frenzied.

When I was almost pushed over the edge, my hands gripping his ass so tight, driving him in deeper, my heels digging into the sweaty small of his back, he groaned into my mouth and pulled away until he was staring at me.

There was a heady kind of madness in their depth, like the lust was driving him insane.

“In Spain, we both fuck and make love at the same time,” he grunted. “You need to look at me, Vera. You need to stay connected to me, stay with me.”

That was something else new to me. I didn’t make a lot of eye contact during sex. It made it too intimate, too...meaningful. I never wanted any of that—until now.

I swallowed, finding my breath, and let him stare right into my eyes. After a while though, I started really staring back at him. I returned the intimacy he was giving me, looking deeper and deeper until I thought I saw the universe, our universe, being created. I was so turned on and in so deep that I could have been on drugs.

The image of our lovemaking burned into my brain. The blue blue sky behind his head, his dark hair sticking to the sweat on his forehead, the golden grass laid out at our sides, my inked skin beneath his rich bronze, the sunshine washing us in its heat.

I’ll never forget this, I told myself. *Never.*

And that’s when it started to hit me. The combination of the mounting orgasm, the beautiful pleasure that Mateo was gifting me, the intensity and intimacy of our locked gaze. All of it began to smash into my heart, smash into my soul, letting my feelings for him flow out. I felt flooded with love, big, burning, bright love, filled to the brim and ready to burst out of me, to erode those walls that I’d put up and ensure they’d never go back up again.

Seconds later, I came and came hard. My orgasm ripped through me, shockwaves and tremors and ripples that satiated every crevice of my body. I cried his name in release, my voice drifting into the air. The flood took over and tears began to fall out of my eyes as they rolled back, staring at the sky, at the day moon that was hanging in the still blue.

“Estrella,” Mateo whispered huskily as he kept pounding me, driving himself to completion. “My Estrella.”

I recovered enough to tilt my head and look at him as he came. His eyes, too, were wet and shiny, a look of shock and wonder on his handsome face until his lips curled in a groan, his face contorted with the agony of pleasure, his eyes squeezed shut to keep all the senses in. He cried out, low and primal. His body slowed the push and pull into me and I held him tighter between my legs.

Eventually, he collapsed onto his elbows, his sweaty chest pressing against mine, his fingers nestled in the hair at my temples. His thumbs caressed my cheekbones, wiping away the tears I didn't know were still there. Our eyes were fixed to one another's, addicted to the view of seeing each other so clearly.

He smiled softly and let out a small laugh of disbelief. He ran a finger all over my face, tracing my features as if he was memorizing me for a sculpture. He stopped at my lips and then kissed them, passion still burning between us.

"Now that is a real siesta," he said quietly, as if we weren't all alone in that field.

I giggled and grinned up at him and wrapped my arms around his back, feeling the smoothness of his skin, the strength of his muscles, the heat of the sun. "I think I prefer this siesta a bit more."

A cloud moved past the sun and then it was bright again.

His smile turned sad and he sighed. "I can't let you leave, Vera."

All of a sudden his weight felt like the weight of the world, of our world, was on me. "I don't think we can lie here forever. I have a session with Frog—I mean, Juan Carlos."

He brushed his fingers down my cheek, so softly they felt like butterfly wings. "I can't let you leave Spain. I can't...I can't let you leave *me*." He took in a deep breath and swallowed thickly, his lips pressed hard together.

My heart felt like it was being crushed. "I wish I could stay..."

"Then stay," he said. "Find a way."

I gave him a quizzical look. "That is impossible."

"You keep saying we are impossible," he said. "But you don't have enough faith. You have faith in the stars, but not in us."

"But we *are* impossible. You're...goddamn it, I don't even want to say it anymore."

"I'm married, I know this. But—"

"No," I cried out softly, my hands curling into fists. "I don't even want to talk about it. It is *killing* me, Mateo. I can't even entertain the idea because nothing will come of it. I can't stay here. I have no money. I'm not allowed to stay in your country for as long as I want. I have to go home. You have to go back to your family. To your daughter. To your wife. To *your* universe."

He frowned, confused. "I told you I was creating a new one. And I want you in it. To be the center."

There was so much conviction in his eyes, so much belief in his own words, that it sliced me thin like paper cuts.

"What do you propose we do?"

"I don't know," he said, his voice cracking with desperation. "I don't. But...you could stay and then we could figure something out."

"Mateo," I said slowly, feeling so scared and hopeless. I didn't want to leave him but I couldn't imagine being his mistress either. How did everything get even more complicated than it was before? Hadn't Mateo said that the good relationships were uncomplicated? We were certainly fucked in that aspect, too.

But Mateo was passion. He was now full of the life we both sought after all these years.

He placed his forehead against mine, nose against nose, and closed his eyes. "You bring light to my life. When you leave, there will only be a black hole inside of me. You'll take my heart with you." His breath deepened and he looked into my eyes. "Vera, I am in love with you."

Now I felt like I was drifting in space. I couldn't do anything but float on his words.

He brushed my hair off my face. "I love you." He then kissed my forehead, long and warm and sweet. I wanted to overdose on this moment as my chest grew wings.

But I couldn't. I found my breath again, my voice. "You can't," I croaked. "You don't know me."

He smiled. "I know you."

"There hasn't been enough time."

"I don't care about time," he said confidently. "When I know something, I know it. Now I know what love is. And I love you. And I cannot imagine going back to the life I had before, because that was no life at all. That was just existing. That was just chasing down the next day so I could feel it pass under me." He placed his large hand over my heart. "You made me stop chasing the days. You made me hold onto them."

"And now we both have to let it go," I told him with as much conviction as I could muster, even though I was breaking my own heart for saying so.

His expression was pained and I was overwhelmed by how unfair this was. Why couldn't he have been single? Why couldn't I have been older, or

he younger, or why couldn't I have met him in another point in time? It could have been so damn good.

It *was* so damn good.

I closed my eyes and felt the tears coming again.

"Hush," he said softly. "Don't cry or I will cry."

I tried not to. I tried to hold it in. But a month's worth of second-guessing and anguish had built up. The floodwaters had risen again. I began to bawl. Mateo rolled off of me and then wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into his chest. His kissed my head then rested his chin on top of it so I was free to sob into his neck and chest.

He held me there, never saying anything, just letting me cry. We lay there in that sunbaked field until my tears were dry. Both of us knew that even though we had our problems, we also had an annoyed Anglo and Spaniard to deal with back at the resort.

It was hard to leave that field. It was hard to put my clothes back on and get ready to move on with the day because to move on with the day meant to move on to the next day and the next, until I was gone. Now, I was just like Mateo, holding on to each one, so afraid to let go.

But we had to. We both knew we had to.

He grabbed my hand, and together we walked away from the field, back to the road, and up to the resort. A small part of me thought maybe what had happened back there didn't have to be it, that we would hold on to the day, to each other, a little longer. But as soon as we saw everyone else, he dropped my hand.

We were back to being separate. Our feelings back to being hidden.

Now we were a secret.

And we were running out of time.

Chapter Sixteen

The rest of the day went by as usual even though it felt as if my whole life had changed. I coasted through the afternoon sessions, not listening, not seeing. I kept replaying that image in my head, over and over again, the one of us on the grass together, him on top of me, the impossibly blue sky behind him. If I imagined hard enough, I could still feel the heat between my legs, the feeling of him being inside me. It had felt right to have him in me, to have his body and skin in my hands like we were molded from the same clay.

Just before dinner he found me again, out on the lawn where I was sitting cross-legged in a daze and staring at nothing, trying to process all the emotions that had eluded me all these years.

Without saying anything, he held out his hand and lifted me to my feet. His hand around mine wasn't enough anymore. I had been given all of him, free for the taking, and nothing less would do. But as much as I wanted to kiss him, hold him, take his clothes off and ride him, I couldn't. Not now, not here. If the field was one universe for us, this was another.

"I thought perhaps you would like to have dinner with me," he said with a smile. His eyes were shining bright, happy, and I wondered if he was putting on his best face or if he was coming to terms with the futility of us and just making the best of the time we had left.

I wanted to do the same but it involved pulling my heart out of the gutter.

"I don't think I can imagine dinner without you," I told him.

His eyes softened a bit, the corners of his lips falling. He nodded and dropped my hand, and then put his at the small of my back, guiding me toward the hall.

Now it really seemed that the seating allocations were gone. There were all Anglos at some tables and all Spaniards at another. Jerry was pouring himself a huge glass of wine with Wayne, not seeming to care at all.

As usual, Claudia was the seat saver and she waved us over to her and Ricardo.

When we first sat down, I was certain she was going to take one look at my face, one look at us, and deduce that we had sex. I felt it had to be

obvious, like I was wearing a shirt that said, “I Fucked Mateo Casalles” and his said, “I Love Vera’s Vag.” But she didn’t. Claudia herself seemed very chipper and hadn’t even touched her wine yet.

“You’re in a good mood,” I noted, “considering we all have to say goodbye soon.”

“You are such a buzzkill,” she said.

Mateo’s brows quirked up as he poured me a glass of wine, always the gentleman. “Buzzkill? Like being happy or like a bee?”

I grinned at him. “Like someone is killing all your happy.”

He made a tscking sound. “Vera, that is terrible. Don’t be a buzzzzkill.”

“It is okay,” Claudia said. “Though true I will miss all of you terribly. I do not want to even think about it so let’s not think about it, okay?”

“Agreed,” I said.

She and Ricardo exchanged a gleeful look. “Ricardo,” she said slowly, staring at him with stars in her eyes before she looked back to us, “is getting his job to be transferred to Madrid.”

“Bye bye, Valencia,” he said with the widest smile.

“But Valencia is beautiful,” Mateo said.

“Yes, but Claudia is in Madrid,” was Ricardo’s answer. “It’s time for a change anyway and my lease is almost up. I think I will enjoy Madrid just fine.”

“Madrid is very nice, too,” Mateo conceded, almost quietly to himself.

Talk about a buzzkill. I know that Claudia’s good news was a joyous thing and I really, truly was happy for her. But the fact that they were able to be together, move for each other, just like that...it fucking stung. I could sense that Mateo felt the same way. He put his hand on my thigh and gave it a soft squeeze, all while smiling for the happy couple.

“That’s amazing news,” I managed to say, trying to match Mateo’s praise. “So happy for you guys.”

I never was a very good liar. Claudia could tell something was up and kept giving me the eye for the rest of the meal. When we were done, we all had to disperse to go meet with our presentation groups, but she pulled me aside and tried to get it out of me. I told her I was just sad in general and to leave it at that. I knew she thought I wasn’t telling the truth, but she was a good enough friend that she didn’t try and force it out of me.

The presentations were made by the Spaniards. My group consisted of me, Tyler (ugh), Jorge, and Eduardo, with me and Tyler only helping the

others with their presentations that they'd have to give to everyone. Though they were encouraged to give presentations that had something to do with their job, they really had free reign to do anything, and Eduardo took advantage of that, trying to model his after the Cosmo sex quiz we did together.

His was called, "What kind of Las Palabras Spaniard are you?" and his presentation was pretty much going through the quiz and explaining to the audience how it worked. There was the "Sex Pest," and he proudly said he fell into that category, the "Noisy Know-It-All," the "Secretly Fluent One," the "Butt Kisser," the "Drunk Animal," the "Caffeinated Crazy," the "Anglo Challenged," and the "Celebrity," which I assumed was someone like Mateo. When I did the quiz, I got "Sex Pest," too. Wish I could say it had been rigged.

Because each Spaniard was doing a four to five minute presentation, that meant we were held hostage in the rec room for nearly two hours. As much as I loved my Spanish friends, some of them were so damn boring that by the end I was falling asleep in my chair.

That was until I saw the second to last presentation: Mateo's. I hadn't really talked to him about it, you know, because of the sex happening and all that, so I had no idea what his was all about.

Lo and behold, I was shocked to pieces when he wiped the whiteboard on the wall clean and started pointing to people in the audience and asking them to name a constellation. Beatriz named Virgo, and he drew the exact stars for Virgo, including the lines connecting them. Angel named the Big Dipper and Mateo drew that. Ed told him to draw Orion, which was more complicated than you would think, and Mateo somehow drew it perfectly down to the arms that no one pays much attention to. As he drew, he told us about the stories behind each one of them, the actual myths behind their being. When he got to Leo, he started off by repeating my Lambert the Sheepish Lion story, before he chuckled to himself and quickly told the right one.

When he was all done, he put the marker down and faced us all, hands behind his back.

"For as long as man has been around, he has felt governed by the stars," he said in a rich, teacher-like voice, making deep eye contact with everyone like a pro. "But I do not believe this to be true. The stars may place us in each other's paths—I dare say that everyone here has been a victim of some

sort of celestial fate. Perhaps we were all fated to meet, to be here with each other, but it is up to us to decide to shine or not. The stars are not unreachable. They are not untouchable. And they do not control us. I just took the concept of stars and made them my own.” He swung his arm, gesturing to the star-studded wall. “I just created my own universe in this room here. When we all part ways, I invite you all to do the same. Design your own universe, make your own stars, write your own stories, and create your own destiny.”

I was so stunned by what he had done, the knowledge he must have soaked up, the practice he would have had, that it took me a moment to notice that he had walked off the stage and everyone else had started clapping.

I snapped out of it. I stood up and started clapping really loud, trying to encourage more applause. I was met with a few curious stares. I guess people weren’t as moved as I was by the whole thing, but it didn’t matter. And as I saw Mateo take his seat a few rows ahead of me, I could have sworn his face had gone red, adorably embarrassed.

When it was all over and the last presentation was done, I pulled him aside, so close to reaching up and pulling his head down into a kiss. Somehow, I managed to refrain by digging my fingers into his arm.

“That was amazing,” I gushed, conscious of everyone walking past us, probably heading right to the bar.

He gave me a satisfied smile. “I am glad you thought so.”

“Where did you learn all of those?”

“I found a National Geographic in the stacks of magazines in the lobby,” he said. “I guess I wanted to impress you. Again. In a less painful way this time.”

I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face. “Well, you did impress me. Both times.”

And hours ago, in the field, when you gave me the best sex of my life, I thought. I would have told him that if it wasn’t for Wayne who was hanging around in the background.

I looked over at Wayne and he gave me a sheepish smile. “So sorry to interrupt. Mateo! I thought perhaps we could finish what we started earlier.” He glanced at me. “Boring business stuff. You don’t mind, Vera?”

Of course, I fucking minded. The day was finally over and I had a million things I wanted to say and do to Mateo while I still had the chance

to do them.

I could see Mateo was worried from the faint lines on his forehead, trying to figure out a way to either tell Wayne yes or tell Wayne no.

I sighed and put my hand on Mateo's shoulder, giving it a squeeze. I would make the decision for him. "I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

His face fell, a look of being totally defenseless.

If Wayne noticed it, he didn't care. "Thanks, Vera," he said in his drawl.

I gave him a tight smile and hurried out of there and down the staircase of doom. Though everyone was in the bar listening to music, dancing, and laughing it up like there was no tomorrow, I decided I couldn't do it. I couldn't fake it. I went straight home, crawled into my boy shorts and tee, and slid right into my bed.

There was a tomorrow. And it was coming fast.

I lay on my back and stared up at the ceiling, the occasional laugh or note of music coming in through my open window. Moonlight dappled the walls and bathed the room in a cool grey blue. Too many feelings were making their way up through me, like tiny insects you couldn't swat away. I hated that this was almost my last night in this bed, in this room that I had started to call my own. I was afraid of what life outside of Spain meant for me, what would happen when I got home, how I was going to keep feeling the life I had felt here when I would be so far away. I was jealous that Claudia and Ricardo had a chance to be together. I was lonely because I was lying in bed by myself and I knew that this was only the start of many more lonely nights.

And I was angry. I was angry, both that I had fallen for Mateo, and that I had fallen for him so late in the game. I was angry at how unfair life was, how it could present me a man that I felt a deep-souled connection to, but could never have him be fully available to me. I didn't care what Mateo said about wanting to be with me. It could not happen and he was only trying to fool himself in thinking so. If he let himself realize how impossible it really was, he would feel this angry too.

I don't know how long I lay there, letting the feelings bite and nibble at me until I was totally numb, but it was long enough to hear the party die down. And then to hear a knock at the front door.

I got up and cautiously opened my door, poking my head out, half expecting to see a party formed in my living room again. Instead there was

only Sara in her robe, opening the door to reveal Mateo on the other side, shadowed in the night.

“I am sorry,” he apologized to her, though his eyes were already on me. “I came here to speak with Vera.”

Sara looked at me for my response, not saying anything. I gave her an imperceptible nod. She smiled weakly at the both of us and retreated back to her room.

I should have felt bad for him waking her up like that, but I’d never been so happy to see someone in my life. I stood in my doorway, my hands clenching and unclenching in anticipation as Mateo shut the door behind him. He was at me in five large strides. My heart felt like it had dropped five stories.

I slowed my nerves and stepped back from the door, letting him walk inside my room. I turned around to close it, and before I knew it, his hands were in my hair and around my waist, my body pressed up against his, his mouth hungry and seeking mine.

“Vera,” he growled into my mouth, his lips hot and tasting like cinnamon. “I couldn’t stay away.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” I said breathlessly, an understatement, my head falling back as he started to suck down my neck. His hands were under my shirt, cupping my breasts and feeling the weight of them, his thumbs rolling over my nipples, over and over again until the pressure between my legs was at capacity.

“I’m so fucking wet for you,” I told him, licking his ear. I wasn’t sure if he was one for dirty talk but I thought I’d try him out.

He didn’t even flinch. “Let me have a taste.”

He pulled my t-shirt over my head then let his thick tongue trail down my chest, over my breasts, down the center of my stomach. He got to his knees and, in the reverse of yesterday, pulled my booty shorts down until they were around my ankles and threw them across the room. He picked up my right leg and placed it on his shoulder. As I put one hand against the door for balance and one hand in his hair, he worked his tongue between my legs, slowly licking the insides of my thighs, teasing me. His beard was gorgeously rough against my sensitive skin, my nerves dancing at the abrasion.

Finally his tongue found me, just as wet as I told him. He lapped me up, his hunger still not satisfied. I was seconds away from coming when he

pulled away. I stared down at his dark eyes at they burned up at me, his mouth glistening in the cool light.

“I want to get in deeper,” he said, his gaze not breaking mine. He got to his feet and then put his arms under my thighs and back, lifting me up into his arms. I let out a little squeal as he walked across the moonlit room and threw me onto the bed.

I landed on my ass, my breasts bouncing, and he grabbed me by my hips and roughly jerked me to the edge of the bed, my legs on either side of his head. God, I loved dominant Mateo as well.

He went back to work, lifting my ass up with his hands and holding me to his face. He pushed his long, thick tongue inside and started fucking me that way. My hands automatically gripped the sheets as my body tensed to keep myself from coming too soon, then relaxed once I thought *fuck it*.

As the ripples washed over me, my mouth opened wide in a silent moan, my head rolling from side to side. That orgasm nearly felt like a fucking exorcism and in the most beautifully out-of-body way. I had barely recovered when he came up over me and kissed me, the same tongue back in my mouth. I loved the way I tasted on him.

He leaned across my naked body for a few moments, brushing the hair off my face.

“Are you okay?” he whispered, his eyes searching mine.

I nodded. “I am now.” A slow smile crept across my face. “I thought that was going to be it. Just that once.”

He shook his head once and let out a quiet laugh. “No. No, not all. I am going to be with you until I can’t be anymore.”

My smile tugged down from a rush of melancholy. I reached up and touched his jaw, brushing along his beard with the backs of my fingers. “Seems a shame we couldn’t have started this up earlier.”

“Yes,” he murmured, kissing my forehead. “But good things take time. As much as I hate having so little of it with you like this, I wouldn’t have given up any of the other days. They all counted. They all brought me closer to you. They all showed me what I wanted.”

I put my hand behind his neck and pulled him closer to me, enveloping him in a kiss, sucking on his soft lower lip. I got his shirt off then he took off his pants and deftly rolled on a condom. With the moonlight streaming in behind him, he looked like a work of art, a silhouette of finely tuned grace and muscle.

The two of us lay on the bed as he turned me over on my side and pushed in from behind, one hand holding mine above our heads, our fingers laced together. He was right about Spaniards fucking and making love at the same time. It was hot and fervent, my body craving him insatiably, his grunts loud and animalistic in my ear. At the same time, it was intimate and safe, and each moment we were with each other, brought closer and closer to the edge, I felt myself falling and falling and falling in love with him.

When we came, we came together, and as the waves smashed through me, obliterating my reality for a star shining moment, I wished he wasn't wearing a condom so I could absorb him into me. I still wanted more, wanted all of him.

I really was greedy.

We only slept for a few hours that night, after the moon disappeared from the sky. The rest of the time we were fucking, making love, exploring each other's bodies in hopes that the night would never end.

But eventually the sun came up and a rooster from a distant farm reminded us that our last full day together was here.



The next day—the *last* day—was all about stealing time. In the early morning hours, Mateo kissed me goodbye and went back to his room. Even though Sara had seen us together, we still had to be discreet. She couldn't quite prove anything just because she saw him drop by at night and go into my room (and maybe heard us doing it like animals), and even though I could tell it wouldn't matter to Sara, it could matter to someone else.

So, on the last day, we had to pretend that there was nothing going on between us. It should have been somewhat easy to pretend; after all, I had been pretending one way or another for the last month. But it wasn't. My skin felt bereft at the absence of his; my heart ached painfully when he was so close but so far. All we had were knowing looks across rooms and sly smiles to connect us.

It wasn't really fair, the way things worked out. I was so wrapped up with the matters of my body and my heart for Mateo that I was missing out on the sadness around me. Maybe that was a good thing in the end, but everywhere I looked, I saw the quiet sorrow in everyone's eyes, Spaniard and Anglo, at the impending farewell. We had all bonded so well and so

hard that I knew everyone was hurting inside, feeling as if their lives weren't going to be the same the next evening.

Each one-on-one I had was bittersweet. I had Beatriz, who was unusually emotional and kept wiping a tear away with her dainty fingers; Angel who wouldn't stop talking about all the things he would miss; and Antonio, who kept on making me laugh with his knock-knock jokes, which in turn made me realize how much I was going to miss them.

At lunchtime, I sat with Mateo, Polly, and Eduardo. Halfway through the meal, Jerry stood up in the middle of the dining hall and sang us a song a cappella. It was shocking, actually, how well a dweeby goof like Jerry could sing, and made some of the tears around the room fall again. The song was in Spanish too, and Mateo told me it was a famous farewell song. I gathered that already from the hushed tones and the sweet, crystal sound.

It was hard not to continuously touch Mateo. I had to keep reminding myself where I was. Because our table was at the back of the room and we had our backs to the wall, we were able to hold hands under the table from time to time. It steadied me, to feel his skin, the pulse in his veins. It both reminded me that he was real and he was here now and that he'd soon be gone.

After lunch, Jerry cancelled the last free time and handed out pens and small pads of paper with the program logo on it. He told us we had a half an hour to go around the room and enter phone numbers into our phones, if we had them, or write down emails. Then afterward we would all go out on the lawn for a group picture.

With the pen in my hand I immediately looked up at Mateo. I tried to swallow. "I guess we should exchange information."

He nodded, eyes glittering at me. "Of course."

He wrote down his email and tapped it with his finger. "This is private." He then wrote down his phone number. "iMessage will work overseas. You can text me anytime you want."

That struck me like a hammer to the chest. Texting. We were going from seeing each other every day and fucking to seeing each other never and texting.

"It is going to be all right, Vera," he said, his voice lower. "Remember my presentation that impressed you so."

"You're saying we can write our own destiny," I said, feeling too jaded and stubborn in the moment to believe it.

“I am saying,” he said carefully, “that this is not the end of the story. Not the way I am writing it.”

“Hey, I’d love to get your guys’ info,” Eduardo said, walking over and interrupting us, “and Facebook if you have it.”

I took a step back from Mateo, conscious now that we may have been standing too close, and looked at him for his response.

Mateo gave him a tight smile. “I don’t have Facebook, if you can believe it. I’m too old for that.”

“I can believe it,” Eduardo said good-naturedly. Even though Mateo brought the joke on himself, I swear I saw a shadow pass over his eyes, darkening them.

I exchanged information with pretty Polly, who also seemed to be going through emotional turmoil, having to leave Eduardo and all, then went around the room, exchanging emails, Facebooks, and phone numbers. I talked to pretty much everybody.

Even Lauren.

I didn’t approach her and she didn’t approach me, but I ran into her when I was coming out of the women’s washroom. I was going to let it go, to just forget everything and leave this place without having to talk to her. But I couldn’t.

“Hey,” I said to her as she brushed past, ready to say something to put her in her place.

She slowly turned around and gave me a caustic look. But through her glitter-coated glasses, I saw her eyes were completely red and puffy, and the corners were wet with tears.

“Are you okay?” I asked, feeling an uncalled for bout of concern. I couldn’t help myself.

She sniffed and shook her head. Then, as if she remembered who she was talking to, her back straightened, her expression becoming hard. “Are you okay?” she retorted.

“No,” I said honestly.

She gave me a blasé look. “Well. Then you know.” She turned and pushed open the door to the bathroom. I could hear her muttering, “Of course, you could mind your own business,” to herself as she went.

Huh. I guess the Brony ended up having a sexual preference after all, and it was Lauren, the slut-shaming feminist. It seemed as if hearts were breaking all over the place. I thought back to the first piece of advice I had

been given by Gabby when she dropped me off at the bus. “Don’t fall in love,” she had said. She knew exactly what happened in Las Palabras, every single program. It kind of made me wonder why this wasn’t a reality TV show.

Soon, when people’s emotions were more in check, we all gathered together on the lawn for the group picture. It was pure chaos. Eduardo, Angel, Sammy, and Froggy Carlos all lay down at the front like they were posing as centerfolds in a 70’s Penthouse, while the rest of us were all squished together, laughing, touching, hugging.

I had Claudia on one side of me and Mateo on the other. Mateo had his arm around me as if we were a couple. I felt my cheeks flame red for that picture and I was sure my smile was ridiculously huge. It wasn’t until the camera stopped clicking that I realized that Mateo also had his arm around Ed on the other side, to make things less suspicious, I guess.

It didn’t matter. We’d all been captured in a moment for the rest of time. That was the picture that I wanted on my wall, so I could stare at it whenever I felt lonely. I could look at it and remember that for one month out of my life, I had a family, I had friends, and I had love at my side. The exalted look on my face would say it all. Apparently it would be emailed to us all in a few days, and I was already anticipating the joy and pain it would bring.

The final business sessions were all cancelled and Jerry told us all we had free time to do whatever we wanted, as long as we were back for dinner at six. It was earlier tonight because there were a few special performances that some of the Spaniards wanted to do to thank the Anglos for all their hard work in teaching.

I felt it should have been the other way around—I wanted to do something for the Spaniards for teaching me about love and life.

But, I could always start with Mateo. As soon as Jerry announced the free time, we were gravitating towards each other, eager to get away for a few hours and just be together whatever way we could. We walked off up toward his cottage since I saw Sara and Nerea go back to my apartment. We checked his apartment, but Marty/Mark was there with a few other people, cracking open a few beers. They invited us to stay, but it just didn’t feel right.

So, we ended up going back down the road and to the dining hall. Mateo grabbed a few cushions off the chairs and waved them at me. “For

old time's sake," he said. He took them over to the tree and threw them on the ground.

We may have not had enough privacy to do what we really wanted, but we at least had some.

We lay down, this time as close together as possible. With him on his back staring up at the sky, I rolled onto my side and propped my head up with my hand. I just wanted to stare at him for as long as I could, drinking in the features most people missed: How dark and long his eyelashes were, how they curled up at the ends, the silky shine of his black eyebrows, a tiny white fleck of a scar gracing his bronze cheekbones, the salt and pepper hair at his temples.

"Do you like what you see?" he asked me, rolling his head to the side to gaze at me.

I grinned. Butterfly wings beat against my heart. "Always."

A soft moment passed between us. It was becoming dangerously sad again.

I cleared my throat, forcing myself to perk up. "Remember when you said you were going to ask me a question every day? And you said I could have my question at the end?"

He pursed his lips in mock contemplation. "I seem to recall something like that, yes."

"Well, I have twenty questions for you. Right now."

"No siesta for us?"

My smile was sly. "We can siesta tonight. In between...other things."

He nodded. "That is fair. Ask away."

And so I got my twenty questions and I got twenty answers. I asked him sexual questions like when he lost his virginity (fourteen, to Barbara Lopez, after school, behind the gym), if he'd ever had a threesome (twice, in his twenties, after football matches), the kinkiest thing he ever did (jack off while watching a teammate do a girl up the ass...apparently this was normal, back in the day), and the weirdest place he'd ever had sex (the Tibidabo Amusement Park in Barcelona). When I got too horny for the questions to continue, I switched to personal ones: his first pet was a golden lab called Pedro, his best subjects in high school were gym (of course) and history (very interesting), his favorite childhood memory was fishing off of Gibraltar with his father. Noting that he didn't mention his mom, I asked him what her name was. It was Sandra, and she died of cancer when he was

only three. His father eventually remarried, and his sister Lucia is only a half-sister.

“And your favorite memory?” I asked him, the questions winding down.

“My first favorite memory is the day Chloe Ann was born,” he said, smiling to himself. “I wasn’t allowed in the room with her, so I was just pacing outside all day in the hallway, losing my mind, going crazy. It was a long labor too. But when I finally saw that little red face...I couldn’t love her enough. I told myself that I would do whatever I could to make her happy, to keep her safe, no matter the cost to me. And I did.”

There was a despondent strain in his voice, his eyes gazing off into the distance. I watched him for a few beats, not wanting to say anything.

Finally he turned to me and said, “Do you want to know my second favorite memory?”

I nodded.

“This,” he said, gesturing to me. “All of this, all of you. Here.”

“I’m not a memory yet,” I whispered.

“But you will be. After tomorrow, all of this will be a memory.” His eyes held such soft sadness. “You and I, we were always a memory in the making.”

That gutted me. Hard. And it hurt because it was true. Suddenly I wanted nothing more than for him to whisper hopeful things in my ear, that somehow this could all still work. I could see the appeal in kidding ourselves.

“I wish I could kiss you right now,” I said softly, my hand itching to touch him.

“You could,” he said, his face serious. “And if there are any consequences, I will gladly suffer them.”

But I couldn’t. To carry on in private was one thing. To flaunt it in public was another, especially when he was someone who frequently appeared in Spanish gossip rags.

So I just stared at him and he stared at me, and we lay there on the grass for one last siesta at Las Palabras.

Chapter Seventeen

I don't know how anyone got through the rest of the night. It was a shitshow of emotional carnage, just pure tear-soaked chaos worse than any *Grey's Anatomy* episode.

It all started with the performances after dinner. With Manuel on guitar, Nerea gave a solo flamenco performance, the dress and shoes and everything, with Jerry singing another song. Soon, Sara and Beatriz joined in, and Antonio, Froggy Carlos, and Jorge stood behind them, clapping loudly on beat with the music.

There wasn't a dry eye in the house after that, though there were some laughs after Angel distributed a tiny bronze pig figurine, with the words *Acantilado* carved on it, to each Anglo. He shook my hand, shook everyone's hand, telling us all individually—and with tears in his eyes—that every Spaniard thanked us for our hard work and that we would be missed terribly.

I held the cold metal of the pig in my hands and looked up at Mateo sitting beside me, about to totally lose it.

He smiled down at me. "Something to remember us by."

My lower lip trembled. I looked across the table at Claudia and Ricardo who were smiling at me with tears welling in their eyes as well.

As I said, there wasn't a dry eye in the house. It only got worse as the night fell and sangria started to flow. Everyone was drunk. I saw Lauren and Tyler making out and crying at the same time (which was really disturbing), big Antonio was hiding in the bathroom and drying his tears on Froggy Carlos's sweater, Angel was wasted and publicly declared his love for Sammy—thank goodness she reciprocated with a very big, albeit sloppy, kiss.

I had people coming up to me, telling me that they were sorry they didn't get to know me better, and I had others telling me they'd never forget me. The more sangria and beer I drank, the more I started saying the same shit. It was just one big red-nosed, mascara running cry fest. We should have all been committed.

As much as it was breaking my heart to stay there with everyone, my heart deserved to be with Mateo. When I couldn't take anymore, I went

over to him by the door where he was making polite conversation with Ed and Jorge.

“You wanted me to tell you more about the stars,” I said brightly to Mateo.

He suppressed a smile and nodded at Jorge and Ed. “If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen.”

We walked together into the dark of night then disappeared into the dark of my bedroom.

We collapsed onto the bed, our passion untempered by our sorrow, our mouths and hands seeking pleasure and joy, getting what we could from each other. I put all tears aside, all thoughts aside, and decided to just exist. We were pure, primal sex.

“Are you seeing stars yet?” I asked as he slid in and out of me, his thumb rubbing my clit in slow, building strokes.

“Only you,” he moaned in my ear. “My Estrella.”

Hours later, when we were finally satisfied, our bodies sweating and exhausted and overrun by the day, we settled under the blankets. I put my head on the crook of his arm, my fingers teasing the soft treasure trail of hair that led down toward his beautiful but overworked dick. I tried to live in the moment but the moment was passing us like the hands on a clock, and I knew that tomorrow night I wouldn’t be doing this; I would be sleeping on a plane.

I wouldn’t ever have this, this exact same wonderful thing, ever again.

The tears started flowing again, silently and steadily, until a sob escaped me. I was wrecked through and through.

Mateo gently kissed my tears away and brought me into his chest, his strong arms encompassing me. I could hear his heart beating loudly, smell his scent of ocean and musk. His rubbed his hand along my back and kissed the top of my head.

“There will be nights where you will feel alone and lost,” he murmured into my hair. “Where I will feel alone and lost. When that happens, I want us both to remember this, right now. Bring our thoughts back to this room, this moment. Where we aren’t lonely. Where we are both found.”

I swallowed a lump in my throat. “I hope it will be enough.”

“It will never be enough,” he said.

I drifted off to sleep in his arms.



The dry countryside rolled past the window, golden fields speckled with old stone barns and crumbling walls. Little by little, there were more gas stations, more houses, more yards, more fences. More traffic, more people, more concrete. The city of Madrid was getting closer and my love and life were getting further away.

I was at the very back of the bus, my head on Mateo's shoulder. I had realized no one cared about anyone else anymore. Everyone on the bus, every Anglo, every Spaniard was either trying to deal with their own emotional distress or their own raging hangover. Some people, like tear-streaked Eduardo who had already puked into a bag, seemed to be dealing with both. The Spaniards were so passionate, wearing their emotions on their sleeve. I was going to miss that about them.

There was nothing I wouldn't miss.

That morning, Mateo and I crawled out of bed and missed breakfast because we both had to pack. There was barely even any time for that. By ten o'clock, we were all piling into the bus and looking at Las Palabras for the last time. Well, unless we returned again. But even Becca had shining eyes—each time she came here, she was faced with saying goodbye again and again. I could come back to Las Palabras, too. But there would only be new people to miss.

And there wouldn't be Mateo Casalles.

When we got closer to the city, the driver, Manolo, decided to put on the radio to try and perk people up. Unfortunately, Lana Del Rey's "Summertime Sadness" came on. Totally *not* the right song for this bus.

"Kiss me hard before you go," her dulcet voice sang. The lyrics were too real, hitting too close to home, the strings cutting deep. Tears were falling again from my eyes, another dam bursting.

I stood up. "Turn this sad shit off!" I yelled down the bus at Manolo, then sat back down in a huff. I think someone clapped. The radio went off and all you could hear were sniffles all around.

I could hear Mateo chuckle softly. I raised my head to look at him, hoping I hadn't soaked his suit jacket too much. "What?" I asked.

"I'm going to miss your fire," he said with a small smile.

Soon the bus was making its way down past a university and into the crowded, bustling, hot summer streets of the city. Traffic was swallowing

us, and even though it could mean I would miss my plane, I relished each second we were at a standstill, like we were granted extra moments to steal away and put in our pocket.

Eventually though, we were moving again.

Time slipped by with each turn of the wheel. Panic slipped its claws into me, around my fragile neck. There would be no second chances.

I made sure no one was looking back at us. I quickly grabbed Mateo's rough jaw and put my lips on his. A hard, closed-mouth kiss in which I could barely breathe. A tear flowed down my cheek and crept through the cusp of our lips. Salt and sadness.

I pulled back, my hand still on his jaw, trying to tell him everything I could before I wouldn't have a chance. His eyes were wet and glossy, trying to tell me the same thing. We stared at each other like that until the bus pulled to a stop in front of the familiar entrance of the Las Palabras office.

We were here.

The month was over.

Everything was over.

We got off the bus and got our bags, and everyone went through the long process of officially saying goodbye to each other. Some people, like Dave and Polly and Becca, had time to kill and headed off to the bar for lunch. Others did a quick nod and hurried off to their loved ones who had come to pick us up. A few, like me and Mateo and Claudia and Ricardo, lingered around the bus. Only, they were more or less already home. Ricardo would go to Claudia's apartment, Mateo would go to his house. I didn't quite know where that was, but I knew who would be waiting for him.

And I was going home. I kind of wanted to die.

"When is your flight?" Claudia asked gently.

I talked through the pain. "In about two hours or so. Which means I guess I better get a cab, pronto."

Mateo walked to the roadside and did that two-fingered whistle that nearly blew out your eardrums. When he walked back to me, he said, "Speaking of Spanish, I guess I never did teach you all the bad words."

"Put a cona, vete a la mierda, punta, tonta, bastardo, pendajo, chinga tu madre," Ricardo gleefully rattled off.

"Ricardo!" Claudia admonished him, smacking him on the chest.

I somehow managed to laugh, but it sounded like a hollow mask, a temporary band-aid. Then the cab pulled up to the curb and Mateo quickly gestured to the driver to wait a minute.

And there you had it.

This was it. This was the end.

Holy fuck.

I wasn't ready to say goodbye.

I'd never be ready to say goodbye.

I stood there, looking at these three people in shock, afraid that if I moved, it would end. If I just stood there forever on that busy Madrid street full of workers heading to lunch, I wouldn't have to say goodbye. We could just keep going and I could keep being happy, keeping feeling understood and loved. If I kept standing there, I'd never have to feel alone again.

Claudia came to me first, bringing me into a hug. She hugged hard and pulled away, smoothing the hair on my head, a waning smile on her lips. "You write to me, you text me, every day. Facebook, phone calls, I don't care. I love you, girl."

I clenched my jaw, trying to keep it together. I could only nod and try to smile. My eyes burned.

Ricardo came next. He didn't say anything. He gave me two pecks on each cheek, patted me on the back, and that was it. But I caught a tear in his eye and that was enough to set my chin trembling.

He went back to Claudia, put his arm around her, and led her away to give me and Mateo privacy.

By now, the tears were spilling down my cheeks, my nose running. I quickly wiped it on my arm and almost smiled at how much of a mess I must have looked, my hair sticking to my wet face, my nose all red and snotty.

Mateo's eyes crinkled, that beautifully soft look, and he came over to me with open arms. He swept me to him, embracing me as hard as he could. I gripped the back of his jacket like a lifeline, not caring if I was wrinkling it, and held on tight. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't feel my heart beat. I felt like I was stuck—trapped in panic, in pain, and the only reason I wasn't falling to the ground and shattering like glass was because of his arms.

And then it all came out in a wet cry, the emotion unleashed. I needed to hold it together but my body was in a war of being so overcome with grief and sadness that it was locking up with the need to let everything go.

But I couldn't let it all go. Not here. Not now. Not with him anymore.
That time was over. That little life I had for a month—that was over.
It was just a memory.

"Vera," Mateo said gruffly into my ear, squeezing me tight. "Don't give up on us."

Then he relaxed, releasing me, and took a step back.

I caught my breath, gulping the air down. I stared at him, seeing the sorrow on his brow and in the tightness of his jaw. And I still couldn't speak.

He raised his hand to wave.

I managed to wave back.

Then, using every ounce of will and energy I had left, I turned around and headed for the cab. The cab driver took my backpack and threw it in the trunk and gestured for me to get in the backseat.

I told myself not to look back.

But I did.

Mateo was still standing there, his hand raised. He then put his hand on his heart.

My breath hitched painfully and I forced myself to get in the backseat. The door closed, a barrier between me and the man, the love I would never see again.

We pulled away from the curb and I watched behind me, craning in my seat, until Mateo disappeared from view.

Part Two

Vancouver

Chapter Eighteen

I'd gone crazy.

Absolutely assfuck crazy.

After eighteen hours, no sleep, three layovers, and abused tear ducts, I finally landed in Vancouver as a complete zombie, drained of emotion and numb to the world. Though it was a nice change from the hours of crying into my shitty airline food and downing beers in an attempt to drown my feelings, it didn't help my mental stability whatsoever. I kept feeling this pain that wanted to come out; my brain kept wanting to dwell on things I was too afraid to embrace.

The culture shock, though, was immediately jarring. And surprising, since I had lived in Vancouver my entire life. Suddenly I was looking at things written in Mandarin and hearing Canadian accents spoken at a rapid pace. Everything was sterile looking, modern and boring. People barely smiled and they didn't make eye contact. When I grabbed my pack from baggage claim and stepped outside to wait for my brother, I was hit with damp air and dark grey skies. It was July. It was raining.

Thankfully it didn't take long for a black VW Golf, just as my brother had promised, to come roaring up to the curb.

Josh got out of the driver's seat and raised his arms. "I'm here!"

And finally, I had my first smile in what felt like a very long time. Josh. Despite everything, I had fucking missed him.

"Shit, you're tanned," he said, coming around the car to hug me. When he got closer he grimaced. "You also look like shit."

"Yeah, thanks," I said, giving him my backpack. He threw it in the trunk then gave me a big bear hug.

For some reason I thought he'd look different after six weeks, but he looked the same as always. Josh had been a fairly awkward teenager until he was nineteen. Then he stopped growing (thank God, cuz he was 6'2" at sixteen), gained muscle, his face cleared up, and his stutter disappeared. He had my dad's ice blue eyes and my mother's dark brown hair which he died black. He had a lip ring that he sometimes wore, and full sleeves and a ton of other tattoos, thanks to my influence. I knew Jocelyn thought he was a total "bad boy hottie," but that description of my brother honestly made me

want to barf. Josh, in some ways, was a bad boy, but the hottie thing was beyond what I was willing to admit.

“Good to have you home,” he said. He pulled away and frowned. “I’m guessing the feeling isn’t mutual.”

“I’m really tired,” is all I managed to say.

I didn’t speak much during the forty-five minute car ride through the city to our house. I couldn’t speak. My chest felt empty, everything felt hollow inside me. It was like I was suffering the worst emotional hangover of my life. In fact, it was like a life hangover. Is this what it felt like to die? When our lives were over, did we feel this same loss, this same ache for all the experiences we had just gone through?

Josh talked though, conscious of how I was feeling and needing to fill the car. He was good at that, picking up on other people’s feelings. I didn’t listen, I just stared out the rain-splattered window of his new car. The buildings here looked so plain and boring, no history to them at all. Everyone was rushing to get somewhere, stomping through puddles. Though Vancouver was beautifully green, it looked dark and gloomy under the skies. Even the sight of the North Shore Mountains, normally breathtaking above the shiny glass high rises of downtown, didn’t stir anything in me. I was just a shell.

I really needed to sleep.

When we pulled down the alley toward the back driveway of our house, Josh told me our mother had planned a surprise that wasn’t really a surprise. She had ordered in sushi. Now, my mother didn’t cook and never had, so ordering in was nothing new, and we often ordered in or got sushi for take-out several times a week (you, like, have to eat sushi in Vancouver or they’ll boot you from the city). I knew he was just trying to make me feel better about being home, so I gave him a quick smile and then brought out my phone again. Now that airplane mode was off and I wasn’t roaming, I was desperate to see if I’d gotten any texts or emails from Mateo.

I hadn’t.

I sighed and put it away. Josh noticed as he parked behind the house and nodded to my purse. “I never saw you update very much on Facebook. I thought you would have been all over that. No drunk photos of the Spanish flag wrapped around you or drinking sangria. Nothing.”

I shrugged. “There wasn’t really any time to go on Facebook.” And besides, this life here didn’t exist at all when I was at Las Palabras.

Our house was pretty nice—a narrow three stories with a small front lawn and a tall solid fence for privacy—but the lot it was on was worth an absurd amount of money. My mother, being a real estate agent and all, planned on sitting on the lot so she would “really make a killing.” With the way the real estate market kept rising, then stalling, then rising again, it looked as if she’d be trying to make a killing for years to come.

Josh got my pack out of his trunk and swung it up on his shoulder with ease. Guess he’d been upping his workouts at the gym. “You never said a word about Herman.”

I raised a brow. “Herman?”

“My car. He’s German, ya?”

“Aren’t cars supposed to be chicks?”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re so sexist.”

“Look, do you really want to say, ‘I’m going to go take Herman for a ride,’ or ‘I love filling up Herman?’”

He shrugged as we walked through the single-car garage where Mom’s Volvo was kept. “I’m not a homophobe. Besides, Kit, Hasselhoff’s car in Knight Rider, that was a guy. Shit, so was Herbie in the Love Bug.”

“All right, all right,” I said, waving him away. We walked up the stairs to the main landing. It looked the same as before but the familiar was now foreign to me.

My mom was in the kitchen, nursing a glass of wine and on the phone with someone. Once she saw me, she gave me her beautiful and genuine happy-to-see-you smile but then turned her back and continued to talk on the phone. From the tense way she carried herself, I could tell she was talking to a client.

My mother was a gorgeous woman, even for her age. Though she was tiny and she’d gained a lot of weight on her lower half over the last few years, her face was unlined and her eyes behind her square glasses were youthful. She had long, dark brown hair that she always kept tied back in a bun. I knew she did this because she thought it made her look more professional and polished, but it also showed off her high Hungarian cheekbones.

She was dressed well as always, too—she had a closet full of sharp suits, and she was wearing a slick navy one at the moment. This realization made my mind conjure up an image of Mateo, standing in the dining room

at Las Palabras, wearing a silver grey suit that fit him like a second skin. In my head he smiled at me, a wide stretch of white teeth against golden skin.

So breathtaking.

And just like that, the bereft feeling encased my heart. All of that, all of him, felt so far away. Impossible to get back.

“Are you all right?” Josh asked, putting a supportive hand on my shoulder.

I nodded, noticing that my eyes were welling up again. “Jet lag.”

And jet lag became my new excuse. I used it again during dinner when my mother noticed the glum expression on my face. For some reason my mother still insisted we all eat together at the dining room table, even though in the pre-divorce era everyone scattered to their rooms with their meals.

“I’m sorry Mercy couldn’t be here,” my mother said as she daintily put a piece of maki tuna in her mouth. She finished chewing it completely before she swallowed. “She and Charles had a fundraiser to go to.”

Of course. Mercy’s future husband, Charles, was an English ex-pat and worked for one of the city’s biggest developers. His company was always putting on a fundraiser or another, supposedly for charity, but I think it was just an excuse for a tax break—or a party.

I shrugged. It used to sting when Mercy would throw me aside for her fiancé, but I didn’t care anymore. Funny, I think six weeks away made me realize who in my life was worth caring about.

When dinner was over, I went straight to my room and told Josh and my mother I was going to bed. It was only seven o’clock, but again, jet lag. Actually, this time it wasn’t an excuse. I could feel my sleep deprivation catching up to me, making each step I took down the hall toward my room feel like I was moving through Jello.

I dragged my bag into the corner of my room, started up my laptop with the noisy fan with the intention of uploading photos, and looked around my room. Posters of Mr. Bungle, Deftones, Nine Inch Nails, Soundgarden, Pearl Jam, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, and Depeche Mode all stared down at me, as well as a few art prints I had ordered online. I had them all framed, so it didn’t resemble a teenage boy’s room. On top of my overflowing dresser I had my jewelry tree, lush with retro baubles and estate jewelry I had collected; on the tiny desk I had stacks of magazines,

hardcover fantasy books, and my textbooks. On my ceiling I had stuck star charts and the stick-on stars that glowed in the dark.

My eyes were drawn to the constellations of Pegasus and Leo, and suddenly I was seeing Mateo again, hearing his rich accent as he gave the presentation with so much ease and confidence, the way he blushed when I applauded so loudly at the end.

This fucking *sucked*.

One minute we were a memory in the making, and in the next we were just a memory. Something to haunt me for the rest of my life.

I sighed, expecting the tears to fall again, and when I realized I didn't have it in me anymore, I walked over to my bed, collapsed on it, and went straight to sleep.



When I woke up the next morning, I had a blissful few seconds of actually thinking I was back in Las Palabras before the reality hit me. I blinked a few times, feeling the dampness in the air. The rain spattered noisily on the windowpane, partly obscuring a slate sky.

I exhaled and lay there for a few moments, wondering what time it was. My purse was on the desk where I left it. At that though, I was suddenly struck with an extraordinary sense of euphoria. My phone. Who knew what texts I could have, what emails. I needed to hear from Mateo like a junkie needed their next hit.

I got out of bed and staggered over to the desk, still in the same gross clothes that I wore on the plane. That I wore when Mateo hugged me goodbye.

Stop that, I told myself. *You won't survive a day if you keep getting sad over everything.*

I tucked my unruly hair behind my ears and dug out my phone. I had a text from Mercy that said, "Welcome home," though it wouldn't have killed her to put an exclamation mark at the end. There was one from Jocelyn asking how I was. That was it.

The disappointment was physical.

I brought out my wallet and the piece of paper Mateo had given me. He said we could iMessage. I suppose I could have texted him, but I was afraid that the phone wasn't private. What if his wife was super nosy and was

always rooting through his stuff? What if she was super paranoid that he'd been gone for a month and was keeping an eye on him?

What if she knew?

I felt sick to my stomach. With the emotional haze of Las Palabras slipping away by the minute, like waking up from a dream you wanted to keep going, the reality of what had happened between us was slowly seeping in.

I was a bad person. This wasn't news to me, but now I really knew. I wasn't the black sheep, I was a black hole. I fell for a married man...I had sex with a married man. He'd told me I made him forget his vows and that had made me happy. People like me were disgusting.

And yet, it still did make me happy. It made me more than happy. Being with him had fulfilled me.

God, I was looney tunes. To hammer that point home, I went into my phone and checked my email, hoping to have gotten something from him.

There was nothing. No sign that Mateo ever existed except in my head.

And so began the rest of my day. I slowly got ready, taking a shower, my hair happy to have new shampoo and conditioner on it. I put on fresh clothes that had been laundered recently. Even though the maid service at Las Palabras did your laundry for you once a week, you were still stuck wearing the same things over and over again. I put on makeup that I hadn't seen for six weeks, going nuts with shimmery emerald green on my eyes.

Every spare moment I had, between the shower and the clothes and the makeup, I was checking my phone. I kept entering my damn passcode so often that my thumb was getting carpal tunnel. Finally, just as I was pouring myself a bowl of gluten-free cereal (my mom had a gluten intolerance and my Froot Loops had gone stale), I got an email. I nearly leaped for joy.

It was from Eduardo, and it was a group email to everyone at Las Palabras, telling us all what a great time he had. It was weird to see those names again while I stood in my mother's sterile kitchen, my memories of heat and gold contradicting with the grey and damp. It was like the two worlds could never really mesh with each other.

Minutes later there was another email, this one from Wayne, hitting "reply all." And then another person and another. I wasn't all that interested in Froggy Carlos's first day speaking English to his co-workers, I just wanted to hear from damn Mateo. But, it seemed, he hadn't emailed them either.

I really didn't know what to do with myself. I didn't even want to unpack because that really meant it was all over. But I couldn't keep living with a backpack of smelly clothes. I took everything out and my heart sank at the sight of the turrón from Nerea and the bronze pig from Angel and the Spaniards. I brought them out, carrying them as if they were baby birds, over to a corner of my bedside table. I would make a shrine to Spain.

Yes. That wouldn't be weird at all.

I'd been sitting on my bed for hours and going through the photos on my SLR when Josh stuck his head in my room. My mom had been out all day, so for once I was grateful for the company.

"You're home!" I exclaimed.

He gave me a puzzled look. "Yeah, just got cut early. Slow day."

I could smell him from where I was, a mixture of burgers and weed.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"You keep asking me that."

"You seem strangely happy to see me."

I shrugged. I guess I'd become so used to having people around me twenty-four seven.

"What have you been doing?" he asked, leaning against the doorway. He eyed my backpack, the clothes strewn all over the floor. "Gave up already?"

Don't give up on us. Mateo's last words rang through my head. I hadn't. So why hadn't he contacted me? Maybe I had to email him. He did say it was private.

"Vera," Josh said loudly. "Earth to sister."

"Sorry," I said absently, switching the camera screen off.

"Look," he said, "I'm going to the Met tonight with some people. Why don't you come with?"

Ugh. The Met. That skeezy bar was such a hit or miss. Still...I was up for getting out of the house, doing anything to take my mind off of things. I couldn't believe I actually missed talking all day long.

A friendly Facebook message from Claudia and an email from Sammy later, I was shimmying into a pair of black skinny jeans and a tight Queen baseball tee that put Freddie Mercury's eyes right on my boobs. Hearing from those two girls helped my mood, even though Sammy's email contained a picture of a penis.

The Met was located in the bad part of downtown that resembled a typical episode of *The Walking Dead*. It was too far to walk, both of us were too cheap for a cab, and Josh wasn't going to drive drunk, so we got on the bus. It was weird sitting on it and observing the people around me. Though Madrid had also been a bustling city, there was more life and friendliness there. More smiles.

"Why does it look like you're plotting to kill everyone?" Josh leaned over and asked as the bus zipped down Broadway. "Is there something I don't know about?"

"They were right, you know," I said. "Whoever said Vancouver was a no-fun city."

"Maybe, but...you know *you* can still have fun, right?"

"People in Spain were so...I don't know...happy to see you. Friendlier. Talkative."

"Vancouver has always been this way. It's not that different from other big cities."

"It's changed."

"No, Vera. You've changed."

He was right. I'd been happy with my beautiful no-fun city up until now. This became more apparent as the night went on. We got a table in the corner of the dingy hipster bar, and while we waited for his friends to show up, I couldn't help but notice the atmosphere. Oh, it was pretty much the usual—drunk chicks, cocky boys, \$3 cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon on ice—but I was now noticing the differences between here and Spain. The men would stare, but only the really drunk or overly arrogant men would approach the women. There was a lot of lusty looks that eventually led to grinding by the jukebox, but no friendly smiles or flirty conversations.

Josh's friends weren't much better, I knew this, but at least when they were around me they talked and didn't stare endlessly at Freddie Mercury. Well, not all of them. I'd known the lanky Brad since I was a kid, and body modification lover Phil had been my friend since high school. I was pretty much a sister to them.

Then there was Adam, a guy I had only met a few times before. He was pretty hot, I had to give him that—green-blue eyes, wide jaw, spiky dark blonde hair, strong build—which is why I normally didn't mind when he stared at my breasts. Now, though, it just felt wrong. He was pretty much leering and I wished I could make Freddy give him the stink-eye.

“So, Spain,” Adam said. “Bet you partied pretty hard there. Did you go to Ibiza?”

I shook my head, turning the can of beer around and around. “No, I was just in one place. Acantilado, teaching English.”

“That sucks.”

I gave him a sharp look. “Believe me, it didn’t.”

He leaned back in his chair and gave me a wry look. “I don’t know, teaching? That sucks. That’s, like, totally not a vacation. You should have seen some culture or something.”

I exhaled in a hard puff. “There was plenty of culture.”

“So who were you teaching? Were they kids?”

“No, adults.”

“Were they, like, retarded?”

I glared at his choice of word, feeling very defensive. “No, they were professionals. They all had a basic level of English. This was just for conversational English. To build their vocabulary and confidence in business situations.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, that still sounds boring to me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.” I got out of my seat and looked at Josh who had been looking at me with a strange look on his face. “Do you want a drink?”

He nodded and Adam said, “Get one for me too, babe.”

I held out my palm in front of him and wriggled my fingers. He looked confused. “Give me money,” I said, “and I’ll get you a drink.”

He grunted and fished out some cash, tossing it across the table, nowhere near my open hand. He gave a chagrined smile to Josh. “Jeez, Josh, your big sister comes back from Europe and suddenly she hates my guts.”

I gave him an odd look and snatched the money off the table. Hate his guts? I didn’t even know him. Sure, I had made the flirty eyes, touchy-touchy moves on him a few times before, but that was then and this was now. Adam was just a boy, and I didn’t want a boy anymore. I wanted a man, I needed a man, and one man in particular.

I went to the dirty bathroom, checking my phone for texts and emails while I was in the stall. Nothing from Mateo.

I felt like crushing the phone in my hand, my lips pressed together. I stuck it back in my purse and made my way out to the bar. While in line,

having a chick spill beer on my boots, I started thinking maybe I'd had enough of this place. When "Summertime Sadness" came blasting on through the speakers, much to the squeal of all the hipster girls, that's when I really knew. I bought Josh and Adam's beers and then plopped them down on their table.

"Where's your beer?" Josh asked.

"I'm going home," I told him.

He started to get up but I put out my hand. "No, I'm fine. Stay. It's the jet lag. Need to go to sleep." I gave everyone else a quick smile. "Have a good night."

I turned and walked, hearing Josh yell, "Vera!" and then Adam saying, "Let her go, she's probably PMSing."

"Fuck you," I grumbled under my breath. I walked out onto the puddle-strewn street, the lights reflecting forlornly in them. It wasn't cold out but the dampness made me hug myself as I walked, my head down, my pace quick. I walked up a few blocks until the sketchy junkies were replaced by drunk bums, then walked past a hostel on the way to my bus stop.

I couldn't help but stop. They had a small bar and computer area right by the windows. I stared in at the warm glow of the room, the travel posters of Vancouver and BC on the red walls. There was an Indian girl and a German-looking guy having a drink and chatting, all shy smiles, guidebooks in their hands. There were two Asian girls on the computers, fueled by paper cups of coffee, and writing up a storm. A tall couple with blonde hair and backpacks were talking to the young woman at reception who was pointing to a map of the city.

That had been me in London six weeks ago. All this promise and possibility ahead of me, the novelty of the new. Those people inside were experiencing something that would change them forever.

And here I was, standing on a dark, damp city street, alone.

Just memories.

No messages.

Chapter Nineteen

I'd become obsessive.

This wasn't a new thing for me; I'd always gotten easily wrapped in things. When I was twelve, I saw Indiana Jones for the first time (yeah, I know, took me long enough), and I became obsessed with not only Harrison Ford, but with archeology. I decided I was totally going to be an archeologist instead of an astronomer, and wanted to live my life traipsing through the jungles and deserts on wild adventures. I also decided I would invent a time machine to take me back to the 1980s when Harrison Ford was younger and less grumpy, then somehow convince him to marry me and bring him back to the future.

When I was sixteen I became obsessed with Nick Cave and everything Nick Cave related. I joined chat rooms and fan groups, I poured over lyrics, analyzing them, I collected interviews and read them over and over again in hopes of gleaning something from his words. I started babysitting, even though I wasn't a big fan of children at the time, so I'd have enough money to drive around America and follow him on tour. Needless to say, I never saved up enough money for that, but I did earn enough to buy signed LPs for my non-existent record player and rare concert posters.

And when I was twenty-three, I went to Spain for a month, fell hard for a married Spanish man and became obsessed over the fact that I hadn't heard from him. For two days after I had gone to the Met with Josh, I'd become a walking time bomb. I wrote countless messages to Claudia, even Polly, who I grew closer to after the program, it seemed, since we were going through the same thing. At least Eduardo was in contact with her. I talked to other people too—Sammy, Becca, even Manuel the rocker dropped me a line asking about a band we had been listening to together.

No Mateo.

I checked all the time, thinking that the world could change in ten minutes, five minutes, two minutes, thirty seconds.

"Okay," Josh said to me one sunny morning over bowls of Froot Loops. "Time to spill the beans. Why do you keep checking your phone?"

Caught, I quickly shoved my phone back in my pocket. I opened my mouth to speak but he showed me his palm. "And don't tell me it's jet lag."

I rolled my eyes. "It's nothing. I'm just waiting to hear from a friend of mine."

His eyes narrowed and he shoved a spoon of cereal in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. "This wouldn't be a male friend, would it?"

I just stared at him blankly.

"Vera, you're not blinking."

I blinked. Several times.

He shook his head. "I don't believe it."

"What?"

"I've never ever seen you like this before over a guy," he said.

He's not just some guy, I wanted to say. He's my man.

At least, he was.

Kinda.

"I don't really feel like talking about it," I said, making sure I was blinking a lot while I ate.

"Are you sure? Because your leg keeps shaking the table and you've got the crazy eyes going on."

I stilled my leg. I brought the conversation over to Josh's art because that was something that we both liked to talk about. But once he got up to put our empty bowls in the sink, I quickly ripped out my phone and checked. My compulsion was out of control.

But I had an email!

I wriggled in my seat, biting my lip as I got a closer look.

Shit. It wasn't from Mateo. It was from Las Palabras. And it was an attachment.

With my heart in my throat, I downloaded the attachment and opened it.

I sucked in my breath, a pain forming at the back of my throat. It was the group picture on the last day.

From far away it looked like a blur of smiling faces against a blue sky. I took my fingers and zoomed in, going right for me and Mateo.

There we were. My cheeks were red, my face fresh and dewy, like I had this radiant glow about me. Mateo had his arm around me. Seeing his face on the screen felt strange, like he somehow knew I was looking at him, like I was being intrusive. I couldn't explain it. The fact that he looked more handsome than my memories didn't help either.

"I see," Josh said, and I spun around, realizing he was behind me and peering inquisitively over my shoulder. For a split second I had déjà vu,

then I remembered that Mateo had done a similar thing to me when I was writing an email to Josh.

“It’s the group picture,” I said. I quickly zoomed it out so it showed all of us.

“You look very happy,” he said in a tone of voice that let me know he wanted to say more. He turned and went down the hall to his room, leaving me with a picture of what was. I stared at it alone, in silence, for a very long time, memorizing everyone’s faces, remembering their voices, their accents, their laughter. Saliva flooded my mouth and I swallowed it down.

Eventually I got up, printed out the picture from my mom’s high tech office computer on a glossy 8x10, and then put it on the wall above the turron and the pig. My shrine to the person I was, was growing.

The obsession continued. I had a feeling it was the only thing keeping my heart from breaking.



The next day, before Mercy and Charles showed up for dinner, I decided to bite the bullet and email Mateo. He had told me it was private, but just in case I wanted it to look as professional as possible.

Hi, Mateo!

Just wanted to drop you a line and see how your English was keeping up! Things are great back in Vancouver, although it’s raining more than usual and that says a lot. The sunny days remind me of Las Palabras! Well, anyway, thought I would say hello. Hope you’re enjoying time back with your family.

Best,

Vera Miles

Not the best email I had ever written but it had to do. I waited a full five minutes, debating on whether to send it or not before I closed my eyes and clicked send. Now it was gone, out of my hands. And of course, now my obsession was going to grow two-fold.

I decided to be brave and leave the phone behind at the house when we went out for dinner. Mercy and Charles were coming over for a few drinks beforehand and then we were going to go to The Fish House in Stanley Park.

“VeeVee.” Mercy said my nickname as she walked into the house with her arms open wide. “I would have thought you’d be more tan.”

“Nice to see you too,” I said as we did a quick, shallow hug. “Less than a week back and the rain has sucked the color out of me.”

“You really need to go to my tanning studio,” she said, comparing her orangey tanned arm to mine. It wasn’t really a fair comparison since I had tattoos on mine which seemed to highlight the pale.

Mercy and I looked vaguely similar. We had the same build, generous in the boobs and the butt, but she did a lot of pilates that made her stand taller and look more toned. Her hair was chemically straightened and a dark golden blonde that I couldn’t figure out if she dyed or not, since I hadn’t seen her natural hair color in years. In a nutshell, she was like Jennifer Aniston on *Friends*, right down to the sleek and simple way she dressed. The pricey rock on her ring finger and her diamond earrings were spoils from her materialistic aspirations.

I went to give Charles a quick hug.

“VeeVee,” he said in his condescending accent. After spending time in London, I learned that his accent was “BBC English.” I knew because I imitated him a lot.

“Looking good, Chuck,” I said, knowing he hated that as much as I hated him calling me VeeVee.

We retreated into the sitting room by the balcony, my mom having bought wine from Spain for the occasion. As we sat around, only chatting mildly about Spain, I felt like I was thousands of miles away, across a continent, across the Atlantic Ocean. The Vera who was making small talk and sipping wine that didn’t quite taste the same, she was just a hologram.

Before we left for the restaurant, I went into my room to grab my purse and leave my phone on the table. Mercy poked her head in, and I expected her to comment on how messy my room was but instead she spotted the Las Palabras photo on the wall.

“Ooh, this is new,” she said. “This from Spain?” She crossed the room and then peered at it.

“Yup,” I said in a strained voice, wishing she wasn’t looking at it and making her judgements, which I knew she was doing in her head. I didn’t want anyone to assume anything about these people.

“Who is this handsome man who has his arm around you?” she asked in surprise, her finger pointing at Mateo. I wanted to swat it away.

By now Charles had followed her in and was looking at it too, like spectators at a zoo.

“He looks familiar,” Charles mused, frowning.

I couldn’t help myself. “He played for Atletico Madrid,” I told him proudly. “Mateo Casalles.”

I hadn’t said his name out loud in a long time. It sounded larger than life.

Charles nodded. “Ah, that would explain it.” Charles was a big soccer fan and often dragged Mercy out to five in the morning games, cheering on Manchester. At least he used to—she probably complained about it until he stopped.

“He’s married,” Mercy said with a twist of disgust on her face. I raised my brows, wondering how she could see his ring clearly but she just showed me her phone. She had Googled his name and brought up a damn Wikipedia page.

Shit. I hadn’t even thought of Googling him.

I peered at the picture, swallowing hard. It was of him back in his team uniform, yelling at someone during a game, all dark tanned skin, wild hair, and fiery eyes. It stunned me.

Now I was really glad I was leaving my phone behind.

Mercy sucked at her teeth and put her phone away into her designer clutch. Then she smacked her clutch against Charles as if he’d done something. “When we’re married, there is no way in hell you’re going to learn another language overseas. Especially if there are hussies there, leaning all over you.”

Wait. Did my sister just call me a hussy?

“Hussy?” I repeated darkly. What was this, the fifties?

“Oh VeeVee,” she said with a coy laugh. She grabbed Charles by the arm and led him out of the room.

As soon as they were gone, I gave them the finger. Mateo probably wouldn’t have approved of my anti-family behavior but whatever.



Dinner was a lonely affair. Funny how you could be surrounded by your family, your blood, and yet feel totally alone. Even with the sun shining on

the sparkling shores of English Bay and Josh at my side, I felt like I was invisible, and in a dark, dark place.

My fingers itched for my phone, cursing myself for leaving it at home. I wanted to check to see if he responded, I wanted to cyberstalk the shit out of him. I was going crazy, this feeling of despair that carved out a hollow place in my bones. I knew this wasn't good, that I shouldn't be so upset over losing the people I cared for and loved when I hadn't really lost them, they were still out there alive and living their lives. But I was no longer a part of his life. And sitting with my mom and my sister and Charles, it made me realize I wasn't a part of anyone's lives.

I thought about calling my dad tomorrow and asking if I could come and visit him in Calgary. He and Jude were always so welcoming, and now that the program was over and I didn't have an internship, I was free to do whatever I wanted in the summer. Well, I suppose I had to try and get my job back at the coffee shop and try and earn some extra money before I headed back to school.

Wow. I wasn't looking forward to any of that. Not the job, not the school. I wondered how long it would take for me to go back to the way I was before. Spanish Vera did not belong in Vancouver.

When we finally got back home, I practically ran to my room, my nerves tingling, my heart kicked up a notch. I closed the door behind me and picked up my phone.

And there it was.

Mateo's name as the sender.

He had sent a reply.

Now I really started shaking, the phone nearly jostling out of my hands.

Breathe, I told myself before my anxiety got out of control. I felt giddy, excited, nervous, and pukey all at once.

I closed my eyes for a moment, took in a deep breath and then opened the email.

Vera,

It is good to hear from you. I thought you were ignoring my emails, more or less, and did not wish to harass you by phone, but I see now I was sending it to the wrong address. It looked like you wrote down "VerastarS" instead of "Verastar5". Now, I am a bit worried what VerastarS thinks about me.

You sound like you are happy to be back, yes? I wish I could say the same for me, but that is not the case. I miss La Palabras terribly, and most of all I miss you. I couldn't tell from your email if you feel the same. You sounded different. I wish to talk to you, hear your voice. My English is slipping away fast. I look up to the sky and I can't see the stars from the city.

Let me know if you ever want to talk on the phone. Give me a time and I will call you. I believe I am eight hours ahead of you, but I don't sleep much without you anyway.

Love,

Mateo

(The man you had siestas with in Spain)

I thought I was going to die from happiness. Relief pulsed hot in my veins and I was filled with this drug-like sense of euphoria. I read the email again and again, making sure it was true, it was real, I wasn't missing anything. Each time, I grew happier.

Mateo had been trying to reach me but my chicken scratch handwriting led him astray. Oh god, I can't believe he thought I was ignoring him. And then my actual email was so cool and professional compared to his. Ugh, I felt like such an asshole.

He didn't sleep much without me. If I could hug my phone to my chest and dance around my room like a Disney heroine, I would. Okay, maybe I just did.

After I was done with my pathetic twirling, I quickly wrote him back. I calculated it being about four in the morning where he was and reminded myself not to expect anything back from him right away. I told him he could call me tomorrow morning after eight my time, which would make it around four his time, perfect for after work. Or, if he was really ambitious, he could call me tonight—I was staying up late.

I really hoped he was feeling ambitious. If he woke up around six o'clock, that meant he could phone me in as little as two hours from now.

Not sure what to do with myself, I grabbed a bottle of wine from my mom's collection, took it in my room, and opened it. I put on what I knew to be two of his favorite albums, Paul Simon's *Graceland* followed by *Still Crazy After All These Years* and just danced and danced and acted like a lovesick fool. At some point Josh knocked on the door, concerned that I

was having a party in my room and he wasn't invited. From the look he gave me, I could tell he thought about bringing the white coats to take me away.

By the time midnight rolled around, I was getting kind of depressed. Maybe it was the whole bottle of wine at the bottom of my stomach. I tried to be optimistic, knowing that at least he'd try and call me tomorrow, and it was just as I was getting into bed that the phone rang.

I nearly jumped out of my skin.

An extremely long and alien looking phone number flashed on my call display.

I stared at it for a few beats before I bit the bullet and answered it.

I hoped I'd sound cool.

"Hello?" I croaked. "Vera speaking?"

"Vera," Mateo's rich, beautiful voice came through the line.

It was enough for my breath to hitch. Tears teased at my eyes, tingled my nose.

"Mateo," I said breathlessly.

"Hi," he said, sounding so warm, so close, despite our voices being bounced around the earth. "Sorry, am I too late to call you?"

It was funny, his fluency had slipped up a little bit.

"No, not at all," I said. "I was up."

"Oh, good."

A thick silence filled the air and I found myself smiling to myself, unsure of what to say next.

"Do you know what this reminds me of?" he asked.

"What?"

"When we did our business calls, back at Las Palabras."

I laughed lightly. "Well, sorta. We don't have to follow any scripts."

"No, but I do have questions for you."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. What are you wearing?"

I chuckled. "What, are you serious?"

He laughed. "Yes, but I'll ask my other questions first." I heard him sigh and his voice became lower, softer. "How are you, really? It is so good to hear your voice, to hear Vera."

Yup, I was still a sucker for the way he said my name. My lady bits tingled in response; they'd been deprived for too many days.

“It’s good to hear you, too,” I told him. “I’m okay.”

“Just okay?”

“The only thing okay about me is the fact that you called... otherwise...” I wasn’t sure how much I wanted to admit to him, that I’d been nothing but lost and lonely since coming back from Spain.

“If it helps, I am not okay,” he said. He was trying to keep his voice light but I could hear the gravity in it. Somewhere on his end, a car honked its horn. I imagined the city streets of Madrid filled with sunshine.

“It doesn’t help but yet it does,” I admitted.

I could almost hear him smile. “I understand. I...I don’t know. Things are not the same anymore. I feel like a foreigner in my own city, in my own house. I stare at Isabel and I can’t seem to understand what she’s saying. I go do my job and I feel like I quit a long time ago. The people on the streets, they aren’t familiar. The only constant is Chloe Ann. She stays still while the whole world spins.”

I bit my lip. “I thought I was feeling that way because I came back to a different country.”

“I think Las Palabras was a different country. And you and I, well, I told you I wanted a new universe. Yet, here I am back in the old one. I know I have...changed, I suppose, in some ways, and I’m not too sure if I want to go back to the person I was.”

I exhaled, my heart melting with my breath. “That’s exactly how I feel.”

“Then, I am sorry for both of us.”

We fell quiet. It wasn’t awkward now. It felt comfortable, natural, just to hear each other breathing, to know we were alive. I heard what sounded like a bus zoom by.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“I am walking down Calle Toledo,” he said, not sounding out of breath at all.

“How is your knee?”

“Better,” he said. “Hurts in the morning, but that is all. As long as I stay away from the ball, I should be okay.” He sounded a bit dejected, as if playing soccer again had factored into his plans. I remembered how joyous he looked on the field, how confident and in control. He couldn’t have gotten that same feeling from co-owning a restaurant. Though we never talked about it, Mateo didn’t seem the slightest bit passionate about food or

cuisine, aside from telling me what tasted like shit and what didn't taste as much like shit.

"Are you coming from the office?"

"Si," he said. "I've been spending a lot of time at work. I think my partner thinks I'm a bit crazy. I told him I was trying to make up for lost time. It's just a tiny room in a building downtown, and I know he wants me to go work from home. But, I just can't."

"Why?" I asked, though I had an inkling.

"Because Isabel is there," he said. "And I can't stand to look at her."

My chest squeezed and I tried to take a deep breath. "Are you going to tell her?"

"I don't know," he said. "It is the right thing to do, yes? I just need... more time. To think."

"About what?"

"About my new universe. I've never been one to jump into things without thinking it through. Even with you, I spent a month weighing the pros and cons."

This was something new to me. "I see."

"There were only two cons."

I nodded to myself—I knew what they were. "Do you think she knows?"

He sighed. "I don't know. I don't think so. Things have been distant between us for a very long time. She goes out a lot to parties. Usually I go, but I have turned her down the other night. She didn't like that. But no, I don't think she suspects anything."

I don't think she suspects anything.

Shit just got real.

"Vera?"

"Yeah?" I whispered, feeling out of breath. "Sorry."

"Is it getting too much?"

I rubbed my lips together. "Yes."

"Don't feel bad," he said. "You are not the one married." He sighed, silence wrapping the line for a few beats. "We are both adults. If I could have chosen it any other way, I would have. But...I love you. And I don't want to deny myself, or yourself, of that, no matter how selfish that might be."

"I know," I said as the self-loathing tried to sink its dirty claws into me. He loved me. How could something so beautiful making me feel so ashamed?

"You are still my Estrella," he said. "Aren't you?"

"Yes." I was. And like the stars, I was unreachable, untouchable, oh so far away.

At least, I thought.

"Vera," he said. Sometimes I think he just liked to say my name for fun, letting it roll off his tongue. "When can I see you again?"

I nearly laughed. He said it as if we'd had our first date and were planning the next. "Mateo," I said. "That's not funny."

"I am not trying to be funny. I'm serious."

I had no idea what to say to that.

"How about next month?"

"As in August?" I asked, completely confused.

"Yes," he said. "You have some time before school starts, don't you?"

"With what money?"

"I will fly you here."

"And where the hell would I stay?"

"You don't need to get upset, Vera."

"Well, I kind of am upset!" I said. "You're being a tease."

"I am not being a tease," he said, his voice gruff. "I told you I was serious and I am. Do you not take me at my word?"

"And where would I stay?" I repeated. "In your house?"

"I would get you a hotel room."

I laughed at the sincerity in his voice. "A hotel room. Perfect."

"I do not understand..."

"I will not be your mistress, Mateo!" I shouted into the phone. "I'm not going to fly to Spain for a month and stay hidden in a hotel while you continuously cheat on your wife."

"But in Las Palabras..."

"That was a different animal and you know it," I maintained heatedly. "We knew better. What we did was wrong. What we did, I am sure will come back to haunt us in the end. But, please, I cannot willingly go and be your mistress. I can't let you keep me hidden while you pretend to have this other life at the same time. I won't do it."

And now is when the silence felt awkward, but my heart was beating so loudly, the blood in my head so hot, that I barely noticed it. So much time passed that I thought he hung up on me until I heard a bird chirping in the background.

Finally he said softly, "I am sorry, Vera. Very sorry. You're right, about all of it. I guess...I'm not thinking properly. No, I'm not at all. It is just that I am so...blind, without you. I just want to feel like I did before. I'm desperate for you and I'm not making the right decisions. I am being a total asshole. Forgive me, please."

Ugh. I put my hand on my chest, pressing down. He sounded so fucking lost; he wasn't like the Mateo I had known. Then again, I wasn't the Vera I had known either.

"It's okay," I tried to reassure him. "I forgive you. I just don't know what to do either."

"I guess the only thing to do is....keep talking?"

I leaned over and turned out the light, settling back under the covers. "I would love that."

"So," he said after a pause. "What are you wearing?"

"Vete a la mierda," I swore at him in my best Spanish accent.

"Go to the shit," he commented happily. "I like that. I like your pronunciation, it is pretty good. How about saying it this way..."

And so, a week after Las Palabras, Mateo taught me how to swear properly in Spanish until five in the morning, when the stars in the sky started to fade.

Chapter Twenty

Compared to the previous month, the month of July crawled by at a sloth's pace. In some ways this was good since every day that passed was a day that took me further and further from the Spain version of Vera. It made the memories harder to recreate in detail, it made me forget conversations, forget myself. Every day brought me closer and closer to becoming the old Vera Miles, the one I didn't want to go back to, so the slower the month went, the better it was.

There was only one thing that kept me going throughout the days, and that was Mateo. Sure, I was enjoying the summer weather and the gorgeous beaches now that the rain had let up. I had gone to Calgary to see my father and Jude, and that was a nice little escape where my dad still spoiled me rotten. I got my job at Waves Coffee back, only I couldn't get full-time, so I just picked up shifts when I could. I even briefly saw Jocelyn when she came to town, which ended up in a night of debauchery on Granville Street and me in tears because I'd had too much to drink. I couldn't blame her for hurrying back to Saskatchewan after that.

But, even with all that, it was Mateo who got me up in the morning, looking forward to each day. He was a busy man, still looking into opening a restaurant in London thanks to his fancy English skills, so we didn't talk on the phone every day. But we texted as much as we could, and sent emails when texting wasn't good enough.

Sometimes we would talk for hours about everything under the rainbow. Other times we would watch a movie together, trying to get our DVDs on our computer to synch up. The other night we tried phone sex, which was an absolute first for me. I never asked where he was when we were talking dirty to each other, but I tried not to think about it too much. He would pleasure himself while talking wildly in Spanish, and that was such a fucking turn on that it only took me seconds before I was coming. My vibrators definitely got a work out, as did my voice control. No one wants to be a screamer when you live with your mom and brother.

We were pushing the limits with that and yet it only felt natural.

So, in some ways, I was satisfied. My sex life was healthy in its own fantastical way, I was able to keep in contact with him, to hear his voice, to

talk and understand and enjoy each other. It was like part two of the relationship, a slower, distant version of what we had at Las Palabras.

But in other ways, I was absolutely miserable. There were only so many times I could hear him whisper that he was biting my nipples without needing him to physically be there biting my nipples. There were only so many times he could tell me he loved me and wanted to hold me without me feeling that hollow ache that he couldn't hold me in his arms.

The only high point in my day was him, and after a while, that just wasn't good enough anymore. That depression, that descent into Crazyville that happened right after I landed, that was coming back to me. To make matters worse, I had to start picking courses for the school year and concentrate on what my future would bring—a future that didn't contain the man who had my heart.

On one extraordinarily hot and humid day, I felt pretty close to snapping. It didn't help that Mateo and I had a fight of sorts over the phone in the wee hours of the morning. It wasn't even over anything in particular, I was just being super bitchy and snippy, and he didn't take that attitude very well, so the angry Spanish stallion in him came out. I didn't see that side of him very often, but it made me realize I couldn't be a bitch for no reason and not get called out on it.

Sleep-deprived and even more pissed off because of our fight, I had spent the morning listening to angry music, which was Faith No More's *King for a Day* album. I had it on repeat as I cleaned my room over and over again.

"All right, that's it," Josh boomed above the music, suddenly appearing in the doorway. He walked over to the iPod dock and pushed the volume slider down, then leaned against my desk and stared at me, arms folded across his chest. "This has got to stop."

I spritzed Windex onto my window for the millionth time and frowned. "What?"

"This. Your angry music."

"So? Don't be a Patton hater."

"I'm not a hater. But you're fucking driving me crazy, Vera," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "To be honest with you, you're worrying me a little bit."

Now he had my attention. I turned around fully and faced him, putting the cleaner on the windowsill. "What are you talking about?" I asked, my

heart picking up a beat.

He gestured to the music. "You're playing your angry album every day. You're cleaning and you *never* clean. I talk to you, and half the time you're not even there. You're just this ghost of who my sister used to be."

That kind of hurt hearing it from him. Was I really that obvious? I opened my mouth to protest but he went on.

"Then later in the day, or sometimes in the morning, I don't know anymore, you're happy like a pig in shit. You're all goofy, googly eyes, like a fucking muppet, and you're smiling and it's great. But you still don't seem like you're here. And then you descend into your daily bout of PMS again." He threw his hands up. "Look, I know we don't tell each other everything. I know you're older and you've got your own problems and I get it. But, you know, just let me in a bit. It's hard sometimes, just living life, you know? I feel like you never even came back from Spain at all."

My throat hurt. My eyes stung. He was right. I hadn't come back from Spain at all.

He reached over and shut the door. "You don't have to tell me what happened over there, but...I think it might do us both some good."

My brother was right. I hadn't really told him anything. I told him I missed my friends and he knew what the trip had meant to me. But when it came to Mateo, I hadn't uttered a word. Josh never even knew his name.

He was the only family I could truly trust, could truly count on. He'd been there for me when others hadn't. I owed him the truth, as silly as it would probably seem in the end.

With a heavy sigh, I sat down on the bed and patted the spot beside me.

"Take a seat," I said. "I'm about to go all Nicolas Sparks on your ass."

He reluctantly took a seat, knowing full well how much I hated Nicolas Sparks' books and movies. I launched into it, from the very moment I stepped on the bus in Madrid, to when I got in the cab and watched Mateo through the rear view mirror.

Josh was wide-eyed, speechless. I went and got myself a glass of water, my throat raw from talking, and then told him about the last month, about our phone calls and how it was all taking its toll on me.

"So," I said, exhaling loudly. "That's the whole story. That is the dirty, shameful truth. Do you hate me now?"

He frowned, giving me a puzzled look. "Why would I hate you?"

"Because," I said. "I slept with a married man."

“But you’re in love with him,” he said earnestly. “And I’ve never seen you like this before. You don’t do love, Vera. You keep everyone at a distance.”

“I do?”

He nodded. “You may not realize it, but you do. You’re just so wrapped up in your head sometimes, I think. All my girlfriends wouldn’t shut up over the slightest thing, but getting you to open up, it’s like pulling teeth. And this dude, this Mateo, if he can manage to get through to you...I don’t know. I think it’s a good thing.”

Hmmm. The things you find out about yourself.

“That said, I don’t envy you, like, at all.” He got up and stretched his arms above his head. “Because if the two of you are ever going to be together again, even if you just keep doing what you’re doing and talking on the phone like you are, there are going to be consequences. At some point, shit will hit the fan. It always does.”

“Like dad and Jude,” I said sadly, looking down at the fleur-de-lis pattern on my comforter, my fingers absently tracing the lines.

“Yeah,” Josh said grimly. “Like dad and Jude.” His tone lifted. “But that’s an extreme case. Dad and Jude were carrying on for years. He was just stringing mom along, even though I’m sure they weren’t even in love anymore. All I remember were the fights, like mom and dad had always hated each other and were only staying together because of us. But yeah, eventually she found out, and well...we know the rest.”

I couldn’t pretend that I wasn’t thinking about that every time my heart leaped for joy. It was like I hadn’t allowed myself to be happy this whole time because I knew that the happiness was coming from the potential misery of someone else.

“I have to say though,” he continued, “and I’m not excusing Dad because he was being a real dickhead. Totally. But...I see how happy he and Jude are, and part of me understands it. They went about it the wrong way. He should have broken it off with Mom the minute he was attracted to Jude...or at least, you know...I don’t want to get any visuals, but you get what I’m saying. There were always going to be consequences for what they did, but they could have saved a lot of extra heartache by not keeping it such a secret.”

I looked up at him, surprised to see my brother being so insightful and serious for once. Maybe we’d all grown up recently. “I just don’t

understand how something like love can be wrong.”

He shrugged. “I don’t think it can be wrong if it comes from a pure place. I suppose you could be like one of those chicks who just keep it all inside and secretly pine for someone for their whole life until it kills them. But you’re not. What you feel isn’t wrong, Vera...it’s not black and white like that.” He cleared his throat. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to go get high and purge this estrogen from my system.” He gave me a wink before he left.

With the door closed, leaving me to get back to my thoughts, I felt a little better having confided in Josh. It made me feel like I wasn’t so alone anymore. Unfortunately, talking about it hadn’t solved the problem. I couldn’t really go on like this, every day a battle between my heart and mind, between right and wrong, between the dreams and the reality.

I had to start getting over him.

I started by not answering his phone call later that night.

Then the next.

And the next.



It had been three days since I last talked to Mateo, since I had the talk with my brother. I had hoped, foolishly, that by ignoring his calls, his texts, his emails, that I could pretend he didn’t exist. It wasn’t really working. I was a wreck. I even took after Isabel and mentally began to put my chaos and heartache into tiny little boxes, but I wasn’t sure how long they would hold. I wasn’t as strong as Mateo had been.

On the third night, Josh, sick and tired of my moping, invited me out with his friends again. This time we were going to the Cambie, which was one of my favorite bars. It was situated beneath a somewhat scummy-looking backpacker hostel, and had really cheap pitchers of beer. There were large picnic tables for seating, so you often shared a table with a whole bunch of people you didn’t know. The food wasn’t too bad and there were pool tables and arcade games. The bathrooms were always disgusting though, with stall doors that barely covered you from view and rarely locked. Apparently in the men’s bathroom, you all had to pee into a long trough.

Still, I loved it. It was cheap and relaxed, with no pretension, and at least one fight every night. Plus in the summer, there was a large patio area where you could sit and drink and ignore the junkies who would pester you for money.

Unfortunately, the patio was full by the time we got there, and we barely managed to snag the end of a picnic table inside. The other half of it had been taken over by a bridal party, the bride wearing bunny ears and a veil and looking totally shit faced. It made me cringe internally. Not that they were drunk and having fun, but that she was getting married to someone—someone wealthy, by the look of the rock on her finger—and despite her drunken antics, she looked completely happy and in love.

I was jealous. I wasn't completely happy, I was only in love.

I knew it was going to be a weird night. I started drinking my beer fast, going through the pitcher I was sharing with Josh in just ten minutes. Every time the bridal chick mentioned her fiancé, I felt my heart turn black and cold. Meanwhile, I had Adam sitting next to me, who kept rapping his hands on the table and wiping his nose. He'd obviously been doing lines in the bathroom, and I watched Josh carefully to see if he'd been doing the same. We'd both left cocaine behind in high school, though I knew he still did it on occasion.

It just wasn't for me anymore, so I just got myself another pitcher and proceeded to drink the night away. Soon the pitchers were starting to pile up on the table, and I found myself leaning into Adam, almost like I was flirting with him. I suppose I really was becoming Old Vera again.

I bummed a cigarette from Josh's friend Brad and staggered out into the warm night air. I felt like I was losing myself, very slowly, draining away like the empty glasses. I had no idea what I was doing, I just needed something, anything to mend my heart, to distract me from the cave inside my chest, to make it all go away. All I could think about was Mateo and where he was, and if he was with his wife. Was he in bed with her? Was he kissing her? Was he falling back in love with her? Each thought was another dagger to my gut, the feelings so physical that my shoulders were curling over as I stood there on the street, enveloped in cigarette smoke.

I thought by ignoring him, I could make it all go away. But I couldn't. It only got worse.

"Hey," I heard Adam say, coming up to me. "Can I have a drag?"

I gave him a small smile, trying to straighten up through the pain. I handed it to him and his finger brushed against mine. I felt nothing. He kept staring at me, blinking rapidly, nose twitching as he puffed on the cigarette.

“So how are you?” he asked. “How are you feeling right now?”

I pursed my lips. “Drunk. I’m feeling drunk.”

He smiled. It was somewhat predatory. “Good. There’s nothing wrong with feeling loose.”

I shrugged. “Guess not.”

I reached back for the cigarette, almost falling over. He caught me by my arms, his hands squeezing me, and straightened me up. “You look like you could use a walk,” he said.

I nodded dumbly, numbly. He took hold of my hand and led me up the street and around into a smelly, dark and dirty alley.

Suddenly he flicked the cigarette to the ground, pushed me back against the slimy brick wall and stuck his tongue in my mouth. He tasted like beer and nicotine. For a moment I was shocked, and then something in me let him kiss me. I even kissed him back. It felt good to be in someone else’s arms, the object of someone else’s affections.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t just a kiss. His hands were groping me, squeezing painfully at my breasts, trying to undo my jeans. The warning bells went off in my head, breaking through my drunken, emotionally damaged haze. This wasn’t going well.

“Adam,” I said, “stop.”

“What happened to the girl who used to flirt with me?” he said, biting my neck so hard I thought he was drawing blood.

“I mean it,” I said. I tried to get out of his grasp but he grabbed me by the throat and pushed me back to the wall, my head striking it hard. I blinked through the stars, fear coming over me. Oh my god. What if he didn’t let go?

“You mean it,” he snarled. “Everyone knows what a slut you are, that you spread your legs for everyone. What’s wrong with me, huh? Not good enough for your whore ass?”

“Please, Adam,” I said, trying to speak, my throat pressing into his palm as I did so. What the hell drugs was he on? “I’m sorry if it seems like I led you—”

“You’re such a liar,” he said, then kissed me again, trying to yank down my jeans. “Fucking whore thinks she’s suddenly too good for me.”

“You’re drunk. You’re fucked up.”

“You’re mine.”

I couldn’t move, his grip on my throat like iron. I opened my mouth to yell but he quickly put his other hand over it, leaving my jeans alone for the moment. His pupils were crazy big, darting back and forth, his face red, mouth curled in a sneer. I’d never seen anything uglier.

“You’re going to shut up and take it,” he said. “I know you want it. You’re suddenly too much of a prude to say so. A slut doesn’t change her spots.”

“What the fuck are you doing?” I heard Josh bellow from behind Adam. I looked over his shoulder to see Josh running toward us. In seconds he had his hand on Adam’s shoulder, ripping him off of me.

I gasped for air, sliding down along the sticky wall until I was on the ground, and watched as Josh punched Adam right in the face.

“The fuck is your problem?” Adam cried out, holding his nose.

“That’s my fucking sister, you fuckhead!” Josh yelled, decking him in the side of the head. I had never seen my brother fight anyone before, I didn’t think he had it in him. But now, he was so livid he looked like he was about to beat Adam into oblivion.

“She’s been after me from day one,” Adam cried out, his arm out, trying to get Josh to stop. “She wanted it.”

“No,” Josh said, pointing at me, a shivering, quaking mess on the ground. “She did not fucking want it.”

“Whatever, you know she’s a big slut.”

And Josh punched him one more time, this one bringing Adam to the ground with a thump. Then he came over to me and grabbed me gently by my hands, pulling me to my feet. “Are you hurt?” he asked, peering at me.

I shook my head, a lump in my raw throat, unable to speak.

He put his arm around me. “Come on, I’m taking you home.”

I nodded feebly and he led me to the road, hailing a cab.

Once inside, he took off his leather jacket and placed it around my shoulders.

We were silent for a few blocks, the neon glow of the cold city lights flashing across our laps.

“Vera,” he said quietly, “I’m just your brother. I’m not Mercy or Mom. I’m not going to tell you how to live your life. But you can’t keep doing this either.”

I gave him a look, shadows rising and falling on his face. “Doing what?” I asked testily. “You think I asked for that?”

“No,” he said quickly. “I know you didn’t. No one does ask for that, no matter who you are, no matter who spins it. But...I feel like you’re on a path that you don’t want to be on. Drinking away your sorrows and putting yourself into these kind of situations where you’re acting out of loneliness. You need to treat yourself better.”

You should treat yourself better than that, Mateo’s words came ringing into my head.

I let out a sob, caught unaware by the pain of that memory, the memory of him after he caught me with Dave. Mateo. He’d been right, always so right about me. And I was pushing him away because it was too hard. *He* deserved to be treated better than that.

Josh brought me to him in a hug. I stayed that way for the whole ride.

Once I got home, I staggered to my room, locked the door, and called Mateo. I needed him right then, more than anything.

It rang for a long time before he answered. “Hola, es Mateo,” he said slowly, almost questioningly. I knew I had called him at a bad time; he would have seen my phone number and now he was pretending.

“Mateo,” I choked out, the tears rising up, my chest tight.

“Si,” he said.

“I am so sorry. I’m so sorry and I’m so sorry I’m calling you right now like this, but I just needed to speak to you...” I trailed off and started sobbing.

I heard a female voice in the background. “Quien es?” I couldn’t breathe.

“Si,” Mateo said to me, his voice strained. “Te llamaré de Nuevo, estoy teniendo el desayuno.”

And then he hung up. I had no idea what he said. I felt the cold grip of dread, wondering if I had made a mistake by calling him. I lay back in bed, then rolled over onto my side, curling into a ball. I tried to imagine his arms around me, his lips on my forehead, the kindness and complete understanding in his eyes, but I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. He was right. It would never be enough.

I was half-asleep, my face coated with tears, the blanket soaked beneath me, when the phone rang. It was Mateo. I gripped it in my hands, afraid to let go.

“Mateo?” I cried softly.

“Vera, Vera,” he said, his voice shaking. “Oh, Vera, my Estrella, what happened?”

I couldn’t speak for some time. Finally I was able to say, “I miss you. I miss you so much.”

“I miss you too. Oh, Estrella, my star. You have no idea. No idea. I have been so worried about you, you haven’t answered my calls or my emails. I think you don’t love me anymore. My heart has been breaking.”

I made a fist at my chest. “Mine too. This is just so hard. I can’t do this anymore.”

“Please, please, Vera, don’t say that. There is always a way.”

There wasn’t. There was only one way, and every time I entertained the notion, it made me feel sick with guilt.

“I need you,” I told him. “I need you too much, miss you too much. I thought if I ignored the problem, it would go away.”

“The problem?”

I licked my dry lips. “Yes. The problem of us.”

“There can be good problems to have,” he said quietly. “I would rather have this problem than not have you at all. Don’t you feel the same?”

I wasn’t sure. All I knew is that I hurt, constantly, and his voice was the only thing that could make it go away. Even his voice sounded like home. “I think I feel too much,” I told him. I took in a deep breath, trying to concentrate on my breathing. What a fucking night.

“I’m glad you feel so much.”

I laughed caustically. “I don’t. My heart is a whore.”

I heard the changing gears of the engine in the background. “Where are you right now? I’m so sorry I called you like that. I know it’s...risky.”

“It is fine, I am glad you did,” he said. “I was just having breakfast. Heading to work now.”

I didn’t dare ask who he was with, I knew it had been his wife. “What did you have?”

“Lots of mam and chess,” he said.

A grin spread across my face and I giggled. “My favorite.”

The next day I woke up hung over but still feeling better than the morning before. That was a good start.

Chapter Twenty-One

Exactly seven weeks after Mateo and I parted on that tear-soaked street in Madrid, I got a phone call that would change my life.

It was 3:30 a.m. when my phone rang, jolting me out of a dreamless sleep. I grabbed my phone and peered at the screen. It was Mateo.

My heart lurched, my thoughts immediately thinking that something had to be terribly wrong for him to call me in the middle of the night. I had no idea what time it was in Spain, but he had to have known I'd be sleeping.

"Hello, Mateo?" I whispered frantically into the phone, not wanting to wake the house.

"Vera," he said thickly. My skin prickled with the familiar sound of his voice. Because of one thing or another, I hadn't spoken to him on the phone for a few days, with only a few texts passing between us.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I...I think so."

I sat up and swallowed hard. "You don't sound okay."

"It's just that..." he trailed off. The silence felt miles wide.

"What?"

"I filed for divorce today."

I put my hand to my chest, to make sure my heart was still there. "What?" I cried softly. I was floored, stunned, my brain was short-circuiting. "I don't understand."

"It wasn't working. We all knew that. She knew that."

"Holy shit," I swore. "Sorry. I'm just...I'm shocked. I don't know what to say. Was she...upset?"

"Of course," he said simply. "She doesn't want a divorce at all, but I cannot force myself to love her. I think deep down, she does not love me either. That this has been this way for years because of Chloe Ann."

Shit. This was so real.

"When will you...when will it be final?" I asked softly.

"That, I do not know. It all depends. She agreed to it. However, I did not agree to the judge's ruling about joint custody."

“They see you as an unfit parent?” If I knew anything it was how much Mateo loved his daughter.

“Not at all. But in Spain, the mother always gets custody. You have to appeal for joint. I would let her have full, but I don’t particularly trust her when it comes to visitation rights. She could take my daughter away from me and I’d never see her. I’ve seen that happen to a few friends of mine and I couldn’t bear that.”

This was so heavy. I was too young to know anyone who had gotten divorced, and I had no idea how any of it worked. For a second there, my age started to weigh on me. But there were bigger things to worry about. This was Mateo’s burden and I had to be there for him, as much as I feared I had something to do with it.

“Do you have to pay alimony to Isabel?”

“No,” he said. “Because she had money coming into the marriage. The judge only forces alimony payments if the other party is clearly disadvantaged economically. I am sure it pains Isabel to not get a dime from me, but her parents and lineage will take care of her, perhaps better than I can. But for Chloe Ann, I will pay more than I should. I will give her as much as I possibly can.”

“I’m sorry,” I said softly, feeling pained for him. “I can only imagine how hard this is going to be.”

“Do not be sorry,” he said. “Yes, it will be hard. But I will fight. I have faith this will work out. I want this, Vera. And I want you.”

The blood in my veins slowed to a whoosh.

“You didn’t do this for me,” I croaked, a statement, not a question. “Please tell me you didn’t do this for me.”

“My Estrella,” he said. “I did this for me. Even if you don’t agree to what I’m about to ask of you, I know it had to be done. Eight years is a long time to be unhappy.”

Now my breaths were slowing, catching in my throat on the way out. “What are you going to ask me?”

“Come live with me.”

There was an undercurrent of desperation in his voice that reached down into my heart, opened the steel gates, and let loose the butterflies. I closed my eyes, surrendering to the feeling, that this man loved me, wanted me so much.

But one by one, the butterflies fell. And my heart closed up again.

"I can't," I managed to say. "You know I can't."

"I'll fly you out here. I'll take care of you. You won't have to worry about anything."

"My school," I said. "My degree. I can't just quit school now. I have one more year."

Silence made the room a wasteland.

"Maybe in a year," I went on, grasping for something.

"No," he said adamantly. "I cannot wait a year. In a year you could become someone else's star. I can't let that happen. You belong to me and only to me."

"I'll wait for you," I said feebly, feeling like I was living a World War II film.

"You're twenty-three years old," he said gruffly. "I would never ask you to wait for me. Vera, I need you. I love you. I want you here, now, tonight if I could have you."

My fingers curled into fists above my chest, feeling the squeeze. God, I wanted him so much, just to be in his arms, to feel his heart against mine, to kiss his beautiful face. Oh fuck, this was killing me fucking slowly. All this time, every day since we parted, I was slowly being drained of life.

"Maybe you could come here?" I said, willing the tears to stay away. "You could open up a new restaurant..."

"You know I would in a heartbeat," he assured me. "But I will not leave my daughter, and I would not be able to take her with me. I have to stay in Spain. In Madrid." I heard him swallow over the phone. "You'd love Madrid, Vera," he said quietly. "You could find a job if you wanted to or I would take care of you. We could create that universe. It would be so beautiful. Please. Please, just think about it."

I had no choice but to think about it. The love of my life just asked me to move to Spain to be with him. It was all I would be able to think about until the day I died.

"Mateo, I love you," I told him. "Please know that."

"I know that," he said. "And I don't want you to love me from afar. I want you to love me, right here, in my arms."

The butterflies stirred again, their wings brushing my ribs, leaving a trail of champagne bubbles in their wake. This damn man. This lovely, beautiful, passionate man. He was instilling me with hope all over again, that dangerous, ruthless thing.

“Don’t give up on us,” he whispered, fueling the flames. “I haven’t.”

“I’ll call you soon,” I said when I found my voice. “Adios.”

The line clicked dead. My room was as silent as a tomb. I was all alone again, but this time I had that burden of hope, a box of butterflies and chaos in the corner.

Waiting to be opened.



The next morning I got up early and went down the hall to talk to Josh. I wanted to catch him before he went to work. The truth was, I hadn’t gotten a wink of sleep after Mateo’s call, and I spent the rest of the night going over pros and cons lists in my mind. I couldn’t believe I was actually considering it.

“Josh?” I said, knocking gently with one hand on the knob. “Are you awake?”

I heard him grumble through the door. My mom was in her room, getting ready for her day, and I wanted this to remain completely private. I took a chance and opened it a crack, peeking my head in. To my surprise it didn’t reek like weed as it normally did.

He opened the door, squinting at me with one eye open, his hair a mess on his head.

“It’s called sleeping in, Vera,” he grouched.

“Are you decent?”

“I have clothes on if that’s what you mean.”

“I need to talk to you,” I said. He took one look at my face and gave me a grave nod.

“Okay,” he said, letting me in.

I closed the door behind him and cleared off his desk chair that had a stack of porn on it. I frowned, picking a magazine up and waving it at him. “People still buy these? I mean, the internet is full of porn. Free porn.”

He sat down on his bed and shrugged. “I’m old-fashioned, what can I say?”

I rolled my eyes. “Ew.”

“So what is it? I’m guessing you didn’t come here to discuss Hustler with your brother.”

I grimaced. “No, I certainly did not, you fucking weirdo.” I sighed, realizing I was stalling. “So...Mateo is getting a divorce.”

His eyes bugged out. “No shit.”

“No shit at all,” I said. “He called me last night to tell me.”

“Damn. Well...I suppose that’s good, right? I think so. He called it off, did the right thing. No more lies.”

“Yeah, but how is his daughter going to handle it? Look at how I turned out.”

“I think a divorce when you’re a kid is a lot easier to handle than a divorce when you’re a teenager. You were thirteen. I think you handled it way worse than I did, and I was eleven.”

“It’s my fault.”

He frowned and gave me a wry smile. “Vera, you’re not quite off the hook, but I wouldn’t go around calling you a homewrecker either. It just happened this way. Obviously he was unhappy. Fuck, isn’t it better to be happy than not?”

“But at what cost?”

“Look, Vera, I know you want to victimize yourself here and all that, but honestly, this is for the best. You know it, and knowing it does not make you a bad person. Shit, there are worse people out there in the world, doing hurtful, spiteful things. You just fell in love with each other at a very messy time. It’s life. It happens. Mateo never set out to fall in love, to hurt his wife, to get a divorce. You never intended any of that to happen either. You aren’t some femme fatale from one of your noir films, prowling on married men. Give yourself a bit of a break here. This is a *good* thing.”

I cleared my throat. “He asked me to live with him.”

Now he was stunned. “Sorry, what?”

“He asked me to come live with him in Madrid. Now.”

He laughed dryly. “Well, you can’t.”

“I know.”

“You have school.”

“I know.”

“You have no way of getting there.”

“He would fly me out.”

He bit his lip and nodded. “I see.”

“Yeah.”

We lapsed into thick silence, both of us wrestling with the same question.

“So,” he said, “are you going to tell him no?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Vera...”

“I’m not telling him yes either. I just...I need to talk about it. I need to work through it.”

“Well, I can help you work through it. The main reason you can’t go is because you have school. Why not wait until you’ve graduated?”

“I don’t want to wait,” I said. “Waiting drowns me.”

“So dramatic.”

I waved my arms in the air. “What is the point of me staying here? I’d go to school and I’d hate every minute of it. Yeah, I want to finish my degree, but Madrid has programs too. I’m just...I feel like if I don’t act now, what we had is going to totally disappear and I can’t lose that.”

“I guess if you can’t be reckless and adventurous at twenty-three, when can you?” he mused.

I nodded. “I’m not worried about school. What’s an extra year? I know myself. I know I’ll get my degree somehow. That’s not the issue.”

“What is the issue then?”

“I’d be giving up a lot on uncertainty. What if it doesn’t work out?”

“Then you come back home.”

“But...” I could barely think about it. “I don’t think I’d survive it.” I caught a look in his eyes. “And don’t tell me I’m dramatic. I have no idea if our relationship is strong enough to handle me going all the way over there and trying to start a new life with him. I’d have nobody except him.”

“What about your friend Claudia?”

I breathed out through my nose. “Yes. Thank god. But even so, it wouldn’t be the same thing. What if the relationships I made at Las Palabras were only meant to survive right there in that bubble? What if they don’t stand a chance outside of that world?”

He ran a hand through his hair, making his bedhead worse. “Look, Vera. You’re in love with him and he’s in love with you. Obviously your relationship is strong enough to get this far. And long distance, that’s the fucking worst. I will be here for you no matter what you choose. I just want you to promise me one thing.”

“What?” I looked at him curiously.

“If you do decide to stay here, please stop crying and moping around about him.”

“But if I stay here, that’s all I’ll do.”

“Then you have your answer.”

Shit. Fucking Josh, when did he get so damn smart? He was right. As frightened as I was about taking a chance on uncertainty, a risk on love, shit, moving to another fucking country for a *guy*, I knew this was the best solution to the life I was living. If I told Mateo no, I would break my own heart and I would break his. I would be miserable for a very long time and I would spend the rest of my life wondering if I made a mistake.

I did not want to live a life with regrets. You only regretted the shit you didn’t do. That’s what I told myself when I signed up for Las Palabras in the first place. I didn’t want to be thirty, married to some dude and thinking back to how different my life could have been if I had just followed my heart.

Because my heart, as abused as it had been lately, was beating to the pulse of Spain.

I took a deep breath and got up. “Well, I guess I’m going to Spain.”

Josh smiled. “And I guess I’m going to lose my fucking sister again.”

I pouted, despite the butterflies that were taking flight and filling me with excitement. “Oh, come on.”

“I’m just joking,” he said. “Maybe I’ll come visit someday.”

“He does have a sister who’s twenty-five.”

“Oh, older women, my favorite,” he said wryly.

I picked up a porno and threw it at him.

He laughed and picked it up. He stared at it blankly for a moment before he put it aside and looked back up at me. “When are you going to tell Mom?”

Oh, god.

Why the hell did I think I could just jet off to Madrid and not tell my mother about it?

Oh, fuck. She was going to kill me.

I couldn’t move. Josh got up and put his hand on my shoulder. “Hey. Let me know when you tell her and I’ll back you up, okay? Now get out of here so I can go back to sleep.”

I nodded weakly and left his room. I could hear my mother in her room down the hall. This was not going to be easy, and it was not going to be fun.

I decided I better tell Mateo and get the plane ticket all squared away before I had that conversation with her. She had paid for my tuition already, so it was going to be extra tricky to reason with her when she had so much at stake.

In the end, I had more at stake. I just had to get her to see that.



Things moved fast. As soon as I had made up my mind, I told Mateo. The joy I heard in his voice only added to the joy in my heart. I was so excited and nervous but so fucking happy. It felt good. It felt real. It felt like the right thing to do. He bought me a ticket on Iberia Airlines, flying from Vancouver to New York to Madrid on August 25th.

Naturally I had to tell Claudia. She was totally excited, pretty much as excited as I was. That felt good, to be missed, to be wanted. I started feeling like maybe I was going to be able to build a new life there after all.

A new universe.

I called Jocelyn too, to let her know. I wasn't sure how she was going to react, maybe call me crazy. I had been writing her all about Mateo, and when she came to visit Vancouver after I had just returned from Spain, she got a teary earful about how doomed our relationship was. She'd never seen me that way and I think I scared her all the way back to Saskatchewan. But she took the news of me moving to Spain surprisingly well, with no judging on her behalf.

"Do what makes you happy," she said lightly.

"Doing Mateo made me happy," I joked.

She sighed. "Such a romantic name. Mateo Casalles. Vera Casalles sounds good too. You sound like a Spanish queen."

I flinched at the mention of Spanish royalty. "Well, no one is getting married here."

"No, I suppose not," she said. "You're only twenty-three and have your whole life ahead of you, and I wouldn't be surprised if he never wanted to get married ever again, or even have kids."

Ouch, that hurt. Did I mention that Jocelyn could be really blunt?

"I meant that more as in we don't really know each other that well and should probably live together for a while first before that happens. Or, you know, what you just said."

“Oh. Sorry, Vera. But, I mean, you should probably keep that in mind when you get there. I totally support the move to Spain for your true love kind of notion, even though I won’t see you as often, but try and keep your heart protected, too.”

Didn’t she know it was way too late for that?

After I told her, I knew it was only a matter of time before it would pop up on my Facebook or it would slip out somehow. It was time to tell my mother.

Unfortunately, I picked a day that Mercy was over. She and my mom were in the kitchen, baking dinner together. Josh had picked up extra shifts that week and happened to be home, so if I wanted his support, I was going to have to jump on it.

My chest felt like it was filled with cement. Ugh. This was going to suck so badly.

I went to Josh’s room and gave him a look. “It’s time.”

He nodded and came out to join me, and we walked down the hall. You’d think I was going to war.

We went into the kitchen. Mom was sipping her wine and peering at Mercy over her glasses. Mercy was wearing a stylish apron that she must have brought from her apartment, her hair pulled back in one of those effortless topknots that makes me look like I have an animal on my head when I try to do it. She was grating a block of parmesan into a bowl, gluten-free lasagna being assembled in a pan beside it.

I stopped on the other side of the island and cleared my throat until they looked at me and Josh.

“What is it, sweetie?” My mother asked.

Oh, she wasn’t going to be calling me sweetie in a minute.

I looked up at Josh. He nodded at me encouragingly.

I felt so sick, like I’d eaten a pile of nerves and they were sitting at the bottom of my stomach, wriggling around.

“I have something I need to tell you,” I said, my voice no louder than a whisper.

Mercy put the cheese down and cocked her head quizzically.

I was afraid to look them in the eyes, so I looked at the island instead. I cleared my throat. “I’ve decided to move to Spain.”

There was silence. I risked it and looked up.

My mother cocked a brow. “Okay. Well, I guess we can discuss this.”

Mercy looked at her, appraising her expression. She sucked on her teeth and said, "Sure, Vera. I could see you were really happy there."

"You're going to have to start working more," my mother said. "And you can't let it interfere with your studies."

"I saved up a lot of money in a year," Mercy said. "It's hard, but it's doable."

"When did you want to go?" my mother asked. "Next fall? I don't think you could make next summer work. You've got Mercy's wedding and everything."

"Yeah, my wedding."

Ooh, boy.

I felt Josh nudge me.

I gulped. "I'm going next week."

Mercy dropped the cheese grater. It landed with a clatter that echoed through the kitchen.

"What?" my mother hissed.

"You're joking," said Mercy, shaking her head. She looked at Josh. "What's wrong with her? Is this a joke?"

"No," Josh said. "I had nothing to do with it, but I'm here for support."

Thanks, Josh, I thought angrily. Well, it was too late now. They were already freaking out. I wondered how long I could keep Mateo a secret, my whole reason for going.

"You aren't going," my mother said, putting down the wine glass. "You have school. Jesus, Vera. Use your brain. Sometimes I wonder about you and your flights of fancy."

"I'm not going to school this year."

"Like hell you aren't," she growled, really starting to get mad.

"I'm taking a year off. Or maybe two. Maybe I'll go to university in Madrid. I'm sure—"

"Are you on drugs again?" Mercy asked, folding her arms together in a huff, her lip curled up like somehow this was affecting her life in some way.

I glared at her. "No. I'm not on drugs. I'm just going to Spain."

"Well, you can't and you aren't," my mother said with finality. "Wait till your father hears about this."

"Right. Why is it that you always call dad when something wrong has happened, but never with something right?"

"Because things never go right with you," my mother sniped.

Ouch. Okay, don't cry, don't cry, I told myself. She had a wicked tongue and I knew this going in.

"Mom," Josh warned her.

"I'm disappointed in you, Joshua," she said, her voice taking on that icy competitive realtor tone that she was really, really good at. "You're actually supporting her decision?"

He gulped but nodded. "Yes. She's an adult, she can do whatever she wants."

"No," Mercy interjected. "She can't. She's in school that's paid for by *mom* and *dad*. She barely makes any money at her shit job. She can't get to Spain even if she started turning tricks." At that she gave me a pointed look, as if that was a possibility.

"I already have a plane ticket," I said, and I knew once I said it that the can of worms was going to turn into a bucket of snakes. There were all coming out, unstoppable.

"How the hell did you get a plane ticket?" my mother asked. She shot Mercy a nervous look, as if Mercy had been right.

"It was bought for me."

"By whom?" she demanded.

"By the man I'm in love with."

Silence. I could hear the fridge motor kick on. Somewhere outside a dog barked. The blood inside me was pulsing loudly.

My mother looked truly confused. "What man?"

Suddenly Mercy shrieked, "Oh my god!" and put her hands over her mouth.

She figured it out.

"What?" my mom asked again. "What am I missing here?"

"The soccer player!" Mercy yelled. She pointed at me, jabbing her finger in the air. "You're in love with the soccer player!"

I could see my mother mouth, "Soccer player?" out of the corner of my eye but all my focus was on Mercy as the disgusted look came into her eyes.

"Vera, he's married!" she yelled. "Oh my god, you were with a *married* man?"

"What?!" my mother screeched loudly.

"He's getting a divorce," I said feebly, as if that would help. It wouldn't. The damage was done.

“Oh my god, Vera,” my mother said, putting her hand to her head like she was going to faint. Her face had gone pale. “Vera, you stupid idiot. What is wrong with you? What is *wrong* with you?”

“I’m not an idiot,” I retorted helplessly.

“You had an affair with a married man!” Mercy was beside herself. She kept shaking her head, flapping her hands. “I can’t even...I can’t.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. It’s not like that.”

“Oh, sure it’s not. We all know what you’re like. Can’t shut your legs for one moment, can you?”

“Shut up, Mercy,” Josh sneered.

“Vera,” my mother whispered, holding on to the edge of the island. “Please tell me this is all a joke.”

I shook my head. “It’s not. He’s flying me to Spain. I’m going to live with him. I love him.” She gasped. I continued. “It’s not a joke, it’s just life and it’s happening.”

“You’re such a slut,” Mercy said, practically spitting at me. “After what Dad did to Mom? After the mess you both became? What about me? I’m getting married next year, married, and you’re such a selfish whorish brat that you go and take up with a fucking married man, some Spanish scum, and you think you’re so cool about it?”

I couldn’t breathe. My face turned red, hot, tight. I felt a panic attack coming on, anchoring me in a terrible state of paralysis. I was afraid if I did move, I was going to punch my sister right in her self-righteous face.

“Hey, why don’t we all calm down here,” Josh said commandingly, raising his hands.

“Oh fuck off, Josh,” Mercy said. “You’re getting in the way and this has nothing to do with you.”

I didn’t care anymore if Josh did go. I couldn’t get any more hurt than I already was. I knew this wasn’t going to be easy, but damn, I didn’t think their words would be so vicious, so hateful.

“Vera Elizabeth Miles,” my mother said, her tone suddenly hard. I eyed her wearily, suddenly afraid again. I did not like that tone, the dead tone of indifference and disappointment.

She breathed in sharply through her nose. “If you leave this house, if you forgo your studies, you will never get a dime from me for tuition. And you will never be allowed back in this house.”

“Mom!” Josh yelled at her. “Are you crazy?”

“Oh shut up, Joshua,” she snapped, eyes flashing. “I expected more from you. Instead, you’re supporting your sister during her most idiotic move ever.”

Okay. Apparently I *could* get more hurt. My insides twisted around, the pain physical, as if my whole body was under fire. But she couldn’t be serious, could she? She was just overheated, overreacting because of what happened with her and Dad and Jude, right?

I swallowed painfully and stared at her. She stared right back at me. There was no love in her eyes.

“Do you hear me?” she went on, her expression made of ice. “If you walk out that door next week, you aren’t allowed back here. You’ll get no help with school. You’ll be totally on your own. And don’t even think your dad will help you either, because he won’t. You understand? If you’re going to be a damn homewrecker, throwing away your future for a man who can’t keep it in his pants, then you are going to suffer the consequences. These kinds of things do not go unpunished in life. Hope you learn from this, *sweetie*.”

The sweetie part was a killer. Tears came to my eyes, the front of my face feeling hot and tight. I nodded, able to keep them at bay, and turned around, walking quickly back to my room, my heart in my throat, my lungs deprived of air.

I shut the door behind me and stood there for a few minutes, trying to absorb what had just happened, trying to hold my body together. It felt as if it would come falling apart at any moment.

I was risking the chance at a new life on uncertainty, and the only thing that was certain was that if I ever returned, I’d come back to no life at all.

I collapsed to the floor.

I had made my choice.

Part Three

Madrid

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Shame on us, doomed from the start. May god have mercy on our dirty little hearts,” Trent Reznor sang softly in my ear. I don’t know what it is about listening to music 35,000 feet in the air, staring out the window at just clouds and rounded horizons, but life seems so much more profound. So fleeting. Maybe it was because at any moment you could plummet to your death. Maybe because it made you realize how small your life really was and the music was the soundtrack to your epiphany.

Or maybe it was because you were listening to a depressing and intensely relatable song. I sighed and skipped to the next one just as the seatbelt signs came on and the pilot announced our descent into the Madrid-Barajas Airport.

I didn’t need to buckle my belt—I never took that shit off when flying—so I rested my head against the wall, staring out the window as the clouds came up to meet the plane. I was having immense déjà vu, which made sense since I had landed in London back in late May with the same misfiring nerves coursing through my system. But there was more than just buzzing nerves this time: my entire heart, soul, and life was on the line.

The last week in Vancouver had been as miserable as you could imagine. My mother wouldn’t even look at me, and I never saw Mercy again after that. Josh was my saving grace. He was the buffer between me and the world of disappointment and hate. He made me feel loved when others didn’t.

I was extremely busy as well, trying to figure out if I needed to apply for a permit to work and stay in Spain for longer than normal. Because I was Canadian, working in Spain would be a fairly easy process but it was something I would have to deal with later. The most important thing was for me to just get there.

Naturally, my mother did talk to my father, and he didn’t sound too impressed with me either. He thought I was making a mistake. But he did say that if I ever came back home, I could live with him in Calgary. I really hoped it didn’t come to that, but it was nice to know it was there.

I didn’t want to think about that, about returning to Canada with my tail between my legs. My mind kept going to the “what ifs” all throughout the

flight. What if Mateo's friends and family hated me? What if the spark had died while I was away? What if he decided to reconcile with his wife for the sake of their daughter? What if he had forgotten how to love me—or realized he never loved me to begin with?

I was still so caught up in the questions and the lack of sleep that I didn't even flinch when we came upon horrid turbulence upon our arrival. The man next to me was gripping his seat rest until his knuckles were chalk white, his body rigid, and yet my only fear was losing love.

Soon we landed, and while everyone looked relieved to be alive, jonesing to get off the plane, I was stuck to my seat, strapped down by fear. Suddenly, I couldn't do it. Suddenly, I realized what a giant leap I had just taken, something so ballsy and slightly irresponsible. That wasn't just my mother talking in my head, that was me, that was the me that feared she may have risked everything on a huge mistake. I had five hundred Canadian dollars in my bank account, and no way to get back home if something went wrong. As the flight attendant came down the aisle and asked me if I needed assistance getting off the plane, I asked, "Is there any way I can just stay on this plane and have it take me back home?" She laughed politely then shot me dagger eyes that told me to get my ass up.

I walked through the airport as if in slow-motion, everything so familiar and yet foreign. It was nice to hear Spanish being spoken again, and though it filled me with trepidation because, of course, I didn't speak Spanish, and unlike Las Palabras, English wouldn't cut it, it made me feel alive again. It was a kick in the pants of "Hey, I made it, I'm here."

I just wished I wasn't so damn afraid. Mateo had said he'd meet me at baggage claim, and I was actually a nervous wreck about seeing him. Would he look different? Did I look different? Was this going to be passionate? Awkward? Was I going to cry?

Would he still feel something for me?

I felt as if I was going to be sick. After I went through customs, I ducked into the bathroom and sat down in the stall, breathing in and out, trying to keep my nerves from bouncing like a rubber ball. I counted down to ten, did my makeup in the mirror, making sure I didn't look like a jet-lagged mess. I looked normal...a bit wide-eyed but normal. I was wearing a long-sleeved dress that covered up my tats, just wanting to look more presentable when I flew, my hair pulled back into a braid.

Okay. Time to do this.

I walked out of the bathroom and headed for my carousel, my eyes darting around the busy area, looking for a tall handsome Spanish man. I didn't see him. After what seemed like forever, my bags finally appeared—I had a large suitcase that Josh had given me and the backpack I had gone traveling with. I was moving my whole life over, after all, and was amazed everything could fit in those two bags. Everything else I had to leave behind, Josh promising he would take care of it and not let mom throw everything out. Not that she would, but considering her tendency to overreact, I wouldn't put it past her.

I put the bags on one of the luggage carts and looked around. I hated feeling like he was somewhere watching me when I couldn't see him.

After five minutes though, I was really starting to panic. What if he never came for me at all?

"Are you Vera?" I heard a soft voice beside me say.

I turned to see a girl who was at least model height, all willowy limbs, with long, thick brown hair and greenish eyes. She was wearing a loose strappy tank in a metallic green that showed off her tanned skin, and those Hammer pants that made everyone except women like her look like they had saggy diaper butt.

"Yes," I said, smiling uncertainly.

"I'm Lucia," she said, showing me a great flash of white teeth. She thrust out her hand. "I'm Mateo's sister."

"Oh," I said slowly. Why was she here? Where was Mateo? I shook her hand, limp at first until it really clued in who I was speaking to. Jesus, where were my manners? "Hi," I said quickly. "Sorry. I just got off the plane and...um, I guess I thought Mateo would be here."

"He was but he got called into a meeting with the lawyers," she said with a sympathetic smile. "He asked me to come in and get you."

"That was nice of you," I said, feeling terrible. I couldn't have had the best reputation—I mean, if he asked her to come, then she knew about me. And now she had to come to the airport and pick me up.

"Do not worry about it," she said with a wave of her hand. "Do you need help?" She gestured to the cart. "I parked in the temporary lot but it is not too far."

"No, I'm good, thank you."

"You are good?"

I needed to stop saying that. "I don't need any help. I have it."

She smiled and flipped her long hair over her shoulder. I caught a whiff of a women's perfume I couldn't quite place. She walked slightly in front of me, her car keys jangling from her hand. I noticed she was wearing strappy stiletto heels, and I envied her ease in them.

"I like your shoes," I said as we stepped outside into grey skies and muggy warmth.

"Mango," she replied. "The autumn sales will start soon. We will have to go. Mango, Zara, Blanco, they have the best deals. You can get a leather jacket for forty euros. Forty! Real leather." She looked at me over her shoulder. "Do you like shopping? I like your tattoos."

"Uh, thanks," I said, caught off-guard by how friendly she was. I guess it made sense, since her brother was a charmer. Still, I thought if I ever got a chance to meet Lucia I would have been met with hostility, not this instant buddy-buddy thing, which surprisingly, I didn't think was an act.

I pushed the cart forward, struggling to catch up with her long-legged gait. "And yeah I like shopping. We have Zara at home. They have nice dresses."

She shrugged. "More or less. It is a Spanish store, yes? But I have a feeling you will like Blanco more. Once you are settled in with Mateo we shall go." She raised her keys in the air and clicked the fob repeatedly until the electronic *doo doo* of the locks unlocking rang out down the row of cars. Satisfied, she waved at me to follow.

Wow. It was a silver Mercedes two-door...car. I didn't know cars well, obviously, but it looked really pricey.

"Nice car," I said.

"You like it? My boyfriend bought it for me," she said.

"Nice boyfriend," I commented, giving her the slow nod of approval.

"Yes," she said, staring at it with an appreciative smile. "He likes to spoil me. You will meet him too, soon." She opened the trunk and lifted my backpack up, apparently packing some muscle in her thin arms. Together we lifted up my heavy suitcase and pushed it into the back.

"Come now," she said with a jerk of her head. "I will take you to your new home."

Whoa. I know I had moved all the way here for him, but to hear where I was staying being described as home was jarring to my ears. *My home*. That seemed fucking surreal. It's like I stepped off a plane and found a friend and a home right away. It didn't seem right. It seemed too easy.

As she peeled the car smoothly out of the parking lot, she grinned at me slyly. "It seems you are in shock."

I swallowed. "Yeah."

"My brother didn't tell you much, did he?"

"Not really. But I didn't ask too much either."

"I see," she said, pulling out a tin of Altoids from the middle console. She offered one to me, and though I wasn't a fan of strong mints, I knew my breath was probably rank after being on that plane for twelve hours. I put it on my mouth and the taste made my brain perk up.

"Yeah," I said. "It was all kind of last minute. I guess I was just so focused on getting here, and I didn't really think about what happened after. Mateo told me about his new apartment, after...um, you know. But I guess I didn't really think about the whole moving in, physically, that this would be my home."

"Are you worried?" she asked, her lips pursed slightly, her thin brows furrowed.

Yes, I was very worried. But about things that she'd probably take the wrong way. "No," I told her. "It's just..."

"Don't worry, I understand," she said. "I can only imagine how it is for you, to leave home suddenly and come here. Of course, Mama and Papa, we were so surprised about Mateo and you. We thought that, yes, he was different when he came back from Las Palabras. But when he asked for a divorce and then he told us about you, well..."

Well, ain't you a whore, I finished in my head. Frankly, I didn't think I'd heard it enough.

"Well, it certainly was surprising," she went on with a flash of smile. "But in the end, it made Mateo happy. We all knew that he wasn't happy with Isabel anyway. At least I knew that. She was always in it for the prestige and not him." She shot a quick glance at my face, as if to make sure I wasn't the same. "Like I said, he was happy when he said he met you. It did happen fast, and I'm sure there will be words said about it from the other side, but what can I say, Mateo knows what is best for him and we all support Mateo."

That was an awful lot to process at once. "So your mom and dad, they weren't angry at him?"

She shrugged. "Papa didn't really understand, at first. But my mother, she knew. I think it was a similar situation for her, you know, when she met

Papa. None of us had seen Mateo so...like..." she tapped her fingers against the steering wheel in thought, "like he was back in Atletico. You know, the life back in him. That was so nice to see that we didn't really care what had brought about the change in him." She eyed me out of the corner of her eyes and smiled. "I can see though that you are a nice girl. Very different from what he is used to, so don't be surprised if some people give you a funny look. It is just that you are so much younger, and you have the tattoos. It doesn't really mix in with certain types of people. But you know, I like you."

I felt my shoulders relaxing slightly, despite all the shit she had said that I should get nervous about. "I like you too."

"Good. Mateo says I can be a pain in the behind, but as my brother he has that right."

"Are you two close?" It sounded like they were even though he didn't talk about her all that often.

She tilted her hand back and forth. "More or less. We've always had our age differences between us, so perhaps we aren't as close as we should be. But we make an effort."

The funny thing was that they were closer in age to each other than I was to Mateo. I bit my lip.

"But that is not the only thing," she went on reassuringly. "By the time I was a teenager, he was already moved out and part of the team, so I didn't see him very much. He is a good brother though. And a good father, too. Perhaps not the best husband."

I looked at her, my hackles raised. She was smiling at me. "It is true, no? I say, if you can't laugh about it, then life is too serious. Divorce may not be as popular as it is in America, but it happens more and more. It's just life. You make what you can of it, yes?"

I nodded, swallowing slowly. "Yes." If only other people would see it so easily. "So, can I ask how he's been handling it? The divorce, I mean?"

She rubbed her lips together and shrugged as she brought the Mercedes off the highway and on to a boulevard. "It is not easy. Isabel does not want him to have joint custody."

"Why?"

"I think she is punishing him the only way she knows how."

"With their daughter?"

“Si,” she said. “That is what it has come to. I am not too sure if Isabel knows about you specifically or that you are here, but she does know there was another woman. Of course she is hurt and humiliated, as any woman would be.”

My chest felt cold, heavy. This was all my fault.

“She is lashing out. She doesn’t want Chloe Ann to ever see her father again.” She dabbed pale pink nails at her eyes that were suddenly wet, her voice going an octave higher. “And then I would never get to see my niece again. Papa, Mama, they love their granddaughter. And Isabel doesn’t care. She doesn’t even care what is best for Chloe Ann, which is to see her father. They are close, you know. Mateo would do anything for her. I know that is the only reason he has stuck with Isabel for so long.”

Shit. This was too much. Despite what Mateo said about being unhappy before I came along, and wanting a change, wanting a new universe, this wouldn’t have happened this was if it wasn’t for me. I did this. His sister could be losing her niece, her parents could be losing their grandchild. Mateo could be losing the light in his life, his happiest memory. All because of me. Because I wanted him. Because I was young, in love, and selfish.

“Do not be so hard on yourself,” Lucia said with a snuffle, as if she heard my thoughts. “Mateo will win. There is no reason for him not to. The courts will see he is a great father. It’s just such a long process because Isabel is making it so. She is fighting it every step of the way, even for his money. Spanish women, we like to fight. But Mateo will be fine in the end. He is very respected.”

“Makes me think I probably shouldn’t have come here so soon,” I said carefully, my words pricked with regret.

“Perhaps,” she said. “But falling in love with another woman does not mean you are not a good parent. That should have no effect on it.”

“Even if the other woman is fifteen years younger, and covered in tattoos and piercings and is Canadian?”

She studied me for so long with those pretty eyes of hers that I was afraid we were going to collide with the back of a van. “We like Canadians,” she finally said. “It will be fine.”

After that sobering conversation, I asked her about things that didn’t make me feel like a horrible human being. She told me all about her job in marketing for a major cell phone company, how she still lived with her parents because she and her last boyfriend had only broken up six months

ago and she had nowhere to go. Now, despite the car, she wasn't sure if she wanted to move in with her new one. When I asked her why she didn't move out on her own, she told me that didn't sound like a lot of fun.

Eventually the car pulled down one of the prettiest streets I had seen yet. It was wide, with classic buildings and lots of greenery and color. There were all sorts of smartly-dressed people on the sidewalk, tons of boutiques and tapas bars. Even on this grey day, it had life to it.

"This is the Salamanca barrio," Lucia said. "My ex-boyfriend lived down that street right there. I love it here, you're lucky that Mateo got a place. It can be quite expensive."

"Where do you and your parents live?"

"We are just north of the city. My boyfriend now lives in the Ibiza neighborhood, and it is not so bad. If he asks me to move in with him, I will not mind."

We drove around the block a few times, Lucia peering at the apartment buildings, until she drove down toward another road. "Sorry," she apologized. "I have only been here once. But now I remember."

Finally she found a parking spot in front of a cream colored building with almost a Parisian look to it. "Here we are."

I stared up at it through the car window. It was gorgeous. I was going to be living *here*?

We got out of the car, Lucia swinging the pack over her shoulder, me with the suitcase, and we walked through the glass doors of the entrance. The floor had white marble tiles, and the concierge desk was dark wood. Lucia nodded at the man behind the desk who was sifting through a newspaper, and we continued over to the elevator.

"He is only here during the day," she said as she pushed the button. "At night you need to use your keycard to get in the building."

The elevator was tiny as hell, barely fitting us and all my stuff; the floor was red velvet that had seen better days. I guess not all the building was as well-renovated as the lobby. I liked that. It felt more like me, to have something a bit tired and rundown.

We got off on the top floor, which was the sixth, and I followed Lucia down a long hallway of sleek hardwood floors with a red and gold runner carpet down the middle. The doors to each apartment had intricate moldings around the frames. You'd never find a place like this in Vancouver and have it be from the actual time period.

“How old is this building?” I asked.

She shrugged as she tried to find her keys, her glossy hair falling in her face. We had stopped at one of the doors at the end of the hall, light streaming in through an ornate window. “Mateo would know. Maybe two hundred years old, more or less. Our buildings here aren’t as old as the other European cities.”

“It’s old to me,” I told her, amazed.

She stuck the key in the lock and we walked into my new home.

I sucked in my breath. It was *beautiful*.

The floor was hardwood like the hall, but a lighter maple color. The walls were textured and a creamy off-white. The ceilings were very high and had iron chandeliers hanging from them, much like Las Palabras, but these were painted the same color as the walls. As I slowly walked down the front hall, marvelling at the Matador paintings on the walls, I came across the kitchen to the left, a big open space of gleaming chrome and granite, fit for a chef. Beyond that was the living room with a flatscreen TV and soft white leather couch. Windows on the far wall stretched from floor to ceiling, bathing everything in light. You could hear the muffled sounds of the street below and had a view across the street to another beautiful apartment.

“This is amazing,” I said under my breath, peering out the window. I looked over my shoulder at her. She was standing to the side of the kitchen, my backpack still on her shoulders, texting someone on her phone.

Deciding to give myself a tour, I looked to my right and saw another hallway with a bathroom at the end of it. I walked down it and peered into the first room to my left. It was a small den, barely furnished except for a roll-top desk, a laptop, and an open filing cabinet. A few papers spilled onto the carpet beneath. A large amount of boxes were stacked along one wall. Seeing that, seeing the proof of Mateo having to move, having to start his life over, picked at my heart a bit.

I wasn’t the only one faced with massive change.

I continued down the hall, calling over my shoulder, “Do you know when Mateo will be back?”

I opened a door across from it on the right and peered into what looked like a small guest bedroom, tastefully decorated but un-lived in.

“He just texted me,” she said. “Should be another hour or so, he hopes.”

I nodded and opened the door on my left. The last one. The master bedroom. It was gorgeous: a king bed with a fluffy white duvet that you'd find at fancy hotels, a large window that opened to the street, a humongous antique dresser, a walk-in closet (great excuse to go shopping with Lucia), and what looked to be a vast en-suite bathroom.

"So," Lucia said. I turned to look at her putting the backpack down on the couch. "Now that you are here, I'm afraid I have to leave before the traffic gets too bad."

I walked down toward her, both afraid to be alone and eager to take in my new place by myself.

She embraced me in a quick hug and a perfumed kiss on each cheek. "I will see you soon, yes?"

"I hope so."

She smiled coyly. "This is your home now, Vera. You are with my brother. We will see each other so much that soon I will be a pain in the butt to you, too."

She turned and strutted toward the door. Then she stopped and said, "I forgot to leave you these," and put down a key and a key card on the kitchen island.

Then she was gone and I was all alone in my new place.

I was immediately overwhelmed by the silence, by the unpacking that needed to be done, by the shower I needed to take, by the exploring I needed to do. Instead I lay back on the couch and closed my eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The sound of keys rattling in the door woke me.

My eyes sprung open, my heart immediately off to the races. I sat right up and turned to look at the door, blinking a few times. I had to remember where I was. Mateo's place. My place. I had fallen asleep on the couch, my body and mind weary from my travels.

My god, was it Mateo at the door?

I didn't have to wonder for long.

The door opened and in he stepped.

All the breath was taken out of me.

Time came to a crawl.

My heart kicked up a notch.

The air became charged, electric.

All those cliché things that actually do happen to you once Mateo Casalles steps into a room.

He looked unbelievable. A sharp cut steel grey suit that showed off his broad shoulders, a white shirt underneath with top buttons undone to show off the dip of his throat, and no tie. Grey loafers with no socks so you could see a sliver of tanned feet. A thick briefcase in his large hands.

No wedding ring.

I paused on that for a moment, feeling the weight of it, before I looked up to his face.

He had a few day's worth of stubble along his strong jaw, his hair a bit more tamed than I was used to seeing, slicked back slightly. I preferred his hair messy, but this showed off his great nose and high cheekbones. There was a faint trace of purple under his eyes, like he hadn't gotten enough sleep, but the look in his eyes more than made up for it. They were full of wonder, amazement, and a hint of longing and desire that made me think perhaps I was his favorite food after all.

"Vera," he said in a low voice, unsure, as if I were an apparition. He kicked the door shut with his leg and walked slowly toward me, putting his briefcase on the counter while his eyes never left mine. We were locked in our gazes, that charge in the air thrumming between us.

I found myself slowly getting to my feet, staring at him, feeling that tiny bit of awkwardness that you get when you see someone you haven't for a long time, someone that you've been dreaming of, someone that owns your body and mind. It was like a first date, each person sussing out the other, wondering if they felt the same, wondering what to do.

At least that's how *I* was feeling.

Mateo was never one to overanalyze.

He suddenly marched right over to me, a madness in his eyes, and for a heady moment I thought he might consume me.

He put his arms around me and brought me into a tight, hard, nearly painful embrace, holding me as if I were to be ripped right out of his hands. I was engulfed by his intoxicating smell, that mix of fresh ocean breezes and sensual musk, and strengthened by the feeling of his hard chest pressed up against me. I let out a muffled cry, my body overcome with hunger, my heart desperate for his. I could have been standing in the middle of the Arctic tundra for all I cared; as long as I was in his arms I felt *home*.

"I can't believe you are here, my Estrella," he murmured into my hair. "I can't believe it. I pray I am not dreaming."

"I pray for the same thing," I said, my fingers pressing into him, afraid to lose contact.

He pulled back slightly and cupped my face in his hands, gazing down at me with eyes that burned with liquid intensity. "But you are real."

He kissed me deeply, our lips feeding the passion in each other, our tongues melding together, sweet and spicy. That python of desire was back, squeezing me until it hurt, making me want, need, crave nothing but him, nothing but this moment. We gripped each other, fire in our fingers, pressed against each other as if we couldn't get closer. I'd never wanted his cock inside me so badly, that physical link between us, to feel him so deep and thick.

Before I could even tell my hands to act, they were already reaching for his pants, unzipping them, sliding into his briefs and pulling out his cock, long, hard and heavy in my hands. Jesus. I almost came just from touching *him*.

He groaned at my grip, and that only made me throb even more, my underwear soaked. They needed to come off, now.

We fumbled for each other frantically, Mateo's kisses growing deeper, his tongue fucking my mouth, and I felt my knees buckling. I nearly fell

back to the floor but his hands had a stronghold on my arms. With a flame in his eyes, he lowered me to the rug until I was flat on my back. I hiked up my dress and wriggled out of my panties while he managed to only get his pants and briefs off. He attempted to unbutton his shirt but growled, “Fuck it,” and came down on top of me.

His head immediately went between my legs, and I made fists into his hair, already squirming. “My God, I have missed this taste,” he moaned, the vibration against my clit causing me to gasp and tug hard on his hair. It took no time before his tongue was swirling me to an orgasm. I wasn’t seeing stars—I was the stars.

There was no break, no respite. With my body still riding the wave, trembling with ecstasy, he was positioning his cock at my entrance.

“I must have you, like this, right now,” he said adamantly. “I am clean. Do you trust me?”

Of course I did. I wasn’t going to put a condom on him anyway. If I didn’t trust him by now then I shouldn’t be here. Thankfully, I was religious when it came to the pill.

“Yes,” I said, nearly begging. “Please come inside of me.”

With his hands planted on the rug on either side of me, his answer was a single thrust, going in deep, expanding me. I gasped and he slowly slid out. Then back in again. Then out. Taking his sweet, beautiful time. I stared down at him as he pushed in and out, with his slick cock and his white work shirt. I couldn’t keep my hands to myself. I started playing with my nub but soon my hand was replaced by his.

“That is my job,” he grunted, his fingers sliding back and forth between my clit and his cock.

Soon, his thrusts became faster and faster, and he was so adept at control, playing me just right, that I wasn’t coming until he was. Both of us cried out, moaning and jerking from the spasms, riding an endless wave that made my mouth gape open and my eyes roll back. When he began to slow, he remained inside of me, kissing my face gently and everywhere. My eyelids, my nose, my cheeks, my chin. Our breathing eventually returned to normal, but I didn’t want him to pull out yet. I wrapped my arms around his toned back and held him to me, his face in the crook of my neck.

I’d dreamed about having him like this again. It’s what kept me going on those nights where I felt alone and cold and unloved.

A tear rolled down my cheek.

I was finally home.



I awoke before the break of dawn, the world saturated in a grainy ink blue. After the night of sex—on the floor, on the couch, against the wall, in the bed, in the shower—I would have thought I’d sleep for days. But despite all the frenzied activity, I was wide awake, my internal clock all messed up thanks to jet lag. I stared down at Mateo sleeping soundly beside me, so tanned and dark against the cool white of the sheets. I could still hardly believe he was here.

I wanted to run my fingers over his nose, feel his soft lips, his solid jaw, his chin, his cheekbones, but I didn’t want to wake him. I was somewhat surprised at his stamina last night—I had been with guys my age who tuckered out after two vigorous sessions in the sack, let alone five. I wanted to wear Mateo out until he couldn’t possibly go on—that was my new goal.

I smiled to myself at that thought and slowly got out of bed. The light outside was already turning from ink to sky blue, and through the thin glass of the windows I could hear the birds chirping. The only thing this apartment was missing was a balcony. It would have been nice to start the day outside.

I slipped on my boy shorts and my t-shirt since we’d slept naked, and went out into the kitchen to make myself some coffee. He had a fancy espresso machine that would put my barista skills to good use, but I knew it would be messy and noisy. I rummaged through the cupboards, full of food that looked untouched, and finally found a container of instant coffee. While the kettle was heating up, I leaned against the counter and hugged my arms across my chest. The apartment was cool in the morning, which was good considering that Madrid was apparently going through a heat wave. I was so in and out yesterday that I barely had time to feel it.

I went through three cups of coffee, black, my heart being jumpstarted again and again, and just took in the look of my surroundings, my new home. It was going to take some getting used to, especially with jet lag. I know when I was in London, the first few days were spent in a fog and I had done stuff that, looking back now, I could barely remember. I wondered if I would look back at this exact moment and remember everything I was thinking, everything I was feeling: excited, nervous, hopeful, and scared.

Compared to yesterday though, I felt a lot better now that I was with Mateo. He made a lot of the fears go away, though there were still some dark worries lurking around in the back of my heart. I worried that I wouldn't be able to fit in here—yes, I did well with the Spaniards at Las Palabras, but this was the city of Madrid, and in some ways a whole new game I knew nothing about.

I worried that his friends and family wouldn't like me—while Lucia was darling, and according to her, her parents were accepting of me and Mateo, I didn't know that for sure. As for his friends, I had absolutely no idea. His friends were all going to be in their mid to late thirties. What the hell were they going to think about me? I still liked to party, go out and get drunk, go to concerts where you got stale beer thrown in your face and people kicking you in the head from crowd-surfing. I wasn't a martini-sipping in a fancy lounge, gossiping about boring shit kind of girl. I didn't have children, or even a pet. I didn't have a prestigious career or a well-paying job or a job in general. Fuck, I didn't even speak Spanish.

And of course my biggest worry was the divorce itself and all that involved, particularly Chloe Ann. I was worried that the little girl would resent me for doing this to her, for taking her father away from her. I worried that Isabel and her semi-royal family would turn hateful and come after me for being the other woman, the villainous homewrecker. And more than anything, I worried that it would become too much for Mateo and I to carry on. We'd survived Las Palabras and seeing each other every day; we'd survived a long-distance relationship where we never saw each other, but this would be the final test. If we could survive my moving to Madrid and being with Mateo while all of this shit was whirling around us, then we could truly survive everything.

I just had no idea how things were going to pan out. I'd have to start living in the moment, not worrying too much about the future, or I'd go insane. I already made all the right steps—now it was time to see where they would lead.

Eventually Mateo came out of the bedroom, having slipped on his boxer briefs, and stood in the hallway, staring at me with sleepy eyes while scratching his bedhead. As usual, he skirted the line between sexy as hell manbeast and being absolutely adorable.

"I had the most wonderful dream," he said with a yawn, padding over to me. "That you had come to live with me in Madrid. Now I see you in my

kitchen, drinking my shitty coffee, and I have to ask...am I still dreaming?"

I grinned at him. I don't know why I bothered with coffee when the mere sight of him made my heart turn into a rocket. "I may be dreaming too. Some things seem far too good to be true."

He came and kissed me on the forehead. "I like you like this, my dream Estrella." He walked over to the fridge and opened it, and I took a long moment to admire his ass. "You, in my kitchen, like a vision."

"Well, I like you in the kitchen too. Especially when I'm up here," I said, patting the counter with a wicked gleam in my eye. I jumped up so I was sitting on it, opened my legs, and gestured to my pussy. "And when you're right here." I expected him to laugh. I didn't expect him to be interested right away, not after the night we had, but he closed the fridge door and strolled over to me, a smug look on his face.

"You want more?" he murmured, reaching for my underwear. I lifted my hips and he pulled them right down my legs. I kicked them off to the floor as he pulled his cock out of his briefs, already thick, hard and at attention.

I bit my lip, wondering how the fuck I got so lucky. "Of course I want more. What about you?"

"Vera," he whispered feverishly, coming up against me, my legs around his hips, his hands in my hair. He gazed at my face, blinking as if in disbelief. "I can never get enough of you, ever. I could fuck you every day, several times a day, for the rest of my life, and I'll still never get enough." He kissed me, soft and wet, then slid a finger down into me. I gasped at the intrusion, immediately wanting more.

"Tu coño es mi hermosa prisión," he said breathlessly.

I grinned and pulled back, trying to look at him. "What did you say? Something about my pussy?"

"It is a good thing and it is the truth," he said, lazily returning the grin. He then proceeded to fuck me right there on the counter, my legs wrapped around him, my nails digging into his ass.

It was a good morning.



My first week in Madrid flew past in the blink of an eye. Maybe jet lag had something to do with it, but it felt like one big airy dream filled with

nothing but sex and food. If we weren't in the apartment making up for lost time, we were out exploring Madrid. We ate at a lot of tapas bars in very youthful and vibrant parts of town. It was not at all what I would have expected. I thought once I was with Mateo, he'd be taking me wining and dining to the fancy restaurants, the trendy bars where everything was made of ice and the waiters didn't smile, the lounges for the elite.

Instead, we were almost slumming it. When I brought it up, he told me that he didn't care much for those types of places anyway and thought I would be more comfortable in laidback environments. Frankly, I thought he was probably trying to avoid running into his soon-to-be-ex-wife's crowd and I couldn't fault him for that. I enjoyed living in the happy bubble that the first week brought me, and I wasn't looking forward to the reality that would come crashing into us one day.

On a sunny Saturday, the city still sweltering and strangely empty with most of the locals escaping to Mallorca or the coastal beaches, I finally got to meet up with Claudia. She was working longer hours at her job since so many of her colleagues were on vacation, and we hadn't had a chance to hang out. Ricardo was now living with her in Madrid as well, having been able to get a job transfer.

Mateo and I walked down to Plaza Mayor where we were to meet them at an outdoor café that had an assortment of beers on tap. That's really all I required when the weather was like this—a patio and beer. Though being sticky was never fun, I always took advantage of the sun and heat whenever I could, thanks to Vancouver's mild and rainy weather. You'd never hear me complaining about hot weather.

"It will be nice to see them again," Mateo remarked to me as we waited to cross the street. When the coast was clear, he grabbed my hand and led me across the road. It was the little things like that that made me do an internal *squee*, that got the butterflies racing. I loved it when he held my hand or put his arm around my waist in public.

It especially meant something to me because I often saw the looks that other people gave us, the sight of the business man with the tattooed girl. The men looked envious and the women looked disgusted. The good thing was that Mateo certainly didn't look thirty-eight, so really, it wasn't that scandalous, people just liked any reason to pass judgment. It also helped that Mateo started dressing down a lot more, like he did at Las Palabras—his signature "business" look was jeans and a blazer—and I'd made sure to

start dressing up. It wasn't a stretch for me, especially in the summer—I loved a good sundress.

“Look who it is, the Anglo and the Spaniard!” I heard Claudia yell from across the square. Sure enough, there was Claudia and Ricardo, getting out of their chairs, big smiles on their faces. Claudia looked radiant, her skin deeply tanned, wearing a plain green v-neck and a white skirt. Ricardo was clean-shaven, and in shorts and a soccer jersey.

I hugged her and we exchanged pecks on the cheek. “You look great,” I told her, looking her up and down.

“So do you. Like Marilyn Monroe,” she said. I was wearing a white retro-styled dress with cherries on it. I wasn't sure if I looked Marilyn or just very Rockabilly. Either way, the boobs were definitely getting some sun.

While she greeted Mateo, I greeted Ricardo. “You must forgive me,” he said, pecking me quickly. “Our English has not been so good since we got back from Las Palabras.”

“Speak for yourself,” Claudia admonished him with a grin. She looked at me, her eyes dancing. “I was promoted the other day to take care of the international accounts.”

“Congrats!” I told her.

“That is fantastic,” Mateo said, casually jamming his hands in his pockets. He was wearing black knee-length shorts, Keds (no socks), and a plain white polo shirt, his face erring on the side of stubbly instead of beardy thanks to the heat. “I could barely put together a sentence before Vera showed up.”

“Oh, that is not true,” I said. I wanted to remind him that we were speaking English and talking on the phone nearly every day until I got here. But even though Claudia already knew that about us, something made me clamp my mouth shut. Maybe because now that I was finally here and we were finally together, all the time leading up to now had been part of an actual relationship. It had been an affair—a short one, a distant one, before he had come clean and filed for divorce—but definitely not harmless.

We sat down with them, and like that time at Acantilado, Mateo and Ricardo went off to get us drinks. I watched as his tall, broad-shouldered form disappeared into the dark of the bar, unable to take my eyes off of him.

“Well, look at you, so in love,” Claudia teased.

I rolled my eyes. “Look at yourself.”

She waved at me in dismissal. “Maybe a month ago, when Ricardo first got here. Now I’m already tired of him pissing on the toilet seat, never closing the lids on things.”

“Then I’m sure that will be me soon, so let me have my googly eyes, mmmkay?”

She smiled and studied me for a few moments while she finished her beer. Then she smiled, wider this time, until I could see her canines, and exclaimed, “I am so happy you are here! I never thought you would actually do it, to be honest with you.”

“Neither did I,” I admitted. “Until it seemed like it was the only thing *to* do.”

“Well,” she said, reaching out and laying her hand on mine for a moment. “I am glad you did. This must be such a change for you though. How are you coping?”

“I honestly can’t complain,” I said with a coy smile.

She wagged her finger at me. “I know that look. You had it on the last day of Las Palabras.”

“I was crying on the last day of Las Palabras.”

“We were all crying. But in between your tears you had this same look. Utterly satisfied. Like you just had a great meal.”

“Satisfied. That’s a good word,” I said, leaning back in the chair. I tilted my head to the sun, glad for my shades. Pigeons cooed from below, walking among the cobblestones. I’d been dreaming about exactly this for so long, being in the sun, being where there was life, being with my friends and love again. I needed to soak it up like the rays.

“When does fall come?” I asked her, keeping my eyes closed and face to the sky. “More specifically, when does summer end?”

“Are you tired of the heat?” she asked. “Weak Canadian.”

“Not at all, I love it,” I told her. “But I know that the seasons will change soon. I like to hang on to this—to summer and sunshine—for as long as I can.”

She peered at her arm, as if her tan could tell her. “I say another two weeks. Then it will start to end. October, you will feel the difference.”

I didn’t dare think that far ahead.

Soon Mateo and Ricardo came back with our drinks and we spent the whole afternoon just relaxing under the sun, chasing away the heat with ice cold beers. I was buzzed—summer buzzed, the best kind. And no, not like a

bee. We literally sat there for hours and hours, all chatting away like it was old times. Near the end I was starting to feel guilty for having them adapt to my language, so I made them speak Spanish at the end to help me learn. I was lost, but after a while I started to pick up on things here and there.

After a while though, it was time to part ways. We invited them over for a drink—they would have been our first guests—but Claudia looked a bit drunk and was complaining about a headache, so we made plans for another day and Ricardo took her home.

When we were walking back to the apartment, our gaits meandering along the stones of the sidewalk, Mateo gestured to another bar. I was drunk too but had the energy to keep going, especially as the sun was only beginning to set.

It was fairly busy, but I guess it was Saturday night after all. It wasn't a large bar and had a rustic appeal to it. Little plates of patatas bravas—potatoes with a spicy orange sauce—and calamari and olives were lined up along the bar. Mateo put his hand on my shoulder and asked me to order him a beer while he went to use the restroom.

I went up to the bar and leaned against it, trying to get the bartender's attention since he was wrapped up in conversation with an old dude. A young guy, mid-twenties, sauntered up to me. I could see him approaching out of the corner of my eye, and it wasn't until I looked at him that I saw he was actually quite cute. He had sandy brown hair that fell in his eyes, bronze skin, green eyes, and a chin with a dimple in it.

He rattled off some Spanish to me but I could only smile and say, "Los siento, je ne parle pas Spanish." Then I laughed at myself from my drunken attempt at Spanish. Somehow I managed to get it mixed with both French and English.

The guy laughed. "You are American?"

"Canadian, actually," I said.

He nodded, as if that was better, and stepped a bit closer. "Cool. So what are you doing in Madrid?"

I smiled at him, trying to be polite and charming but not give him the wrong idea at the same time. "I live here."

"Oh, you do?" he asked. "Can I buy you a drink?"

I shook my head. "No, thank you."

He didn't seem offended, not like guys back at home would be. "So do you live alone?"

“She lives with me,” I heard Mateo’s gruff voice say from behind me, his arm going around my shoulder. I looked up at him and was surprised to see the look of cold steel in his eyes, the muscle in his jaw tensing. He was looking at the guy like he was about put his fist through his face.

The guy looked between the two of us a few times then threw up his hands and muttered something with a smile on his face. He turned around and moseyed into the depths of the bar.

“What did he say?” I asked.

Mateo didn’t say anything for a few moments. I could see his pulse beating along an artery in his neck. He was angry...or maybe it was something else.

Could Mateo have been jealous?

“Mateo,” I said.

He slowly tore his eyes away from the guy who had long since disappeared from sight and looked down at me. Instead of looking angry, he looked worried, nearly frantic. His grip around my shoulders tightened.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, his voice breaking with something I didn’t understand. “Come with me.”

I blinked, puzzled, and jerked my thumb at the bartender. “You don’t want a beer.”

“I just want you,” he whispered. He grabbed my hand and led me back toward the restrooms. He kicked open the woman’s washroom and poked his head inside. Then he ushered me in, closing the door behind him.

“What is...*what*?” I asked, still a bit confused as he brought me over to the handicapped stall and locked us both in there. “Um, Mateo.”

He grabbed my face and started kissing me, hard and feverish. The breath was sucked out of me, replaced with fire. “I am the only man for you,” he growled. “I’m going to come inside of you and I’m going to make you come hard.”

Well, okay then.

The man was jealous. And I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like it.

He hiked up my dress until it was around my waist and groaned at the sight of me with no panties—I knew there was a good reason to go commando. Suddenly he picked me up and pressed me against the wall, taking out his cock while I gripped him with my thighs. He pushed into me, tight and quick, and I gasped at the friction.

He fucked me relentlessly, his passion and need filling the air like static electricity, present in every touch of his body. He'd gone mad with lust and I'd gone mad for him.

When he was done, both of us breathless and sore, we made each other look presentable again. I smoothed out his collar, patted down his hair where I had pulled on it; he tucked my breasts back into my dress, pushed the hair behind my ears. We grinned at each other, two silly fools in love, and opened the stall door.

There was a woman standing there as if waiting for us to finish.

She already had a look of disgust on her face, but when she laid her eyes on Mateo, they widened as if she'd just seen the biggest spider in the world.

"Mateo?" she cried out in ardent disbelief.

Oh fuck. I swallowed hard and started paying attention to her. She was probably in her late-thirties with dark brown hair cut into a severely stylish bob. Red lipstick, secretary glasses on her eyes—the cat-eyed kind, a yellow jeweled tunic over white capri pants. Sophisticated. Older. And she obviously knew Mateo.

And suddenly I couldn't breathe. This could not be good.

Before Mateo could say anything—he was, in fact, too stunned to speak—she put one hand on her hip and cocked her head, eying us both with a manipulative gleam, the disbelief having worn off. She pointed at me and looked at Mateo. "Mateo, no creo que esta es tu esposa."

I understood *esposa*. That meant wife.

"Sonia," he said, finding his voice. He cleared his throat. He looked down at me and I saw absolute fear in his eyes. It rocked my foundation. "Vera, this is Sonia. I have known her for a long time. She moved to Paris. I did not know she was back in Madrid." He stressed these words to let me know that this chick did not know about the divorce; at least that's what I got out of it.

Oh, this so did not look good. Now I was blushing with shame, like a flaming tomato. I had to get out of there.

I nodded at her and gave her a quick smile which she did not return. "Nice to meet you," I said. I brushed past her and shot Mateo an apologetic look over my shoulder. "I need to get some air."

I made my way out of the bathroom and bar and into the night air. A certain chill had settled in it, despite the heat of the day.

Summer was ending sooner than I thought.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The next day was Sunday and a day that Mateo thought I should finally meet his little Chloe Ann. I was extremely nervous, especially with what had happened with Sonia at the bar. After I had gone outside, Mateo explained to his friend that he and Isabel were divorcing. He didn't say anything about me, I guess that was pretty explanatory. And even though Sonia had been his friend—an ex-girlfriend of one of his buddies—and not Isabel's, he said he could feel the hate coming off of her.

It definitely put a damper on the evening and made me realize with a kick to the gut that we couldn't be a normal couple, not yet anyway. We were hanging around fun restaurants and bars not just because of me, but because he didn't want to run into people like Sonia. Claudia and Ricardo were the first friends we'd met in a long time, I hadn't seen his parents yet, and it seemed like there was an awful lot of hiding going on.

When I brought the subject up over our hung over breakfast, the feeling that our relationship was as sequestered as it had ever been, he told me that he'd go pick up Chloe Ann and we could take her to the zoo, one of her favorite places.

He called up Isabel and I listened to their conversation blatantly, mainly because I didn't understand any of it. There were a few tense moments, the heel of Mateo's hand pressed to his forehead, his eyes squeezed shut. Finally, it seemed she acquiesced and he let out a sigh of relief.

I, however, was a bundle of raw nerves. This was his daughter we were talking about. And I knew she had no idea who I was. Mateo had told me that though Isabel knew there was another woman he met at Las Palabras, she didn't know I was here, living with him, so Chloe Ann definitely didn't know about me.

"What are you going to say to her?" I asked later as he was grabbing his keys off the hook on the wall, about to leave. "Who will you tell Chloe Ann I am?"

He gave me a soft look. "I will tell her you are a friend of mine from another country, Canada, and that you are very nice."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and folded my arms. "That's it? I mean, don't you think she'll tell Isabel about me? Don't you think that

maybe you should tell her about me anyway? I mean, the thing with Sonia...it'll happen again, don't you think?"

He nodded and exhaled, his shoulders slumping slightly. He looked defeated. He stared at his feet for a moment before he looked back at me, a quiet desperation on his brow. "Vera, I just want you to see Chloe Ann. I want her to see you. You're the most important girls in my life. So...I will ask a favor from you. Will you do me a favor?"

I couldn't say no to him. "What?"

"Today, when I bring her back here, can you cover up your tattoos? Put your hair up. And I will call you Estrella."

I felt my stomach freefall. I frowned, feeling disturbed. "You want me to hide who I am? Pretend to be someone else?"

His lips curved into a sympathetic smile. "No, Vera. Just...you are so lovely, so full of life. You're distinctive. You're right, I need to tell Isabel about you. But I also want you to see Chloe Ann, and I don't want Isabel to hear it from her."

"I don't think I like this."

"Please? Just this once."

"She'll still probably say she met Daddy's friend Estrella, what's the difference?"

"Please."

I sighed, running my hand through my hair in frustration. "Fine."

He came over and held me tight, a quick embrace. "Thank you. I'll be back soon."

And then he left.

I leaned back against the hallway wall, my legs splayed in front of me, barely keeping me up. This was getting so complicated, and it would only continue to be complicated until...well, I didn't know when it would end. Things never got tidied up the minute a couple got divorced. It seemed, from what I'd seen, that the divorce itself was the easiest part and all the real shit is what came afterward, shit that went on for years.

And then I understood why Mateo wanted to keep me so hidden, so under wraps. Lucia had said that being with me wouldn't reflect poorly on him to a judge, and while that may or may not be true, it obviously wasn't what Mateo thought. He feared that if Isabel knew I was living with him, that it would affect his chances of getting joint custody of Chloe Ann. And I

knew that if I was just some other woman, it probably wouldn't be as much of a problem.

But I was me. I had all the tattoos, the piercings, the way I dressed, the way I was, the fact that I was fifteen years younger. I was sure that Isabel could spin me into anything she wanted; all she'd have to do was point to me and call me dangerous, a delinquent, a threat to her child.

For the first time in my entire life, I felt a cut of regret at all my tattoos.

But Mateo loves you for you, I told myself. Because of all those things that make you who you are.

I knew I was right. I knew that had I been someone else, someone older, no ink, someone prudish and classy and demure, that Mateo wouldn't have fallen in love.

It was just such a shame that the reasons Mateo fell in love with me were the very same ones that could be used to rip his life apart.

With that heaviness weighing down on my heart, I went into the bedroom and changed into skinny jeans and my Freddie Mercury long-sleeved tee. I brushed my hair back and knotted it in a bun at the back. I took my dark eye makeup down a touch, but unfortunately that only highlighted my age. There was really nothing that could be done about that. Thankfully to a five-year-old, every adult looked the same—old.

While I was waiting for him to come back, I started pacing the apartment, trying to take my mind off of things, this terrible feeling of dread that had started building up in my gut after we saw Sonia last night, like the week of sex and fun was over and now things had to get very real and very serious. I'd only spoken to Josh once since I got here, but I had a feeling I was going to need his advice again. I couldn't burden Mateo with this exact thing. He already had enough to worry about.

Suddenly my cell rang, jolting me out of my thoughts. It was Mateo.

"Hey, where are you?" I asked.

"I'm sorry," he said in a whisper. "Do you mind coming to meet me at the zoo instead?"

The fuck was going on? "What? Why?"

"Please," he said. "It will work better this way. Trust me."

I exhaled sharply through my nose. "Fine. How do I get there?"

He gave me directions that sounded far more complicated than I wanted to deal with. I grabbed my purse and headed out the door.

Nearly an hour later, after I'd gotten off at the wrong Metro stop, I slogged my way through the heat up to the zoo, which was set in a beautiful park. After I paid my way in, I watched the signs to the Panda exhibit. Apparently it was one of the more popular attractions and Chloe Ann was obsessed with pandas. I was tempted to snatch up one of the stuffed ones I saw for sale in the kiosks, but thought that would probably come across as a bit creepy, a random lady giving a child a toy.

I kept my eyes peeled for them, taking in the sights, the smells, the screaming children, the families. It was kind of weird to be in this atmosphere, so wholesome and normal.

Eventually I spotted Mateo in the crowd. With Chloe Ann up on his shoulders, it wasn't hard. I stood there, watching, unseen, just wanting to observe him and his daughter together.

She was certainly a precious little thing. She had on blue leggings, a white t-shirt that already seemed to have some sort of stain on it, and little blue running shoes on her feet. Her profile was dainty and cute—she got Isabel's delicate nose and Mateo's full lips—and she had long sandy brown hair that waved and shimmered in the sun. I was surprised at how at ease she seemed with Mateo, holding on to his head and occasionally smacking him playfully in the face over something. Sometimes she'd kick her heels into his chest, like he was a horse, and he'd try and take her closer. Unfortunately, the crowd in front of the pandas was so thick that even I couldn't see what they were all staring at.

While they stood there, she talked to him, nearly non-stop, always smiling. In turn, Mateo was smiling too, a big, beautiful smile that made his face glow. It was almost heartbreaking to know what was going on outside of this picture, and once again the guilt started eating away at me.

I didn't know how long I was planning on being a stalker but eventually Mateo's sixth sense kicked in. He swivelled his head and his dark eyes came right to me.

I lifted my hand up quickly in a soft wave. He smiled back and then said something to Chloe Ann. The girl scrunched up her face, not happy about this no more panda thing, and he brought her over to me.

I didn't know what to do or say, how to act, how to stand, so I just stared at him while he stopped right in front of me. Chloe Ann's eyes were not noticing me at all—they were looking in the distance at what other animals lurked out there.

“Hola,” Mateo said to me warmly.

So I was speaking Spanish now?

Chloe Ann finally looked at me, peering down inquisitively. “Hola,” she said in a tiny voice.

I smiled at her. “Hola. Me llamo es Estrella.” And I was totally butchering the language already.

“Mateo,” he said, gesturing to himself. He tapped her leg. “Chloe Ann.” Then he began speaking to her quickly in Spanish and I could only stare, smile, and nod, like I totally had a clue what was being said.

Chloe Ann smiled at me after he finished talking and he gently lowered her to the ground. She ran over and grabbed my hand, tugging lightly at it. “Vamos!” she cried out, giggling, and started to pull me toward the panda enclosure. I laughed in surprise and raised my brows at Mateo.

“Pandas,” he said, rocking back on his heels and watching us go. “Su favorito.”

I guess he had told his daughter something about pandas either being her or my favorite, because she led me over to the crowd and was pointing in their direction, saying a bunch of stuff. I could only nod and keep saying, “Si, si,” over and over again but that seemed to be enough to keep her satisfied. She just kept talking and talking. It was the cutest thing ever, and I felt some maternal part of me that I had always assumed was dormant starting to flicker.

I felt Mateo’s presence behind me, amazed at the energy he radiated without even touching me. “I told her that Estrella has never been to the zoo before,” he whispered in my ear, “and your favorite animal is the panda.”

“She didn’t question how you knew that?” I whispered back.

“No. What her father says is usually the truth.”

Usually.

Soon, Chloe Ann grew tired of the crowds, so she led me and Mateo toward the tigers, taking both of our hands in hers. I was amazed at how brave and comfortable she was with a supposed stranger like myself. I thought maybe she could pick up on how relaxed Mateo was around me, but I could also tell she was just a happy, adventurous little thing.

Mateo beamed at me, at his daughter between us. My heart did back flips at the content expression on his face—there was nothing but love for this moment. We found the tigers, Chloe Ann telling me all about them. I kept saying, “Grande gato” and she kept correcting me with impatience.

When we were done with that, we found a little café to sit at and had something to eat. Chloe Ann only stopped talking when she was devouring her ice cream cone, something she relished so completely that I had the impression she wasn't allowed treats like this normally. Dad was spoiling her.

When she was done, he plucked her out of her seat and put her in his lap, making silly faces at her and blowing raspberries on her forehead. She giggled uncontrollably, loving it, wiping her ice cream sticky fingers on his shirt. He didn't care.

Watching their interaction, I was flooded with warmth. My uterus started kicking at me. It kind of hurt.

Then he said something to her about "adios" and suddenly Chloe Ann's face fell like a brick. Her lower lip stuck out, brow scrunching together. She wailed something to him, talking fast, punctuated by hiccups.

Mateo kept apologizing, trying to sound light. She shook her head and buried it in Mateo's neck, growing quiet, her little arms wrapped around her. He held her close and shot me a look—it was the look of his heart breaking.

Eventually he had to get up, and he held Chloe Ann to him like that as we walked toward the park exit. At the sight of the gift shop though, her tears seemed to dry up and she pointed excitedly at a stuffed monkey. Mateo let her down and she ran over to it, holding it to her chest.

"What was that about?" I asked him.

"I told her it was time to take her home," he admitted softly. "She asked when I was coming home. Said she missed me and wanted me to tell her stories at night. I told her I wasn't coming home anymore." His eyes were getting watery. He sighed. "It's been like this every time I see her. I wish I could see her more, but until the divorce is final, Isabel keeps it to just once a week."

"But legally she can't do that," I said. "If your divorce isn't final, you're just separated. You have the rights."

He nodded slowly. "I know. But I don't want to fight Isabel right now, not with Chloe Ann on the line. I have done and will do what I can to make Isabel happy, to keep whatever peace there is."

The gravity of the situation sank over me. The desperation in Mateo's voice was unmistakable. My eyes stung. "I'm a terrible person," I blurted out, unable to keep it inside.

Mateo's eyes widened with shock. "Don't you ever say that," he whispered harshly, his gaze fiery. "You don't ever say that about yourself, understand?"

"Papa!" Chloe Ann cried out. He slowly tore his eyes off of mine and looked over at her. She jumped up and down, the monkey raised above her head, a pleading look in her eyes. "Por favor, Papa!"

He sighed and squeezed the bridge of his nose. "Si, Chloe Ann," he said and walked over to her, taking the monkey from her hands and walking it to the counter. She followed him, hanging on to the edge of his shirt and pulling at it with excitement.

I breathed in deeply, trying to ease the tightness of my chest. The pain came back, however, when Mateo and Chloe Ann—and the monkey—came out of the store. Mateo stopped and waved at me. "Adios," he said and his daughter said the same. Then they walked away.

I guess I had to leave separately too. I wondered if all our lives were ever going to truly come together.



The week went on with a bit of a damper on things. While the weather was still hot and humid, I felt like the mugginess was becoming a glove around my throat. I stopped finding the heat to be beautiful; instead I found it oppressive and annoying, my patience being tested. I did what I could to seem cheery for Mateo, to try and assimilate into my new life. While he was at work, I explored the city on my own, until I had a really good feeling for the neighborhoods. I liked Madrid—a lot. But I couldn't shake the knot of unease in my stomach.

I talked to Josh on the phone, and though his advice was along the lines of, "No one ever said this would be easy, the hard things are worth it. Hang in there," just hearing his voice and having someone to vent to made me feel better. I talked to Claudia too, but I didn't get very in-depth. I guess I was afraid she'd think I regretted moving here and that really wasn't the case.

By Thursday, Mateo came home to see me sitting on the couch and flipping absently through the TV channels, not understanding a word of it. Rain had started to fall from a dark grey sky but the heat pressed at the windows from the outside.

“That is it,” he said, tossing his briefcase on the kitchen counter. “I miss my smiling Estrella.”

I turned to look at him, plastering a smile on my face. “What are you talking about?”

“You aren’t very good at lying,” he said. He came over and sat beside me. He was wearing a sharp navy blue suit today, including a waistcoat. He had a meeting with a client from the UK, someone who was supposedly interested in franchising his restaurant.

“How was your meeting?” I asked, wanting the subject off of me.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It is a tough sell. I think they thought I was still some big football star and that’s why they were eager to meet. I am not sure what my partner told them, but they looked a bit disappointed.”

“No one could be disappointed with you,” I said, pulling him to me and kissing him softly. The feel of his lips and tongue still made my nerves tingle, as if they were stroked by lightning. “Besides, they could always Google you if they had the inclination to do a bit of research.”

“Have you Googled me?” he asked curiously.

I gave him a quick kiss on the nose. “Of course,” I said. “I wanted to find naked pictures of you, something to get off to while I was in Vancouver.”

He grinned slowly and cocked a brow. “I like that. Did you find any?”

I shook my head. “No. Did you know there is a really fat man from Mexico called Mateo Casalles? He doesn’t have a problem having naked pictures of him.”

He laughed. “Good to know.” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ears and tugged on it. “So, I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” Did I like surprises anymore? I wasn’t sure.

“Well, I have two surprises, one you will probably like more than the other. Tonight we are going for dinner at my parents’ house.”

I tried to keep the smile on my face, I really did. But my anxiety wouldn’t let me.

“Don’t look so worried,” he said with a gentle expression. “They will love you and you will love them. And if you don’t love them, you will love Carmen’s food.” Carmen was his stepmother, and he never referred to her as Mom. “Lucia will be there too, of course, and she may bring that man of hers that she’s seeing, so you don’t have to be the only one feeling awkward. He has also not met them yet.”

Well, that would help a bit. I exhaled. I knew I'd have to meet them at some point, but the idea still terrified me. Despite what Lucia said about them, I was so afraid that they wouldn't like me. I needed them to like me, to like Mateo and I together.

"And," he went on, "as your reward for getting through dinner, as well as an attempt to put a smile on your face again, and to escape this damn heat, I am taking us tomorrow morning to Barcelona. I took time off work and there are no more meetings with the lawyer for a bit—we can stay in the apartment there. Five days on the beach. What do you say?"

Well, that did put an actual smile on my face.

"Really?" I exclaimed. "We can just go there?"

"Of course," he said. "You are my Estrella. Anything for you."

"Anything?" I asked seductively. I slowly raised the hem of my skirt until he saw I wasn't wearing underwear.

I could practically see him salivating, his eyes going glossy with lust. "Especially that," he growled. I lay back on the couch as he buried his head in between my legs.

Soon, I was smiling a second time.

Chapter Twenty-Five

It took me ages to get ready for his parents' house. I was trying on everything I owned, experimenting with my hair and makeup, trying to make myself look as demure as possible. I eventually settled on a long-sleeved navy blue dress, form-fitting but cleavage-covering, and pulled my hair back into a braid that covered up the tats on my neck. I wasn't taking any chances with these people.

On the car ride over there, I was starting to crack a bit. My breathing felt restricted, my thoughts chaotic. I kept rubbing my palms over and over again on my dress. I'd had panic attacks as a teenager, after the divorce, and this felt like one of those episodes all over again.

I couldn't hide it from Mateo. He took one look at me and pulled the car over to the side of the highway, so private and public at the same time.

"Vera," he said, twisting in his seat, putting his hands on my face. "Look at me, Vera."

I managed to meet his eyes, overwhelmed by the panic in them, as if he was feeling how I was feeling, absorbing my emotions for his own.

"Vera," he said, his voice low, soothing but strong. "You're okay. You are with me, yes? You are here and you are okay. Just breathe. Breathe in slowly. Breathe out slowly."

I did as he asked, trying to focus on my breath going in and out of my body. Eventually my heart rate slowed and I was starting to feel more centered and in control.

"Oh, my Estrella," he said softly. He pressed a gentle kiss on my forehead. "What happened?" he murmured.

I swallowed. "I don't know," I said weakly. "I just...I'm just so afraid. So afraid."

He sighed and wrapped his arms around me. "I know you are. And it's okay to be afraid. But, you will see...my parents are not your parents." I flinched slightly, the memories of my mother and Mercy slamming into me. I had told him all about them—he knew. He went on, "You deserve good people in your life and happiness. Trust me, my family is good people."

"They won't like me," I said, nearly sobbing. "The deck is stacked against us, Mateo. There are too many things wrong about me."

“Vera,” he said sharply. He pulled back and peered intently into my eyes, commanding me to listen to him. “Do you know why I love you?”

I tried to think, and in my frazzled state came up with nothing. “I have no idea.”

“I love you because you are you. You’re a little bit crazy, and I find that more interesting than being normal. You’re passionate and I find that more fascinating than being calm. You’re curious and adventurous and sexual, and you’re full of life and you make me want to be a better man, to live louder, to bend and break all the damn rules.” He kissed me hard and I was so shocked by it, shocked by his words, I didn’t have time to reciprocate before he broke away. “And those are all the reasons why my parents will fall in love with you too.”

I gave him a shy smile. “Well, except for the sexual bit.”

“Hey, they are happy as long as I am happy. And Vera, you make me happier than I have ever been. Even now, even with all this shit going on around us, I am still happy because I have you—by my side and in my bed. We *will* get through this. I promise you. I swear on the stars.” He raised my hand to his lips and ran them over my knuckles.

My lip quivered. Fuck, I was getting really tired of getting so weepy all the time, but at least now these were happy tears.

Mr. and Mrs. Casalles lived in a two-story stucco house on the outskirts of the city, in a nicely kept suburban neighborhood. It kind of reminded me of home, except all the houses had this wonderful Spanish-style architecture and the gardens were a lot more colorful.

Mateo pulled the car up into the driveway beside Lucia’s Mercedes. It was funny—the car that Mateo drove was just a black SUV, nowhere near as flashy as his sister’s, even though he could obviously afford a Mercedes himself. I liked that about Mateo, how he had quite a bit of wealth, but aside from the suits and the apartments, he didn’t really flaunt it.

I got out of the car, conscious of my every step, every movement, walking in slow motion. He came around to my side and looped his arm through mine.

“Did I tell you yet how beautiful you look?” he asked, grinning down at me.

“No,” I said. “Did I forget to tell you the same?”

He stroked along his beard, holding his face in his hand. “This old thing?”

We walked up the stairs to the porch and rang the doorbell. I was surprised he didn't barge right into the house.

I held my breath as I heard footsteps on the other side. The door opened and an older man with a thick grey beard and glasses peered out at us. He was a tad shorter than Mateo, slightly portly, and I was immediately reminded of a thinner George R. R. Martin. He even had a fisherman's cap on.

"Papa," Mateo said with a respectful nod.

His father smiled only slightly at his son and then fixed his eyes on me. He raised his bushy silver eyebrows and said something in Spanish to Mateo.

Mateo looked to me. "Papa doesn't speak English. But he thinks you're very pretty."

Now I raised my brow. That didn't seem like what he said.

Luckily there wasn't time to stand on the porch and think about it. He opened the door wider and Mateo led us inside.

The home itself was cozy and inviting. Very Spanish—lots of tapestries, some Dali and Picasso prints among pastoral landscape paintings, walls of color mixed with wood. It smelled amazing, like herbs and olive oil.

"Mateo!" a woman cried, coming out from what I assumed was the kitchen, wiping her hands on her messy apron. This must have been Carmen, and at first I was shocked at how young she looked until I remembered that his father had waited ten years before he remarried.

She put Mateo's face in her hands, squeezing it until I had to laugh, then kissed him twice on each cheek. She was a tall woman with a lively, friendly face. When she finally focused on me and I could see that same warmth in her eyes, I knew she was just a friendly, good person.

She came right over to me and embraced me like I was an old friend. "Vera," she said, her accent heavy. "I am so happy to meet you, Vera. I have been asking Mateo about you."

I was so stunned, I didn't know what to say. She pulled away, and with a firm grasp on my shoulders, looked me up and down. "You are very beautiful. Such a lovely face." She looked at Mateo. "She is an angel, Mateo."

"More like an angel in disguise," he said gleefully, biting his lip at the daggers I was shooting him.

“Oh, you are no good,” Carmen said to him. She looked back to me. “Are you hungry? I hope you are hungry.” She started leading me toward the living room. “Come, come, sit down.”

Mateo’s father said something but Carmen waved him away. “Quiet Sebastian,” she admonished him. “Mateo’s father doesn’t speak a word of English but don’t worry, he is more harmless than he looks. He thinks he’s turned into Hemingway in his old age.”

I wanted to make a remark about George R. R. Martin but decided not to push it. I had a tendency to gang up on people when I was trying to make friends.

Carmen sat me down on a worn velvet sofa. Mateo joined me while his father and Carmen disappeared into the kitchen.

“You are doing great,” Mateo said to me, putting his arm over my shoulder. “Carmen is very lovely.”

“Yes, she is.”

His father came out a moment later holding a bottle of wine and two wine glasses. He gave us one each and poured the bottle of red into our glasses. Mateo thanked him and he only grunted, shuffling back into the kitchen.

“My father is shy,” Mateo said. “And, well, he can be a bit of a grump before he’s had his wine. He will loosen up later, you will see. I bet he is nervous about you.”

“Me? Why?”

“Because he doesn’t speak English and wishes he did,” he said. “He always wanted to learn, he just never got around to it.”

“Maybe I can teach him English one day,” I suggested. “Apparently I am good at it.”

“You are,” he said, clinking the edge of his glass against mine. “And even the fact that you would offer that makes me very, very happy.”

We finished our wine while Carmen worked in the kitchen. Eventually his father came out and made small talk with Mateo, becoming more animated the more wine he drank. Then Lucia came down, a sullen look on her pretty face.

“What is wrong, sister?” Mateo asked in English, giving her a hug.

She shrugged. “Carlos isn’t coming for dinner. He is working late. Again.”

She came over to me and gave me a quick hug. “Nice to see you again, Vera,” she said sincerely, even though she was pouting a bit.

“Fuck Carlos,” Mateo said.

“Mateo!” Carmen admonished him from the kitchen. “Please be nice.”

He laughed. “I am serious, Lucia. He is always cancelling on these dinners. When are you going to give him the boot?”

She glared at him. “His reasons are all true. Don’t be so overprotective.”

He sat back down, pulling me against him. “I am not overprotective. I am just getting annoyed that you are dating the invisible man, that is all. I mean, how do you even kiss him if you can’t see his face? Seems complicated, yes?”

I elbowed him, feeling like Carmen. “Be nice.”

He grinned at me like a jackass. “What? It’s true. I wonder about such things.”

I rolled my eyes, though secretly I was enjoying the banter between the two. Playful Mateo was always fun and he really loved to rile Lucia up who fell into his trap every single time.

Dinner was pretty much the same thing, except that his father was smiling a lot more. He asked me a few questions too, which eager beaver Lucia translated for me. The food was amazing—finally some authentic homemade paella that wasn’t made for tourists—and there were endless bottles of wine. I was pretty buzzed, laughing at everything, while Mateo stayed sober so he could drive us home. And by the time that came, I actually didn’t want to leave. I had a long embrace with Carmen and even Sebastian seemed affectionate enough when we said our goodbyes. For all his grump, there was an innate kindness in his eyes.

In the car ride back, I told Mateo that I had been terribly wrong about his family.

“I told you so,” he chided me. “They are good people and they trust me.”

“I wish everyone was good like they are,” I said.

“Yes, the world would be better,” he said. “But frankly, I am grateful for them and the way things are. Sometimes you don’t need everyone on your side, you only need a few.”

I smiled and prayed someday I would take that to heart.

A few beats of silence passed, that kind of comfortable air that happens when you’re riding in a car at night, only the sound of wheels on the dark

highway and the soft glow of the dashboard lights.

“You know what we should do?” he eventually asked.

“What?”

“When we get back from Barcelona, we should have a party. Let’s invite everyone from Las Palabras, all the ones who live here or nearby.”

My smile nearly broke my face. “That is a fantastic idea!”

“I thought you would like it,” he said. He put his hand over mine and gave it a squeeze. “We deserve some fun and friends, no?”

That night we got home and tore each other’s clothes off, barely making it in through the door. I hoped I was able to show Mateo just how beautiful he made me feel.



Barcelona ended up being an absolute gem. First of all, I loved road trips, so the fact that Mateo and I were jetting through the Spanish countryside, stopping at wineries and olive farms and drinking and stuffing ourselves silly on everything that was overripe and decadent was amazing. Then the city of Barcelona itself managed to knock my boots off. The city was a maze of beauty, a mix of the quaint and the avante garde. Dali and Gaudi-esque architecture made me snap a million pictures, the narrow and unassuming side streets led us to hidden tapas bars and used bookstores, the busy street of Las Ramblas made me spend too many euros giving change to all the living statues that were lined up and down it.

Mateo’s apartment was as fantastic as I had imagined it back at Las Palabras. It was in a modern-looking high-rise overlooking a wide expanse of golden sand beach. With the balcony doors open, you could hear the aqua waves crashing at night and feel the ocean breezes during the day. The apartment was only a studio and it was furnished sparsely, looking more like a hotel room than anything. But it was absolutely exquisite nonetheless.

The day before we left, we packed up a picnic lunch—rose wine, meats and cheeses—and headed to the beach just in front of the apartment. It was a Monday and less crowded than the weekend, with only a few bronzed bodies lying about. I decided to do what I had been too scared to do all weekend long and that was to sunbathe topless.

I sat up on my beach towel and untied the back of my string bikini, my breasts coming free. I could see a bit of movement in Mateo’s board shorts,

the ever-present erection.

"I approve of this," he said, eying my breasts lustfully. They were so white in the glaring sunlight I was surprised he didn't need shades. He could go blind staring at them for too long.

"I figured if you can't beat them, join them," I said, lying back down.

"Now this must be an American or Canadian phrase because no one should beat your breasts. Bite and lick them, yes, but only me."

I shielded my eyes from the sun, looking up at him. "It is an expression. Meaning, everyone else on this beach is topless so I might as well be too."

"Yes, might as well," he said. "Too bad I don't like it when men stare at you."

I frowned. "I would think most men on this beach are used to seeing breasts."

"Yes, but not your breasts. Your breasts are pale, Canadian breasts. They are special, beautiful, and very large."

I let out a laugh. "Wow, you really are putting on the charm, aren't you?"

He shrugged and ran his fingers over the shooting star on my chest. "The other girls on the beach aren't marked the way you are. They are just topless women, but you are something amazing that no one but me should get to see."

"I'm keeping my top off," I told him. "And if we're lucky, I won't burn them to a crisp."

He immediately picked up a tube of sunblock. "Then may I volunteer for the job?"

"Will you try and not have sex with me in public?"

"I promise *nada*."

He smoothed the sunblock on my breasts and I did what I could to not be turned on. While we could go back to the apartment for another roll in the hay, I also wanted to soak up the sun's rays while still possible—this was pretty much the last week or two of good weather. I was only a light golden color while Mateo was this rich bronze that bordered on mahogany. The Spaniards got *dark* over the summer.

When he started paying too much attention to my nipples, I swatted his hand away. Eventually he got the hint and rolled over onto his stomach, perhaps to keep his hard-on hidden from passerby. While women did go topless on the beaches here, it wasn't seen as a sexual thing.

Eventually I got tired of lying around and getting sweaty, so we went into the surf, playing in the waves. I was still topless and finding the whole thing absolutely liberating. Yes, I got some looks because of my tattoos and such, but overall, no one really cared. The only time people really looked was when Mateo picked me up over his shoulder, strode out into the waves and unceremoniously dumped me into the water. I landed into the end-of-summer chill of the Mediterranean and flailed for a few shocking moments, shrieking, before he pulled me up, grinning. I tried to take him down too but I just wasn't strong enough and fell into the water again.

Jerk.

We came out of the waves and he pulled me to him, kissing me hard, tasting like salt. Then he slapped me lightly on the ass and laughed. Barcelona Mateo was a bit of a deviant—I liked that.

The next day we pretty much did the same thing, except we headed out into the city to have our lunch at one of the small bars we had stumbled upon the other day in a pretty yellow courtyard. It was so fresh and new in Barcelona that I was oddly sad that we had to return to Madrid. I guess the sea air and mild breezes reminded me of home, plus there was the fact that the two of us could just be ourselves and wander around the city without a care.

That said, there was plenty to look forward to upon our return. When we arrived back in Madrid on Wednesday, the weather now cooler by a few degrees, I had the party that Friday night to plan for the Las Palabras folks. I had gotten in touch with Jerry, whom I didn't realize actually lived in Madrid, and reached out to about twelve Spaniards on the list, telling them to bring their significant others or a friend. It felt good to have a mini reunion, and I started entertaining the idea that maybe I could get a job working for the Las Palabras office in Madrid. I know that Mateo had said he'd take care of me and everything, but since I wasn't going to school, I would eventually need to do something. And while I had planned to immerse myself in Spanish, I wasn't going to be fluent for a really long time. I needed something to occupy my days and make me feel like I was contributing to the relationship and our way of life, even if in such a small way.

It was Thursday night when I was settling down on the couch with Mateo, a big fluffy blanket wrapped around us, glasses of red wine in our hands, when I got a call from Claudia. I eyed the time and thought that ten

o'clock was unusually late for a call from her; then again the party was tomorrow and perhaps she wanted to know what to bring.

"Hello?" I asked.

"Vera?" she said, her voice sounding odd, kind of panicked. It made my heart skip forward in time.

"Yes? Claudia, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said with a note of unease. A pregnant pause followed. "Have you seen the latest issue of Diez Minutos? It just came out today."

"No," I said carefully. Mateo was staring at me inquisitively but I could only shrug. I turned my attention back to the phone. "Why?"

"Um," she said. "I'm not sure if it will be on the online version or not. But perhaps you want to go to the store and get a copy for yourself, to see. There is a...there is a picture of you in it."

My heart came to a screeching halt. "What?" I asked, voice hard.

Now Mateo was sitting up, trying to get my attention, to figure out what was going on. But even I couldn't figure it out because what Claudia had just said made no sense at all.

"How could I be in it?" I asked carefully.

"You just are," she said. "On page eight. It, um, it's a picture of you. The paparazzi took it."

"What?!"

"You're in Barcelona, on the beach. You're topless in the pictures."

I gasped loud enough to shake the walls. I shot up straight to my feet, hand to my mouth, the phone nearly dropping out of my hands. "How can that be?"

"I don't know," Claudia said, sounding desperate. "They often take pictures of celebrities on the beach. Your, um, nipples are blocked out. But it is you. Three pictures in a row. In one you are kissing Mateo. The other he is carrying you on his shoulder. The other he is slapping your behind. Vera, these were all about Mateo. And now they are about you."

I couldn't even breathe. I let the phone slip through my fingers, thudding to the floor. I pushed past Mateo, grabbed my house keys and a ten euro note from the change bowl on the counter, and ran out the door. It didn't matter that I was barefoot and in pajama pants and a t-shirt, I was running down the stairwell, through the lobby and out into the dark of night.

The nearest convenience store was open late and just a block away—perfect for when you needed coffee, toilet paper, eggs, or a gossip magazine. The bell above the door rang as I pushed myself into the fluorescent lights, my bare feet slapping on the sticky floor. I didn't care and I didn't have to search for long. There it was, propped up below the counter, beside the newspaper and the candy bars.

I snatched it up, trying my hardest not to flip through the pages, and bought it. And by buying it, I mean I slapped the ten euro note on the counter, and without meeting the clerk's eyes, I left it there and ran out of the store with the magazine.

I made it about half a block when I decided to break down and flip through it, but I saw the shadowy figure of Mateo leaving the apartment building and heading straight to me. "Vera," I heard him call after me, but I was on a mission.

Under the orange glow of the streetlights, I flipped to page eight.
And there I fucking was.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It was just as Claudia had described. Though the pictures were grainy, I looked as pale as a ghost next to Mateo, and slightly white trash when you factored in my tattoos and the fact that I was topless. You could even make out a bit of cellulite on my upper thigh.

This was a nightmare come true.

“What is wrong, Vera?” Mateo demanded when he caught up with me. “You’re not wearing shoes. Let’s get you back inside.”

He tried to put his arm around me to usher me back home, but he looked down and saw what I had gone loco over. It was just as well since I was too much in shock to explain anything.

He swore in Spanish and ripped the magazine from my hands. I was almost too much in horror and disbelief to pay attention to how he was feeling about the whole thing, but I couldn’t help but notice his face. I’d never see him so mad, ever. Even under the unnatural glow of the streetlamps, his face was turning dark red, his jaw so tense it really seemed he might bite someone’s head off. The magazine began to crumple in his hand.

I reached out and put my hand on top of his. “Wait. What does it say?”

He couldn’t even look at me.

“Mateo,” I said desperately. “Please. What does the article say?” When he still wouldn’t answer, wouldn’t break that trance he had seemed to go into, I yelled, “Please! It’s about me, I have a right to fucking know!”

Finally he blinked and turned his head to stare down at me, a strain of softness in his hard eyes. He swallowed and said absently, “It says...it says that I have been photographed on the Barcelona beach with someone who is not my wife. It says that we were spending a few days in the city and they are wondering if Isabel and I are getting a divorce. They added, if not, we will be after this. They didn’t mention Chloe Ann, thank god.”

“Is that all they said about me?” I asked. “That I was just someone that is not your wife?”

He stared at me, worried.

“Mateo,” I said, “I have a right to know. I can handle it. If you don’t tell me what it says, I’m just going to find it online and Google translate it.”

He still stared at me, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed.

"Fine!" I said, and I turned and ran across the empty road over to the apartment. I was sure Mateo would have yelled at me to stop, but he was still standing there, staring at nothing, the magazine in his hand. He had gone catatonic with rage.

If it had been anything else, I would have stayed and helped him, brought him inside. But this involved me too much and I hated being lied to.

I burst into the apartment and opened up the laptop on the coffee table. I did a quick search for Diez Minutos and started clicking through the magazine, searching and searching until I searched for Mateo Casalles.

There it was, the first story to pop up, the picture of Mateo slapping my jiggly ass. And the way the search engine displayed the results, the story underneath it was the one I had read back in Las Palabras, the one of him and Isabel at the restaurant.

I breathed in deeply, my eyes flitting between the two stories, me with my tits hanging out, the skimpy bikini I got from H&M, all pale skin, wild hair and ink, playing in the surf with a man fifteen years older than her. Then there was Isabel with her elegant short blonde hair, mature yet beautiful face, classy dress, hand in hand with her sharp-dressed husband. I knew exactly how it looked, and therefore knew exactly how this would play out. I didn't even need Google translate for that. I was the trashy young thing on the side. The homewrecking slut who broke up a marriage between an ex-football star and semi-royalty, leaving their younger daughter in the wake.

I was worse than the other woman. I was Jezebel, waiting to be thrown to the dogs.

I knew right there that we were doomed. We always had been.

The worst part was that this whole paparazzi thing caught me unaware. It wasn't like Mateo was being called for interviews or had photographers normally following him around or fans outside his door. To me he was just Mateo, not this ex-football star, so I never even thought about any of that in our day to day lives. Only occasionally would something remind me of it, say a clip of the Atletico team on TV or on rainy days when Mateo walked with a slight limp. Otherwise, I had lived in a bubble, totally unaware that he was someone really important.

I sighed in frustration and steeled myself against what I was about to read. I clicked on the article about us and hit Google Translate up on the top.

It turned out that what Mateo said was more or less true. He just left out a whole bunch about me. Mainly, that I wasn't just "some other woman," but according to Google translate, a wanton young girl who seemed a very unlikely match for someone as respected as Mateo Casalles. They also added there probably wouldn't be much respect for Mateo after this, though what older man hasn't thought about having a mistress half their age.

These fucking magazines were just as bad as the ones back home. And though I sympathized with celebrities with the way they were treated on gossip sites, I still read the stories eagerly. I never in a million years thought I would be the subject of one of them.

The thing is, I wasn't sure how many people in the country cared what an ex-football star got up to, but this magazine apparently did. Shit was about to hit the fan in a major way, if it hadn't already, and I had no idea what to do to prepare for it. I was not only humiliated and embarrassed but goddamn terrified of what this would do to Mateo and I. I felt like my heart was receiving tiny fractures that would one day lead to a break.

Eventually, Mateo came back into the apartment. I turned away from the computer, numb to the core, and eyed him warily. The magazine was gone, probably in the trash somewhere, where it belonged. He looked as terrible as I felt, though it seemed the anger that had overwhelmed him had left and now he just looked lost and defeated.

"Vera," he said, his voice hoarse, as he slowly came toward me. He dropped to his knees right in front of me, lacing his fingers with mine. He rested his head on my thighs for a few moments, eyes pinched together, breathing in and breathing out. He looked so small at my feet, so meek. It unnerved me deep inside, making me feel unstable.

He raised his head and his brow was wrought with sorrow. "I am so sorry, Vera," he said softly. "You have no idea how sorry I am." The way his voice cracked made my soul ache.

I gripped his hand tight. "It's not your fault."

"Yes it is," he said. "I asked you to be a part of this."

"You didn't ask me to be a part of *this*," I told him adamantly.

"Yes, I did. I wanted you to be a part of my life. I wanted...you. I never thought about the consequences, how they would affect you. I didn't think

much about anything. I was so caught up in finally having you, here in my life, by my side. I didn't think." He kissed my hand and gazed up at me. "I'm still not thinking. Vera, you make me mad, you make me crazy." He shut his eyes again and spoke, his lips brushing my fingers. "Love is like a thief, it robs you of all thought and logic, and all you have left is a heart that you can only pray is strong enough to survive the rest."

Goddamn it, even in the face of all this scrutiny, his passion never wavered.

"Please don't leave me," he said quietly, his eyes imploring mine.

Something inside me crumbled. "Why would I leave you?"

"Because," he said slowly. "I can see it in your eyes. That you're afraid."

"I've always been afraid, Mateo," I said. "From the very moment I met you, I've been afraid. But it doesn't mean I'm leaving."

"This isn't fair to you," he said, as if not hearing me. "I thought we were safe in Barcelona. I didn't think anyone would notice or care. I was wrong because I didn't think and that mistake has cost us dearly."

I sighed and stared down at our hands. Just how dearly was this going to cost us? Isabel was going to find out now, his friends would know. What he tried to keep hidden—me—that was all going to be in the open now. It wasn't just Mateo's fault, it was mine too. I had known we had to lay low for a little bit longer, that we had pushed our luck already, that it was only a matter of time. I had just hoped and prayed that when we were found out, that it would happen after he was granted joint custody, after he had his rights to see his daughter.

"What do we do now?" I asked, looking at him again.

He gave me a sad smile and a subtle shake of his head. "I do not know. In the past, I have gotten mad at the publications. You know, when I was young and doing stupid things that I would never do again. But it never got me anywhere and I am not sure it will now. I can try."

I shook my head, knowing that fighting the tabloids was always useless unless it was something extremely slanderous. The magazine was not presenting anything as fact—just speculation—so there was nothing illegal about it.

He exhaled, long and hard. "I guess the only thing we can do is wait."

"You could tell Isabel," I said. "Before someone else tells her."

He winced. “Yes. But there is that chance that perhaps she won’t find out at all.”

I gave him a look. “Really? If that’s what you believe, then you’re going to be in for a rude awakening.”

“I don’t know what I think,” he said. “Let’s just see what happens tomorrow. We have the party. I will tell her after that.”

“Oh god, the party,” I cried out. “What will they all say?”

He squeezed my hand. “Vera, please, they will say nothing, and if they do, it won’t be anything bad. These people were all there, they all know. They have their own battles to fight.”

I leaned back onto the couch, utterly exhausted. This kind of shit served me right, especially after such a fun and frivolous trip as Barcelona. We had pushed our luck and we didn’t care because we just wanted to be with each other. But the truth always has a way of getting out.

And now we were still together, but having to deal with the truth: that our love affair wasn’t as pure as we wanted to believe. That good intentions meant nothing. That we chose each other despite the consequences and now they were ours to pay.

That night we lay in bed together. We didn’t make love, we just held on to each other in the dark, wrapped in our bodies and the madness of our own minds.

“Remember what I asked of you,” he murmured in my ear as we were drifting off to sleep.

“Hmmm?”

“Promise me you won’t give up on us.”

I won’t, I said, though not out loud. I was too afraid to say it, in case it didn’t end up being true.



The next morning we hadn’t heard much about the scandal. There were no phone calls from Isabel or anyone disgruntled. A part of me thought that maybe we were going to sneak out of this one, that everything was going to be okay. The other part of me thought that the net was just waiting to drop, preferably when we were relaxed and unaware.

I never wanted to let my guard down. The whole day I was a nervous wreck, shopping for party supplies and the menu and expecting the ball to

drop at any moment.

And it did—just not in the way I expected.

I was making the appetizers—things I knew how to make like bacon-wrapped scallops and goat cheese flatbreads—and Mateo had jetted out to pick up the alcohol from the store, when my cell rang. Again, it was Claudia.

“Please don’t tell me you’re cancelling,” I said as I answered. “Because I cannot handle this alone!”

“I’m not cancelling,” she quickly assured me. “Ricardo and I will be there in an hour to help. I just...”

“Oh Lord, what now?”

“They know your name.”

My heart froze. “What do you mean they know my name?” I asked slowly. “Who is *they*?”

“They,” she said. “The magazine, Diez Minutos, they know your name. It is online now with the pictures.”

“What?!” I roared into the phone, seconds away from having a coronary. I shoved the tray into the oven and ran over to the laptop, frantically going to the page, which I had bookmarked.

“Did you talk to the press?” she asked me as I clicked along.

“No,” I said, my chest feeling heavier than lead, my breathing shortened and painful. I pulled up the page and scrolled down to the description. Now it said, “With a Canadian woman, Vera, whom Casalles had met at an English language program this June. This young woman, who is said to be in her early twenties, is rumored to live with Casalles in an apartment in the Salamanca barrio.”

“Oh, fuuuuuuuuuuuuck,” I gasped, my hand curling into a fist over the phone. “How the fuck did they figure this out?”

“Someone must have told them.”

“But who? Someone from Las Palabras?” My paranoid mind began scrolling through everyone, from the guests who were coming over, to Lauren. But everyone had liked us, and Lauren, as much of a bicycle as she was, wasn’t in Spain as far as I knew.

“I don’t know,” Claudia said. “I wouldn’t think so.”

I thought back to the only other person who knew, the woman who heard us doing it in the washroom stall when Mateo got all jealous over that guy. Sonia.

"I'll see you in a bit," I told Claudia, and then hung up, immediately ringing Mateo's phone.

"Did you forget something?" he asked as he answered. "I just left the store."

"What did you tell that Sonia woman?" I asked through grinding teeth.

"What?"

"The woman, your old friend, the one who caught us fucking in the bathroom. I went outside and you talked to her. What did you tell her about us?"

He paused and I could almost hear his mind racing. "I only...wait, why?"

"Just tell me!"

He sighed, frustrated. "I don't know."

"Did you tell her my name?"

"I introduced you as Vera, remember?"

"Did you tell her where we met? Where I was from?"

"Yes."

"Fuck, Mateo!"

"Don't fucking scream at me," he sniped.

Don't fucking tell me not to fucking scream at you, I wanted to yell back. It took a lot out of me to hold it in. "She told the magazine about us," I seethed.

A pause. "How do you mean?"

"Well, come home and I'll show you. But the photos, they now have my name and where you met me. And that I live with you now in Madrid, in the Salamanca neighbourhood. Did you tell her all of that?"

There was silence. I could hear him breathing hard, his footsteps through the phone. Finally he said, "Yes, I did."

"Mateo!"

"Listen, Vera. I do not like it when you use that tone, all right? You know I have never done anything to hurt you, not on purpose. How am I supposed to know that Sonia would take useless bits of information and report them to the magazine?"

"Didn't you know what kind of person she was?"

"I didn't think—"

"No, you didn't think," I retorted. "That keeps on being your excuse. That you didn't think. Well start fucking thinking."

And then I hung up, my heart in my throat, my gut coated with despair. I had never yelled at him like that before, never hung up on him. Even during our heated arguments over the phone, when the long distance aspect of our relationship was really getting to us, I had never hung up on him.

Luckily, he'd be in the house at any moment and I could immediately apologize to his face. I sat on the edge of the sofa and rubbed my hands on my dress, so fucking sick I felt like I was going to vomit.

The door opened and Mateo came in, carrying a canvas bag full of liquor. He kicked it shut, and that's when I knew this wasn't going to be easy. He was in a bad mood now and I feared that I wouldn't have a partner in this battle. I couldn't handle this alone.

"I'm sorry," I immediately said to him as he put the bag on the counter. "I'm sorry I yelled at you and I'm sorry I hung up on you."

He plunked his elbows down on the counter and leaned over, running his hands through his hair in anger before burying his face in his palms. I watched him with bated breath, unsure of what he was going to say or do. When he still didn't move, I started to get really worried. Maybe I pushed him, pushed us, too far. I knew that this, that everything, was either both of our faults or neither of our faults, but no matter what we were in it together.

I got up and walked carefully over to him. I gently placed my hand on his lower back as if he were made of glass.

"Mateo," I whispered.

He nodded, then suddenly stood up and pulled me into his chest, his strong arms wrapping around my back. I felt my whole body give into his, too exhausted to even stand. I relished the feeling of his warmth, his strength, his support. It felt like I was given a tiny piece of relief, an anchor to prepare for the oncoming storm.

"Please do not fight me," he said into my hair, kissing the top of my head. "Please do not get angry. I am angry too, enough for the both of us. I am more scared than you. But I cannot take it out on you because you did not ask for this. Please don't take it out on me. I need you with me, not apart."

I nodded, feeling tears pricking at my eyes. I managed to keep them inside, on the other side of the dam. "I'm sorry."

"I know. And I am sorry that Sonia went and told the magazine. Sometimes you don't really know a person, though I should have figured and that was my mistake. All I can tell you is," he pulled back and peered

down at my face, “more mistakes will be made. I don’t know what I am doing, but I will do everything in my power to keep my daughter and to keep you.”

And what happens if it comes time to choose between me and her? I thought. But of course I knew the answer to that.

I’d like to say that our spirits picked up for the party, but they didn’t. Not until Claudia and Ricardo showed up with even more bottles of wine, which in turn got Mateo and I buzzed in a hurry. I did what I could to put on my party face, ignoring that weight on my back.

Though we invited every local person that was at Las Palabras and all of them had RSVPed, not all of them showed up. It reminded me of the one time I threw a party in high school and only a handful of the guests actually came. Luckily, Mateo told me to not take it personally—people were notorious when it came to being flakes, always promising to be places and then never following through.

The first to arrive was Lucia and the infamous Carlos, even though they hadn’t been at the program. Lucia seemed a little tipsy, her cheeks dark red and she was constantly giggling. Carlos seemed to be an all right guy, in his early thirties and a bit stuck-up. Not at all whom I thought Lucia would be with. But he seemed nice enough, even though Mateo would not stop giving him the stink-eye, sizing him up like he was debating tossing him out of the party or not. His brotherly love made me love him a little more.

After Lucia and Carlos came Jerry, Angel, and his equally timid date, Patricia. It was so nice to see them again that I almost started crying. It didn’t matter that Jerry was still a huge overenthusiastic dork or that geeky Angel forgot all his English, just having them there was like opening a door to another life, flooding me with shiny, sunny memories.

Soon Antonio came, still cute and portly with his bushy mustache and a joke for everything, then Manuel with his rocker look, gentle Nerea (now with bright pink hair), and pervy Eduardo. Lucia and Carlos seemed to get along with everyone too, with Carlos and Antonio talking about business and the rest of us just drinking and eating and reminiscing about the old times. More than once I caught myself getting teary-eyed over shit, especially when the alcohol started getting to everyone. The damn Spaniards and their emotions—it was hard not to be affected when everyone else was so obviously missing what we had back at Las Palabras.

At some point though, Lucia, since she wasn't affected by the Las Palabras effect, put on some dance music. Then the party went from brooding and emotional to happy and drunk. I danced in an Eduardo and Angel sandwich that Mateo pretended not to care about, but I still knew he was watching carefully, making sure Eduardo didn't try any "Sex Pest" moves.

"Do you still talk to Polly?" I asked him, whipping my hair around.

He shook his head, looking a bit sad. "Not really. On Facebook, yes. More or less. But we are not...together. Not like you and Mateo are."

"Mateo is lucky," Angel said from behind me as my hair unceremoniously whacked him in the face.

"Well, I am lucky too," I said.

"Si," Eduardo said, "because now you live in Spain with the rest of us. How you like it here?"

"It's great," I said, and for the first time, I noticed my smile was a little forced as I said that. "Madrid is a wonderful city," I added, so it wouldn't seem like a lie.

Eduardo nodded, seemingly happy with that answer, and we went on dancing again until Patricia pulled Angel away and I needed a break. I went straight over to Mateo, who was leaning against the wall and nursing a glass of scotch. He seemed distant from everyone else.

I wrapped my hands around his taut stomach and pulled myself to him. He smiled down at me and gave me a soft kiss.

"How are you?" he asked.

"I was about to ask you the same."

He nodded at the others who were still dancing. "You're a good dancer."

"Not as good as you. Remember? At Las Palabras, you said you danced like Justin Timberlake."

He chuckled. "I was only trying to impress you."

"Well, you know that it worked."

His face fell slightly. "But will it continue to work?"

I felt like a tiny hole was being drilled into my core, making me wince inwardly. The tiniest bit of pain trickled through. "Of course," I told him adamantly. I gripped the sides of his shirt, afraid that if I didn't, I'd lose us to the undertow of reality.

"I'm going out for a smoke," Lucia said, grabbing her cardigan and brushing past us. She gave Mateo a withering look. "Since my brother

doesn't let us smoke in here."

"I'll go with you," Claudia said, and the two of them left the room.

I wanted to hang on to Mateo, to keep us in this private little world but eventually Jerry came over and started chatting with him about football. It was amazing that no one at the party had mentioned the magazine, which gave me hope that perhaps it wasn't going to be as bad of an outcome as we had been anticipating. I mean, maybe no one over thirty really paid attention to that shit.

Then my phone rang. I was really starting to regret answering it.

I went over to the counter and picked it up. It was Claudia. What the hell? She'd just left.

"Yeah?" I answered, figuring maybe they were too drunk to figure out the buzzer. "What?"

"Vera," she whispered harshly into the phone. I could hear Spanish yelling in the background. "Get Mateo on the phone!"

I automatically put my hand to my chest. "Why? What's going on?"

"She's here," Claudia said frantically. "Isabel is outside your apartment. And she's angry. She's very, very angry."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

My hand gripped the phone tight. I swallowed painfully. “What?” I whispered, barely able to speak or breathe. The yelling continued and now I could make out Lucia’s voice, yelling back at someone. No, not someone.

At Isabel.

At Mrs. Casalles.

Oh, *fuck*.

I looked over at Mateo and waved him over. He was already halfway to me, having observed the phone call from across the room.

“What is it?” he said, his eyes searching mine.

“Isabel,” I managed to choke out. “She is downstairs fighting with your sister.”

His eyes widened. He nodded. “Stay here.”

Then he left the apartment.

I felt frozen in place, just staring at the door as it closed behind him. I picked up the phone. “He’s coming.” I hung up and looked behind me at the party. They were having a blast, dancing up a storm, totally oblivious to what was happening outside. And as much as I wanted to kick everyone out and tell them the party was most definitely over, I couldn’t because I would be kicking them right into the dirty little reality of my life.

My stomach churned. I was going to be sick.

With my hand to my mouth I ran over to the bathroom and promptly threw up all the red wine and half-digested flatbreads. I stood over the toilet, trying to catch my breath, to make the sickness go away.

Isabel was here.

She knew.

I threw up again until I heard a knock at the door and Claudia’s voice. “Vera?”

I flushed the toilet, rinsed out my mouth, and sprinkled cold water on my face while taking in the deepest breath possible. I held it until I was nearly blue then let it out.

I was going to have to get through this.

I opened the door and peered at her. “Wasn’t feeling well,” I tried to explain, in case anyone was within earshot.

She immediately hugged me. “Well, it is not going well,” she whispered into my ear.

I bit my lip. Hard. “What’s going on?”

Her big brown eyes creased with sympathy. “She won’t leave. She’s in the lobby now because she was making a scene on the street. Lucia is still down there. She’s making things worse. His sister is really...feisty.”

“She knows about the magazine...”

“Yes, she knows.”

“Fuck.”

“Yes, fuck.”

“How is Mateo...handling it?”

“Barely. That man has a lot of restraint.”

I nodded, knowing all too well. “I should go down there.”

Claudia eyed me like I’d gone batshit insane. Maybe I had.

“No, you should not,” she said sternly. “Stay here and Mateo will handle it.”

“But it’s not his problem alone.”

She grabbed me by the shoulders and held me firmly. “Vera, you were not married to her, okay? You do not owe this woman anything. Oh, and in case you didn’t understand my English, she is crazy.”

“You’d be insane too if you were in her shoes.”

She wagged her finger at me. “No, no, no, no, no. No, don’t start feeling guilty now. Your heart has no regard for right or wrong.”

“Claudia,” I snapped at her. “I have always felt guilty. Every day, all the time.” I ripped myself out of her grasp. “And my heart should have known better.”

I stalked off down the hall while she yelled after me, “This won’t make your guilt go away!” It was loud enough that I knew the partygoers heard it. But I didn’t care. This was my mess too. She was not my wife, but I had a part in it, and I had to face her. I owed her that.

I went out into the hall and took the stairs down, my adrenaline running too high for me to stand and wait for an elevator. I let that same adrenaline surge power my legs, keeping me putting one foot in front of the other, my brain on autopilot, until I pushed open the door to the lobby.

It was empty except for Lucia, Mateo, and Isabel. My eyes immediately went to Isabel, to the novelty of seeing her in the flesh for once. She was angry, that was for sure. Red face, red nose, face streaked with tears, a look

that broke my heart. She still had this air of elegance about her, a royal blue shift dress, fancy Louboutin pumps, a Chanel purse. She was everything I wasn't, though I knew deep down both our hearts had the same capacity to hurt.

But it was hard to hold on to that thought when she was beating Mateo's chest with her fists and he was doing what he could to just stand there and take it. That didn't last long though, for the moment the door shut behind me, she lifted her dark eyes over to see who the intruder was.

It was me. Me in my cleavage-baring, retro dress, hair curled with red-coated lips.

The jezebel, the harlot, the whore.

There I was, standing face to face with the wife of the man I loved.

She wasted no time. She pulled away from Mateo, her eyes lit up like firecrackers, sizzling with the madness of the moment.

"Put a coño!" she screamed, coming toward me. "You're the stupid slut!"

And then I remembered that she spoke English very well. I was going to understand all of her insults.

"Vera!" Mateo yelled at me, upset that I didn't listen, but I couldn't even look at him. I had to watch for her because she was coming at me and coming fast.

I backed up until I was against the stairwell door and she stopped less than a foot away, smelling like booze and expensive perfume. She thrust a well-manicured finger in my face, jabbing it dangerously close. "You little beast, you fucking whore. Who the fuck do you think you are, coming here and fucking my husband? Huh?!"

I'd never been so terrified. I couldn't even breathe or think or speak. What could I even say? What could I ever say other than that I was sorry, that I didn't mean to hurt anyone, that I thought our love would make up for everything else.

"Talk to me!" she screamed, the veins in her forehead throbbing. "Tell me what you have to say for yourself! You've ruined my marriage! You've ruined my poor daughter's life. You're a homewrecker! You should be ashamed of yourself."

But I am ashamed, I cried inside.

"Well?" she sneered. "You don't even have the guts to say anything to me, to my face, yet you have no problem fucking my husband. You stupid

little bitch!” She spat on my chest. “You’re disgusting, just look at you.”

“Vete a la mierda, Isabel!” I heard Lucia yell from somewhere.

“You’re a horrible human being.” Isabel glared at me, ignoring Lucia’s insults. The spit on my chest slowly slid down, feeling cold as ice. “An insult to women and families everywhere. Fucking whore.”

“Isabel,” Mateo warned her sternly, and out of the corner of my eye I could see him approaching us.

“Talk to me!” she screamed, until I had to shut my eyes to her, her voice rattling through me.

The back of my throat pinched in pain. “I-I’m sorry,” I managed to whimper.

Her eyes widened. “You’re sorry? You are *sorry*? That is all I get?”

And just like that, she whacked me across the face, backhanding me.

Stars. Everywhere. Burning stars.

I didn’t care how much I deserved it though, because I knew I did. But something inside me snapped for just a moment.

“Oh, fuck right off, you bitch,” I barked at her, trying to get away from another hit I knew was coming for me.

Suddenly Mateo was behind Isabel, holding her arms down at her sides, preventing her from striking me again. But his gaze was focused on me as I held my throbbing cheek, his eyes blazing into mine. “Vera, this is the mother of my child,” he said to me, his voice dark, his brow furrowed. “Please show her some respect.”

My mouth dropped open, my cheek on fire. The fuck? Show *her* respect? She hit me!

He quickly turned Isabel around and she was back to yelling in Spanish, though now it sounded more like crying. He led her outside and disappeared into the night. Meanwhile I just stood there, dumbfounded and humiliated beyond repair. I felt utterly foolish at what had happened and so embarrassed by what Mateo had said to me that I wanted to crawl into a hole somewhere and never ever come out.

“I am sorry,” Lucia said, coming over to me. She put her arm around my shoulder and tucked a curl behind my ear. “I didn’t want any of this to happen. We were smoking outside and she started yelling at me about you. I knew she wouldn’t go away until she saw Mateo.”

“It’s okay,” I said absently, unable to tear my attention away from the pain in my heart.

“Mateo is trying hard to do what is best for Chloe Ann, you know this,” Lucia said. “And Isabel has not always been the best wife, so she cannot point the finger too much, but she is very proud. That magazine, what she read, she does not take that well. That damages her image.”

“I damaged her,” I said quietly. “I damaged Chloe Ann.”

“No,” she said. “Do not say these things. Isabel’s ego will return to normal one day and Chloe Ann is very strong. Things will be okay.”

I looked up at Lucia’s pretty eyes. She honestly believed what she was saying. I didn’t have the heart to tell her she was lying to herself.

Things would never be okay.



Mateo never came home that night.

After the incident with Isabel in the lobby, Lucia and I went back upstairs. Even though I had never told anyone that the party was over, they all knew. When I walked in the door, they were all hanging around the kitchen and giving sympathetic smiles and sad eyes. I gave Claudia a look and she only shrugged apologetically.

They were good people though and they each gave me a heartfelt hug goodbye, promising to go out for dinner and drinks soon. Even Jerry mentioned a possible position at Las Palabras, if I was planning on staying in the city for a long time.

Funny how a few weeks ago I never would have questioned my permanency. Now, even with true friends who cared for me, I was prepared to be run out of town.

Claudia hugged me hard and said she would come and get me for lunch since it was the weekend. My heart swelled at how she was trying to distract me, to make me feel better. Lucia, too, was the same and told me to call her. I was so happy that I had her on my side, though now I wondered whose side Mateo was on.

I went to bed alone, those thoughts swirling around in my head. Why wasn’t Mateo back yet? What was he doing? Did I really anger him by calling Isabel a bitch? Did it not piss him off that Isabel had physically hurt me, that her insults were much more vile? Or did it not matter because I deserved it—because I had always had this coming.

I had no answers and no Mateo.

At four a.m., I got a text from him.

I'm staying the night at the old house, for Chloe Ann. I love you. I will call you tomorrow.

I was going to be sick again. He was staying at their old house? With Isabel? Oh god. I knew he had written that he loved me, and I knew he said he was staying for his daughter, but that didn't make the sick, sticky feeling go away, the one that gripped my gut from the inside out, robbing me of breath. The feeling knotted itself until I had to roll over into the fetal position and pray for sleep to take me away.

When I woke up the next morning, the sun streaming in through the curtains I forgot to close, the feeling was still there. I couldn't shake it. It was working its way through me and driving me mad.

Mateo had said we would be our own universe. He made me promise not to give up on us. He had given me so many reasons to believe that what we were doing was right, that love was good, that we could make it work, that the risks were worth taking, that it would be worth it in the end. And I just didn't know if that was true anymore. And the more I thought about it, about us, the worse the pain inside me got. There were tiny strands of my brain that wanted to latch on to one thought, one thought that I was too afraid to look at clearly. The thought represented pain.

The thought was realizing that maybe this relationship wasn't going to work.

That it would have to end.

That I would have to end it.

And that by doing so, I would lose everything I tried so hard to get—I would lose my life in Spain, my friends here, my new family, my chance at happiness. I would lose love. I would lose Mateo.

That thought broke me. It fucking broke me. So I dismissed it, I pushed it aside, because it was too great of a task to think about it, and it was too life-altering to even consider. I didn't want to think about it and realize that it was true, because once I realized it was true, then I would have to do something about it.

I didn't want to do something about it. I just wanted things back to the way they were.

But really, when was our love ever fucking free?



I didn't know how long I lay in bed, waiting for Mateo to call me or come home. But after a while it was obvious that he wasn't.

When the phone finally did ring, it was Claudia. She practically forced me to get dressed and go and meet her. She threatened bodily harm, which I didn't find very funny considering my cheek was still a bit red from where Isabel had hit me. One of her rings had left a mark that I spent a long time trying to cover up with concealer. Unfortunately, it didn't cover up the deep humiliation I felt.

The weather had started off sunny when I woke up, but by the time I was heading out the door to meet her, the clouds rolled in and there was a chill in the air. I held my jean jacket around me tight, sad to say goodbye to the hot summer, and hurried along the streets until I got to the Prado museum. Claudia thought the art would take my mind off of things.

It was only as I was running up to the entrance to meet her that I got a text from Mateo.

Where are you? I am on my way home now.

My heart leaped with uncertainty. I quickly texted back.

I just got to the Prado. Meeting Claudia here. Will be back later, going to look at some art.

I waited a few moments for the next text to come. By now Claudia had spotted me and joined my side, looking on curiously but not being nosy. She knew what was up.

He responded: *Enjoy the museum, it is very important. See you when you get home. I love you.*

I love you too, I texted back. I meant every single word of that. Despite that thought in my head, the one I didn't want to touch, to feel, to look at, I knew without a doubt that I loved Mateo deeply and with every part of me. It was that love that made things hurt so much.

"What did he say?" Claudia asked.

I sighed. "Nothing really, just that he's coming back home now."

I stared at the grand entrance to the palace-like building. People of all ages were lining up to get in. Suddenly I knew that the last thing I wanted to

be doing was staring at paintings and sculptures all while I was thinking about Mateo.

“Go,” Claudia said to me with a knowing smile. “We can always go to the museum another day. This will not take your mind off of Mateo if Mateo is in your home, waiting for you.”

“Are you sure?” I asked her.

She nodded. “I’ve lived in Madrid my whole life. I have seen the exhibits two times already this year. We will come back another day, maybe the four of us, like a double date. But believe me, you’re going to get a hatred for Goya if you go in there in this state.”

I smiled at her. “Well, I wouldn’t want to do that to Mr. Goya.”

She kissed me quickly on each cheek and waved as I walked away. “Good luck.”

Usually I got annoyed when people told me “good luck” because it sounded like I needed luck, needed help with something when I didn’t. But this time, I really did need it. I wanted to get back home and see Mateo and fall into his arms and have him bury that bad thought far, far away. I wanted him to take the burden away, to take everything away, and make me believe we had a way to get through this mess.

I decided not to tell him I was coming home early. In fact, I thought perhaps I could get home before him and make it a surprise, lay out some coffee and cookies and prepare for some soul-searching.

I took the Metro for a bit, trying to hurry, and walked quickly from the metro station to the apartment. I was about a block away, doing my best to ignore the little kicks of hurt that still swirled in my gut, that terrible feeling of dread I was convinced I could overcome.

And that’s when I saw Mateo.

He was across the street, getting out of a shiny red Audi. It wasn’t his car at all. Then I noticed the blond head of Isabel in the driver’s seat, and I realized that Mateo had driven Isabel home in her car last night.

I immediately retreated backward into the doorway of a shop, hoping the shadows would hide me, and watched the scene unfold. There was no way I wanted her to see me again; she’d probably leap out of the car and finish what she started.

Mateo walked around to her side of the car, with the same clothes on as last night, and she rolled down the window.

She said something to him. I couldn't read her expression because she had sunglasses on.

Mateo put his right hand at her jaw, holding her intimately, like a husband would with a wife, nodding at whatever she was saying.

Then he kissed her.

Right on the lips.

A soft, sensual kiss.

And she kissed him back.

My lungs dropped to the floor, the fractures in my heart all blowing up at once, shattering every piece of me, shards slicing me from head to toe. All while my eyes stayed wide open, glued to the scene.

Finally he pulled away and smiled. But there was no time left in this universe to decipher what that smile meant, if it even meant anything.

Because I realized what that thought had meant, what it was trying to tell me, trying to get me to pay attention to.

I was watching Mateo and his wife, or soon-to-be-ex-wife, act affectionate with each other. I was watching them act like they'd been married for years, because of course they had been. I was watching this and I was dying inside, my heart stomped on and crushed, my veins full of black liquid jealousy, choking me from the inside out. I was feeling like I was never going to survive this.

And that was wrong.

Because they had a daughter together.

And me and my feelings, I was standing in the way.

I never wanted my father to leave my mother, not deep down. If there ever had been a way to spare me of all the pain I went through, I would have wanted it. Right now, I was the obstacle between Mateo and Isabel's marriage. If there was ever a chance, even the smallest chance, that the two of them could ever get back together, I couldn't be the one to get in the way of that.

They had a family together.

I needed to do the right thing, for everyone.

Fuck my own heart.

I had to leave Spain.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I managed to make it back to the apartment, hurrying along so that Mateo didn't see me. I wasn't sure how long he was spending at the car with Isabel, and I didn't want to know. I felt as if I was going to die with each step, barely holding myself together as I got into our building. Once in the elevator, I started to keel over, holding onto the railing for dear life, trying to keep myself upright. The pain was so overwhelming I was seeing stars again.

As I fumbled with my keys and tried to stick them in the door, I kept dropping them. And then the tears started coming, streaming down my face, making me see through a watery filter. I tried to keep my sobs inside, tried to bury them deep in my chest, so determined not to lose it in the hallway. If I lost it, I would collapse right on the floor and I'd never make it inside.

Somehow the key went into the lock and the door handle turned. I burst through and immediately collapsed to my knees on the hardwood floors, not even feeling the pain that was shooting up through me. Physical pain was preferable; it could be handled. What I was feeling was being ripped apart right down the middle until there was nothing inside me but agony.

I leaned back against the door, shutting it with my back and letting the sobs tear through me. I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't breathe.

I was dying.

There was nothing.

My chest was being crushed and I was dying.

Breathe, I tried to tell myself. *Please breathe*.

But I couldn't. I gasped for air and only cried out instead, overcome by the pain and the sorrow and the utter destruction of my new life.

I had to say goodbye to everything. I had to go back home. I had to leave Mateo. I had to do this to us to save us.

It was over.

I screamed, loud, shrill, bloody murder. My body shook, my hands and arms shaking, my chest still twisting and turning as I tried to breathe and cry and scream at the same time. I couldn't take this, I couldn't go on. This was the annihilation of every soft part of me; it was brutal and swift and

gory, and I was being eaten alive, made to feel it all, every cut and slice and stab, and the wound in my chest was growing bigger and bigger.

Feeling swept away by the rage and the madness, I tore my purse off my shoulder and flung it across the room.

I screamed again and collapsed onto the ground, my fingers trying to dig into the floor, to give me something to hold on to.

“Please,” I cried out loud to no one. “Please make this stop, please make this stop.” I sobbed, my cries getting caught in my mouth, in my throat, in my lungs.

I barely heard the door opening behind me, barely felt it push against my backside.

“Vera?” Mateo asked from above me, his voice breaking. “Vera, my god. Are you okay?”

He shut the door behind him and put his arms under mine, pulling me up to my feet.

I gasped and stumbled away from him, holding on to the edge of the kitchen counter to keep me up.

“Stay away from me!” I screamed.

His eyes widened in fear as he looked me up and down. “Vera, please, Estrella, please, what happened?”

“It’s over!” I yelled at him, scared at the ferocity of my voice, at the way it was coming out. I had underestimated my emotions.

“What are you talking about?” he asked with a shake of his head, coming closer.

I put my hands out to keep him back. I pinched my eyes shut, trying to stick to what I knew was right. But he didn’t stop, he came and put his arms around me, holding me tight to him. I froze, rigid, unable to touch him back.

“Please, what is over?” he asked softly. “Please talk to me.”

“Us,” I sobbed into his chest. “We’re over. I’m leaving Spain. I’m going back home.”

He tensed, standing still. I could almost hear his heart stop. “No,” he whispered. “You do not mean this.”

“I do,” I said. “I do. I have to leave you.”

“Why?” he growled. He pulled away and grabbed a hard hold of my shoulders. “Why do you have to leave me? Because of Isabel?”

“You didn’t defend me last night!” I yelled and pushed him back from me. I walked backward into the kitchen, one hand on the counter for balance. “She fucking spat on me, she hit me, and you didn’t defend me!”

“I couldn’t,” he whispered, seeming to be in shock. “Vera, please, I couldn’t.”

“Yes, you could have!” I screamed, my heart shuddering violently. “You could have defended me!”

“You have no idea what I am going through!” he yelled right back, loud, his eyes burning up. “You have no idea at all. You don’t know what I have to do to keep my chances of having Chloe Ann alive! Don’t make me choose between you two.”

I felt like I was turning to glass only to be shattered right away.

“I am not asking you anything!” I roared. “I am not that type of woman! You may all call me a whore and a homewrecker, but I would never ask the impossible of you. And you’ve already made the right choice.”

He put his hands in a steeple over his nose and mouth, trying to breathe in and out, his eyes locked on mine. So much anger, pain, and frustration in them. Finally he lifted them away and said, “You are not a whore. Isabel was upset, like we all knew she would be. I could not defend you and her at the same time.”

“I know,” I shot back. “It would explain why I just saw you kissing her.”

His face fell.

I crossed my arms. “I saw you. Just now.”

“Vera,” he said gently. “No, that isn’t what it looks like.”

I swallowed painfully. “Maybe not.”

“I am trying to keep the peace.”

“Are you leading her on?”

“No,” he said quickly, adamantly. “She knows about us, she knows the marriage is over. She agrees. But I have to play nice. Because of—”

“I know!” I yelled. “I know, I know, I know. Because of your daughter. And I fucking agree with you. I just wish I knew how fucking difficult this was going to be before I came out here, before I gave up my school and my family’s respect and my future. I gave up everything for you only to finish last!”

“You are not last,” he cried out. “Don’t fucking pull that shit with me. This isn’t fair or easy for me and you know it!”

“Shit?” I repeated lividly, my voice raw. “What shit am I fucking pulling? I am getting the fuck out of here and going back to a future I left behind, back to nothing.”

“You are not the only one to give everything up!” he roared at me, his voice shaking me to the bone. He stepped toward me and I backed up until I was leaning against the counter. “You can go back to school! You can go back to your country! I can never get my family back! I have lost everything!”

His face was red, the vein in his neck pulsing hard. I was speechless, trying to remember how to breathe again. His anger, his pain, had stolen my breath away.

I blinked and eked out, “I am sorry. Then perhaps you won’t notice the loss of me.” I tried to move around him but he grabbed my arm.

“No!” he seethed. “You don’t get to do this. It’s hard, it hurts, but you don’t get to leave.”

“I get to leave,” I told him, looking him in the eye, staring him down. “I get to leave because it is my choice to make. I will not be the other woman who breaks up a family anymore. The damage is done, but if I can prevent any further damage, I will. You and Chloe Ann and Isabel are a family. You should be together.”

“But you’re my family,” he cried out softly, pulling me closer to him. “Please, Vera, don’t do this to me. This can work. We just have to push through it.”

“It can’t work!” I sobbed. “You know it. Chloe Ann has to come first and she will. I don’t want to be the one to ruin her life any further.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head, his eyes closed. His grip on my arm never lessened. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Vera. You don’t. Just trust me that it will all work out—just hang on, please hang on. You promised you wouldn’t give up on us.”

Tears spilled down my cheeks, part of me wanting to collapse into his arms and believe him, to believe that everything was going to be all right. But it would never be all right. I had to do the right thing. My own pain, my own heart, my own future and my sacrifices, they couldn’t matter. I’d always been the villain, the black sheep, the black hole. But now I finally had a chance to be the bigger person, to put someone else first.

I had to take it.

This was my karma for my entire life.

"I'm sorry, Mateo," I whispered.

"Do you still love me?"

I shook my head. "No," I lied. To tell him the truth would make everything that much harder.

He began to shudder, his eyes welling with tears. "You're lying," he managed to say, his voice cracking. "You're lying. You love me."

"I don't," I said. "And I can't stay. I can't stay here and do this to you and your family."

"But you're killing *me*," he whispered in agony. He tried to pull me closer to him, but I remained as still as stone, rigid as a tree. Unyielding. I would not yield to this, I would not let my selfish heart and emotions win.

"Vera," he went on, now a tear rolling down his cheek. I looked away, unable to handle the sight of Mateo crying. "Vera, you are my star. I love you. I love you more than I've ever loved anyone. I know this isn't easy, I know you're hurting and that I am doing things that hurt or don't make sense to you. But you must believe me that together we can get through this. It is just a bump in the road, if we just hang on we can make it out alive with each other's hearts intact. We will be stronger." He wiped angrily at his eyes and swallowed hard. "Please, don't leave. Please don't let this be the end of us. Please just give us, give me, another chance. You are my universe and I have nothing if I don't have you in my life. Please, Vera. I love you like I love the stars, like I love the sky, like I love the earth. I can't do this without you. I can't."

His voice cracked over the last word and I could barely hold my resolve in check. He searched my eyes with his tear-filled ones and I felt like the whole idea of love was being obliterated into space, leaving a black hole behind. I never wanted to leave him, never wanted to hurt him.

But this wasn't about what I wanted.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I am sorry, Mateo. I never wanted it to be this way. But I am not strong enough for you. This is just too fucking hard."

I wrestled out of his grasp, steeling whatever was left of my heart, and headed down the hall to the bedroom, ready to pack.

"You don't get to leave just because it's hard," he cried out angrily after me. "You don't get to pretend you don't love me because you think that will make it easier on us."

But I didn't stop to answer because there was nothing left to say. My choice was made. I locked the door behind me in case he came after me. I

pulled my suitcase and backpack out of my closet and began to pack up my life once again.

My heart burned beneath the icy glaze, but it couldn't melt it now, couldn't break through. I wouldn't let it.

Love, our love, had been a shooting star, burning in the darkness, unseen until it got too close, too bright and too quick to capture. It burned out, lost to the deep cold and darkness, to the brutality of space, the infinity above us and in the new emptiness inside of me.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The rest of that day passed by in a blur. In some ways it went too slow—every second I spent packing was a second that terrified me, scared that I would relent, that I would go back into the living room and put my arms around Mateo and tell him I loved him, that I would fight for us, that I wouldn't leave him.

In other ways, it went too fast. I wanted to hold on to each second that slipped through my fingers. I loved our apartment, I loved our home, I loved our city. I didn't want to leave this life behind, even with all the hardships; I wanted to hang on to it and pray for the circumstances to change.

I wanted time to wind backward, to go back to Barcelona where we wouldn't leave the apartment, where I would make him tell Isabel right then, or even back further, when he asked me to move to Spain. I would have told him I'd come when the divorce was final. I would have found a way to stay in Vancouver until then, I would have put up with the wrath of my mother. Anything to avoid the pain of having something so beautiful, so fragile, only to be the one to crush it with your own foot.

Eventually though, I had packed everything in the room and bathroom. The only things I needed in the living room were my laptop, my jacket, and my purse.

Unfortunately, Mateo was sitting on the couch, head in his hands, right by them.

I stood there, the suitcase beside me, the backpack hanging off of one shoulder, stuck in quicksand.

"I need to get my computer," I whispered.

He didn't look up at me. "Then take it."

Shit. He was mad. Of course he was mad, I just broke his heart at the same time I broke mine.

I put my backpack down and leaned over him, quickly snapping up my computer and my purse. I tried not to look at him but I couldn't help it. My eyes were drawn to him as they always had been. I took in the thickness of his black hair, knowing how soft and smooth it was, how it felt to tug at it

with my fingers. His striking eyebrows that were the perfect frame for his teak brown eyes.

Eyes that were now meeting mine. He had looked up in time to catch my gaze. His eyes were still dark as ever, but bloodshot and full of pain. I stared at him, lost, afraid, and yet certain that this was the last time I'd ever see him.

"I love Chloe Ann," he said hoarsely. "And I love you. In very different yet very equal ways. Can't you trust me? Can't you trust that I know what is best?"

I swallowed shards of glass.

I was too afraid to trust him.

I straightened up, and finding the smallest pocket of courage, managed to give him a smile. "You are a good man, Mateo. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

He stared at me, dumbfounded now. "You are actually leaving me. I can't believe this is happening. Did none of this mean anything to you?" he whispered harshly.

A tear rolled down my cheek. "It meant *everything* to me."

I turned around and walked to the door, taking my jacket off the coat hook. It took every parcel of strength I had left in my ravaged soul to keep going, even when I heard him say, "I love you, my Estrella. Please don't go."

But I opened the door. And I went.



At first I didn't know where to go or what to do. Just up and leaving Mateo and my Madrid life wasn't as straightforward as I had assumed. If I even did assume. All I knew to do was panic and run, and I had no idea where I was running to.

I had very little money, enough for one night at a hotel.

Not enough on my Mastercard to buy a plane ticket home.

In reality, I was totally fucked.

That didn't stop me from walking and walking through the grey Madrid streets until I was covered in sweat and my back and arms hurt as much as everything else did. I paused, totally unsure of where I was and quickly called Claudia.

“Vera?” she answered.

And then the tears started coming again. I leaned against the cold stone wall of a building, shielding my face from passerby, and letting it all flow until I could speak again.

“I left Mateo,” I told her.

That was all she needed. I gave her vague directions, spotting the name of a few stores. She told me to stay put and thirty minutes later she was roaring down the narrow street and helping my bags and my life into the back of her hatchback.

Claudia didn’t exactly live in the city; her apartment was just to the west, still accessible by metro but things looked a little greener and spread out. It took us about a half hour, and the entire time I cried to her about what had happened—that I had seen him kiss Isabel, that I knew things would never improve, that I was making things harder by staying, that I could ruin his family’s true chance to stay together.

She never said anything except to murmur her shock or sympathies. She was just quiet comfort, which I appreciated more than I could say. Usually in this kind of case, people gave you unsolicited advice or agreed too much with what you were saying, wanting to help but only making things worse.

Claudia was more than eager to offer me anything that I needed. She said that she didn’t have much money to spare, but if it turned out that I couldn’t get my brother or one of my parents to fly me back home, then she would lend me what she could and I would pay her back. The only catch was that it would take her until her next paycheck in two weeks.

I had Claudia’s den as my room for as long as I needed, opting to sleep on an air mattress in there instead of on the couch. With Ricardo living with her, I wanted to give the both of them as much privacy as possible. I set up temporary camp in the narrow room, which Claudia’s fat grey cat Rocco didn’t like too much given that the den was one of his hangouts.

That night I kept checking my phone for texts from Mateo, having a sick kind of pull toward it, some kind of torturous impulse. He had sent no texts though, no emails, and there were no phone calls. It was pretty stupid to admit how much that destroyed me even further. There was nothing worse than thinking that the painful decision you made was the right one. I guess I had held out a little hope that he would continue trying to convince me that I was wrong.

I sat on the couch with Claudia and a bottle of wine, and we talked our way through the night. Ricardo decided he was heading out with some buddies of his, leaving us to vent and cry. I went through an entire box of tissues, just talking and talking and talking and just trying to work through everything.

The only thing I kept getting thinking about, saying over and over again, as if I had willed it to be true, was that we brought this on ourselves, that we were doomed from the start. Ours had been a love that never should have been, that was never meant to be. I wished I had recognized it from the start, that it was too impossible to go on.

“But you did,” Claudia said, pouring the rest of the wine into my glass. “You resisted until the very end.”

“I should have tried harder,” I said. “I should have seen this coming.”

“But love makes you an optimist,” she said. “That is what love is. It is hope for the future. Love doesn’t want you to lose faith, to view the world darkly, to have no hope. Love makes you believe in the impossible. That is the meaning of the word.”

“Very poetic,” I sniffled. “But love is misleading.”

She shrugged. “No one said it wasn’t.”

Talking with Claudia helped, even if it didn’t make me forget or make me feel any better about what had happened. But as the night wore on and a new day begun, I felt like if I kept talking about it to someone, then perhaps I could understand why I really did what I did.

Monday rolled around, however, and with Claudia and Ricardo at work, I was stuck alone with Rocco. I had nothing but time to kill with myself, time to feel that pain that kept reaching up from my gut like an icy hand.

There were still no messages from Mateo. The irrational side of me started getting really mad at his audacity—that he didn’t care. I had to keep reminding myself that this was my doing, my fault, that I had wanted this, that I had done this to us.

I decided to finally face my fears—admit that I was a failure—and call up Josh and my mother. It wasn’t going to be easy, to try and come crawling back to a home I had given the middle finger to.

I called Josh’s cell, knowing it was better if I talked to him first. I hated having to ask him for money, I hated for him to worry about me.

It was about seven a.m. in Vancouver and I was totally waking him up, but I wanted to talk to him before Claudia and Ricardo got home.

“Hello?” he answered groggily.

“Josh?” I whispered, as if I didn’t want to shock him.

He groaned. “Yeah. Vera. What time is it? Are you okay?”

“I’m...” I started. “I’m not okay.”

“What’s wrong?” He was waking up now, sounding more frantic.

I took in a deep breath. “I need to come home.”

He sighed. “Oh, no. Vera. What happened, man?”

“Mateo and I broke up,” I said, choking on my words.

“Fuck,” he swore. “I’m sorry. Why?”

“Many reasons,” I said. “It just got to be too hard.”

He made a funny grunt.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s just, you knew it would be hard.”

I narrowed my eyes at the phone. “No. I didn’t know it would be this hard. You have no idea, Joshua, no idea what the fuck I have been going through since I got here.”

“Sorry. I had no idea you were this unhappy.”

“I wasn’t unhappy,” I said, blowing a strand of hair out of my face. “I just...I don’t know. I don’t know. Don’t you ever think that sometimes love isn’t enough? That it can’t overcome everything?”

“I don’t know about that,” he said. “I’ve never really been in love before, not the way that you have. I’d always hoped that love would be enough. Otherwise it’s just a Nine Inch Nails song.”

“Well, love sucks.”

But the truth was, not having love is what sucked. Not having Mateo sucked. Mateo was love. Despite all the shit while navigating this whole emotional shitshow, he loved me with all his heart. I felt the passion in his touch, saw his soul in his eyes. That man, that wonderful man who was trying nothing more than to be a good father, even with me in the way, he had *loved* me.

And I was turning my back on it, on everything that Mateo had to offer me. He rearranged his life for me and I was bailing when it got tough.

You’re doing the right thing, I told myself. You ruined a marriage; you don’t deserve his love or anyone else’s.

This was karma.

Payback.

Consequences.

"I have to come home," I told him. "I'm doing what's right for everyone."

"And what did Mateo have to say about all of this?"

"That doesn't matter."

Josh laughed. "Doesn't matter? Vera, the dude left his wife for you."

"He did not."

"He did and you know it. He's mad about you, God knows why. I'm pretty sure if Mateo didn't think you could have handled it, he would have cut you loose or bailed himself."

"No," I said adamantly. "Because he doesn't want to hurt me, because he believes so much in making this work."

"Then why don't you?"

I paused, taken aback. "Because my happiness is not as important as a family's."

"Maybe you should let Mateo decide that and not you."

"Josh," I said sternly.

"Vera," he said right back. "Things aren't too late. You're still in Madrid, aren't you? Spain, at least."

"Yes," I said warily.

"Then fucking go back to him and make it work. You love him, don't you?"

I didn't say anything.

"Well, you either do or you don't," he added.

"Josh, I'm coming home," I said, louder now. "What's done is done. I need you to be supportive, okay? You were so supportive when I came here."

"Because I believed in that crazy scheme of yours," he said. "I don't believe in this one."

"So I guess you're not going to lend me money."

"No, Vera," he said. "I am not. And not because I'm being a dick, but I actually don't have a fucking dime to my name. Everything has been going to the car. He's a piece of shit, that Herman." It took me a moment to realize he was talking about his Golf.

"Well, what the hell am I going to do?"

"You really don't have any money?"

"No!" I cried out. "I don't have a job."

He sighed. "What about your friend? Claudia?"

“That’s who I’m staying with right now. And she’ll help me, but only in two weeks when she gets paid. I don’t know what else to do.”

“You want me to ask Mom, don’t you?”

I bit my lip. “She might say yes to you.”

“Maybe,” he mused. “But probably not. You’ll have much better luck with Dad. You rarely ask him for anything.”

“I know,” I said. “But it’s like, if Mom gives me money, then she’s pretty much saying I can come back home. If Dad gives it to me, I’ll probably have to live in Calgary.”

“Or,” he said, “you could just go back to your man and live in Madrid.”

“Josh, please,” I pleaded.

“Okay fine,” he said. “Give me a few days, all right?”

That would have to do. I thanked him profusely and hung up the phone.

The silence thrummed around me like the cadence of Rocco’s purrs. I didn’t want to think about everything that Josh had said. I didn’t want to think about anything. I didn’t want to feel anymore. I wanted the hollow place in my chest to be filled, to take away the emptiness, that black hole that kept swirling with pain and doubt.

The doubt was the worst part. It was the part that made me think everything that Josh said was true. That I was giving up too easily and too soon. But the thing was, he could never know what it was like to be me. He had never seen Isabel’s horror right up in his face or the look in Chloe Ann’s eyes when she asked her dad why he wasn’t coming home. I had to see all of that, feel it coming off of Mateo.

He made all those choices for me, and I was the most undeserving person of them all. He was just blinded by me because I made him feel like a different person. Perhaps the truth was that our love was what it was, that shining star, and it should have remained in Las Palabras. It should have never survived outside those confines, outside of that slice of life we happened upon. We were meant for a certain part of time, and anything else was pushing it.

I didn’t hear from Josh for a few days. I sank into a deep darkness that even Claudia couldn’t pull me out of. One moment I thought I was going to be fine, that I was going to get through this, and in the next moment, a Lana Del Rey song or a certain smell would bring me crashing to my feet, erupting into a fit of tears. There was no smooth ascent out of this pit. It was a jagged rollercoaster ride with no real end in sight.

When Wednesday rolled around, just as I was getting into bed, I got a text from Mateo.

I heard the beep—his particular chime—and my heart smiled. It was automatic, like Pavlov's dog. I was used to feeling happiness at the sound.

With my breath held in my mouth, afraid to pass it out through my lips, I picked up my phone and peered at the screen with trepidation.

I love you. Please come back to me.

That was all it said. That was enough for my soul to crumble, my heart weeping inside, torrents of agony. Oh, god. How was I ever going to get past this? How was I ever going to go home, knowing that this man was out there, a man who totally and completely owned me inside and out?

I missed him. No, missing him wasn't even the right word. I yearned for him, pined for him. I needed him. Something inside me was empty and aching in his absence, like flowers during the night. He was my sun, he was my everything.

I held the phone in my hand, staring at the text, wondering if I should respond, wondering how I couldn't. And yet there was this block inside of me, the moral part that was showing its head too late and trying to make up for past grievances. It prevented me from texting back, even though it killed me inside.

I fell asleep in a river of tears, wondering if I'd ever feel whole again, if this pain would ever make me stop hating myself.

Apparently, I still needed to be punished.

Chapter Thirty

A few days after Mateo's lone text, Josh finally called. It was Friday night, nearly a week since I had left Mateo. Claudia, Ricardo, Rocco and I were sitting on the couch watching the Spanish version of *The Voice*. I was going through the motions, telling myself that everything was going to be all right, fooling myself into thinking this was just a hiccup in my life to overcome.

Mateo couldn't have been my one true love. I was only twenty-three. The cynic in me knew that the odds of me ever finding the right person were skewed toward my late twenties, particularly for the kind of lifestyle I lived.

The romantic part of me knew that love happened at any age. As Claudia had said, it had no regard for time.

I picked up my cell from the coffee table and answered it. "Hey, Josh."

I tried to sound breezy, as if everything wasn't riding on it. I failed. My voice cracked, and Claudia and Ricardo looked over at me in worry.

I got up, shooting them a quick apologetic look, and took the call out onto the balcony. The weather had turned so fast, as if it were mimicking my situation. I pulled my cardigan close around me. "Yes, what is it?" I said into the phone.

"Hey," he said. "How are you?"

"Shitty," I said. "Any luck in getting me home?"

He sighed. "No. I'm sorry, Vera. Mom said no. She did, however, say you could return home if you apologized."

Normally I would have scoffed at that and told him she could go fuck herself. But I was tired of doing that. I'd already started to make the peace here in Spain, and I needed to continue. My pride didn't matter so much. If Mateo could do things he didn't want to do to keep the peace with Isabel, I could do the same with my mom.

"Okay," I said with a sigh. "Thanks for trying."

"So you're actually going to apologize to Mom?" he asked incredulously.

"First things first," I told him. "I'll get a way home, then I will tell her I'm wrong, admit I was sorry, whatever."

“Dude,” he said. “I’m not saying that you and Mom shouldn’t try and get along, but this doesn’t sound like you at all.”

“Maybe I’m growing up,” I told him. “Maybe I need to make some changes in my life.”

“Right,” he said slowly. “I’m still worried that you’ve been replaced by a robot. Since when have you ever cared about doing the right thing? You’re Miss Rebellious, always have been.”

“Maybe when I saw firsthand what the damage was like,” I said. “What I leave in my wake.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Vera,” he scoffed.

“It’s all I know how to be,” I remarked softly. Well, if my mom wasn’t going to help, that meant I’d be waiting another week for Claudia. I hated knowing I owed people but in this case I had no choice.

“Well,” he said, “keep me posted on whatever you do. I’ll let Mom know though, so if she calls you in the next few days, you’ll know why. Don’t freak out.”

“I won’t.”

“Love ya.”

“Love ya too.”

I hung up and leaned out on the balcony railing. From Claudia’s apartment, the city lights were further away. You could kind of see some of the stars in that big velvet sky. They were fighting to get through all the light pollution and the haze, but they still managed to shine.

That night I had a beautiful dream.

I was laying on the grass out in that field, beneath that big oak tree, with Mateo by my side. Wildflowers grew all around us and up the trunk, spreading their colors across the leaves.

“Do you know why I call you Estella?” Mateo asked, lacing his fingers with mine and raising our hands up into the big blue sky.

“Why?”

“Because you are my star,” he said, his voice low and smooth, raising the hairs on my arms. “You shine brighter than the sun.”

“But even the sun goes away every night.”

“But it is the sun’s absence that makes us feel its power. We know the loss, the beauty and the life that the moon can’t replace. That is why we hang on to each day we are given. That is why I hang on to you.” He

lowered our hands and kissed my knuckles. “I love you, Vera. I’ve had the moon, the dark, the cold, for too long. I want my star back. My Estrella.”

He kissed me next, his mouth tasting as I remembered, his stubble rough as my fingers traced his jaw. His eyes were deep and luminous, begging me to stay with him, to bring him the warmth we both needed.

“And what if I was only supposed to burn for a certain amount of time?” I whispered. “What if I was only meant to shine for a while?”

“Then you truly don’t know what stars are meant to do.”

I looked at him in wonder.

“They are meant to give us hope in the face of infinity.”

He kissed me again, his warm hands on my skin.

Then it all faded to black.

I slowly woke up.

My cheeks were wet. My lips tasted like sunshine.



Four more days rolled past, days that went too quickly or too slowly, depending on my mood. Everyone was looking to Friday, the day that Claudia would get paid, the day I would book my plane ticket back home. In those four days, I talked to my mother and apologized to her. It went about as well as I thought it would. I felt utterly humiliated, having to admit I was wrong, that I made a bad choice. She sounded cold as always, though near the end of the conversation, she was conceding a bit.

“I would pay for your ticket, Vera,” she said. “It’s not a matter of punishment here, I just can’t swing it. Not with Mercy’s wedding.”

Of course. I rolled my eyes and yet still managed to ask my mom how the wedding was going. For some reason, I thought the wedding planning would have brought joy to my mother’s life, but she seemed perpetually annoyed about the whole thing. Perhaps Mercy and Charles were pissing her off too with their demands.

I told her not to worry about it, that I now had a way home and just had to pay my friend back. She sounded vaguely happy about that, which gave me a smidgen of hope for my return. Hope was a dangerous thing, I knew, but it didn’t stop your heart from latching on to it like a life raft.

Thursday night, however, the night before Claudia’s paycheck, my mother called me back.

“Vera?” she asked.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, panic never too far away from me. Did something happen to Josh? Dad? Mercy?

“Nothing,” she said. “Nothing at all. I just called to let you know that I bought you a ticket home.”

“What?” I asked, completely floored.

“It’s on Sunday at five p.m., a red-eye. Do you have a pen? I have a confirmation number for you here.”

I scrambled for a pen, totally blown away. I hated owing my mom, but I knew deep down she could afford it. Claudia couldn’t. She had signed up for a big favor by offering to lend me a thousand dollars for my flight home, and I would have been eaten by guilt until I paid her back, something that would have taken a long time.

My mother told me the number and I wrote it down with all the details. Five p.m., Air Canada, on Sunday. Stopover in Toronto with a four hour layover. It all sounded like hell, but I didn’t care at this point.

I thanked my mom profusely and hung up the phone.

“What is it?” Claudia asked, coming out of the kitchen with a bottle of wine for our girl’s night.

“My mom bought me a ticket. I leave for home on Sunday.”

Her face fell slightly as she placed the bottle of wine on the coffee table. “Oh.”

“What?” I asked. “I thought you’d be happy. I’m saving you money.”

“I know,” she said. “But...” She plopped down on the couch and brushed her hair out of her eyes. “I thought maybe I could have convinced you to stay.”

“Why would I stay?”

“Because you love it here.”

“Claudia,” I said, “I don’t love it here. I love you. Ricardo. Your cat. Okay, I do love Madrid, I do love Spain. But if I stay here, it will just remind me of why I came. It will remind me of Mateo.”

“Then go back to him,” she blurted out.

I frowned at her. Claudia had never given me any advice or any input into this whole thing. “What?”

She sighed and stared up at the ceiling. “I just think you are making a mistake if you get on that plane.”

“Why?”

“Because Mateo loves you and you love him, and while you think love doesn’t conquer all, I think it does. Vera, you need to go back to him.”

“I do not,” I said. “He hasn’t even tried to get in touch with me.” *Except for that one text, I thought, the one I keep replaying in my head over and over again.*

“Because he thinks that you’ve made your mind up, or maybe he even thinks you’re gone.”

I shook my head. “I made the right choice. I don’t need you to second guess me right now!”

“Just...” Claudia stammered, looking for words. “I don’t want you to go either. You need to stay here. This is where you belong.”

And then Claudia started crying.

My heart melted. She wasn’t a big crier and I didn’t want to leave her either.

“Claudia,” I said to her, bringing her into my arms. “This is still a happy ending.”

“How?” she sobbed. “You’re my friend and you’re leaving me. You’re Mateo’s love and you’re leaving him. You’re leaving the ones you care most about and the ones who care most about you.”

“But don’t the best stories, the best experiences, aren’t they about character growth and change?” I asked. “Aren’t they about sacrifice? This is just something I need to do. I’ll be happy again. So will you. So will Mateo.”

“You don’t need to justify your actions to yourself,” she said into my shoulder.

I pulled back and eyed her. “I’m justifying them to you.”

“No,” she said, meeting my gaze. “You’re not. You’ve been trying to explain everything away from the minute you called me up on the phone, telling me that you left Mateo. You keep repeating over and over again that you are doing the right thing, that you are doing what needs to be done for the greater good. Did you ever stop to think that you may not have a fucking clue what you are talking about?”

My mouth flapped open, slightly aghast. “I do know.”

“No, you don’t. You say you do and you don’t. You know nothing, Vera, nothing about Mateo and what he wants. He’s the one who is going through the divorce. He’s the one going through all of it, center stage. He is older, you know, he knows what is going on, he knows Isabel and his daughter. He

is making the best decisions for everyone. You cannot make those decisions for him. You have no idea."

A cold feeling came over me. "Has he talked to you?"

She looked away.

"Has he?!" I screeched, getting to my feet.

"He called me a few days ago," she said. "He asked if I knew where you were. I told him you were still here and you hadn't gone home yet. We were waiting for my paycheck. He asked me how you were doing."

"And?!"

"And I told him what you've been saying for the last ten days."

"And what did he say?"

"He said he loved you."

"That's it?"

"It's not enough?"

The thing was, it was enough. Just not enough to keep me here.

"You're only doing the right thing because you're trying to get rid of your guilt," she said to me. "But wouldn't you rather have some guilt and be happy than be miserable and not feel guilty?"

"One way is selfish and the other way isn't."

"Vera," she said patiently. "You are selfish by nature. So am I. So is Mateo. It's why he left his wife, so that he could be happier. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be happy and believing you deserve to be happy."

I shook my head, refusing to believe that.

She got up and put her hand on my shoulder. "Look, I don't know who has been telling you over the years that you aren't worthy of love and happiness, but they're idiots. We all deserve it. And if people get hurt along the way, that's life. We've all been hurt. Doesn't that make love more crucial to our lives? Did you ever think that loving Mateo hasn't been punishment for the wrong you've done but payment for the shit you've gone through? Vera Miles, you are a lovely, beautiful, funny, generous, great human being and I am honored to call you my friend. Don't let anything else color that or rob you from the happiness that you do deserve. Tell those voices in your head to shut the fuck up."

At that I burst out laughing. Crazy happy and sad tears that rocketed through me, turning me hysterical. I wanted to believe Claudia so badly. I really did. I wanted to say she was right and a small part of me knew she

was right. The part that burned for Mateo, that still believed in us, that believed that everything would be okay.

But it was too late now.

I hugged her, bringing her close to me, wishing I didn't have to let go.

Chapter Thirty-One

On Saturday night, my last night in Madrid, Claudia and Ricardo took me out to the bars. I hadn't really left the apartment for two weeks, and definitely hadn't gone back into the city, so I felt like I had to have the Madrid experience one last time.

We walked through cobblestone streets, the night soft on our shoulders, the air filled with laughter. I hung on to every single smell—garlic, chilies, fish—and on to every sound—the chatter of Spanish, the classical guitar that wafted out of the bars, the cries of people having a good time. I soaked up everything that assaulted my senses because I knew, I knew, it was my last time to ever experience this place.

I wanted to leave on a good note. I wanted Madrid to brand me, make one last mark on my soul that I wouldn't forget.

And because of this openness, this willingness to take what I could get while I could get it, I kept thinking that maybe by luck, maybe by chance, maybe by the fate of those motherfucking stars, I would run into Mateo. Just to see him one last time.

What I wouldn't give to see his beautiful face one last time.

My god I loved that man.

And that night, I allowed myself to feel every part of that love. Everything he had ever made me feel. I rolled in the memories, letting them scar my skin. I relived them, telling myself that I was lucky to have known him, to have been loved like that, to have loved like I did. I'd told myself that our love never had been free, but that was a lie. I had loved him freely, beyond restraint or constriction.

I had loved and always would love Mateo Casalles.

There was no one else.

Claudia, Ricardo, and I were winding down the night at some quiet bar when I got a call from Josh. I took the phone outside, staggering a bit thanks to the copious amounts of sangria.

"Hello?" I said into the phone as a bunch of drunk chicks stumbled past me.

"Vera," Josh said. "Hey, you got a minute?" He was slurring a bit which made me think he was probably drunk.

“Kind of,” I said. “Just out in the city. Last night and everything.”

“Right. Good.”

“Josh.”

“Yes?”

“Why did you call?”

“There is something I’m not supposed to tell you.”

I pursed my lips for a moment. “Well, now you know you have to tell me, right?”

“Vera, Mom didn’t buy you that plane ticket.”

“Okay...”

“Mateo did.”

Stunned.

I was absolutely stunned.

“What?” I hissed into the phone. “Why? How?”

He sighed. “He called my cell the other day. I guess he knew the number for emergencies or whatever. He asked to speak to Mom.”

“I don’t understand.” My heart started pounding wildly in my throat, at just the thought of Mateo calling my brother, talking to my mom.

“Mom said he made her promise not to tell you. He had heard that you needed a way home. He offered to pay for your ticket. Mom said sure. He told her that you needed to be with people you loved. That he was sorry. That this was a gift. That you should have your family with you.”

I was utterly conflicted over this. Completely torn down the middle. One side of me appreciated the gesture, the generosity of Mateo that had never failed me so far. That he was mature enough to understand what I wanted, to want to help me even if it cost him.

The other side of me was splintering. Because he was telling me it was okay to leave. He was giving me his blessing. The flight was a parting gift. It was only fair—he flew me to Spain to begin with.

“Vera?” Josh asked.

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing the heel of my hand into my forehead, trying to put some sense in my brain.

“Are you okay?”

“I guess.”

“Should I have not told you?”

I thought about it. “I guess if you hadn’t...maybe I would have wondered if he hated me. But...now I know he doesn’t. He just finally

agrees with me. That I did the right thing.”

“Yeah.” He breathed out. “I guess so. I’m sorry.”

I breathed out and looked up at the sky. “Yeah. Well, I guess I’ll see you in a couple days.”

“I have your info. Mom and I will see you at the airport.”

I hung up the phone and stared out at the plaza across from me, at the people enjoying the Saturday night, the vibrancy in the air. I always felt like I belonged here. Even with the shit Mateo and I had gone through, I still felt like Madrid was my home. Hell, I felt Mateo was my home too. There had never been a moment that I thought I didn’t belong here.

I was going to miss this place, the way it made me move, made me dance, made me love, made me live. And now I was leaving. I could only hope that the Vera that returned to Canada could manage to hold on to Spain somewhere deep inside her soul.

I had lost it once before. I didn’t want to lose it again.



The next morning, I woke up slightly hung over—it was a fitting goodbye to Spain. After Josh’s call, I went back inside the bar and decided to keep drinking and dancing my face off. Eventually I told Claudia about Mateo’s purchase. She was actually upset, not understanding why Mateo would send me off without a fight. It didn’t seem like him.

“Maybe he’s going to be at the airport,” Ricardo spoke up from the backseat as Claudia drove me to the airport.

I would be totally fucking lying if I hadn’t been secretly wishing for that the whole entire time. What woman didn’t want the dramatic airport reunion scene, the guy running up to her gate at the last minute? I had hoped that maybe that was Mateo’s plan. Seemed I wasn’t the only one.

“*That* would be more like Mateo,” Claudia said. She gave me a quick look. “But if that doesn’t happen, are you going to be okay? You’re going to need to be okay if he doesn’t show up.”

I sucked in a breath and stared out the window at the Spanish landscape as it flew by. Of course it was nice and hot on the day I left. It would probably be raining when I got home. And would I be okay? Would I be okay with Mateo never showing up, with going back to Canada as planned, alone, on my own, with a scattered life to return to?

Would I be okay?

No.

I wouldn't be.

Not at first.

But in time, somewhere, deep inside I knew I would be. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not a week from now, maybe not a year. But at some point in time, in this universe and among these stars, I was going to be okay just being me. Just being Vera Miles.

With that strengthening thought, we arrived at the airport. I hugged Claudia and Ricardo at the curb, not wanting to delay our goodbye any longer.

Claudia held me tight, crying into my hair. "I promise to come to Vancouver. Ricardo and I. We'll do it as soon as we save up. Maybe in the winter for skiing? You could take us to Whistler Mountain."

"Absolutely," I said, hoping that Claudia would stay true to her word, that she wouldn't forget about me over time, forget about what she meant to me. I wanted her as a friend for life, someone to overcome distance and cultures. I think we could make it last.

At least I had that.

I dried away stray tears with my knuckles, trying not to smudge my makeup. I smiled at the two of them, putting on my brave face. "Well," I said. "Adios."

Claudia and Ricardo both waved at me sadly. I pulled my bags toward the checkout counter and turned back to see them one last time. Claudia was crying into Ricardo's shoulder and he was leading her back to the car. I felt my throat pinch again, the sobs wanting to escape. I took in a deep breath and sucked it down.

I went to the Air Canada counter and put on a fake smile that I could barely wear, getting my tickets and checking my bags. All the while I kept looking over my shoulder and searching for Mateo. Was he going to come? Would he show up? Dammit, he had to do it soon. He knew what flight I was on and what time, he bought the damn ticket.

"Are you traveling alone?" the desk agent asked me, noticing my wandering eye. "Or waiting for someone else?"

I shook my head. "No," I said. "I'm alone."

She must have caught the sorrow in my voice because she gave me a soft smile. "I like flying alone. It's one of the few times where you have to

pay attention to yourself.”

I nearly sobbed at that. I gave her a tight smile, my eyes welling up. I thanked her, got my tickets, and took off for the security checkpoint.

I wanted to stall on my way through there, knowing that Mateo couldn't go through without a ticket. I wanted him to catch up with me and take me in his arms and tell me he loved me and that everything was going to be okay. I wanted him to be my home again.

I wanted him in every way I could.

But he never came.

After security, I headed to my gate, still harboring the tiniest seed of hope that he would still somehow come through. Maybe he was on my plane, as ridiculous of a notion as that was.

I was such a dreamer. A romantic deep down inside. After everything I pushed away, I still believed in that great big love, the one that you would create stars and galaxies and universes for.

When the plane boarded, I got to my seat—window, my favorite—buckled up my seatbelt and curled up into a ball, leaning against the window and trying to shield my eyes from the passengers who were still getting on. I felt the people sit down beside me but I didn't dare look at them. I didn't dare make a sound. I just let the tears stream down my face as I stared at my last view of Spain. I sobbed silently during take-off. I tried to compose myself as we hit cruising altitude. This was a private moment for me. This was me saying goodbye to Spain.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine all my best memories, Mateo's wonderful face, his hands on my body, the feel of being in his arms, Claudia's smile, the late nights, the sunshine, the feel of the air, the taste of the wine. If I tried hard enough, I could even smell Mateo's cologne, ocean fresh. It brought me the smallest bit of comfort.

I had to be okay.

As the country of Spain became a distant land below me, as the clouds formed over Portugal, as the continent of Europe carved out its name into the Atlantic, I had to be okay.

I took in a deep breath and looked deep inside me for an answer.

There was only me.

And I knew I was strong. I was resilient. And I wasn't as bad as people had told me.

I was Vera Miles.

And I might have been the villain of my own story.
But I was the hero, too.
I was going to be okay.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I exhaled and adjusted myself in my seat, trying not to elbow my seatmate, which was impossible. I totally knocked them off the armrest.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, still trying to keep my shitty red nose and puffy eyes hidden from view.

“I’m sorry, too.”

The blood in me stilled.

The voice.

That voice.

No.

No, it fucking could not be.

I very slowly turned my head toward the passenger sitting beside me, looking at them for the first time.

Mateo was right there, staring at me, his quiet smile and soft eyes just inches away.

My breath hitched in shock. I was dead, wasn’t I? The plane crashed on take-off and I was dead! Or sleeping. I was sleeping.

I slowly tore my eyes off of him and looked around at the other passengers on the plane, wondering if they were dead too or asleep or strange, or if something was out of the ordinary, some sort of sign that I was dreaming or God was playing the world’s cruelest practical joke.

“I was hoping to get your attention earlier,” he said with a shrug. “But you never looked this way once. I can see why, your little red nose.”

I continued to stare at him like a deer in the headlights. I started shaking my head in disbelief. “No. No, h-how can you be here?”

“Is it bad that I’m here?”

I shook my head again, licking my lips, trying to find words where there were none. Everything around me throbbed as if in slow motion. My mind was officially blown and the rest of me was struggling to catch up.

Mateo.

Here.

Next to me.

Flying to Vancouver with me.

“I told your mother that I wanted you to be with your family and people who loved you,” he said simply. “Whether you believe it or want it, Vera, you are my family. You are my universe. And I love you more than anything.”

“That is so sweet,” the woman next to him gushed, obviously eavesdropping. Actually, I was sure the whole plane was probably listening to this.

I blinked at him, wishing we had privacy. But really, that didn’t matter. Everything I wished for was here.

“Will you forgive me?” he asked, placing his hand on mine. Warmth flooded through me, a shiver ran down my back.

How could this be real? How could this be happening?

“What for?” I breathed out.

“For not being sensitive enough during everything, for thinking you could handle all of that when I should have never asked you to handle it. You are strong, Vera, very strong, but I was so wrapped up in my own burdens, of what I had to carry, that I thought yours weren’t as hard. But they were. There were many, many things that I did wrong.” He raised my hand up to his and kissed it. “Will you forgive me?”

I still couldn’t believe it. “Of course,” I whispered, my emotions all fighting each other. What did this mean? “There is nothing to forgive, Mateo. You did what you had to do.”

“I know,” he said. “I just wished it could have been different. I forget that you are only twenty-three years old, Vera. You have shouldered so much and you are only twenty-three. Women your age shouldn’t have to deal with these situations. I am in awe of you, do you know that?”

I swallowed hard, unable to ignore the gnawing feeling of doubt in my chest. “And...how are things? With you. And them?”

He smiled and his eyes lit up. “I was granted joint custody,” he said.

I broke out into a wide grin. “Are you serious?”

He nodded. “Yes. I am serious. After you left me, I went and visited Isabel most days.” My face fell but he shot me a reassuring smile. “Do not worry, it wasn’t like that. It was just to talk to her. I very slowly got her to understand. I owned up to everything so there were no secrets. I explained how serious I was about you, what you meant to me, the kind of wonderful and good person that you were. I told her how badly I didn’t want Chloe

Ann to grow up without a father. With a lot of patience, I finally got her to sign it over.”

“Just like that?” I asked.

He turned his hand from side to side. “Mas o menos. More or less. I promised her a big settlement in exchange for any humiliation she had to suffer.”

I raised my eyebrows. Figures it would come down to money.

“But,” he added, “it is worth it. I took the time to take care of everything while you were gone. The divorce is almost final. And my daughter can never be taken away from me.”

I felt like the sun was bursting inside my heart, flooding me with utter relief. I felt like I could finally, finally breathe again.

Mateo would never lose Chloe Ann.

All my worries turned to dust, blown away.

“So what are you doing on the plane with me?” I asked when I composed myself.

“I’m taking you back home,” he said. He noted the puzzled look on my face. “Madrid is your home. I am your home. We’ll go to Vancouver and I’ll meet your family. It is only fair, yes? And then I’m taking you right back to Spain.”

“And if I say no?”

His smile faltered, his eyes creasing sadly. “Then I will have tried my best. I bought you this plane ticket because I knew that a nine hour flight was the only way I’d be able to have your attention, where you wouldn’t be able to run, to leave. I figured I would spend the entire flight trying to win you back. Trying to make you love me again.”

My heart swelled, my lower lip trembling. “I never stopped loving you,” I said quietly.

He reached out and stroked my face, running his fingertips over my cheekbones. “I couldn’t quite be sure. Sometimes, when love makes you mad, you wonder if it makes other people mad too.”

I nodded. “It does.” I sighed and looked down. “I’m sorry that I gave up on us. I just tried to do the right thing.”

“That is okay, Vera. I love you enough to make up for it. I would never let you go without a fight.”

I shot him a quick look. “You didn’t know I was at Claudia’s for some time. I could have left the country.”

“You are impulsive,” he noted, “but I figured it would take you a while to make arrangements. And even if you had left, I know your address in Vancouver. I would have found you. You burn too brightly to be missed.”

I closed my eyes at that and smiled, a happy tear streaking down my cheek. I was finally letting myself believe it, believe that we were together and had a chance.

“So,” I said carefully. “You still want me?”

He laughed lightly. “Oh, my Estrella.”

He grabbed my face in his hands and kissed me, hard at first, then soft as our lips and tongues melded together, feeling like honey, tasting like gold. I felt him all the way to my toes, making my skin and body come alive.

The woman next to Mateo let out a happy sigh, apparently still watching us.

Mateo and I slowly broke apart, our noses pressed against each other, gazing into each other’s eyes. I couldn’t keep the smile off my face. I gripped his hair, holding on tight, afraid to let go. He was here, he was here, he was here.

And he was mine.

“You still want me?” he whispered, the utter vulnerability of his words sinking into me like silk.

“Si,” I said adamantly. “Always and infinity.”

He grinned and pushed up the armrest between us, unbuckling my seatbelt and pulling me to him. He put his arm around me and held on tight, his warm breath at my ear, his heartbeat steady against my back. He held me as the world outside the window turned to night and the starshine filled the endless sky.

We flew together like the stars.

Epilogue – Whistler

Five Months Later

“Come on, Vera, you can do better than that!” Josh yelled at me.

“Fuck you!” I yelled back. I couldn’t even look up to see his face because the moment that I did was the moment I was going to break my neck and legs. I was currently going down Whistler Mountain on a run that was way more challenging than it should have been. While I was a skier in my youth, I’d totally forgotten how to do it. As a result, I’d gone down most of the mountain in a snow-plow position. Several times the tips of my skis started to cross and I freaked out and launched myself into the snow.

In short, it was hell, and I didn’t appreciate my brother yelling at me. He was on a snowboard and was actually really good at it. He drove me crazy zooming down the hill and yelling at me to keep up.

Now I was pretty much near the end and I could see the sprawl of Whistler Village at the bottom of the hill. Most importantly, I could see the large patio where skiers and snowboarders were having their après run beers under the heaters, languishing in the high altitude sunlight.

Beer was my biggest motivator.

Somehow I made it to the bottom and immediately snapped off my skis and then brushed off my ski pants that were caked with snow.

“You did awesome,” Josh said, sliding next to me like a show-off, powder flying everywhere.

“Shut up,” I told him. “Don’t patronize me.”

“I’m not!” he said, lifting his goggles on top of his head. “I mean it.”

“Whatever.” I bent down and awkwardly scooped up my skis. “Get a beer in me and get it in me now.”

“I wonder if they’ve gotten a table already,” Josh mused.

We made our way through the throngs of people walking awkwardly in ski boots, just as I was, and stacked up our skis and board along the rack.

“I see Claudia!” Josh said.

I went and joined him and saw her at a table by the wall, waving at us and looking adorable in her little snowboarding outfit. I probably should have started snowboarding instead of skiing, but how was I to know I’d be so damn terrible at something I used to be good at?

“How was it?” she asked us as we snaked our way towards her.

“Great,” Josh said.

“Crap,” I said. “I nearly broke my legs a million times.”

“Well,” Claudia said, lifting up her beer. “All those shots at the bar last night probably didn’t help, did it?”

I dismissed her logic and sat down. “Why are you back so soon? I thought all you professional people were going to spend all day on the slopes on all them fancy black diamond runs.”

She shrugged. “All the shots last night didn’t help me. Ricardo looked worse than I did, so I’m surprised he’s still out there. His loss. I will drink all the beer.”

“No, we will drink all the beer,” Josh said, signaling for the waiter who quickly came over. We ordered a round of beers for us and for our missing ski bunnies.

Josh leaned back and put his face to the sun. “Oh man, I don’t want to go back to work. Can we just live here?”

“Well, I don’t want to go back to work either,” I said. “It’s all grey and shit outside and dark, and things are so boring during the off season.”

“At least your job is kind of fun,” Josh pointed out. “And at least you live in a foreign country. Doing paperwork for Las Palaminos or wherever you work sounds a lot better when you’re doing it in fucking Spain.”

“Speaking of Spain,” Claudia said, looking over my shoulder. “Look who made it back alive.”

I twisted in my seat to see Mateo putting his skis away. He gave us a wave when he spotted us and I grinned in response. He looked fucking sexy in his ski gear, I had to say. I should have figured that Mateo was also an excellent skier. The man who could do fucking everything.

When I started getting my first bout of homesickness around Christmastime, I’d brought up the fact that Claudia and Ricardo had wanted to go to Whistler. Of course, she had said before Mateo had shown up on my plane, resulting in a two-day trip to Vancouver before we returned home to start our new life together. Still, I thought the Whistler trip was something we could all save up for. Besides, I had to return briefly to apply for my work permit. I had been paid under the table for my office services at the Las Palabras office but now I was ready to make it official.

As it was, Claudia and Ricardo were getting kind of blue about the Madrid winter and wanted a change of pace from the usual European ski

spots. With Mateo on board and taking care of our hotel and part of our flights, the four of us were able to fly to Whistler and invite Josh along.

Well, actually we invited my mother and Mercy and Charles too, to be nice, but they declined. Oh well, couldn't say I didn't try. I wouldn't stop trying to get close to my mother and sister, but at least I was learning not to take it personally anymore. Sometimes your family was through your blood and sometimes it was through your love.

While the waiter came back and put down the beers, Mateo came over to the table and leaned over me for a lingering kiss. He tasted like snow and fresh air.

"How is your knee?" I asked. "Can it handle skiing?"

"It is holding up." He lifted his aviator shades and peered down at me. "I saw you, you were doing very well."

I rolled my eyes and snorted. "Oh, now you're yanking my chain too?"

"What is this chain you keep speaking of and why is anyone yanking it?" he asked.

"Yeah," Claudia said, completely earnest. "Seriously, whose chain is this? A dog chain?"

Mateo made a small barking sound and laughed.

I slapped him on the arm. "Sit down, you dog. It's an expression."

Claudia made a tsking sound. "These damn English expressions. The moment you think you have the language under control, more letters explode."

"I do know one expression though," Mateo said, sitting down next to me and resting his hand on my knee. "We shall get buzzed like a bee."

We all raised our glasses and clinked them together.

"To getting buzzed like a bee," I said, smiling broadly at my crew, feeling warmth from the sun and warmth from my friends.

"Here, here," they said in unison.

We drank and we laughed. Ricardo soon joined us and we drank and laughed some more, until the sun went down and the stars came up.

The End

If you have enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review on Amazon, GoodReads, Barnes & Noble or any other review site. Authors really appreciate it.

Want to say hola? Drop me a line at authorkarinahalle@gmail.com and I'll do my best to get back to you. I love hearing from my readers (when they say nice things, hate mail will not be read).

Keep reading to read the prologue of my upcoming dark romantic suspense book, *Dirty Angels*.

Acknowledgements

After so many books it's hard to know what to say other than thank you and it's hard to know who to thank, other than...everyone.

But Love, in English (LIE) was different. This book had me pulling from personal experiences in foreign lands. No, Las Palabras does not exist but there is a program just like it out there that I was once a part of. No, Mateo and Claudia don't exist but there are Spaniards out there who inspired me to capture their essence in these pages. No, I am not Vera (though I kind of wish I was) but I did suffer from her lust for new experiences, that feeling that life would be better off somewhere else.

This book had me throwing out all my horror and suspense and action scenes out the window and made me dive deep into the world of Vera and Mateo. It was scary, to be honest, writing a romance with no crazy plot attached to it. But being scared is a good thing. "It scares me, so I should do it" is what Mateo said and I couldn't agree more. Love, in English ended up being one of the best writing experiences of my life.

Of course, it wasn't always rainbows and butterflies for this author. I cried a lot, suffering with my characters, finding myself thrown into fits of despair and afraid to continue on. I also freaked out a lot, lamenting to my tireless beta readers that I didn't know what I was doing, that my first romance would be a failure, that it was boring, or people wouldn't connect to the characters the way I had.

Time and time again they talked me off the ledge. And they weren't the only ones. So really, for this book I have to thank all the people who assured me I was doing okay, that encouraged me to keep going, that believed in the book and in me and loved the both of us.

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About the Author

With her USA Today bestselling The Artists Trilogy published by Grand Central Publishing, numerous foreign publication deals, and self-publishing success with her Experiment in Terror series, Vancouver-born Karina Halle is a true example of the term “Hybrid Author.” Though her books showcase her love of all things dark, sexy and edgy, she’s a closet romantic at heart and strives to give her characters a HEA...whenever possible.

Karina holds a screenwriting degree from Vancouver Film School and a Bachelor of Journalism from TRU. Her travel writing, music reviews/interviews and photography have appeared in publications such as Consequence of Sound, Mxdwn and GoNomad Travel Guides. She currently lives on an island on the coast of British Columbia where she’s preparing for the zombie apocalypse with her fiancé and rescue pup.

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