

KIKI ASTOR

ART

LOVE



*& other
miracles*

ART, LOVE & OTHER MIRACLES

Kiki Astor

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“Art is the lie that enables us to realize the truth.”-Pablo Picasso

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Epilogue

Chapter 1

Catalina fumbled with the keys to her new art gallery, impatient to check on the completed renovations. It had taken her an extra hour to get there, thanks to the Day of the Dead celebrations raging throughout the city. That was not the only reason she was late. She'd had even more difficulty than usual dragging herself out of bed that morning, and a series of mini breakdowns that made her worry that she would not be able to leave her apartment at all. Today, after all, marked a full year since she'd lost her husband- a year she could now break, in retrospect, into quarters.

Quarter one was marked by disbelief, or rather a single firm belief- that Alejandro would return. He'd promised he would never leave her, hadn't he? They'd sworn that to each other, in front of all of their friends, and she'd held up her end of the deal. After he had died, she had told her employers that she could keep coming into work, as a much-needed distraction, but seeing the turmoil raging inside of her, they had sent her home, telling her to take as much time as she needed. This was cruel, because for Catalina, time had stopped. The days bled into each other. Each morning, she drank her coffee alone, sitting at the wooden dining table they had so carefully chosen together, half convinced that he might at any point walk back into their apartment. Both she and the cat would stare at the door intently, as if daring him to show up. And on some days, they would still be sitting there when night fell. The only respite was Catalina's best friend Maria bringing food and trying to bring her back to the world of the living.

Quarter two: blankness. Gone were the fantasies that Alejandro, or at least life as it was before, might return. This was the point at which Catalina's dreams all evaporated. She realized that the timeline of her life was now definitively cut in half, split between the *before* and the *after*. Her imagination, which had once been so vivid, grew muted and then retreated altogether, in the face of her inability to see anything past this current stage. Invitations started trickling in, from people telling her it would be good for her to get out, but she refused them, ignoring her ringing and buzzing phone until it eventually began to quiet again. Because every time anyone expressed belated condolences, it was another nail in his coffin. Her friends, those that still remained, began to despair that she would ever speak to them again. And maybe she wouldn't, she'd decided. Solitude had become like a balm.

But then, quarter three: blackness. Black like despair. Black like how she imagined her heart to be now, carbonized by the devastating conviction that she would never be able to experience anything light and lovely ever again, never be able to give her heart over to someone new. She restricted her wardrobe to the rare dark pieces in her closet, as she rejected the bright colors he had so loved to see on her. But her sister had started forcing her to come out with her, mostly to events that bored Sofia's husband, and that meant art shows, in those private art foundations and spectacular modern museums that had been popping up all over Mexico. And then, an unexpected *milagro*- a miracle: at a special show at the Museo Soumaya, it had been blackness that had saved her. Catalina had stood there, transfixed, in front of a sculpture by Anish Kapoor- rendered in Vantablack, that darkest black that absorbed all light, making 3D objects look two-dimensional. Sofia had panicked upon finding her sister still standing in the same spot at the end of the evening. But somehow, that blackness had dragged Catalina back from the brink. It had provided some contrast to the darkness that had been consuming her soul. These conceptual art pieces had made her intrigued again, made her curious again, made her start searching for more

artworks that would speak to her and make her feel something, anything. After all, if an artwork could do that for her, it could do it for others too. With the search for beauty and meaning came a willingness to explore the possibilities, and that meant life.

And that had ushered in the fourth quarter. It had been a springtime of sorts for Catalina, even though it was actually the beginning of autumn in Mexico City. This made sense, as she little by little divested her soul of its dead leaves. As Day of the Dead celebrations approached, she'd had the distinct impression that her proverbial branches were finally bare, and now, she'd dared to hope that they might burgeon anew. She'd started appreciating the small things again, wandering through the streets of Roma Norte, both with Maria and alone, stepping into the art galleries, the shops, and the cafés that had cropped up in the past few years and months like spring mushrooms. She'd started noticing that strangers smiled at her, and she had even begun shyly smiling back. She'd started craving connection again and had thought about possibly reaching out to old friends. After a cold, desperate season, she had started sending out green, timid, but hopeful shoots. The color had snuck back into her wardrobe. And most significantly, she had taken a leap of faith. She'd rented this gallery space, this thing that they had both dreamed of, and had made this crazy dream, the one that she'd thought had died along with Alejandro, a reality. Finding this gallery space, at a price she hoped she could afford, had been the first sign that maybe life would go on, after all. At the end of a nightmarish year, maybe she had another act to look forward to. Maybe she might even one day love again.

And today, on the Day of the Dead, of all days, that feeling had reached its climax. As she'd approached her brand-new gallery space, she'd spotted a man strolling by on the sidewalk. Dark hair, aquiline profile, his every facial feature sharp- except for his mouth, an almost obscenely soft thing that she immediately imagined clamping down on her own. He had dark blue eyes- had she imagined that detail? Had she imagined how his irises matched his impeccably cut navy blazer, worn over a t-shirt, a nod to the bohemian nature of the neighborhood? She must have stared, because the man seemed about to say something. But then, he'd reconsidered and had continued on his way, leaving Catalina reeling. She'd watched him as he proceeded down the street. Even his movements were elegant, languid but intentional. She couldn't help paying attention to him, she told herself. It was not her fault. It was simply artistic curiosity. Because if a romantic painter had chosen to paint a classical god transposed into modern times, this would have been the result.

But if Catalina had thought that taking possession of her gallery at last, or even coming across this handsome stranger, or the fact that it was the Day of the Dead, was the most significant thing about that day, she had another thing coming, because when she finally opened the door to the space, there stood Alejandro.

Chapter 2

When Catalina recovered from her shock, she noticed that Alejandro was in fact a bit transparent, and that his skin matched the gallery walls, which were drenched in the custom chalky white shade they had breathlessly described to each other, back when the gallery was nothing more than a dream. She also noticed that her late husband was very slightly levitating over the gallery's polished concrete floors, much like the gallery's walls themselves, which featured a precisely executed cutaway reveal effect. Catalina blinked, and when she opened her eyes again, he was standing on one of the exposed wooden joists that supported the ceiling of the building, a former dance hall that had been divided into several commercial storefronts. Catalina had worried that the contractor wouldn't be up to the task of translating her and Alejandro's exacting vision into reality, but everything was perfect. Everything, except for her dead husband's very unexpected appearance.

She was just starting to get used to the idea of seeing his ghost there when she realized that he had disappeared. *Que típico*. She checked in both rooms of the gallery, and in the storage area. There was no trace of him. Relief flooded her whole body. She would have welcomed the idea of never losing the man she had once known. A ghost, however, was a different story. Surely, she had just imagined it. She was simply overwrought. She did not have time for this nonsense. Tomorrow, the paintings would be hung, and after that, she would officially open her doors. She'd done all of this on her own. Without him. Well, almost without him. But now, as she looked up to the large skylight that opened onto a cerulean Mexico City sky, it wasn't pride or triumph that she felt. It was guilt, and worry.

In a way, it made sense that Alejandro would appear in some guise. This art gallery should have been theirs. It was the thing that they had both dreamed about, strategized on, planned for, until his life had been cut brutally short. It was, in many ways, their child, the only one they would have, in any case. When he had died, she had felt like quitting everything. And yet, she had persisted and had found the strength to go on.

Was it a coincidence that her husband's ghost had appeared on the very same day that she had noticed a man she felt attracted to? Was it a manifestation of her guilt? That made sense. She forced herself to stop thinking about the man. She was being ridiculous, and this was a big day for her: the final walkthrough, the last opportunity to have her workmen smooth any perceived imperfections in the walls. Tomorrow, the art storage company would conduct the complicated process of bringing in all the art pieces for her inaugural show into the gallery and hanging them up.

The gallery's grand opening was coming up in a week's time. Catalina had hesitated before sending out the first batch of invitations, but she had been collecting addresses, emails, and contacts for what felt like a lifetime, now. Hopefully, everyone who had wished her well, sent her thoughts and prayers, condolences, flowers, and donations—all those people would come to support this first show. She'd taken a risk on her choice of artists. They were all women, mostly figurative painters, which she knew was not the style these days, but it felt right. Frida Kahlo had long been an inspiration for Catalina, and she'd found herself seeking out female artists in that tradition. She hoped that she would help to further their careers by representing them.

Was Catalina a businesswoman? Hardly. She'd been raised in a wealthy family, with everything that entailed: the security detail, travel by helicopter, boarding school in Switzerland, and ultimately, being sent away to the States to attend an Ivy League university. She'd been coddled and spoiled, until the day she had severed ties with her parents.

Her parents had not approved of Alejandro, no doubt because Alejandro had come from a modest background. He had pulled himself up by his own bootstraps, which she had found admirable, but her parents had clearly questioned his suitability. They had called a family meeting when she had gotten engaged, but Catalina had refused to go and hear what they had to say. Had they only given him a chance, they would have seen what natural elegance, sophistication, and intellect Alejandro possessed. She hadn't spoken to them in years, now. They had reached out at Alejandro's death, but she had shut them down.

She wished them well; she really did. She saw articles about them opening this museum or that cultural center, saw updates about their various businesses, and photos of them socializing. It hurt, but she did follow this news closely- if nothing else, so that she could avoid her parents at any given event. Let them have her sister Sofia, and Sofia's perfect family. Catalina had vowed to make her own place in the world, and she had done it, or was doing it, on her own.

And now, this leap of faith, taking most of the savings she and Alejandro had accrued, and pouring them into something that had no guarantee of success. She had no safety net. Nothing but her passion to keep her aloft. The last thing she needed was a distraction, especially a distraction in the form of a ghost, or of some stranger spotted on the street.

But of course, since her husband's ghost was a mere figment of her imagination, and the man she'd seen was real, her thoughts wandered back to him. Did the man work in the area? Maybe he was an architect or a designer, or an art consultant, or any of the endless string of creative professionals with offices, ateliers, and creative spaces in Roma Norte and Condesa these days.

This new CDMX coexisted with Mexico City as it had always been, and this was most apparent as the city woke up in the morning. Catalina's daily walk from her apartment in Condesa to the gallery took her past a unique street opera that had barely changed in decades: women sweeping the sidewalk, men throwing buckets of soapy water out in front of their businesses, and bustling coffee shops, frenetic movement set to a symphony of honking horns, shouting vendors, and the buzz of traffic, as millions of people lived out their diverse existences in her country's capital.

She was glad she'd come back here as an adult. It would have been all too easy to stay in Los Angeles, where she'd lived after her graduation from Brown University and an obligatory stint in Europe, working at a trendy Venice Beach gallery. She'd loved West LA, but eventually, she'd felt that she was starting to stagnate. The growth she craved had all but ceased, but she was missing a catalyst to make her change. Then, meeting Alejandro, at an art opening in West Hollywood, had changed the course of her life forever.

Alejandro had been visiting a friend at the time, also looking for meaning in his life, taking small jobs to enable him to keep moving to the next place. After a brief but intense courtship, they'd returned to Mexico City, each of them promising the other that they would work and save for five years before embarking on their joint project. Alejandro had used his financial acumen to become the right-hand man for a wealthy real estate developer, while Catalina had become a programs and events coordinator at one of the new privately funded museums in town. They had just started looking for the perfect gallery space when Alejandro's life had been cut short.

It was cruel, the way in which one day, her life had been if not perfect, at least full of promise, and the next day, it had been sectioned off as if with a sharp set of shears. No, not even sharp, because they had left ragged threads behind, mangled, hanging. Catalina was terrified that pulling on any one of those messy strings might create a whole new unforeseen disaster, destruction above and beyond what she had already suffered. So now, what she was looking for was peace and progress. And somehow, even more than having hallucinated the specter of her husband, that dearly won peace had been destroyed by the sight of the handsome stranger, this morning.

Destroyed. That was a bit dramatic, wasn't it? Why did she always look at the negative side of things now, in the *after*? Now, she always had the feeling that every win would be met with a loss. She was self-sabotaging, maybe, trying to find reasons why something unlucky just had to happen, trying to find things that would distract her from her purpose. This man, even though he had the sort of classical good looks that drove her to distraction, would remain a stranger to her. He would not impact her life. Had she imagined it, or had he looked back at her, staring deep into her soul? Well, it had been so brief. Surely, she would never see him again. And she wouldn't see the ghost again, either. All would be well. She would hang her first show. It would launch to critical acclaim. All of the relationships she had nurtured throughout her life- with the exception of the past year, when she had been a virtual hermit- those connections would pay off. The press, the bloggers, the influencers, they would rave about her new space, and she would be on her way to a new era. *No safety net*, she reminded herself.

She wondered if her parents would catch wind of her new enterprise. Mexico was a huge city, but high society was a small community. Even though she hadn't spoken to her parents in years, it was impossible not to think of them often. Every few weeks, like clockwork, her sister would bring them up. At first, Sofia's entreaties to speak to them again had been timid. Now, she grew more bold, more insistent. But Sofia didn't know what it was like to be Catalina. Sofia had married Federico, a friend of the family, a half-German aristocrat who had taken over his own father's business, and he and Sofia had had three perfect children with curly hair and pin-tucked outfits. Catalina imagined that these children were their grandparents' pride and joy. She wondered- if she and Alejandro had had children, would her parents have liked them less? Would they have spoiled them as much? This was why she had cut it off preemptively, before their preference could be marked. Had it been immature? Reactive? She didn't think so. She wanted to stand on her own two feet, not feel bad because she had decided to forge her own way.

She cautiously walked around the gallery one more time, fully expecting to see a spectral Alejandro around every corner, but thankfully, normalcy had returned. In fact, everything was perfect, wasn't it? From the gleaming alabaster walls to the carefully chosen lighting, to the smooth cement floors, to the inconspicuous white desk near the entrance, to the name *Alex Black* stenciled onto the glass door, everything had been perfectly executed. Alex Black. People probably assumed it was a nod to Alejandro's name, but her middle name was Alexandra. And black, well, that was the color that strangely had pulled her back from the brink. She liked this dichotomy of black and white, light and dark. This was a new beginning. And if she could help it, nothing would go wrong.

Chapter 3

Catalina was just ever so cautiously checking the storage room for any rogue ghosts when something shook her hand. Her heart in her throat, she let out a terrified squeak before realizing that it was simply her phone vibrating. Letting out a shuddering breath, she picked up.

"*He terminado.*"

"I'll be right there," she said.

She took another deep breath, wiped some tears away from under her eyes, and rushed out the door.

It had been a coup, managing to hire Armando Hidalgo to paint a mural for the front of her gallery. Boutiques in Polanco had been clamoring for his work. There was a rumor that the Gucci flagship in Mexico city would be the next building to be adorned with an original Armando Hidalgo. But Catalina had gotten him first. They had met at University, so she had an advantage. Together, they had worked on a concept that included motifs both modern and traditional, reflecting the past, present, and future of Mexico City. She was so proud of what they had achieved. The effect was going to be attention-grabbing but chic, exactly the image she hoped to convey for her art gallery.

Armando was standing back on the sidewalk, wearing his trademark uniform, a blue jumpsuit like those worn by gas station attendants in Europe, paired with one of his vast collection of vintage graphic t-shirts, a colorful scarf, and a pair of outrageous sunglasses that would have made Elton John jealous.

Catalina remembered how she'd approached Armando at Brown, entranced by his unapologetic flair, and thrilled to find another student from her country. They had forged a friendship built on mezcal drinking sessions in their student apartments and road trips to New York, and had stayed in touch ever since, through his meteoric rise in the art world. For Armando's wedding to his longtime partner, Sergio, in Brazil, she and Alejandro had splurged on a trendy hotel and had spent a memorable day exploring the colonial landmarks of Paraty. They had skipped the planned activities before the evening wedding ceremony to make love on the edge of their villa's private plunge pool. She could still see the rivulets of water running down her husband's abdominal muscles, taste the salt on his skin, remember the droplets on his lashes as she looked deep into his eyes while he moved inside of her. Alejandro had ended up with a vicious sunburn on his back, and it had been their little private joke for the rest of the weekend. It had been one of their last happy memories.

She brushed these thoughts away. She had been living with the ghosts of the past for too long. Now, especially in light of the hallucination she'd had in the gallery, she owed it to herself to look towards the future. She joined the artist on the sidewalk, admiring his work.

"*Que padre*, you've really outdone yourself."

Armando's chest puffed out with pride.

"It's not bad," he smiled. "I'm already fielding calls from journalists. It will make some good press for you."

"Thank you. And to think I only hired you for our Instagram following," Catalina cracked.

Then again, if she could only harness the secret sauce that drove Armando's Instagram account to nearly a million followers, she wouldn't have to worry about her gallery ever again. So far, her own account was limping along. She supposed things would look up once she started having openings and shows. But she certainly hadn't yet hit her stride.

"What's this here in the corner?" she asked, pointing to a green, undulating shape she didn't remember from their design talks, emerging from a pool of darkness, as if bursting through the stonework of the building. It snaked around and upward, searching for the light.

"You don't like it?"

Armando's face fell.

"No, it's beautiful, but I can't tell what it's supposed to be."

"It's you," said Armando. "*La enredadera.*"

"I'm ... a vine?"

"Yes. You've been in shadow, but soon, you'll bloom, because one thing about you is that you always go towards the sun."

Catalina brushed away a tear.

"That's beautiful. Thank you so much."

"I'm glad you like it," he said. "Listen, I have to pack up. Traffic will be crazy."

"See you at the opening?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

"You're the best."

"I know," said Armando, grinning. "When you have a chance, go take a look from across the street. It has a whole other effect from there."

"Why don't we do that now, together?" Catalina started to say, but her phone rang. It was her sister.

"Ah, never mind, I need to take this."

She gave Armando a quick hug and headed back into the gallery, answering the phone as she opened the door and sent up a little prayer that there would be no ghosts inside.

"*Por fin,*" said her sister, Sofia, dramatically. "I thought you would never pick up."

"You could have just left me a message if you were that desperate to tell me something," Catalina said.

"Why bother? You don't check them," Sofia scoffed.

That was a fair statement.

Catalina and her sister were like the sun and the moon. Sofia was lighter of hair and complexion. She dressed in cool, neutral colors or pastels. She was graceful, and her nickname in school had been *la Serena*, while Catalina's had been *Cata*, short for catastrophe. They bickered constantly. They had different talents, goals, and interests. They didn't always see eye to eye. But when it really mattered, they had a real bond. They were so close that only Catalina could see how her sister resembled a swan gliding on a placid lake, but also be aware that, under the surface, her feet were never still. She was full of energy, full of ideas, always thinking and doing, but mostly for others. Catalina wished Sofia would stand on her own and stop existing solely as reflected by her husband and children. But some women were like that. They needed a man and a family to define them. Catalina didn't have the luxury of that. She had no choice but to stand on her own two feet.

"How's the mural?" asked Sofia.

"It's done. And it's beautiful."

"Oh, say hi to Armando for me."

"Too late, he's gone. You didn't call me to talk about Armando, did you?"

"No. Did you decide?"

"Decide what?" Asked Catalina, genuinely stumped.

"Very funny, Cata. Are you joining me?"

"For?"

"Seriously? The party."

Catalina remained silent, furiously searching her brain for this missing information.

"You haven't forgotten already, have you? The embassy?"

Catalina groaned.

"Do I have to?"

"Yes."

Sofia was right. The diplomatic circuit was a great networking opportunity. The German ambassador was, according to Sofia, a huge fan of Catalina's, as was his wife. And considering how many events she had skipped in the past year; she was shocked and grateful that they still invited her to anything.

"When did you say it was?"

"Day after tomorrow. I'll come pick you up."

"You promise *they* won't be there?" Catalina asked.

Sofia's attempts to force a reconciliation between Catalina and their parents had maybe slowed down, but Catalina never put it past her to attempt another time. Her sister was no quitter.

"No, and Fredo won't be coming, if that's what you're thinking," said Sofia.

"Oh, good," Catalina responded.

Their parents loved her sister's husband Federico so much that they would want to be anywhere he went. And it wasn't that she didn't like Fredo- well, she didn't like him that much, but notwithstanding that, she liked having her sister to herself.

Sofia laughed, as if she could read her mind, which she probably could.

"I can't wait to see you. I miss you."

Though the girls technically lived in the same city, they had very different lives: Sofia spent most of her time in Polanco, where she engaged in shopping, going to work out classes and beauty treatments, and lunching with friends. She spent the rest of her time with her family in her villa in Lomas de Chapultepec, where many of the wealthier people lived behind security gates, or in vacation homes in Mérida and San Miguel de Allende. Her children never went to school without a bodyguard and an armed SUV. Catalina, who got around the city either on foot or in her *Vocho*, her beloved vintage orange Volkswagen, felt this level of security was excessive.

"I miss you too. Well, I better go," said Catalina. "Itzi must be getting lonely."

"Lonely? I doubt it. Itzpapalotl is the devil incarnate," said Sofia.

There was no love lost between Sofia and Itzpapalotl, aka Itzi, Catalina's black cat, who Sofia alternately called *la bruja* and *she-demon*. Then again, Itzpapalotl didn't tolerate anyone- except for Catalina. Catalina had rescued the creature from a dumpster the day after Alejandro's demise; actually, they had saved each other. Thanks to the feline, Cata had felt protected from the demons of the past. In fact, the original Itzpapalotl, which translated to *obsidian butterfly*, was the leader of the Tzitzimimeh, Aztec deities who embodied the paradoxes of life and death, destruction and protection. Catalina held the cat in the highest regard and made sure to treat her like an empress. Even when money was tight, she made sure she got the best meals in the house.

When she had hung up with her sister, Catalina cautiously looked around the gallery one last time. No ghosts. Nothing was out of order. Good. Tomorrow, Ricardo and Francis would be coming to hang all the paintings she'd so carefully selected. She said a quick prayer to whichever gods happened to be listening, grabbed her blue leather handbag, and headed outside, carefully setting the alarm and locking the door behind her.

Chapter 4

There was still enough light for her to be able to admire Armando's handiwork from across the street, as recommended. Taking advantage of a gap in the traffic on the one-way road, Catalina jogged across and climbed onto the uneven sidewalk on the other side. She turned, backing up to better take in the effect. But, due to a sudden blurred movement, a strange shifting in the light and shadow across the street, the first thing that caught her eye was not her own gallery, but the storefront next door.

There was some sort of mosaic art on that section of the facade. The effect was quite striking, but before she could admire it more closely, she noticed the words etched on the thick glass of the window. *Galería E...* The rest of the word was blocked by a parked car. Catalina felt like the air had been siphoned out of her lungs. Another art gallery was opening right next door to hers? She took another step back to take in the rest of the name, and suddenly found herself falling backward, stars bursting in front of her eyes as an excruciating pain zinged around her ankle. *Oh no.* As she fell in slow motion, she winced, anticipating the inevitable jarring thud to her tailbone that would come as soon as she hit the ground. But before that occurred, something lifted her up. Still reeling, she tried to process what was happening.

"Are you hurt?" she heard a deep voice utter.

Two strong hands kept her propped up as she tried to stand and get her wits back about her. She put her right foot down and gasped, "Oh!" Pain shot through her ankle again. Oh no, she really had hurt herself, hadn't she?

"*Estás bien?*"

She wasn't able to respond right away. Darkness inched into the edges of her vision as the pain subsumed her. Then, the wave pulled back, and she managed to eke out a rather pitiful "it hurts."

Dammit, this was the last thing she needed. She had so many things to do leading up to the show. Also, she had picked a cute pair of shoes to wear for the opening. She would be infuriated if she couldn't show them off. Spending that night, of all nights, on crutches was not the way she had envisioned it. Then again, nothing was the way she had envisioned it anymore.

"Here. Sit."

She vaguely registered that a chair- presumably from the bar just down the street- was being pulled up, and she was being guided to sit down in it.

"May I check if you broke it?"

She nodded and watched as the man who had saved her from falling completely crouched down at her feet. She recognized him, now. It was the stranger who had caught her eye, on the sidewalk. The one who had made her feel instantly guilty. The benefit of her current situation was that she now had ample time to examine him, to hopefully give herself the opportunity to confirm that her imagination had run away with her after that first brief glance on the street. Surely, he was far more pedestrian, more ordinary than she had initially hallucinated. She took in his black hair, slicked back in a continental style. Sure, it was thick and lush, but it was a pretentious look, wasn't it?

"Where does it hurt most?" he asked, glancing up at her.

Now, she noticed his dark blue eyes. They truly were navy, the exact color of the hull of her father's favorite sailboat. They could be contact lenses. Natural eyes didn't come in that color, did they? And the man's features were indeed razor-sharp, except for his lower lip, which provided a crucial trace of softness, a pillowy landing place for her gaze. *Uh-oh.* Her heart did a little flip. The man looked at the same time very Mexican, but also European. Like a darker, far more handsome

version of her brother-in-law. He was tall, too, as far as she could tell from his current position, squatting in front of her, with broad shoulders.

"My ankle, I think," she said. "I hope I didn't do anything stupid."

He palpated her leg, and she winced as his hands came closer to her foot.

"Ooh, that looks pretty nasty," he said.

"Thanks," she laughed, the sound of it surprising her.

"No, you have a lovely ankle. If I was an 18th-century nobleman, I'd be getting terribly excited right now," he cracked.

She smiled, considering him again.

"You actually look like you could be an 18th-century nobleman."

Had she said that out loud?

"Thank you, I think," he said. "Tell me if this hurts."

He took her ankle bone between thumb and forefinger and pressed. She winced.

"Yes, but not too horribly," she said.

"Okay, what about this?"

He stroked the top of her foot.

It was kind of pathetic how the first man to touch her in over a year, and probably the last, was only doing so because she was injured.

"Are you a doctor?" she asked.

"Does it hurt?"

"It feels twingey, if that makes any sense."

"Makes sense," he responded. "And I'm not a doctor, but I did volunteer for an organization that did medical aid in villages, if that counts."

Catalina scoffed.

"It doesn't."

At this, their eyes met, and Catalina got another uncomfortable wiggly feeling in her heart, or was it her stomach? Maybe both. She wanted to look away, but instead, her gaze landed again on the man's lower lip, and specifically on a little divot between lip and cheek that made him look like he was mildly amused, even though the rest of his expression was serious.

"I'll have you know that most of my patients were little kids who hurt their ankles playing soccer. And the good news is that, in my professional opinion, I think it's just badly twisted."

"Hmm," said Catalina.

"You might have hurt the tendon. I hope not, but I don't think it's broken. Here. Let me check one more thing."

He took hold of her foot. She blushed at the intimacy of the gesture. With his hand under the arch, he rotated it a bit. She took in a deep intake of breath.

"Bad?"

"It's not great," she admitted.

"Well, you're certainly going to need some ice," he said. "How far is your house?"

She shrugged. Her apartment was all the way over in Condesa, a delightful walk under normal circumstances. But now, she couldn't imagine how she would get there.

"That lovely ankle needs some rest. Promise me you won't try to stand on it."

"I would promise," she responded, trying not to look at him. "But I have to get myself home somehow."

"I would offer to drive you," he said.

She made a face.

"Right. I imagine you wouldn't get into a stranger's car."

She nodded. She would not. Not even a stranger as handsome as this one.

"What if I called you a car?" he asked. "Would you accept that?"

"I can call my own," she protested, though she knew she didn't have the Uber app installed on her telephone. That was a luxury she could scarcely afford.

"Too late, I've already called one for you," he said, holding his phone up. "Is there someone at home who can help you when you arrive?"

"Yes," she lied.

Itzpapalotl would totally help her, if she could. Catalina didn't want the stranger to know that she otherwise lived alone. That wouldn't be very cautious.

She saw a fleeting expression across his face. Did the stranger not like that she had someone at home? In any case, in a city as large as this one, there were few chances she would ever see him again. Even though she had now seen him twice.

"Let me pay you back," she begged, hoping he would refuse.

He simply grinned.

"If we see each other again, we can discuss it."

She gave him a look. Was he being dismissive, or flirtatious? She was too out of practice to tell, and besides, she didn't even know how she felt about it either way.

"Actually, what if you gave me your phone number?" he asked.

"Ah, but that would significantly improve your odds of reimbursement."

"No, I was simply asking so I can, you know, so I can make sure your ankle is OK."

"Maybe if we see each other again, you can just ask me."

Now Catalina was flirting, wasn't she?

"Fair enough."

He gave her a small smile, the divot at the corner of his mouth giving way to something like a dimple, but far more hot than cute.

A sleek black car pulled up, and he helped her into it.

"Take good care of her," he said to the driver. "I'll see you again, I hope," he said, to her, looking deep into her eyes. She felt another shocking little jolt of attraction. He closed the door, and the car pulled away.

Suddenly, alarm bells began ringing in her head. This car was far too luxurious for an Uber. And the driver hadn't asked for her address. Where was he taking her? Just as her panic reached a crescendo, the driver glanced back at her.

"¿Cuál es la dirección?"

Oh. She was just being paranoid. She gave the address and settled back into the leather seat of the car. She could still feel where the man's hands had touched her foot, could recall his expression as he had looked up at her, crouching on the sidewalk. Well, that was nice, to feel something for someone after so long, even if it did still make her feel guilty- but she didn't have time to dwell on it. This was the biggest week of her adult life. No distractions.

Chapter 5

When the car pulled up to her apartment building, she thanked the driver and hobbled out.

"¿Necesita ayuda?" the driver called out the window.

"No, thank you. I'll be fine," she said.

She turned the big brass key in the dark blue exterior door. Behind the nondescript facade was a lush interior courtyard with plants tumbling down the far wall and a handful of apartments, two per floor, accessed via a staircase and exterior terraces. There was a burbling rough stone fountain in the center of the courtyard, and Catalina loved how this feature added to the feeling of an escape from the bustling city.

Her apartment was on the second floor, with ample natural light and a view not only onto the courtyard, but also across a street where one of her favorite coffee shops was located. Usually, even though she had suffered through a terrible year, returning home always made her feel happy, and safe.

But today, once she got to the stairs leading to her second-floor apartment, she found herself crawling up on hands and knees, fighting back tears. It really did hurt. She could feel the swelling in her ankle, now. Maybe she should go get it checked out. But she didn't have health insurance, and didn't want to ask Sofia for help. So instead, she let herself in, limped along the glossy Saltillo tile floors, collapsed on the green velvet sofa, and called her friend Maria. Maria, whom she had known since grade school. Maria, who always was the voice of reason. Maria, who had never been in love, never planned to be in love, and couldn't care less about handsome strangers. And that was what she needed right now.

"Put some ice on it," said Maria very seriously. "If it doesn't feel better by morning, I'm taking you to the doctor."

"Thank you," said Catalina. "I'll be better."

"If not, I'll come pick you up," said Maria. "We'll have that drink you promised me in the hospital."

Catalina smiled. Even though she'd forgotten that plan, as well.

"Now, do you have food?" asked Maria.

Maria was very food driven. Eating well was extremely important to her, and she was an excellent cook and selector of restaurants.

"Don't worry," Catalina smiled. "I have some stew left from yesterday, and some tortillas. I'll survive."

"Ice," Maria reminded her, hanging up.

A few minutes later, Catalina looked down at her foot, which she had elevated and placed on a little ottoman. Itzpapalotl was sprawled on her lap, purring contentedly, obviously not caring that her mistress was in pain. But she did feel a little better with the ice. Catalina looked around her apartment. After spending everything they had buying the place, she and Alejandro had worked so hard on making it feel like an adult, elegant home, despite the fact that they hadn't had the same budget as the one that Catalina had grown up with. They had found some beautiful antiques on the sidewalk or in small shops in the various corners of the city that they explored together on weekends. Catalina's collection of green plants sat on every available surface. An assortment of colorful plates adorned the wall she could see past the dining room, and bright, unexpected colors completed the tableau. It was a look both classical and contemporary, and she thought they had done quite a good job. provided texture and grounding for her feet. She had assembled a collection of flat woven Mexican rugs, which anchored each space in the open-concept main room.

A kitchen occupied one corner, small but serviceable, with open shelving that proudly displayed Catalina's collection of traditional ceramics, various assemblages of colors and patterns. On one side was a dining alcove with a large dark wood table, which she had dressed with a traditional embroidered *otomi* runner and modern ceramic candelabras. Her favorite shop in Roma Norte, other than Maria's shop, carried colorful beeswax candles, and she entertained herself by creating new color combinations on the table and displaying her favorite colorful glassware.

The chairs around the table were mismatched, but she had unified them with a coat of red, glossy paint and colorful cushions. She had proudly created the overhead chandelier from the inflorescence of an agave plant, now dried and blackened, wrapped in fairy lights.

Catalina was quite pleased that her apartment had a rare feature for Mexico City, namely a dressing room and a large closet leading to a bathroom rendered in dark green tiles, which had a deep tub and a separate shower. This, of course, was not original to the building. Catalina and Alejandro had strategized on how to fit both a tub and a shower into their nest. She'd been so proud of this place, and she still was.

Now, she spent the next half-hour scrolling through her phone, looking up things like *tobillo roto* and *how to wrap a hurt ankle*. After a while, she motivated herself to hobble to the kitchen and reheat her dinner. She gave Itzi a few pieces of chicken from her stew, rinsed in the sink to remove the excess spice, cut into small pieces, and mixed in with the kibble the cat had been ignoring all day. Within seconds, the chicken was all gone, the kibble still all accounted for, and Itzi was meowing at her in a tone that clearly communicated her meaning: *Where's the rest of my food, puta?*

Catalina ignored the furry dictator and limped to the living room to eat in front of the television, finally electing to watch an old telenovela episode. She had no idea what was going on with the story. She hadn't watched this series before, and didn't plan on watching any more of it, but it was company, or at least an antidote to an excess of silence. Finally, Catalina got ready for bed and went to sleep. She hoped her ankle would be miraculously better in the morning.

Chapter 6

The next morning, her ankle was decidedly not better. Catalina was brushing her teeth, balancing on one foot, when her phone pinged.

Ronaldo: *45 minutes away. See you there.*

She had better hurry. The owner of the art storage facility, an old elementary school friend of hers, had decided to drive the artworks in himself to make sure that everything went smoothly. He was bringing along Francis, his partner in business and in life, who had a finely calibrated eye that enabled him to hang paintings within a fifth of a millimeter without the laser tool most galleries depended on, and light them with such precision that it made everything look more professional, in some ineffable way. Catalina quickly checked her reflection in the mirror. Today was going to be a long day. It would go smoothly, she hoped, despite her injury. At least, she could be sure that, between Ronaldo and Francis, everything would be just so.

She smoothed her heavy, dark chestnut locks, which she had put up in a thick, braided bun. When she'd been little, her mother would always brush her hair one hundred strokes each night, telling her it would help it to shine. Sofia's lighter, finer hair couldn't withstand that kind of treatment, and Catalina had always felt lucky to have those special moments with her *mama*. She tried to wipe the memory from her mind. In the mirror, she admired the pair of large, red beaded earrings she was wearing, which had been made by an artisan from Oaxaca who blended traditional handiwork and a modern aesthetic. A white embroidered shirt, red culottes, and black platform high-top sneakers that felt like they hopefully would stabilize her ankle completed her look. She threw on a cerulean blue scarf and her leather jacket to ward off the morning chill, picked up her gold leather handbag, and headed to the door.

"Make sure to keep the evil spirits away," she told Itzi.

The cat blinked its yellow eyes, as if taking this order very seriously. Catalina gave her one last pat and left her apartment, wincing as she took the first set of stairs. She definitely wouldn't be able to drive in her condition. She had to take a taxi, and thankfully, an available one was pulling up just as she arrived on the sidewalk. Sitting in the taxi, she looked out the window at the typical morning show on the sidewalks of her city. Usually, she was so intent on dodging flying buckets of soapy water and fruit vendors' carts that she didn't have the opportunity to look above eye level. Now, she let her gaze dance over the living patchwork of exotic plants: bougainvillea and datura and *monstera deliciosa* and ivy, covering so many of the buildings' facades and the crisscrossing electrical lines, making a tic-tac-toe board of the sky. It was an effect both chaotic and beautiful. She couldn't wait until spring, when the jacarandas would burst into purple blooms all over her vast city, making it her favorite time of year.

She was almost at her gallery when she received another message.

Ronaldo: *Que mierda- Big moving truck blocking the street.*

How was that possible? A moving truck? What if it was for the gallery next door? That would be just her luck. Catalina herself had requested the boys squeeze her art into a more manageable van, as moving trucks needed to request a permit if they were going to block the street, at least on principle. But in Mexico City, chaos reigned, and principles were not always adhered to. Perhaps this particular truck wasn't planning to spend too much time blocking the street, anyway.

Catalina: *Did you speak to the driver?*

Ronaldo: *Yes, he's a cabron.*

Catalina: *Did they say long they are going to be there?*

Ronaldo: *Not clear.*

"I think you'd better drop me off here," Catalina told the taxi driver as they approached the intersection. "Looks like the street is blocked."

She gathered her things and gingerly got out of the car, hobbling down the sidewalk, faster than she should have, but she needed to get to the bottom of this. Her heart, as a result of an unpleasant cocktail of anxiety, exertion and pain, started beating a panicked tattoo. This was ridiculous. It was going to waste time. Some of the artworks in the van were heavy. She mentally prepared herself for a battle of wills as she limped up to the moving truck, which indeed was blocking the whole space in front of her building. The movers seemed not to be hard at work, either; rather, they were sitting in the back of the truck, enjoying pieces of fruit and apparently, a scintillating conversation about their success with the ladies.

"*Hola*," said Catalina. "Is there any way you can move the truck a bit further down the block? I'm moving in, too."

Two of the movers stared at her blankly. A third simply shrugged. Catalina gave him an expectant look. Finally, he caved.

"Speak to the *Patron*," he said.

"*Perfecto*," said Catalina, "where might I find this *Patron*?"

"*Adentro*," said the man.

It was not very detailed as far as responses went, but the man gestured towards the other gallery with his chin, which all but confirmed her theory. Catalina hobbled towards the sidewalk with newfound purpose. Ronaldo intercepted her.

"What did they say?"

"They said to speak to the boss. I assume he's in the gallery next door."

"Do you want me to go speak to him for you?" Asked Ronaldo.

"I should probably go myself. Might as well meet my new neighbor," said Catalina. This set her heart to beating again. *Please let my neighbor be someone reasonable, inoffensive, and innocuous*, she prayed. "Wish me luck," she told Ronaldo.

"*Buena suerte*," he said as she turned around and hobbled towards the neighboring gallery. She'd been wrong about the high-top sneakers. They were doing a horrible job of stabilizing her ankle. In fact, the leather was pressing against her injured limb in the most uncomfortable way. If she was smart, she would get herself some crutches. She looked up as she approached the door. The mosaic work was finished and looked absolutely incredible. She'd thought having Armando do a mural was such a coup, but this mosaic was colorful and polished and looked richer and more professional, next level. In fact, was she dreaming, or was it the work of that new artist everyone was talking about? She didn't have time to dwell on this. She was on a mission. She grasped the door handle and started to pull the heavy frosted glass panel open, but immediately almost fell back, because someone was behind it, pushing it towards her. She stumbled and caught her breath, looking up and finding herself face to face with the man from the previous day. Her heart did an unbidden somersault. *Damn it*. She'd been wrong about how he looked. He didn't look like a classical god. He looked *better*. Far more devastating. She'd noticed the contrast between the sharpness of his features and that lower lip of his, but today he had a bit of stubble. It highlighted his mouth even more, and now she noticed that its corners were now a bit downturned, and that a pair of frown lines marked the spot between his heavy eyebrows. Not just a classical deity, then. A slightly grumpy one, and that made it all the hotter. God, what was wrong with her? She hadn't reacted to anyone like this since... since forever. And after what had happened to Alejandro, she had written off the possibility that she would ever think about anyone in that way again. Yet here she was, drooling over this stranger, a stranger who, despite his Prince Charming act the evening before, was actually now ruining her day with his big *pinche* moving truck.

She saw his eyes widen in surprise.

"You? Hi," he said, uncertain.

"You...I..." she stuttered. She struggled to compose herself. "Are you the one who has that moving truck blocking the street?" she asked.

"Yes?" he responded cautiously.

"Oh, well, you see, I'm moving in today too, and it's not very practical for my guys to be unloading, what with you taking up the street like that. Is there any way you can maybe shift the truck so we can both..."

"I'm so sorry but, I'm in a huge hurry," said the man, checking his fancy watch as if to demonstrate.

Fresa, though Catalina. She couldn't believe the gall of this spoiled brat. She knew hundreds of men just like him, and she didn't like them.

"My guys should be done soon, and until then..." he pointedly looked right past her, and at the van where Ronaldo stood talking to Francis animatedly through the passenger side window, then looked back at her, a small grin on those lips. Was he mocking her?

"What?"

"You have to admit, it looks like you have a lot less to unload than I do."

Catalina, for once, was stunned into silence. How very rude. Maybe he had packed his van less efficiently than she had hers.

"You're literally parked in front of *my* door. You could pull up just a little bit and be in front of yours," she said, as a last-ditch effort to talk some sense into the man.

"Yes, but the sidewalk dips- it's not even. You of all people know how dangerous that can be. I don't want these guys tripping and suing me."

"You're being ridiculous," said Catalina. "What about my guys?"

"They can wait for just a few more minutes. In fact, the sooner you let me talk to my movers, the sooner they'll be done."

Wow. Catalina stared at him through narrowed eyes. So that was how it was going to be. But in a way, she was relieved. Any feelings of attraction she'd felt towards this jerk were quickly evaporating. It was going to be so much easier to have an enemy, even if he was a competitor. Even if he was next door. Especially because he was next door.

"You know what?" she started to say.

Then she reconsidered. Forget it. If she'd had any doubt as to whether he was trying to be intentionally rude, this whole exchange had more than cleared that up. Better to cut her losses and keep her dignity. Without another word, she turned around and started limping back to the van to fill Ronaldo in on what her horrible, not-that-handsome next-door neighbor had had to say.

"Hey," she heard the man call out, behind her. She ignored him and kept going.

"Don't worry, Catalina," said Ronaldo, once she had gotten to the van. The pain in her ankle was flaring now, sending sparks up her leg and behind her eyes.

"We'll be fine. It's just ridiculous though, that he can't do the neighborly thing."

"I know," Catalina responded. "Anyway, what can I do to help?" she asked.

"You're limping," Ronaldo said, frowning at her. "What did you do to yourself this time?"

She had a vision of a six-year-old Ronaldo on the playground at their international primary school, making the same face when she'd fallen off the monkey bars and was trying to just shake it off. Some people never changed.

"Come on Cata, you look like you need to sit down. Your job is just to tell us where to put things. We'll unload as quickly as possible, and then we'll park somewhere, and we can start hanging."

"You're the best," said Catalina. "Just so you know, I've planned to order your favorite lunch."

"Then you're the one who's the best," said Ronaldo, smiling.

He and Francis now lived in San Miguel de Allende full-time and didn't make it into the capital as often as they once had. It was a special treat to see them, and a special treat for them to enjoy their favorite tacos. So many new restaurants had popped up in the city in the past couple years, but their old favorites from the modest establishments those in the know lined up in front of still stood firm.

Chapter 7

After checking the gallery space for any ghost husbands and thankfully finding none, Catalina busied herself behind the desk, checking her planned social media blast featuring the invitation to her art opening. Now that the art had arrived, the launch of her passion project felt so much more real. She looked at the central image on her invitation, a portrait of a woman executed in a Frida Kahlo-like style, but with an urban edge. Catalina had spent hours making sure the font she had selected was readable, clear, and coordinated well with the subject matter. She had triple checked the address, the time, and the date, but she did it once more before taking a deep breath and hitting *share*. She couldn't believe it. A mere week from now, she would be hosting her first show at the gallery. Before opening night, she would have to organize the wine, the snacks, and the doormen. She would have to do everything to ensure that someone from the press was coming. There was so much to think of, to keep track of. She'd been nervous before today but seeing that the paintings were being brought in by Ronaldo and Francis and being leaned against the walls of the previously empty space, her nervousness was turning to sheer panic. And now, she had something entirely new to worry about: she hoped her next-door neighbor wouldn't do anything to impact her show. That was ridiculous, though, wasn't it? she thought. It was just a bad coincidence that he happened to be moving in on the same day she was. She wondered again at the size of the moving truck. Was his space so much bigger than hers? She hadn't remembered it being available when she was looking for the perfect spot. Maybe he had snagged it before her, or just a bit after her. No matter. She shouldn't compare. She was happy with the way things had worked out for her. The price was right, and the space was perfect. Except for, of course, her neighbor.

A couple hours later, all of the paintings had been carefully unwrapped and leaned gently against the wall. Francis had examined and adjusted all the hanging wires, and she, Ronaldo, and Francis were now enjoying a lunch of carnitas from just down the street.

"So, what do you know about your neighbor?" Ronaldo asked.

"Yesterday, he acted like my knight in shining armor when I tripped on the sidewalk- which was indirectly his fault, mind you," said Catalina. "And then, this morning, he basically told me to go screw myself. So, I guess I know as much about him as you do."

Ronaldo and Francis exchanged a look.

"Wait- what?" Asked Catalina.

"Actually..." said Francis, piping up at last.

Catalina stared at him, silently encouraging him to go on. Francis usually remained pretty quiet. Ronaldo was the big talker of the two of them. But when Francis did speak, it was usually to drop a bombshell.

"You didn't see the article?"

"What? He's already had press for the gallery?" Catalina asked, envy making her cheeks burn and her eyes smart.

"Oh yes," said Francis. "It was in one of the big outlets, too. Maybe Condé Nast? I can't remember. I'll have to go look it up. But of course, the article was fawning- and of course he looked good in the picture, and then I realized that he was in your neighborhood..."

"He already got a mention in Condé Nast? With a photo?"

Catalina gulped. She'd been reaching out to anyone she could think of, trying to ensure that she got press, but so far she hadn't secured anything. She wondered what this guy's story was, and what his connections were.

"And so... you don't remember the guy's name, do you?" she asked.

"Of course I do. It's Sebastian Espinoza," said Francis.

"Of all the neighbors," Ronaldo spat out.

"Am I supposed to know who that is?" Catalina asked, impatiently.

"Oh, come on. You don't know Sebastian Espinoza? Serial entrepreneur? He even launched one of those omnipresent rooftops in San Miguel a while back. He also opened one of those trendy yoga studio sound bath things that all the Americans love, over in Coyoacán."

Catalina's heart sank.

"Oh. I did hear about that. Sofia's friends are all obsessed with it, and it was on every Instagram feed."

"That's the least of it. He's done multiple other projects in the city. He's quite the businessman. Otherwise, you've definitely heard of his family."

"Wait, he's from *that* Espinoza family?"

Catalina blanched. The Espinoza family did not shy away from associating with the cartels. They had their hands in every industry, from liquor to finance to hospitality, and maybe they had business acumen, but according to everyone, they had gotten where they'd gotten through less savory methods.

Passing her uneaten taco to Francis, she said, "Here- take this one. I've lost my appetite."

Ricardo gave Francis a look.

"Come on, Francis. Tell her he's not that bad."

"Too late, Ricardo," said Catalina. "I may have spent a lot of time abroad, but everyone knows the Espinozas. Then again, maybe he comes from a less criminal branch?" She suggested, hopefully.

"Ha. His brother had some girl's boyfriend killed because he decided he wanted to marry her. Had his goons jump him as he was leaving a club," said Francis.

Ronaldo rolled his eyes.

"*Gracias*, Francis. You didn't need to say that."

"That's terrible," said Catalina.

"And nothing happened to him, not even a slap on the wrist. Even though it was an absolutely open secret."

"The girl didn't marry him, did she?"

"Damn right, she married him. You don't pass up the opportunity to marry into the Espinoza family. That kind of money is heady stuff. Yes, she's married to a sociopath, but she can dry her tears with dollar bills and high thread count sheets. Haven't you seen their mansion? It was in an issue of *Architectural Digest* a few months ago."

Francis was a magazine maven. There was nothing pop culture, international design news, or celebrity and local gossip he didn't know.

"It doesn't seem on-brand for anyone in cahoots with the cartels to be inviting reporters in," said Catalina, hoping to have found a hole in Francis' argument.

"Don't be naïve. They're planning on selling the house," said Francis. "And Sebastian, for one, has been laser-focused on his reputation, especially lately. It's like he'll do anything to rehabilitate his image. He donates to the most fashionable causes. He's been trying to ingratiate himself with society. And it seems to be working. It might have something to do with his looks."

Catalina stared at Francis, horrified.

"His looks? How can that be enough to make people forget that the Espinozas are just a few steps above common criminals, and the only reason they're above the *pandilleros* is because they're standing on stacks of money? *Ay, Dios!* Of all the next-door neighbors my gallery could have!" Catalina exclaimed, her head in her hands.

"Well, hopefully he'll stay out of your way, and you do the same with him, all right?" said Ronaldo.

"For sure," Catalina responded.

"I just checked my Insta," said Ronaldo, very obviously trying by all means to change the subject, holding his phone up. "Your invitation looks amazing. Did you invite your parents?"

"Of course not," Catalina scoffed. "And I told Sofia she'd better not bring them."

"We saw your sister a couple of weeks ago," said Francis. "She was throwing a house party in San Miguel. Her place is looking great."

"When you've got the budget to hire the top interior designers, I guess everything's easy."

Catalina shouldn't have said that. She wasn't jealous. Not exactly.

"That could be you, too," said Francis.

Thankfully for their friendship, whatever he was going to say after that never made it out, because Rodrigo discreetly elbowed him, and Francis clammed up. Catalina decided it wasn't worth starting an argument about this now. Getting into fights with the few people who still seemed to care for her was not a good idea.

They spent the next few hours discussing how to hang the paintings, and when it was done, they all stood back, congratulating each other on the effect. All would be well. Maybe this crazy art gallery dream was actually going to work out, despite her inconvenient next-door neighbor.

Chapter 8

Once Francis and Ronaldo left, Catalina locked the door behind them and limped around the gallery space, eyes open wide. Not looking for ghosts. No, of course not. She was checking the lighting. Even in the dying light, the space was bright, she observed. She'd installed a retractable screen over the skylight, to filter the light as needed. Now, she turned on the electric lights and admired how Francis had tweaked the angle of the spotlighting to bathe each piece in a diffuse, even glow.

"Oh, Alejandro, you would have been so happy to see this," she whispered. "I think you would have loved the artists I chose, too."

She froze, and clamped her lips shut. Yes, she'd taken to talking to him in the past year. But now, she had the disconcerting feeling that maybe Alejandro was somewhere, listening. Her eyes darted around the space.

Suddenly, there was a rap on the door. She jumped. No need to be afraid of ghosts, better to focus on real concerns. Mexico City had gotten much safer in the past decades. Roma Norte was a high-end neighborhood again. But an unpredictable knock on the door after closing hours was not always a good sign. Another series of knocks rang out. She walked closer to the metal and glass contraption. The name of the gallery rendered in clear glass permitted her to catch a glimpse of the person on the other side of it. She groaned. *Him*. What did he want? As he caught a glimpse of her peering out, the man pasted a small smile onto his perfect, no longer so grumpy face. The little divot was back. *Too little, too late, amigo*, she thought. He mimed opening the door. She sighed.

"Yes?" she asked curtly, not opening the door fully.

The door opened out, which meant that anyone with a little strength could pull it open. She should invest in a chain.

"I wanted to apologize for my behavior earlier today," the man said. Now, she knew his name was Sebastian, but she wasn't going to bother remembering it.

"Don't worry about it," she responded dryly.

"No, I am worried about it," he said. "We got off on the wrong foot. I was just having an issue with some paintings that hadn't shown up. And these movers were trying to shake me down and make me pay more than what we'd discussed."

"How you run your business is no concern of mine," said Catalina.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"Why?"

He seemed thrown off balance by her brusqueness. Good.

"Just, well, you've put up your paintings. I'm sure it looks good. I just, you know, we're neighbors. I wanted us to start over and maybe see how we can help each other."

"I doubt there's much I can do to help you," she said. "And I wouldn't accept help from the likes of you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sebastian asked, taken aback.

"What do you think?" she replied.

Then, she realized that he probably didn't know that she had figured out his identity.

"Aren't you Sebastian Espinoza?"

"Yes. How did you...?" he started.

"My friend recognized you. And, well, you couldn't resist naming your gallery after yourself. So... the illustrious Espinoza family, that's your people, right?" she asked.

The man made a funny face somewhere between a grimace and a frown, contorting his lips into a shape that made Catalina imagine him leaning in for a kiss. *Stop thinking like that.*

"Yes, that's my family, but..."

Sebastian was clearly dying to change the subject.

"I noticed this morning that you're still limping. Did you get that ankle looked at?"

"It's fine."

Catalina registered the hurt in his eyes and caved. *Fine.* They were neighbors. She could be the bigger person. She also, unfortunately, had a vision of the man holding her foot in his tanned, strong, capable hand. She could still feel his fingers on the delicate skin of her arch.

"Fine. Would you like me to show you around?" She asked.

"If it's not too much trouble."

She pushed the door open the rest of the way and let him in, holding her breath as he swept past her, but not before getting a deep whiff of his aftershave, a smoky, herbaceous thing she didn't hate. She decided to start off in the far corner but noticed that Sebastian wasn't following her. He was glued in place, staring at the first painting on the wall, the one closest to the door, which happened to be one of the images she had chosen for her invitation: the portrait of a mysterious woman looking over her shoulder, beckoning. Her expression was as compelling as the Mona Lisa's. There was seduction, but also perhaps pain, in her eyes.

"This is riveting," Sebastian said.

Well, at least he had good taste in art. She didn't consider that to be a foregone conclusion, even if he did own an art gallery. And why did he even have that? It was probably just a front for something else.

"What kind of art do you have in your gallery?" she asked finally, after they'd been silent for a moment.

"You're showing me yours, the least I can do is show you mine," said Sebastian, smiling wolfishly and looking into her eyes.

She blinked, to break the spell. Was there a double entendre in that? Was it an invitation? He probably flirted like this with all the women, because he could. She hadn't so much as thought of someone else since Alejandro's passing, and she hated that the first bloom of attraction had to be with someone like this, someone from a family with a bad reputation, someone with an attitude, someone spoiled and entitled. Though she did recognize, now, that those guys she'd seen casually hanging out in the moving truck had probably indeed been trying to take advantage of him.

"It's getting late. I'm sure I'll have an opportunity to see your gallery some other time," she said. "After all, I'm assuming you have at least a year's lease on the space."

"I own it, actually."

"Of course you do," she responded.

Then, panic bloomed in her chest. He owned his gallery. His gallery was part of the same building as hers. Did he own the whole building, or just that one space? She didn't want to know. She had rented this space through an agency and sent her checks off to a management company with a generic name, she realized. But she wouldn't ask- she'd had enough to deal with today without worrying about this, too. Even if he did own it, surely he wouldn't elect to kick her out as a tenant just because she'd been a little rude about seeing his paintings?

"Tell me more about this artist," he said, gesturing at a photorealistic painting of a ladder-back chair with a cardigan sweater hanging off of it. It was one of a series. The artist specialized in different iterations of the same idea. Catalina was relieved to be able to talk about art, the one thing she actually had a handle on these days. But of course, her mouth ran away with her before her brain could catch up.

"This one commemorates the girls that have disappeared from frontier towns," she said pointedly.

Sebastian's family had been implicated in some of those disappearances; some of the girls in Juarez worked for one of his family's factories, if she remembered properly.

"It's very powerful. Evocative," he said, seemingly not picking up on her accusation, or at the very least choosing not to. "When's your opening?" he asked.

"Next week," she said dismissively.

"Ah, mine too. Maybe we could..." Sebastian started.

She almost groaned out loud, but she repressed it. In Roma Norte, openings were traditionally held on the second Tuesday of the month. Of course, his opening was on the same day as hers, and of course he would steal her thunder, and maybe even some of her clients.

"We'll help each other," he was saying. "I can take a stack of postcards from you and display it in my space. You could do the same for me," Sebastian suggested, as if he needed her help.

"We have plenty of time to discuss that," she responded.

"All right, well, it seems that we've both had a long day," he said. "Will you be open tomorrow?"

"Not open, but I'll be working on some last-minute things."

"OK, maybe I'll see you then."

"Sure," she replied.

She waved him away and locked the door behind him as he left. After he was gone, she looked around her gallery again, almost wishing to spot the spirit she had hallucinated earlier. Because she felt more alone than ever, in this space that was supposed to be the culmination of her dreams. How dare this near stranger, her neighbor, take the joy away from her, today of all days, when today was the first time she'd felt a glimmer of optimism in such a long time? And now, she was dreading the competition between them, wondering whether he would play dirty, or whether his family members would come and make her life hell, worried about finding out that maybe he owned the building her gallery was in, which would make it feel like he owned her, somehow.

Chapter 9

Catalina's phone pinged.

Maria: *Why haven't I heard from you today? You were supposed to tell me whether our drinks are at the hospital or at a bar.*

Catalina: *Because today is not over yet.*

Maria: *I'm just a few blocks away, so don't you dare go anywhere. I have crutches in my car for you, just in case. I'll pick you up, I'm taking you out for a drink, and then I'll drive you home.*

Catalina smiled faintly. She didn't deserve Maria, didn't deserve her optimism and patience, or all the help she'd given her. Maria had tracked down an elusive artist Catalina had dreamed of representing in the gallery, she had lent her money for the painters, and she didn't ever ask for anything in return. Maria had stood by patiently when Catalina had fallen apart after Alejandro's death, even though she herself had never had a romantic relationship, and had, according to her, never had a romantic impulse in her whole life. If Catalina had been asked why she had stayed in touch with Maria after Alejandro's death, while she had avoided all her other friends, if she was truly honest with herself, she might have realized that it was comforting to have a friend who wasn't likely to ask her when she was going to start dating again, one who wouldn't accuse her of wasting her life, of wasting time, or of running out of youthful years by not looking for another man. Catalina and Alejandro had been planning on starting a family in just a few years, and now, that timeline had been obliterated. There was no way she could think of going it alone, and there was no one else she wanted to do that with. So having someone like Maria, who saw a whole life in front of her, without any of the trappings of traditional womanhood, well, it was refreshing.

When they'd been kids, Catalina's parents had loved for her to spend time with Maria because, unlike some of the other girls, she was a calming influence, never wanting to go to the nightclubs or to the bars. *Can't you be more like Maria?* her mother had asked, on more than one occasion. But no, she couldn't be like Maria. Even now, she wasn't really like Maria. The lack of love and passion in Catalina's life now was a constant ache, a constant missing, a constant feeling of void, so present it was painful.

She took a deep breath and rubbed under her eyes, wiping away the tears that had somehow made their way there, again. She was exhausted. So tired, she didn't know what to do with herself. How could she be expected to go out in public? Another knock on the door. This time, she barely needed to double-check who it was through the clear part of the glass. The sliver of colorful floral print was a dead giveaway. Maria designed and hand-sewed clothes, which she sold at the boutique she owned, just a few blocks away. She designed her own prints, experimented with organic pigments, and hired artisans from all over Mexico to render embroidered or woven details in cloth and leather. Catalina thought Maria was extremely talented, even though most of the garments were not something that she would have worn herself. Especially now. They were far too cheerful for how she felt. But her friend was one of the women shaping the new identity of Mexico City. Maria had been featured in numerous blogs and travel articles. People posted themselves wearing her distinctive looks on their social media profiles, and Catalina was certain that her friend would make even more of a name for herself as time went on, if not in retail, which she claimed to detest, then in some other creative realm. Even though Catalina felt ancient, and even though Maria had a streak of gray shooting through her shoulder-length, otherwise black hair, they were still young, barely 35, with hopefully still a lifetime to make a name for themselves.

"How was your day?" Catalina asked as she opened the door.

“Who cares how my day was,” said Maria. “It’s always the same. Customers complaining that my clothes are too small, too large, too bright, too weird. And then other people love what I do, so it is what it is. Here. Crutches.”

She held out a pair she must have held onto from her last accident. Maria was not so coordinated, either, and Mexico City sidewalks seemed to have it out for her, too. The padding for the underarms and the hand grips were festooned in her custom fabric. At least they were more stylish than the standard issue from the doctor.

“Looks like you’ve had a busy day. This looks amazing. I’m so proud of you,” Maria said, wandering around the gallery.

Catalina felt a warm flush of pride.

“Thank you. I can’t believe I’ve come this far. Francis and Ronaldo were here today, putting everything up, and I met my neighbor.”

Why in the world had she mentioned him? What was wrong with her?

“Oh?” asked Maria, raising an eyebrow. “Looks like there’s another art gallery opening next door. Is that who you’re talking about? Is it a good thing or a bad thing?”

Catalina considered this. She couldn’t trust herself to say anything without mentioning who Sebastian was, and what he looked like.

“It could be okay, depending on what kind of a neighbor he ends up being,” she said carefully.

“What do you think so far?” Maria asked.

Most friends would have asked, *So he’s a man? How does he look? Is he handsome? Is he rich?* But not Maria. She just waited for Catalina to tell her whatever she had perceived. And Catalina felt disingenuous for not saying everything she thought about Sebastian. But she did give her friend one tidbit.

“Apparently he comes from a family that’s not very well regarded.”

“Oh, which family is that?” asked Maria. “Oh, wait- I saw the name on the gallery. Espinoza?” She scoffed. “‘Not very well regarded’ is the understatement of the year. What are they even doing opening an art gallery?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” said Catalina.

“Hopefully you don’t have to have too many interactions with him.”

“Well, we certainly got off to a bad start.”

If you forgot their super romantic meet-cute on the sidewalk and skipped straight to today’s offenses.

“Yes, I would stay away,” Maria concluded when Catalina was done venting. “That seems like the smart thing to do. Now that that’s settled, let’s go get our drink.”

Catalina hesitated. Maria gave her a stern look.

“We’re going. We need to lift a glass to you. You’ve done so much. You should be proud of yourself.”

Catalina simply nodded, not because she wanted to celebrate, but more because she didn’t feel like being alone. Also, she needed to get Maria out. Maria was a secret introvert, when she wasn’t with family or working, and she was almost always working.

“Shall we go to the new whiskey place around the corner?” asked Maria.

“New whiskey place?” Catalina echoed, dumbly.

“It’s been all over the blogs.”

“All right,” said Catalina.

She didn’t really have an opinion one way or another, and whiskey sounded appropriately potent. She carefully locked the door behind her, and they set out into the street. It was not easy to get the hang of juggling her crutches and her handbag.

"I'll carry that, *bobita*," said Maria.

Now, they set off in earnest. Dusk was coming to Roma Norte, and its denizens were stepping out in their fashionable garb. The street fashion in Mexico City was incredibly sophisticated, now. Each person had a unique look that signaled their belonging to a distinct fashion tribe. It was part of the charm of the area. In her own getup of red culottes, high tops, and big earrings, Catalina felt she looked appropriately arty, if not particularly sexy. Not that sexy was something she had been aiming for lately. Alejandro had always loved for her to wear slinky dresses, and lacy lingerie, which he picked up for her in boutiques in Polanco as soon as he made an extra commission. But she'd retired those things, in the *after*, and had started wearing more utilitarian undergarments and plain, drab clothes. The red culottes, at least, signaled a return to color, which was a step in the right direction, but who did Catalina even have to dress for anymore?

"I'm so proud of you," Maria was saying. "I think your opening is going to go so well. I got the invitation already, and you'll have to let me know if there's anything I can do."

"*Gracias*," said Catalina. "I'm too overwhelmed to think of anything else right now."

They finally arrived at the whiskey bar. There were young people spilling out from the establishment and onto the sidewalk, gathered in small groups, drinking, laughing, filling each other in on their days. Looking around self-consciously, Catalina registered a few sets of eyes alight on her, and then quickly move on. She used to pride herself on attracting attention, but now, who cared if she caught anyone's eye? She wasn't out looking for that. But she realized that wasn't quite accurate. For the first time in a long time, she wanted to be noticed again. She was on crutches, she reasoned, and she still had her hair up in the bun she'd constructed that morning. She would have to make more of an effort, moving forward.

"Let's go check out the inside," said Maria.

They stepped into the space, all lined in warm woods, with a mosaic mural of a tiger on one wall, intricately rendered in brilliant glass tiles, in a now-familiar style. It was certainly by the same artist who had crafted the incredible piece that adorned the front of the Espinoza gallery. Automatically, Catalina's eyes swept over to where there might be a signature by the artist. She recognized the name. Dammit. Sebastian had scored a real coup, there, too.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" said Maria.

"It's OK," Catalina replied.

"Just OK?" Catalina heard a voice say behind her.

She spun around, almost losing her balance and needing to lean on a crutch. Of course, it was Sebastian. Wasn't that just her luck? Catalina repressed the urge to groan and roll her eyes.

"You've no doubt noticed the artist's work on the front of my gallery, but when you come by, I'll show you more of her pieces, including some she created as custom commissions. That's why the moving truck couldn't move. These things are quite heavy," he said.

"Whatever you say," Catalina said, feeling like a bratty five-year-old.

"And you are?" Maria said, as she stepped up protectively, closer to Catalina.

"This is my neighbor, Sebastian Espinoza," Catalina said. "Sebastian, this is my best friend, Maria Aragoes."

"Lovely to meet you," said Maria in that special tone of hers that clearly communicated that it was anything but nice to meet Sebastian. Catalina repressed the smile that was teasing at her lips.

"Likewise. Please, let me get you both a drink," said Sebastian.

Catalina was going to refuse, but Maria elbowed her lightly. She could guess at her meaning. Why not make this *pendejo* pay?

"Sure, I'll have their special cocktail, whatever that means," said Catalina, peering at the menu. The special cocktail was twice the price of everything else.

"As will I," said Maria. "We'll be outside. Why don't you bring us our drinks when they're ready?" she asked. It was more of a command.

"Of course," said Sebastian, visibly taken aback.

Was he shocked at their rudeness in selecting the pricey drink, and giving him orders? Or was he used to women jumping at the opportunity to stand right by him while they waited for whatever he was paying for? During this whole exchange, Catalina had been trying to prevent herself from looking into his dark blue eyes, fighting to avoid letting her attention flit from his lips to his nose—not so straight, after all, it had a slight bump, didn't it? She absolutely hadn't stared at his dark eyebrows, hadn't noticed how his black hair, which he was wearing less slicked back, fluffier today, was just brushing his shirt collar. Despite that bump on his nose and the frown etching an eleven, her lucky number, dammit, between his brows, he was almost too conventionally good-looking, she decided, almost a caricature of what a handsome man should look like. How boring, how basic. And his personality did not match the exterior, of course. He was an arrogant prick, no matter what he tried to pretend to the contrary.

The girls were sitting at a small wooden table they had managed to score outside, still catching each other up on the past few days. Maria was telling her about a problem she'd had with a fabric purveyor when Sebastian came out holding three glasses in his large, well-manicured hands. Catalina self-consciously looked at her own hands, zeroing in on the broken nail she hadn't had the chance to address, and noticing the still slightly dented spot on her finger where her wedding band had lain. She still felt it there, like a phantom pain from an amputated limb. She thought of the wedding band, tied with a ribbon along with Alejandro's, sitting on her nightstand back home. She would hold those two rings at night, not as a prayer that her Alejandro might come back, she knew that ship had sailed, but more as a prayer that love hadn't completely disappeared from her existence. It was ridiculous, praying for something like this, something that could never be. And then, she realized: had she summoned the ghost? Ridiculous. It would have shown up at the apartment. Not to mention, ghosts did not exist. But this man in front of her, the one handing her a cocktail, he did. *Stop thinking that way, Cata.*

"Cheers," said Sebastian, clinking his glass against hers. "I just realized," he said, "you know my name. I know Maria's name. I don't know your name. Are you Alex Black?"

He had read the sign on her door, and thought he had her all figured out, didn't he?

"No," she responded, not wanting to explain the meaning behind the name. "I'm Catalina Cervantes... Ruiz. Actually, Catalina Ruiz ...Not Cervantes."

Most women she knew used their maiden name, but considering her fraught relationship with her parents, she had embraced American conventions and had toyed with taking Alejandro's last name, even though she had never officially done it, or fully gotten used to it.

Sebastian's eyes widened. "Oh. Catalina."

"Yes. What? Do we know each other? Or do you know of me somehow?" she asked.

This wasn't so shocking. When she'd been younger, she'd been something of a socialite, both in Mexico and internationally, thanks to her stint at her Swiss boarding school and her years in Los Angeles. She didn't know Sebastian from any of these places, hadn't met him since she'd been back, and social climb as he might, she couldn't imagine they would run in the same circles. None of her friends would be friends with cartel members, would they?

"Were you married to Alejandro Ruiz?" Sebastian asked.

She froze. There it was, the stabbing in her heart, the same one that always hit her whenever she heard Alejandro's name, or thought of him, or lately, saw him.

"Yes," she said cautiously.

"Oh," Sebastian responded.

"Oh, what?" Catalina pressed.

She vaguely registered Maria's head swiveling back and forth, as if watching a tennis match. He couldn't just ask a question like that, and then not clarify what her response had meant to him.

"Nothing. He and I, we were... friends," he responded.

Catalina narrowed her eyes. How was that possible? She had never once heard the man's name on Alejandro's lips. Alejandro had begun making a name for himself in commercial real estate, before his death. Some people tried to pretend they knew him or had been close to him. But it was true, as they had both gotten busier, they had stopped sharing all the details of their lives with each other.

"Well, I've never heard of you," Catalina said dryly, nipping that in the bud.

She noticed a strange expression on Sebastian's face. Hurt? Could it be hurt? As if this arrogant man could feel such an emotion. No, perhaps it was shame. He'd been caught out in a lie. Of course he hadn't been friends with Alejandro.

"It's late. I need to go," said Sebastian.

Que lastima, Catalina almost said, but she decided to be polite and thank him for their drinks, instead, and watched him leave.

"What was that?" Maria asked. "Do you think he really knew Alejandro?"

"No, I think he's lying," Catalina responded.

"He seems like the sort of man you would find handsome," Maria said carefully, peering at her to gauge her reaction.

Catalina had never been able to lie to Maria, but in this case, the distaste she had for this man, for his family, and for everything he stood for, far outweighed any seeds of attraction she may have initially experienced, so she found it easy enough to say, "Really? you think so? I hadn't noticed."

Chapter 10

The next day, Catalina was sitting at the desk by the door, designing price sheets for each of her artists, when she heard a knock again. She had locked the door, to make sure she didn't have any curious people walking in before the official opening. She sighed and got up.

"S?" she said through the intercom, which had finally been installed that morning.

"Delivery," came the response.

"I didn't order anything."

"Pues, I have your name here, Catalina Ruiz."

She opened the door cautiously. A man held out a large bouquet of flowers and a clipboard. With a slight frown, she dashed off her signature and took the flowers the man was extending to her. It was quite a luxurious bouquet, she recognized, with exotic blooms. It must have cost a pretty penny. Even the vase it came in was not the usual florist-grade glass. It seemed like something made by an artist or an artisan. What in the world was this? Was it from her sister? It did seem like the kind of over-the-top gesture Sofia might make to preemptively apologize for inviting their parents to the opening, after all. Or maybe Sofia had informed their parents that their daughter was finally opening the art gallery she had talked about for so long, and her parents had decided to contribute in this small way. But this arrangement was far too artistic, not like the stodgy flowers her conservative, high-society mother would have selected. Catalina noticed a small, cream-colored envelope pinned to the arrangement. She opened it.

Apologies for the moving truck. I owe you. Anything you need. - S

Que ridiculo, she thought, casting the card aside. She didn't need Sebastian's charity, his flowers, or his offers of help. This was terrible. Now, she felt obligated to thank him when she saw him next, when the last thing she wanted to do was engage in any further conversation with the man. He was already proving to be a nuisance. And he was already poaching artists she would have loved to have in her gallery. What was next? Was he going to try to woo away potential buyers? She certainly hoped not, but with his resources, she didn't see how she could possibly compete. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again. The flowers really were very beautiful. A burst of light, surely a rogue sunbeam, hit the vase, making her look at it more closely. Its distinctive style looked so familiar. Was it really by that artist who had just opened a high-end glassblowing studio in town? If so, it was quite extravagant. She lifted the vessel, checking it for a signature. Yes, there it was, right there on the base. She put the vase down, more carefully, now. She didn't want to accept it, but there was nothing she could do at this juncture. She moved the arrangement to the top of her desk. It gave the whole space a much-needed infusion of life.

Now, she went back to her price list. It was more time-consuming than she'd anticipated. She continued working until her eyes nearly crossed with the strain of staring at the computer screen. Then, looking up, she thought she saw a shadowy figure gliding near the chair painting. She shuddered, blinked, and then it was gone. That settled it. She needed a break. She would go see Maria, she decided. She had become more agile on the crutches, so it would be no problem to make the few blocks' journey. Her friend had brought in some new leather goods, apparently, not that Catalina could afford them, but it would be nice to see what she had in store.

She was locking the gallery door when she heard someone clearing their throat behind her. She spun around. It was Sebastian, of course.

"Hi. Heading to lunch?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," she responded. "I'm just taking a break."

"Mind if I join you?"

She sighed. *Be polite, Catalina*, she told herself.

"Thank you for the flowers."

"It was the least I could do," he said. "I'm serious. Anything you need, please let me know."

"Thanks," she said, half-heartedly.

"Well, which direction are you heading in?" he asked.

"I'm going to my friend Maria's shop. Just a few blocks away, over there."

"Why don't we walk together, for a moment? We can talk about our openings, see if there's any way we can collaborate, make the event more special," Sebastian said.

She paused, holding her tongue. He was right. Why cut off her nose to spite her face?

"I was thinking," said Sebastian, as they set off, "of getting a band, maybe some mariachis, on the sidewalk. But of course, if it's disruptive to you and doesn't sound like something you would want, I can put them inside."

"No, a band sounds festive," Catalina allowed. "But it sounds like you're planning on a huge event. How many invitations did you mail out?"

This was a test. Catalina had done an email and social media blast, but the older high society people on her list expected a paper invitation. She had splurged on one hundred of those.

"Technically, none."

Catalina turned to give him an amused look. *Ha*. Maybe she was beating him at something, at least. But her smirk soon died on her lips.

"I mean, I had them hand delivered."

"Hand-delivered?" she asked, aghast.

"Of course."

"With flowers?" She guessed.

Sebastian blushed a little bit, or was she imagining things?

"Only to the VIPs."

Catalina considered this for a moment. How many VIPs did she actually have? No doubt she had some society personalities, but no actual celebrities or anything like that. Would any of these so-called VIPs decide to grace her space with their presence when they came by Sebastian's? She didn't want to look like she was sponging from his customer base.

"Oh, so the flowers, this morning, they were basically left over from your VIP strategy?"

"Of course not. That bouquet ... never mind. We started off on the wrong foot, and I want to make it up to you."

"No need," she said.

She winced. She sounded rude. They had reached an intersection, now, and she focused on gingerly navigating the curb. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sebastian reach out to take her arm, then hesitate, and jam his hand in his pocket.

"How long were you married to Alejandro?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

The question hit her like a sledgehammer. She didn't want to talk about Alejandro, and certainly not with this man. But still. She should be polite.

"Three years," said Catalina. "If you were friends with him, why did I never hear of you?" she asked.

She could ask hard questions, too.

"Because," Sebastian began. "Because..."

"Yes?"

"Listen, forget about all of that."

"Sure."

"You look like you need some time alone. I'll see you later. Sorry. I didn't mean to impose."

Catalina merely waved him away and tried to pick up the pace as she hobbled towards Maria's shop on her crutches, feeling conflicted. In her mind's eye, she could see Sebastian's expression as he struggled to answer her simple question. Was he even telling the truth about being friends with Alejandro? Clearly not. The man was a liar, from a whole family of liars. But the hurt in his eyes—that had been authentic, hadn't it? But why? What did it mean? She hated herself for dwelling on the memory of his expression. Of his face. Hated herself for starting to compare it to Alejandro's. Alejandro hadn't been as conventionally handsome. But when they'd gotten together, she had thought him the sexiest man she'd ever met. Dark brown hair, like hers, large, almond shaped brown eyes, and a generous mouth. He'd been a bit slighter than Sebastian, not as tall and broad-shouldered, but still masculine, with strong sinewy arms that had made her feel safe when he held her. Until ... no, she would not think of that. Not today.

Chapter 11

By the time she made it to Maria's shop, she was in tears, both from the ache under her arms and on the palms of her hands, and from the gaping hole in her heart. She almost considered turning back, so as not to force her friend to make her emotions her problem again. It wasn't fair for her to always be leaning on Maria, when Maria never asked for anything in return. Thankfully, there was no one in the shop when she arrived- other than her friend, standing behind a counter in the back of the store.

"Catalina," Maria called. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"No, I'm just... just overwhelmed, I think," Catalina said, shaking her head. "That *pinche* Espinoza, he sent me flowers today. Do you think it's true he was friends with Alejandro?"

"I don't know, Cata. If he's a liar, the truth will come out. Can't you just avoid him? You don't need to pay inordinate attention to him just because he's your neighbor."

"He wants to collaborate on our openings," Catalina said. "He's invited all these VIPs. He sent invitations by hand. With flowers. I can't compete."

"You don't need to compete. He's him. You're you. The art in your gallery speaks for itself. Just keep doing your best."

Catalina could seize upon what she was saying intellectually, but emotionally, she was terrified—terrified that she would look like an amateur by comparison to this man who had managed to pay for the finest artists and who would probably have a fantastic band and high-quality food, compared to the basic playlist and cheese and crackers she had planned on. But Maria was right. She couldn't compete, shouldn't compete. They were two different entities.

"Listen, why don't you go and see what's in his gallery? It might put your mind at rest," Maria suggested.

"What if it doesn't? What if it makes it worse? What if he's got everything in there that I ever wanted?" Catalina worried.

"Catalina, come on, if you'd wanted it, you would have gone for it first. You just only really started wanting that mosaic artist's work when you saw it yesterday. So, don't act like he's stealing everything from you. You just have to learn to be one step ahead of him."

"You're right," said Catalina. "Do you think I should have a taco truck?"

"Cata! Remember that it's about the art. And this opening is just one of many," said Maria. "If you're looking at each one as an opportunity to outdo him in every way, you're going to suck the joy out of it."

"You're so wise," said Catalina, smiling. The tears had stopped now. "Can I woo you away for lunch?" she asked. "Nowhere expensive, just—"

"No, unfortunately," said Maria, "I'm waiting on a few clients who promised they were stopping by. I can't afford to not be there when they come. That's what retail's all about. You'll find out."

"All right," said Catalina.

She decided to savor one of her last few days of freedom and stopped at one of her favorite local cafés. She ordered a fall salad with squash, Manchego, and *pepitas* and sat at the counter against the window, looking out onto the street at the stylish passersby. She was lucky to live here in Mexico City at this time, when it felt like the epicenter of the art scene. She scrolled through her phone, looking at Instagram, looking for artists to follow. Her attention alighted on an advertisement. ZONAMACO was right around the corner, in February. She had attended the massive high-end art fair two years prior and planned to do so again this year. Her business was too new to consider participating as an exhibitor. She followed the links in the bio of the account and scanned the long list of participants, most of them big names, listed on the website. Then, she

spotted the name *Espinoza Gallery*. She froze. If he was doing it, why not her? But was it too late? She tapped a link on the *contact* page and held her breath as the phone rang.

A few minutes later, she was staring into space, depressed. The cost of participating in ZONAMACO was far too great. She couldn't even consider it. Not until she started making significant sales. Maria was a little bit right. That mosaic artist, Catalina hadn't even thought of representing her, and today, with this art fair she'd not even thought of participating in, the very fact of knowing that Sebastian was going to be exhibiting work there made her experience powerful FOMO.

All of a sudden, she remembered.

She had a late lunch planned with a certain Raquel Sanchez, an arts critic for a local blog, whom Sofia had met at a party and had insisted she get in touch with. Catalina had begrudgingly contacted the woman, and when Raquel had accepted a meeting with her, Catalina had done her homework and had been blown away. The blog was in fact a local but well-regarded magazine that Raquel had founded herself, and that was just the tip of the iceberg. Raquel was a serious journalist who had once worked with *Vanity Fair* and *Condé Nast Traveler*, and she served as an art consultant for one of the biggest family art foundations in the world, which happened to be based in Mexico City.

Catalina must have realized that morning, at least in her subconscious, that she had something important to do. She'd paid special attention to her outfit, settling on an indigo blue asymmetrical dress Alejandro had gifted her. The garment had been made by an artisan in Guadalajara, using traditional methods and materials, but with a modern edge. The way the dress was cut highlighted Catalina's curves, and the seaming held her in, making her feel more confident and secure. She absolutely hadn't chosen it on the off chance she ran into her neighbor. Not at all. On her feet, she had slipped on a pair of red clogs by a Swedish designer she had discovered in one of the shops in Condesa. They felt more stable and less constricting than the high tops from the day before. She'd popped on her signature large earrings, this pair woven out of green straw, and had decided to wear her long hair down with a middle part, a look that her mother had always said suited her particularly well. As the darkest one in the family, she had embraced more traditional Mexican styles, while her sister, Sofia, passed for European, and dressed like a *gringa*, too. Catalina was proud to be from Mexico City, and considered herself a *Chilanga*, even though the very term made her sister and her parents cringe, even though she had been away, first in Switzerland, then in the United States, for most of her adult life. The whole time she'd been away, though, she had boasted about the cultural riches of Mexico, of her homeland, and had never not missed it. After university at Brown, she'd embarked on an art degree in Paris but had hated the weather and been unimpressed by the men. She had moved to Barcelona, which had felt too small, even though it had been fun while it lasted. She couldn't believe she had lived in Los Angeles for eight years after that. It had been professionally useful, she had made some friends, but it would never be home. Each time she had come back to visit her parents and Sofia, they had begged her to stay, but she was still proving herself. And then, meeting Alejandro had changed everything. Coming back to Mexico City, finding her apartment, settling in—it had all felt like a dream. The falling out with her parents had been painful, to be sure, but otherwise, her life had taken a new direction, one driven by purpose, and not by what was expected of her because of her family's standing.

When she really thought about it, she had been the one to cut things off with her parents. They had simply voiced their disapproval with her choice of spouse, but she had elected to cut them out of her life, a suggestion by her American therapist. Had it been a mistake? Not at the time. Separating herself from them had forced her to stand on her own two feet, to challenge herself to go further, and achieve things on her own merit. She had taken to using Alejandro's last name,

Ruiz, instead of the *Cervantes* that Sofia had held onto. Why was Catalina thinking about her family so much? She had so many other things to think about. She should look toward the future, not toward the past.

She checked her watch, a vintage Rolex that had been an anniversary gift from Alejandro. She rarely took it off. He had bought it a year before his death, when he had really started succeeding in business, telling her that he had always wanted one, but that he would have more pleasure from seeing it on her wrist. She had questioned the wisdom of purchasing such a thing when they had so many other plans and obligations, but he had let her know that he had in fact purchased it to make up for the fact that he had not been able to afford an extravagant engagement ring, and so she had accepted it. It was commendable, how someone like Alejandro had managed to pull himself up by his own bootstraps. Alejandro didn't have any family, just an old aunt living in Querétaro, who hadn't even attended their small wedding. Everyone else was deceased, and it had been a sensitive subject with him.

I wish things had been different, she whispered into the ether. Enough nostalgia. She needed to hurry if she wanted to make it to her meeting on time.

Chapter 12

Catalina made her way down the street, trying to ignore the pain in her hands and armpits. Her ankle was getting better, wasn't it? She might be able to forego the crutches tomorrow. The weather was balmy. She admired the cobalt blue sky, and the bright pink bougainvillea climbing up the facades of the buildings. She loved living in Condesa and working in Roma Norte. The two neighborhoods combined into her own perfect little village: peaceful, full of greenery, and parks where she could spend a few moments reading a book when everything became too overwhelming, but also bustling, metropolitan, and artistic.

The meeting was at her favorite bookstore, El Pendulo, which was full of plants, with an atrium and a lovely coffee shop that served lunchtime treats that would sustain them as they conversed. Catalina would have to pretend that she hadn't already eaten a salad. After their chat, she had planned to take the journalist back to the gallery. In her head, she went over what she would tell Raquel: that she had chosen each of these artists for their story, for how they made her feel, not necessarily by the value of their paintings on the market. She assumed that her next-door neighbor had gone completely in the opposite direction when it came to selecting his artists.

Once she arrived inside El Pendulo, she looked around, scanning the space. She spotted Raquel in a corner, perusing some books on a shelf. She'd looked her up on LinkedIn, and Raquel was easy to pick out of the crowd thanks to her tall stature and closely cropped platinum hair, not to mention the heavy black eyeliner and statement earrings she wore. They could potentially find a rapport based on their mutual love of big jewelry, Catalina decided. She approached the woman.

"Hi, Raquel," she said.

"Catalina! So nice to meet you," said Raquel, extending her hand for a quick shake.

"Find any good books?" asked Catalina.

"Yes, this monotype on Luis Barragan. He's absolutely my favorite architect. It's a goal of mine to see as many of his houses as possible."

"Oh yes, I adore him too," said Catalina.

The architect's dramatic volumes, simple lines, and use of bright color had drawn her to his work. When she had been in LA, she'd had the pleasure of visiting his one residential commission in Beverly Hills and had been blown away. Some of their family friends in the DF lived in homes he had designed, but she didn't want to say that to Raquel, who might get the wrong idea.

"I'm dying to get into the foundation he designed," said Raquel.

"Oh yes, it's lovely," Catalina responded.

She had gone when it had first opened, thanks to Sofia, who had invited her to a cocktail party there.

"Shall we go sit down and chat?" asked Raquel.

"Yes, sure. Can I order you something?" asked Catalina.

"What do you usually get here? Do you come here often?"

"Yes, it's one of my favorite spots. I'm quite the book addict, you know. But I also love their savory pastries. And I really like their hot chocolate, too," said Catalina. "I know it doesn't feel like hot chocolate weather, but believe me, theirs always hits the spot."

"Sounds like I should trust you to order whatever you think is good," said Raquel.

"*Muy bien*," said Catalina. "Why don't you find us a seat? I'll be right there."

Catalina put in their order, briefly catching up with the young woman at the counter, whom she had grown quite friendly with after months of ordering the same thing from her on at least a weekly basis, and then found Raquel at one of the outdoor tables.

"I hope this table's ok. The weather has been so beautiful," said Raquel. "I keep waiting for a storm to hit. Something."

"Don't say anything to jinx it," said Catalina. She tended to be a bit superstitious, a funny trait that Maria mocked relentlessly.

"So, tell me everything about your gallery, your inspiration, what made you decide to open it. How you choose your artists, everything."

"Oh, wow. Asking me all the questions at once," Catalina smiled, "a sure way to make sure that I will talk my head off. Feel free to interrupt me at any time."

She launched into a description of the project she and Alejandro had devised, how they'd dreamed about a gallery for years.

"Oh," said Raquel. "My condolences. I didn't realize."

"Yes, but I was lucky to have known such a relationship once in my life," said Catalina.

"You'll find love again, won't you?" asked Raquel.

"I don't know that I want to."

Raquel's eyes widened, as if she'd said something devastating.

"Don't say that. I think you have so much to give. I don't think he would want that for you."

"I don't have the luxury of knowing what he would have wanted," said Catalina, suddenly pensive.

"I'm sorry. Tell me more about your artists, how you pick them. Am I correct in concluding that you have mostly figurative artists in the gallery?" Raquel asked.

"Yes," said Catalina proudly. "I know that it's not trendy, but I think that there's a fine tradition of representative art in Mexico. I like artists who are inspired by the mural tradition we have in this city, and also I love the way that female artists see the world. I think there's something more elemental about the way a woman paints things, about her use of color, her sensibilities. It's a tragedy that female artists are so underrepresented. The art world has become so male-driven, with so many curators, heads of museums, and collectors being men. Yes, there are some prominent women, but I just felt that I could do my part to make sure that the balance is maintained or created."

"That's a worthy cause," said Raquel. "So which kind of artists are you hoping to have in the future? How many artists do you have in this first show?"

"My first show is showing off the works of four artists. One is indigenous. She comes from the Yucatan peninsula, and barely spoke Spanish at all until she was in school, and is the very definition of outsider art. The second one is an urban artist. She started off with graffiti. She was actually incarcerated as a young woman, grew up near Tijuana in quite a rough upbringing, but then put herself through art school and used that immediate freedom of the graffiti method and applied it to fine art. Her paintings are almost like Kehinde Wiley's in their exuberance and classicism. The third artist is more international. She's been represented by a few galleries in the United States but wants to make a return to Mexico. I was lucky enough to meet her in Los Angeles at an opening, and I talked her into showing in my gallery if I ever opened one."

"Sounds like you have a good balance. Who are you thinking of carrying next?" asked Raquel.

"Well, I noticed a mosaic artist I would have loved to represent..."

"Do you mean Bibi? She's incredible!"

Catalina forced herself not to react.

"Yes, well, she's with someone else, but it got me thinking that I'd like more multimedia, sculpture, photographers, you know, whatever strikes my fancy. We're so lucky to be in Mexico City right now. We really are the capital of so many things at the moment, I feel. And I'm happy to be at the forefront."

"I love that," said Raquel, taking a last sip of hot chocolate. "You're right. This was delicious," she said, putting down her cup at last with an air of regret. "So, shall we go see your gallery?"

"Yes, if you have time. It's just a few blocks away," said Catalina.

"My next meeting is in an hour, so I think I have ample time."

"Do you need to get across town?" asked Catalina.

"No, it's in the neighborhood. I'll double-check the address once we're at yours," said Raquel.

As they approached her gallery, Catalina's mind was racing. What would Raquel think seeing her space? Would she feel that it measured up to some of the other art spots she had covered before in her articles? Would she think that Catalina was a mere amateur? She was glad that Raquel probably did not know who her parents were, because if she did, she would think she was just some sort of spoiled rich girl using art as a hobby, but the truth couldn't be further from that.

As she unlocked the gallery door, Raquel said, "Oh, how lucky. What a coincidence."

"What?" asked Catalina, distracted, thinking about which artworks to show her first.

"My next meeting is right next door to you."

"Next door?" asked Catalina, blinking.

"Yes, I'm interviewing Sebastian Espinoza."

Catalina didn't like the way Raquel said the name, as if he was some sort of celebrity.

"You know each other, of course?"

"We've only met briefly," said Catalina, a slide show of those brief but intense encounters flashing through her mind. "Are you featuring both of us this month?" she ventured.

"Well, I think I'll feature your gallery as a rising star," said Raquel. "Of course, Sebastian Espinoza is a bit more established."

"Established? This is his first gallery too!"

Catalina could feel her cheeks burning as she heard the indignation in her own voice.

Raquel hesitated.

"I ... right. But, you know, he's known ... a serial entrepreneur."

"Yes, I'm aware of that," said Catalina, "but isn't his family problematic?"

"You think so?" replied Raquel, noncommittal.

Subtext: she didn't want to risk angering the Espinosas.

"That doesn't seem fair," Catalina remarked.

"Don't worry," reassured Raquel. "You'll still get coverage. It's just, well, any Espinosa would get more pages. And, full disclosure, he did invest in my magazine, you know."

Now, Catalina's happy optimism had evaporated, and as she showed Raquel the artworks in her gallery, she felt heavy and morose, and her ankle started aching anew.

Chapter 13

Once Raquel had been gone for a few moments, Catalina imagined how her interview with Sebastian was going. Was he going to try to seduce her? Was he going to impress her with the high quality of his artists, all of whom were probably already much more famous than the ones Catalina was representing? She forced herself to take a calming breath. She couldn't think this way. She decided to focus on reaching out to more journalists and bloggers, going through her address book and her social media accounts.

One well-known influencer responded immediately with a direct message.

Of course, I'll come by on your opening night.

Oh, I'm so pleased you can make it, Catalina replied.

Well, I'll be in the area for the opening of Sebastian Espinoza's gallery, anyway, so it works out well. I'm so excited!!

Catalina threw her phone down, frustrated.

Mid-afternoon, her sister called.

"I know you've forgotten," Sofia said.

"Forgotten what?"

"I knew it!"

Oh damn. Catalina remembered, now. The cocktail party at the German ambassador's residence.

"Do you really need me there? It's always the same people, same thing."

"Catalina, you promised. You're not getting out of this. It's good for you. You need to get out. Network. Maybe you'll meet someone."

"I'm not interested in meeting someone."

"Whatever. You're going."

"Fine. It's in Polanco, right?"

"Yes, but I will pick you up at your place. Because I'll bet you need to change. Are you still on crutches?"

"I don't know. How dressy and what time?" asked Catalina.

She was actually almost looking forward to it, she was surprised to note. Going to a cocktail party would not only be entertaining and something to do, but also perhaps she could make a few more contacts and invite a few more people to her opening night. She had to remind herself that it wasn't just about opening night. It was also about the day-to-day, about sales, about making friends with interior designers and private collectors. There were so many moving parts that it boggled the mind. If Alejandro had been alive, they would have worked on these things together. They would have been able to divide and conquer. Her weaknesses were his strengths, and vice versa. She wondered if Sebastian Espinoza had a business partner or a significant other who was helping him. But then again, with his family backing, he hardly needed it. *Stop thinking that way*, she chided herself.

"It's the usual cocktail thing," Sofia was saying. "It's at seven thirty. They're honoring a chef and a poet."

"Oh, good," said Catalina, "that means they'll have some decent food."

The German embassy was not known for its haute cuisine, but if they were honoring a chef, they would make an effort.

"I'll see you around seven. I'll text you and you can come down," said Sofia.

Sofia always traveled in an armored SUV with a driver, quite the opposite of the way Catalina usually got around town in her little orange Volkswagen, her *Vocho*, without a care in the world.

Catalina went back to reaching out to journalists and bloggers, all of whom were planning on coming to both openings, they assured her, and she spent a bit of time texting with Maria.

Maria: *You're looking great. Let's have a drink before the event. Have your sister pick you up at the gallery.*

It was tempting. Catalina considered it, but when she looked up from her screen, she saw a solidifying shadow in the corner. She blinked, and it faded. No way would she come back here alone in the dark.

Catalina: *My sister will be furious with me if I don't doll myself up.*

Maria: *Whatever. Have fun at the embassy. Even though it'll be boring.*

Catalina smiled to herself. Maria had grown up in the international community, as well. Embassy parties and consular functions had been part of her routine, too, and she had decided to reject all of that as an adult, not that she didn't still ascribe to many of the unspoken codes she had been raised with.

Catalina hurried out the door, not wanting to stay a minute more, and got in her taxi to head home, cringing at the cost again, deciding that she would probably be fine to drive starting the next day. The driver was knowledgeable, taking detours through a few smaller streets, to avoid the five o'clock traffic. For Catalina, it was an opportunity to feast her eyes on the vegetation and on the facades of a few architecturally interesting buildings she hadn't noticed before. She still couldn't believe that she got to live here in Mexico City, after so many years of being away. She was glad that she had this small pleasure of being able to open her eyes and discover something new around every turn. Not that it compensated for everything she'd lost, of course.

When she got home, she watered her plants, fed the cat, and went about selecting something to wear for the party. Since she had left the gallery so early, she had no excuse not to make an effort. She chose a gathered skirt with embroidered birds, a top with a corset detail that showed off her bust in a tasteful manner, and a Bavarian-inspired jacket on top that the German Ambassador would appreciate. Normally, she would have paired this with high-heeled, pointy shoes, but that was not in the cards today. If she hoped to leave the crutches at home, she would have to settle for flats, and compensate with an interesting hairpiece, which would give her added height, and a careful application of red lipstick. The effect was festive, formal, and artistic, and she was quite pleased with it. It felt good to get dressed up, she realized. She had missed it.

Chapter 14

Catalina's phone pinged. Her sister was downstairs. She made her way down and was pleased to note that, while her ankle was far from perfect, it was much improved. Once in the street, as she approached the shining black chariot, a customized Cadillac Escalade, she noticed quite a few eyes on it- people in the street were staring. Yes, a chauffeur-driven bulletproof people carrier attracted the wrong kind of attention. She heard the click of the doors unlocking. The bodyguard came out to open the door for her. She knew he was heavily armed, but again, wasn't that a bit silly, to get out of the bulletproof vehicle just to let her in? In any case, she wasn't there to talk about her sister's security detail. She leaned in and gave Sofia a peck on both cheeks.

"How are you? How was your day?" Catalina asked.

"Oh, you know," said Sofia. "Same old, same old. The kids had a little playdate. Spoiled brat *fresa* friends that I had to entertain."

Catalina smiled. She and her sister both qualified as *fresas*, the stereotypical preppy, international set often parodied in various *telenovelas*.

"You had to entertain them? Where was the nanny?"

Sofia gave her a little slap.

"Exhausted. She said she never wants to see that little monster Ignacio back in the house again. Anyway, before that, I had a lovely lunch with Isabella. She says hello, by the way."

"Where'd you go?" asked Catalina.

"Oh, Quintonil, that place in Polanco everyone's going to this month. But it was a special menu. Their new sous-chef was trained in Peru and Italy, but he wanted to try Japanese food. Sushi meets ceviche."

Catalina appreciated the trend for all things raw that had gripped Mexico City of late. She thought that it did the local ingredients justice, and she enjoyed eating that way herself, even though it was not always realistic for her budget.

"So, are you looking forward to this evening?" Asked Sofia.

Catalina nodded, even though she was mostly looking forward to a glass of wine. She'd started to appreciate the Mexican whites that were coming out of the Guadalupe Valley. She realized she was also looking forward to hopefully having some intelligent conversation and perhaps meeting a few more potential collectors.

"A few of our friends will be there," Sofia noted.

"You mean a few of your friends?" Catalina corrected.

"Whatever, you can't change who you are," said Sofia. "Anyway, *mama* says hi."

"Great," said Catalina.

She missed her mother more than she missed her father, even though her mother had been more vocal against Alejandro, but she felt that her father, having started off firmly middle class and having built his own business empire, in addition to the fact that he'd married a wealthy woman, should have known what it was like to come from a more modest background. But she wasn't going to think about it tonight. She was going to have a light and lovely evening and then go home, sleep, and have a great day tomorrow, with no ghosts or other unpleasant surprises.

They pulled up to the embassy. The gates to the courtyard opened, and, once they'd gone through, closed behind their vehicle. Armed guards stood on either side of the door and helped the sisters exit from the car. This time, the bodyguard stayed put.

"Come back at 9:30," Sofia instructed the chauffeur.

Catalina couldn't remember this one's name. She supposed this driver had been vetted thoroughly, like all the others, but she was getting paranoid by association, and it was always disconcerting to see someone new.

"Let's go," said Sofia.

Catalina looked her sister up and down, appreciating her ensemble, consisting of a heavily beaded, sleeveless dress in a light *Eau de Nil* tone that shimmered as she walked, and a bolero jacket for warmth.

"Beautiful dress," Catalina complimented.

"It's vintage," said Sofia. "I've been collecting the work of designers from the 1960's. I find the clothes are so much better made."

"Fabulous," said Catalina. She wondered which of the school or tennis moms had decreed this and gotten Sofia on this new bandwagon.

"You look great, too," said Sofia. "Though I would never in a million years be able to pull that outfit off."

"Of course you would be able to," said Catalina. "You just don't want to."

She smiled sweetly at her sister. They walked inside, Sofia waving at a few people who looked vaguely familiar to Catalina, as well, and they headed to the bar, where they each were served a glass of Champagne. So much for the crisp Mexican white. They wandered around, greeting the German ambassador, a charming enough man, who was friends with Sofia's husband.

"How's Federico?" the Ambassador asked, as they greeted him and exchanged pleasantries.

"Great. Is Monika here tonight?" Sofia asked.

The ambassador's wife was a jewelry aficionada who promoted the handiwork of various artisans, which apparently led her to travel an inordinate amount. In fact, Catalina still didn't understand why quite so much travel was required, but it was none of her business.

"She's traveling," the Ambassador said, pulling a face. "Enjoy yourselves, *doñas*."

He walked away, to greet another group.

"Oh, there's one of the guests of honor," said Sofia, nodding towards one of the corners of the large reception room.

The woman in question was quite a few years older than they were, with bright henna-dyed red hair piled on top of her head in a style that was both edgy and classical. She wore a double-breasted suit in a rather shocking shade of chartreuse, with nothing underneath. She was statuesque and imposing. Regal. Catalina could see how many of the people in the room were hesitating to go up to her, because she was nothing if not intimidating.

"Let's go talk to her before she gets mobbed," said Sofia.

They headed over.

"Beatriz Blas? I read your poem in the Atlantic last month," said Sofia.

Catalina glanced at Sofia, momentarily taken aback. Her sister always surprised her with the amount of research she did before attending any social event.

"Oh?" asked the woman, clearly pleased and surprised. "What did you think of it?"

"Devastating," said Sofia, which, judging from the woman's reaction, was exactly the right thing to say. "Catalina, may I introduce Beatriz Blas. I think she should be the poet laureate for Mexico, frankly. Talented is an understatement."

Catalina smiled. Even though she was one hundred percent sure her sister had not read the poem, she was impressed. Sofia's talents were wasted on being the ideal mother and putting together a picture-perfect life for herself and her husband. Not that Sofia had any aspirations to do anything differently, so Catalina supposed that was a type of success.

"I have to admit, I've not read any of your work," said Catalina, "but now that I've met you, I have no excuse. Which themes do you like to explore?"

"The usual," said Beatriz. "Sex, death, loss."

This froze Catalina in her tracks. It was the Cliff Notes version of her life in the past few years.

"Oh," she stammered, "Have you experienced much loss, yourself?"

She felt Sofia gently kick her on the calf. Thankfully, it was not the calf of the wounded leg. Sofia often accused her sister of getting into conversations that grew too personal, too quickly.

"I just saw someone I must speak to," said Sofia, pointedly. "Nice meeting you."

Her sister wandered off, and though Catalina knew she expected her to follow, she stayed put. And she was glad she did, because once Sofia was out of earshot, the poet decided to answer Catalina's indiscreet question.

"I actually have experienced loss," said Beatriz. "My partner, Milena, passed away a few years ago. And, well, I've been forcing myself not to shove down the emotions, to let myself experience all the..."

She hesitated for a moment, and Catalina jumped in and finished her sentence.

"All the seasons of it, the stages of it. Almost the flavors of it, though it's something you don't want to taste, but you're compelled to?"

"Yes," said Beatriz, looking back at her with a new appreciation. "You've experienced something like this, as well."

"I wish I hadn't, but at the same time, it's made me who I am."

"Exactly," said Beatriz. "And tell me, Catalina, what do you do?"

"I'm opening an art gallery," said Catalina.

She wasn't one of these people who liked to talk about what she did to strangers, but she supposed that being a business owner made it a requirement.

"Oh, interesting. And what kind of art do you promote?"

"Mostly female artists. Figurative. I like to represent women from all walks of life," she said.

"I would love to come by and see your gallery sometime. Where is it? Roma Norte?"

"Yes. I'm not very original," said Catalina.

"Well, I think there's something to be said for having a dedicated area for art. I like this idea of Second Tuesdays. I think it's great fun to make an evening of visiting various art galleries. Which street are you on?"

Catalina told her.

"Ah, I have a dear friend who's opening a gallery on that street too."

Catalina froze. Was this woman, this brilliant poet, possibly friends with the arrogant fool next door?

"Sebastian Espinosa?"

"Yes, that's him. Why do you make that face?" asked Beatriz.

"So far, my run-ins with him have not been fully positive, and, well, he does have a reputation," Catalina ventured, feeling more and more stupid as she said it. She was usually a proponent of giving people the benefit of the doubt, and here she was, making pronouncements on a virtual stranger, to one of his good friends, to boot. She bit her tongue to stop herself from digging herself an even deeper hole.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that," she admitted.

"Sometimes reputations are earned," said Beatriz carefully, "but sometimes people inherit the reputation of their family, and you need to be able to tell the difference, no?"

"Quite," said Catalina. "Well, it was lovely meeting you. I think I'll go get another drink to wash out the taste of my foot in my mouth."

"Don't worry about it. You're entitled to your opinion, and I believe you will end up being pleasantly surprised. I'm going to Sebastian's opening on Tuesday, and if you're having an opening as well, I'll make sure to stop by and see you."

"Thank you," said Catalina. "I don't even know if I deserve that, but I appreciate it. My gallery is right next door. Alex Black."

"We women support each other," said Beatriz. "I'll see you soon."

"Will you be doing a reading tonight?"

"We shall see. The ambassador threw this event out of obligation, I think. I'm not sure if he's a great supporter of poetry."

"But his wife Monika is," said Catalina.

"True, but she's not here tonight. I try not to have too many expectations," said Beatriz. "I find that it cuts down on disappointment."

Catalina excused herself and went to find Sofia, who was regaling a circle of women with a tale of drama at the nursery school, so Catalina went wandering through the various reception rooms. She was starting to feel self-conscious and out of place. She realized she'd lost the knack of socializing. Well, she would force herself to practice. She approached a group of young women, fashionably dressed, standing in a semicircle, which left her an opening.

"Hello, good evening. May I join you?" Asked Catalina.

"Of course," said one of the girls, a petite brunette with an impeccable chignon. "We were just saying that this is a fabulous event," she said, catching Catalina up. They proceeded to introduce themselves. Catalina eventually mentioned the gallery.

"The opening is next Tuesday," she said. "In Roma Norte."

"Oh, perfect, I was planning on being there anyway," said Stefania. "There's a fantastic new gallery opening that I wanted to check out."

"Really," said Catalina.

She had a feeling she wasn't going to like what came next.

"Yes, Sebastian Espinoza's. Surely you know him? He's so handsome. I'm sure it's going to be beautiful. He has incredible taste. I heard a rumor that Luis Barragan's protégé renovated the gallery."

Of course, thought Catalina. Her previous assessment of Sebastian, that he was trying, but failing to be accepted in high society, was clearly wishful thinking. Just as she was thinking this, her gaze swept the room and locked onto a pair of dark blue eyes overhung by dark, straight eyebrows. *Damn*. There he was. Sebastian Espinoza, the man she couldn't get away from, her neighbor, her newfound nemesis. She was being ridiculous. He hadn't done anything too terrible to her. And she might have been a creature of principle, but why let her principles ruin her life? She could be the bigger person. She would go up and say hello.

In fact, he had two glasses of champagne in his hands. Maybe he had spotted her. Maybe he was going to bring her a flute of bubbly as a peace offering. As she headed towards him, her mind started racing. What would she say? How would she start the conversation? But then, a blur of brown and gold, as a model-looking girl, six feet tall at least, with a killer figure and honeyed hair draped over her shoulder, so as not to cover too much of a bare back exposed by a revealing gold lamé dress, stepped between her and Sebastian, plucking the coupe of Champagne from one of his hands. To add insult to injury, she started laughing- a crystalline, delighted laugh, as if she couldn't believe her luck at being the one standing next to him. Catalina realized she recognized her. It was the famous Bibi. One-name Bibi. Like *pinche* Cher, or Madonna. Bibi, the mosaic artist *du jour*. The same girl who had done the mosaic mural on the facade of Galeria Espinosa, and now she knew why.

Catalina spun away, beating a hasty retreat. Not only was Sebastian's name on everyone's lips, but he had a girlfriend, a beautiful one, at that. It shouldn't have bothered her, but it did. She decided to go off in search of her sister.

Chapter 15

Sofia was nowhere to be found in the main reception room, so Catalina went back to the library. And there, she found her sister, deep in conversation with a bearded man who was standing just a little bit too close to her. Alarm bells went off in Catalina's head. She was being ridiculous, though. So many people in Mexico didn't respect others' personal space. But still, this man's energy was off. She closed the space between them in just a few steps.

"Sofia, *todo bien?*" she asked.

Sofia's eyes were just a little bit wider open than normal. Anyone else wouldn't have seen anything wrong, but this was her sister. She knew her every expression, her every mood, and there was something strange going on here.

"Oh, there you are," said Sofia. "I was just having a lovely conversation with Joaquin."

"Joaquin," said Catalina.

"Yes, hello," said the man, reaching out and squeezing her hand in his big paw. "Joaquin Diaz. I am a friend of your sister's, and of her husband."

As he said this, Catalina looked at his sharp white teeth. He didn't look like any of Fredo's other friends. It didn't feel very friendly, this exchange they'd been having. Her sister lived a quiet, respectable life with her children and her husband. There was no way she was wrapped up in something scandalous. Or was there? Catalina had spent so much time believing that Sofia's life was perfect, and boring. That image of her sister as a swan on a pond, those legs pedaling fast, so fast, just out of view...had she ever really stopped to consider what was actually lurking just under the surface? Then again, maybe she was just jumping to conclusions. Maybe the man was a disgruntled ex-employee of Federico's. Or maybe Sofia was just acquainted with this fellow through the gym or her kids' school, or any number of places, and he was simply standing too close and making her uneasy.

"I wanted to introduce you to someone," said Catalina, vaguely.

"Oh, great," said Sofia, as if jumping at the opportunity. "Well, let's go. Lovely seeing you, Joaquin."

"Likewise," said the man, his grin predatory. "Tell Fredo I'll be in touch."

Catalina shuddered. She didn't like it. She would have to ask Sofia about it, when the appropriate moment presented itself.

"Thanks for saving me," said Sofia simply.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not particularly," Sofia responded.

They headed back to the bar, and this time were served the white wine that Catalina had been craving. They spent some more time circulating. The women that Sofia had been chatting with had already left, no doubt to relieve the nanny or head to dinner- probably at some place they had seen on Instagram.

The sisters also spent some time admiring the paintings on the wall, which were part of the Embassy's rotating collection.

"Perhaps you could have one of your painters have a show here too, to make a bigger name for themselves," suggested Sofia.

"Yes, you're right," said Catalina.

Sofia checked her watch. "Well, Cesar's probably almost here with the car. I've had enough, how about you?"

"Same," said Catalina, looking around to make sure that Sebastian was nowhere to be seen. This evening had been useless. Dejected, she took her sister's arm, and they headed towards the ambassador to thank him for his hospitality.

"What a wonderful time we had," said Catalina. "I spoke to Beatriz. She's so impressive. I was hoping she'd do a reading."

"Beatriz? Ah, yes. The poet woman. Oh, I should have thought about that," said the ambassador. "Usually my wife—"

"Yes?" Said Sofia, encouragingly.

"Oh, she'll be back soon," said the ambassador evasively.

"All right. Well, please tell her we asked after her," said Sofia.

"I will," said the ambassador. "See you again soon, I hope."

"You should make an appointment to speak with my sister," said Sofia, gesturing at Catalina. "She's opening an art gallery."

"Is she?" said the ambassador, giving Catalina an appraising look. "That's impressive. Please feel free to send us information about any openings or anything like that," said the ambassador.

Catalina was annoyed. That was so vague, so non-committal, that he might as well have said nothing. Well, it never hurt to be a little pushy, she decided.

"Actually, I would love to work with you to promote female artists. One of my current artists is part German. I believe that..."

"If you address any information and materials to my secretary, she'll forward it to me," said the ambassador, interrupting her, now looking over their heads, obviously at someone else that he was dying to talk to.

"Great, thanks so much," said Catalina.

It was always like this.

"Wait- actually, before you go, there is someone I'd like to introduce you to," said the ambassador.

"Oh?" asked Catalina.

"Yes, yes, he's over here." He gestured in the direction where he had been looking, obviously relieved to finally have found a way to make Catalina someone else's problem.

For a moment, Catalina was afraid that, with her luck, the ambassador was going to try to introduce her to Sebastian Espinosa, the last person she wanted to speak to. But instead, he directed her to a tall, elegant, white-haired man with excellent posture and a deep tan.

"Catalina, this is Eduardo Smith. He's going to be the Mexican ambassador to the U.S. starting next month. Eduardo, Catalina Cervantes. Her family are close friends of this embassy. She owns an art gallery."

"Oh, how nice to meet you," said Catalina. "And how wonderful that you'll be in the United States. I went to school in the U.S. and spent time in Los Angeles, as well as a little time in Washington, D.C. It's lovely there."

"Honestly, I would have preferred anywhere else," said Eduardo, a petulant tone to his voice.

Catalina instantly decided she didn't like him very much. The German ambassador, however, laughed as if this was the most charming thing he'd ever heard.

"One of the projects close to Eduardo's heart is to promote Mexican artists in the United States. He was just telling me how something called Art Basel is coming up, and he thought it would be great to have the participation of a few Mexican gallerists."

Catalina's heart started beating. Art Basel. She'd gone to the Miami one once, mostly to party. Alejandro would have loved to go, but it hadn't been in their budget. Catalina had, of course, attended other art shows such as Frieze, Fog, and the Venice Biennale, as well, before she met Ale.

ZONAMACO, the show in Mexico City Sebastian was participating in, the one she couldn't afford to, was on track to blow many of those other shows out of the water, but Art Basel still reigned supreme.

"Were...are you looking for galleries that could participate?" she asked Eduardo.

She couldn't afford to do this herself, but with the help of the embassy, perhaps all things were possible.

"I was thinking of calling in a couple of galleries from Mexico City," Eduardo began. "I haven't yet come up with a completely clear idea, but I did take the step of reserving a booth at Art Basel next month."

Next month? It was true, with all the activity of opening the gallery, Catalina had barely registered the month, let alone the season. She made a calculation in her head. What Eduardo was calling "next month" was the first week in December, which was more like just a few weeks away. He was cutting it close.

"Would the gallerists be attending themselves, or will you have a representative there?" she asked.

"Great question. I wouldn't mind having a discussion with you about it," said Eduardo. "Perhaps I can invite you to lunch or dinner, and we can discuss how you think it should be organized."

"All right," said Catalina, heartened.

She noticed, however, that Eduardo was looking more at her cleavage, and at her lips, than at her eyes. But at the same time, some men were shy, she reasoned, and bad at making eye contact. In any case, if this level of inappropriateness was what she had to endure to get a foot in the door, it would be worth it. Especially since having breasts was one advantage she definitely had over Sebastian Espinoza. Also, this was not some indecent proposal. All Eduardo was talking about was a simple business meeting over a meal. It would be fine.

"Lunch would be great," she nodded. "Here's my card." She dug through her bag and produced her brand-new business card.

"What a beautiful card," said Eduardo. "I love the art- and the gold on the edges."

"Thank you. The design is from a mural the artist Armando Medellin painted on my facade. If you attend my show next Tuesday, perhaps you can see it, and meet him, in person."

"Great! I was planning on exploring a few of the galleries on Tuesday, so I'll make sure to stop by, and in the meantime, we can plan a lunch date. Time is of the essence."

"Yes, of course," Catalina responded. "At your convenience. I look forward to speaking again."

As they walked away, Sofia took her arm.

"That seems like a good connection," her sister observed. "Maybe this is your lucky break."

Now, they headed towards the door, and of course, in front of them, blocking their way, were Sebastian and the supermodel. As if Sebastian could feel her eyes on the back of his head, he turned around.

"Ah, there you are! I thought you were going to come up and say hello, but then, you ... I lost track of you," he remarked.

The girl next to him was staring at him, as if drinking in every word, and now, she glared at Catalina accusingly. My God, she was intense.

"I saw you were otherwise occupied," said Catalina.

She winced. Why did she sound like a jealous girlfriend? She didn't care who he spent his time with and what he did.

"Why don't you introduce us?" Sofia prodded.

"Oh, Sofia, this is Sebastian Espinoza."

"Sebastian Espinoza," said Sofia, pensively.

Sebastian coughed and looked down.

"Well, yes, just Sebastian will do. Catalina and I are neighbors. I'm —"

"Are you two sisters?" interrupted the supermodel, giving each of them an up and down look Catalina did not like.

"Yes. Well, it's good to know that my sister has a good neighbor," said Sofia, smoothly redirecting the conversation. "Hopefully, you can help each other in case of any emergency."

"Absolutely," said Sebastian. "She can count on me."

The golden creature by his side was still staring at him intently. She dramatically cleared her throat.

"Sorry, this is Bibi," he said, simply.

Catalina noticed that he had made no effort to explain the relationship between them, but what did she care? She could tell Sofia was about to ask Bibi some question that would clarify things, but Sebastian interrupted that.

"Well, there's our car."

The valet was bringing up a red Porsche 911. Flashy, of course. Catalina expected no less, from him. She saw Bibi get behind the wheel, with a proprietary gesture.

"His girlfriend is incredibly pretty," observed Sofia as they watched her driver navigate their big SUV into the courtyard. "She looks familiar. I wonder where I've seen her before."

"She's a famous mosaic artist," said Catalina, dryly.

"Maybe. But I wouldn't recognize her from that. She must be a model, too. She's certainly gorgeous enough. So is he- they're well matched, in that regard. Is he really from *that* Espinosa family?"

"Apparently. I can't believe you suggested that we could help and support each other," she scoffed, mocking her sister's idealistic pronouncement.

"Eh," said Sofia. "Too bad he's taken. He really is quite handsome, isn't he?"

"If that's your sort of thing," said Catalina evasively.

"Oh, come on. He's everybody's sort of thing. Look at him. I mean, you couldn't even invent a guy who's better looking than that if you tried."

"You could, if you had some imagination," said Catalina.

Sofia burst into laughter.

"Oh, never mind, you probably honestly don't think he's cute at all, since I think he's gorgeous."

The Cervantes girls had always had vastly different tastes in men, which was a good thing, because otherwise, being close in age, they could have been competitive about boyfriends as they were growing up, especially when they were attending Institut Le Rosey together. When they were younger, they made a sport out of disparaging each other's partners, but as they matured and settled with men they were actually serious about, they tried to keep their opinions to themselves, in order to keep the peace. In Catalina's opinion, there was not much to say about Federico. With his wavy, blondish hair, green eyes, athletic stature, and impeccable breeding, not to mention his wealth, he certainly was perfect on paper. There was nothing wrong with him, but nothing terribly exciting about him either, unless you liked the German aristocrat type, which Sofia clearly did. Sofia, similarly, had never really emitted a strong opinion on Alejandro, which at least was better than their parents' disapproval.

They got into the SUV.

"*Mucho trafico*," said the driver.

"You don't need to drop me at home," said Catalina. "It's out of your way."

"No, it's fine," said Sofia. "I'm the one who forced you to come out. I'm not going to make you get a taxi- and you certainly can't walk- your ankle must be sore, by now."

It was. But Catalina was thankful that she'd been able to spend an evening out without crutches. The sisters settled in, the bodyguard gave them bottles of mineral water, and they debriefed each other about the evening.

"So, tell me," said Catalina, "who was it? That man you were talking to, the one with the beard?"

Sofia opened her eyes wide, clenching her jaw. Clearly, she didn't want to say anything in front of the driver, or the bodyguard.

"We'll talk about this again," Catalina warned.

"If we must," said Sofia. "More importantly, tell me more about Sebastian Espinoza. What kind of art does he have in his gallery?"

"I've not been inside, but I imagine it's the very expensive, abstract, high-ticket stuff. Including pieces by that mosaic artist supermodel everyone, including you, is obsessed with."

"I can't believe you've not been inside to see the art. Aren't you even a little bit curious?"

"A little bit, I guess, but I've been busy with my own stuff, Sofia."

Sofia narrowed her eyes.

"Oh my God! Of course!"

"Of course, what?"

"You have a crush on him. That's why you're being so weird about him!"

"You're being ridiculous," Catalina responded. "And Alejandro barely..."

"Come on. It's been a year, Catalina. Anyway, I'm just saying it's a crush. You don't need to marry the guy."

"Sofia, stop it right now. If I was ever going to fall for somebody else, which believe me, I am not planning on, it would not be for the likes of Sebastian Espinoza. What would that say about me?"

"I don't know. Maybe we should give him the benefit of the doubt."

What Catalina had really wanted to discuss was her misgivings about Eduardo Smith, but now Sofia was pouting, and they ended their ride in relative silence.

Chapter 16

Catalina was relieved to get back to her apartment and to her cat. She was hungry. She had been too busy schmoozing at the embassy to partake in the high-end food she had been promised, but then she realized that she hadn't in fact seen any food. How strange. After scavenging a few pieces of cheese from her refrigerator and brushing her teeth, she went to bed. Itzpapalotl did not join her. Perhaps the cat was pouting because she had been refused the last bite of cheese. Catalina tossed and turned until she finally fell asleep.

She wasn't surprised to find herself dreaming about Alejandro. This happened about once a month. They were always vivid dreams. Many times, the dreams were erotic. She'd had dreams of him coming home and ravaging her on the green velvet sofa or taking her in the backseat of her car. Making love in four poster colonial-style beds. Sneaking in a tryst on a rooftop in San Miguel de Allende, where they had honeymooned, thanks to Sofia's generosity. These were in fact not just dreams. They were memories. But now, for the first time, she dreamed of a place she had never been to with her husband, at least not when he'd been alive. She was in her gallery, walking through, inspecting each painting to make sure that they were hung just right. But all the paintings were skewed, hung at different angles. Over and over, she tried to straighten them, and they would go right back to canting. In her dream, she'd gone to call someone on the phone, to get them to come fix the paintings, and who she was calling was Alejandro. She waited with bated breath, until he came through the glass door. Now, he didn't look so spectral. In fact, he was feverish, feral, excited to see her, closing the space between them in just a few steps and taking her into his strong, wiry arms. Within moments, he was kissing her, claiming her mouth the way he always had, his hands running under her blouse, raising goosebumps on her skin. Now, he was reaching under her skirt, pulling down her underwear, and pulling her close to him, with his hands on either side of her bare ass. She was conscious it was a dream, but the feelings were so real. The sensations were building up, now, and she knew where this was going. Their dream lovemaking would always escalate to a point where she would wake up, shaken by the orgasm that had come in her sleep. She felt like maybe this was a gift from him, wherever he might be, to make up for having left her. Her sister had once, and only once, suggested that she would have to meet somebody eventually, or let her buy her an electric alternative, because after all, she had needs, didn't she? When Catalina had responded that she didn't need anything, because she was provided for in her sleep, it had brought the conversation to an awkward close.

But this time was different. This time, as the tension mounted, as the pleasure grew, as she felt this dream version of her late husband filling her, grinding against her, taking her against the gallery wall, she opened her eyes, at least in her dream, and looked into a face that was not Alejandro's. When she realized who it was, she should have wanted to stop, but she didn't. She kept rocking, grinding her hips to meet his thrusts, staring into his eyes like she'd done that very evening at the cocktail party, before looking away, confused. She could feel his fingers digging into the flesh of her backside. Feel his hands running up her back, now, pulling her closer to him. See the look of intense concentration on his handsome face as he thrust harder into her, looking at her as if asking a question, a question to which the answer was only a passionate *yes*. And then, she woke up, gasping for air, a throbbing release running through her body.

Right after that, the feelings came crashing down: the loss, but now, also, more guilt. Because this release that had woken her up tonight was stronger than any of the ones she'd experienced before.

Once she'd gotten her breathing back under control, she got up, went to the bathroom, where Itzi had somehow gotten herself locked in, and then to the kitchen, where she poured herself and

the cat some water. Sipping the cool liquid and trying to regain her wits, she considered what was going on. She'd only been in contact with Sebastian for a few days now, and already, she was far more intrigued by him than she wanted to admit. This tension that she felt- how would she resolve it? This dream- she hoped it was the first and only one of its kind she'd have. She couldn't be thinking of him that way. Not when his gallery was next door to hers. Not when they were competitors. Not when his family had such a reputation. He was just a regular person, she reminded herself. It shouldn't be a big deal. Perhaps she should just admit to herself, and even to her sister, that yes, she did find him attractive. She did find him fucking sexy, with those thick eyebrows, those piercing eyes, that sharp jawline, those lips she dreamed of kissing. *Stop it*, she told herself. She was awake, now. No excuses. She couldn't help what she dreamed about, but what she thought about when she was lucid, that wasn't okay. She turned on the light to dispel all remaining shreds of the dream that had subsumed her. She would try to read for a little bit, she decided. Itzi jumped onto her regular spot on the bed, and Catalina picked up her iPad and tracked down the Atlantic Monthly article that contained Beatriz's poem. As she read the poet's words, tears ran down her face, because Beatriz had indeed expressed everything she was feeling. The loss, the guilt, the renewal, the optimism, the dread. Reading those lines, she felt seen. That could have been therapeutic, but instead, it made her despair feel validated, and therefore all the more real.

This newfound attraction, it was the sort of thing that could happen to anyone. It was messy. It was human. But if she wanted to get rid of it, she needed to find something that would supplant it. Sebastian was just a person. A hot person with a supermodel art whiz girlfriend. If she wanted to stop fantasizing about him, the best thing to do would be to replace the attraction with competition. She would compete with him on a strategic, business level, try to outdo him, outsell him, and outperform him, and maybe that would feel just as good as... well, maybe *almost* as good.

Finally, she managed to fall back to sleep. And thankfully, no further dreams interrupted her slumber.

Chapter 17

The next day at ten am, Catalina was at her desk, busy trying to come up with a strong marketing and advertising strategy for her gallery that wouldn't cost her any extra money. At the same time, her mind was racing. Eduardo had sent her an early message asking if she was free for lunch, and, even though, thinking back on it, there had been something about Eduardo's behavior the night before that had made her uneasy, she had felt compelled to accept. After all, time was of the essence. Thankfully, she had made an effort in getting ready that morning and had kicked herself for thinking for even a second about what Sebastian would think about what she was wearing if she saw him.

She was fighting to focus on creating a content calendar for social media when her phone rang. She looked at it distractedly. When she saw it was her sister, she decided to pick up.

"Oh my gosh, Catalina, I'm so excited," said Sofia when she picked up.

"What's going on?" asked Catalina.

"I think Fredo is planning a surprise for me."

Catalina rolled her eyes. That morning, as she had let herself into the gallery, she had caught a glimpse of a semi-transparent Alejandro drifting towards the storage room. How was *that* for a surprise? Fredo's version of a surprise was gifting her sister pieces of jewelry that Catalina found uninspired and basic. Another ubiquitous Cartier love bracelet or Van Cleef quatrefoil added to her collection was not exactly exciting news.

"Which jeweler is he working with this time?" Catalina asked, suppressing a yawn.

"No, this is something that even you will like," said her sister. "I think he's planning on commissioning an artwork for me."

"An artwork?" asked Catalina, sitting up straighter.

A million thoughts were racing through her mind, now. First of all, if her brother-in-law was going to commission an artwork, wouldn't he go through her, the gallerist in the family? Also, Fredo didn't seem like an art aficionado. It didn't seem to be something he was very interested in at all. The artworks in their various homes had been selected directly by their interior designer, to match the sofa. Even her sister didn't have a very strong interest in art, other than seeing and being seen at the important gallery openings.

"I have to admit, I'm a little surprised," Catalina said carefully. "I mean, I would have thought that if Fredo was gifting you a piece of art, he would have gone through me. Also, I'm your sister. I know what you like and don't like, and I know you like fashion better than art, by the way."

"I know, but you don't represent this artist," said Sofia.

Catalina sighed. How convenient for Fredo.

"Okay, and you're so excited because...?" she asked, a little snippily. "Is the artist some society maven? Some billionaire's wife? Some blue-chip painter that just recently died? What am I missing?"

"It's that supermodel mosaic artist, the one we saw at the embassy," said Sofia. "She's all the rage. Imagine- if I have one of her custom installations, I might get the house into one of the design magazines."

"Ah," said Catalina, her stomach dropping at the thought of her own sister having an artwork commissioned by Sebastian's gorgeous girlfriend.

Catalina had insisted that she had zero interest in the handsome Mr. Espinoza, but she would think that her sister would be a little bit more sensitive when it came to commissioning artworks from the girlfriend of her direct competitor.

"Wait- if it's a surprise, how do you know?"

"She sent me a Facebook message," said Sofia.

Catalina paused. This sounded strange.

"Why would she send you a message if it's supposed to be a surprise? Fredo must be livid."

"Her message was a little vague, but I can tell she's trying to get more information about me to help her with a piece, or, I don't know, find out if that's really what I would want. I agree, it maybe wasn't the smartest thing. She should have just had Fredo ask me. But you know how men are."

"Okay," said Catalina, cautiously.

Alarm bells were going off in her head, but she didn't want to needlessly worry her sister or insinuate anything that would make her mad at her.

"I don't think it's a sure thing yet," Sofia was saying. "But I'm so excited. Do you think I should tell him how happy something like that would make me?"

Catalina considered this.

"I don't know. He seems like the sort of man that, if he's planning a surprise, he'll be upset if it's been ruined."

It was strange that Fredo would have pre-selected someone like Bibi. Was it a coincidence, or something else?

"Well, report back if you hear anything."

"Of course," said Sofia happily.

Catalina wanted to tell her sister about her upcoming lunch with Eduardo, but her feelings about it were so much to unpack that she paused.

"Okay, I'd better go." Sofia said. "My trainer is here."

Catalina put the phone down, her mind reeling. What was Fredo playing at? Surely there was some angle. He never did anything without a reason. So, perhaps Bibi's artworks were going up in price more than Catalina had even thought, or did Fredo want to impress Sebastian, or ingratiate himself for business reasons? Would Sebastian be getting a commission as well for the artwork? It felt cruel, but fated, that her own sister was instrumental in helping him to best Catalina in what she was starting to see as their gallery wars.

Was Fredo mad at her for something? She realized she had not seen him much lately. Sofia claimed he was always away on business. But was that all? She hadn't done anything that she could put her finger on.

Chapter 18

Two hours later, Catalina swore as she nudged into the tiniest parking spot imaginable, the bumper of her orange Beetle touching that of the car behind her. Of course, in Mexico City's congested streets, this was par for the course. She was lucky she'd found a space at all. She was running late to her lunch with Eduardo, and she couldn't afford to have him think she was unprofessional or not reliable. She would have preferred to remain in Roma Norte rather than making the trip to Polanco on a work day, but this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, wasn't it? The opportunity to participate in an art show on the scope of Art Basel was something she had only dreamed of. The cost of participating and even the exclusivity of the event had made it nothing but a pipe dream, until now.

Catalina gingerly stepped up to the restaurant, a new seafood place she had read a lot about recently that was slated to be the new Contramar. This was one of those spots that, like so many others in Mexico City that her sister liked to drag her to, had DJs playing on weekend evenings. But during the day, with a crowd that was well-heeled and elegant, it was very much a see-and-be-seen business lunch situation, which made her confident that there was nothing untoward in Eduardo's intentions.

This lunch was important. Sebastian was participating in the big ZONAMACO fair in February, something she knew she could absolutely not afford to do, so beating him to the punch by participating in Art Basel would put them on more equal footing. Sebastian would be blown away when he heard about it, and hopefully a bit envious. At the very least, he would respect her as a worthy competitor. A little bit of friendly rivalry was good for business, after all.

Catalina smoothed down the skirt of her black shirtdress. Unfortunately, she had remembered too late that the garment had a chest-level button that liked to spring open in the most inconvenient moments. She had paired the dress with a woven belt in red and turquoise blue. Her earrings of the day were large woven turquoise balls, and she sported a pair of red shoes with a wedge heel. She frequently had a pop of red in her outfit, or at the very least on her lips- it made her feel confident.

She arrived at the podium, where an elegant young girl stood, greeting visitors to the restaurant.

"Hello, I'm here for lunch with Mr. Smith," Catalina said.

"Oh yes," said the girl. "I'll lead you to his table."

They proceeded through the restaurant towards the so-called power booth in a corner. It was the sort of placement that would also have been the choice of Catalina's brother-in-law, or her father, or any of these men with massive egos. They loved being placed where they could watch all the other diners, and the other diners could understand how important they were.

She took a deep breath as she got closer to the table, noticing how Eduardo's eyes lingered on her. She'd been hoping that her impression that he was somehow predatory was unfounded, and that she'd merely been too sensitive. But now, she was realizing that she had initially read the man exactly right. Unfortunately, her desire to avail herself of an opportunity that probably would not come up again, or at least not come up for a very long time, had made her throw caution to the wind. She would handle herself, she decided. She would be careful. She needed this.

"*Hola*," said Eduardo, politely rising from his seat, the wolfish look in his eye, however, only increasing. "Thank you for joining me. You look ravishing."

"Thank you for the opportunity," said Catalina, ignoring his choice of words.

"Was that your sister with you, at the embassy, the other day?" he asked as they sat down.

"Yes," Catalina responded.

"I thought so- you don't look at all alike, but she is stunning. Just like you."

"Our personalities are even more different than our appearances," Catalina said pointedly.

"Ah," said Eduardo.

Catalina wished they could just start talking business from the first moment, but unfortunately, she knew that wasn't how etiquette worked. So, she very politely asked if he had been to the German embassy before.

"What a beautiful building," Catalina said. "Are you close with the German ambassador?"

"Yes, we've been friends for a while, through family connections," said Eduardo, evasively. "I don't think the building is as nice as the Swiss embassy, but then again, what is? But at least, even though some say the Germans are as boring as the Swiss, the German embassy pool parties are absolutely decadent."

"Oh," Catalina didn't even know there was a pool, but she did remember her sister mentioning a private courtyard. It was probably for the best that she hadn't attended any further events there, especially if things were getting that debauched. For a split second, she had a vision of Sebastian doing unmentionable things to her in a swimming pool, but thankfully, she was soon onto worrying again about the strange man she'd seen her sister speaking with a few days prior. But for now, she needed to stop getting distracted. She tried to find another subject to chit chat about, but when she brought up his upcoming diplomatic appointment, he picked up his menu.

"Never mind the tiresome Americans. Do you know what you want to order? I'm starving."

What a rude, impatient man. She hadn't even had a second to look at the menu, and he knew it. She had been watching the massive platters of fish making their way across the space, presented by formally dressed waiters in white shirts and aprons, but she wanted to order something modest, so as not to feel awkward when the bill came. She had no intention of letting Eduardo pay for her.

"Um, you know, I'm not very hungry," she said. "I think I'll just have something small."

"Then you must try the crudo with the caviar," Eduardo said, clueless to her motivations.

"What shall we drink?" he asked.

"Oh, you know, I need to go back to work, so ..."

"Don't be silly. Don't you want to have a nice meeting and get to know each other better?"

Wow, she was blowing it already. She couldn't afford to lose the opportunity that had been dangled in front of her. But had he been serious about her gallery participating in Art Basel, or was he just toying with her?

Once they'd ordered, Eduardo finally got down to business.

"About what I mentioned the other night- do you know Art Basel?"

Catalina almost scoffed. Did anyone in the art world not know the famous art show? Anyone who was anyone in the art world made it their business to attend Art Basel, to see and be seen.

"Yes, I'm familiar with it," Catalina said. "So, tell me what you're thinking."

"I'm thinking that it would be nice to represent Mexican artists. We, after all, have a growing art scene here, especially in Mexico City. I think Miami would be the perfect location to show that off. That way, Mexican nationals living in the States might decide to buy from Mexican artists instead of from others. I'm planning on having two Mexico City galleries participate. As I mentioned, I've already secured a booth."

"Yes, that's amazing," said Catalina.

She knew that not only was it expensive to participate in Art Basel, but not all galleries were guaranteed a spot. Eduardo must have been thinking of this for a long time, and he clearly had connections. He might have been cutting it close in selecting his galleries, but she admired the fact that he'd had this foresight before even starting his tenure as ambassador. Or had it been his predecessor who had laid the groundwork, and he was just now stealing his or her thunder? It didn't matter. Catalina reminded herself to simply be thankful.

"So, if I participated, how would that work? Would I merely ship paintings to you or..."

"Oh, no, of course not. I would want you to participate fully. I would need you there."

She took note of the almost imperceptible stress on the *need*. He gave her a slow smile. Those alarm bells came back. She ignored them.

"My office would organize the transport of your art. Time is of the essence. The fair, as you know, is coming soon," he said.

Exactly, thought Catalina. It was strange that, for a man who had supposedly planned ahead so much, he certainly had taken his time selecting his galleries.

"It *is* very soon. Don't get me wrong- I'm thrilled that you're giving me the opportunity- but I'm surprised you didn't choose someone else long ago."

"Well, I'd been looking for exactly the right gallery. I thought I had found one, but the gallery owner was not being honest with me. I abhor people who lie to me. It is the one thing I cannot accept. That gallery is as good as over, now."

"Over?" asked Catalina, puzzled.

She could feel her heart hammering in her chest. What had this gallery owner done to offend Eduardo, and how far did he go to ruin them? He hadn't spelled it out, but she had a feeling the owner of that other gallery was a woman. Was it a woman who had refused his advances? Should she back away gracefully? But Art Basel...that was the opportunity of a lifetime.

"Meeting you was fortuitous," Eduardo was saying.

"Oh," said Catalina, feeling a little shaky.

Maybe she shouldn't be so suspicious. Maybe she should just accept that, yes, she was doing a good job, and that people had taken note already. But how did he know her gallery was so good?

"I suppose you'll need to come see what I have before you decide..."

"No, I've heard such good things from everyone. I trust you. I think you have exactly what it takes. And I'd like to be surprised," he said.

With the expense of participating in such an event, his limitless confidence in her seemed a bit strange, but again, maybe people had different ways of doing things. Maybe she was more cautious than she should be.

"All right, so how many pieces?"

"Well, ultimately," he said, "six to twelve pieces per gallery, depending on the size."

Catalina nodded. That sounded like a large booth. She wondered who she would be sharing it with.

"I'm looking for a second gallery," Eduardo said. "The ambassador said he was going to introduce me to another gallerist, but I didn't have the chance to meet him before he left. Do you have any ideas?"

Uh oh. Catalina was certain she knew exactly who the second gallery was. She opened her mouth, and then closed it again. She hesitated. She would do research when she got back to her space, to find someone else worthy of being given the chance.

"I can think of a few. Let me get back to you."

Their food arrived.

She picked at the tuna carpaccio she had ordered, conscious of Eduardo's eyes on her. She was uneasy. This whole plan still seemed so up in the air. By the end of the meal, she had gleaned that she was going to have to pick out the art that she would send a mere three days after her first gallery show. That wouldn't give her much time. Also, what if she sold everything at the opening? She reminded herself that was wishful thinking, and would be a great problem to have, but the fact was, she was such an amateur. Would she even manage to make it work? Was she worthy of success? Without Alejandro's business acumen, would she crash and burn?

She tried to banish the negative thoughts.

She also pushed aside the other thought that entered her mind, which was that if she nominated Sebastian to come to Miami with her, what would happen? Would the forced proximity of participating in the show together lead to regrettable actions? No, she would absolutely not nominate him. She would go back to her gallery and brainstorm on more appropriate artists and galleries.

"Well, I'd better get back to the gallery," she told Eduardo. "Lots to do before the opening. I hope to see you there."

"Yes. I'm going to try to make it," said Eduardo, "but I leave for the States the next day. So, hopefully you can let me know about the other gallery as soon as possible so we can coordinate the transport."

"Yes, absolutely," said Catalina. "I'm going to be thinking about it this afternoon."

She realized that she also needed to firm up the taco truck plan for her art show. After scrambling to find a good candidate, she had reached out to one that came highly recommended, but after an initial call, they hadn't gotten back to her, and she was starting to panic.

Chapter 19

Two hours later, Catalina sat at her desk, her head throbbing. What was she going to do?

The taco truck she had been counting on had apparently broken down, and the company had gone out of business. Somehow, every other taco truck in town seemed to have another event that night. It made sense. There were many other gallery openings on that same day. One of the trucks she called even let her know that they were servicing a party right next door to her. She groaned. Of course, Sebastian had secured a truck that wouldn't break down. And now he would come out looking like a professional, and she would come out looking like an idiot. And of course, to add insult to injury, as Catalina looked up from her computer screen to rest her eyes, she let out a terrified squeak. There stood Alejandro, an intense expression on his translucent face, one she couldn't quite interpret, not that she wanted to.

That was it. Maybe she really was going crazy. In any case, there was her sign that she needed to go out for fresh air.

Of course, it was just her luck that, as she stepped out of the gallery, she almost ran headlong into Sebastian. Again, she found herself overwhelmed by the sheer masculinity of him. She looked up into his dark blue eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Ha. Funny. She certainly wasn't going to tell him about seeing Alejandro in the gallery, and she wasn't going to tell him about what was going on with the taco truck, either, but of course she found her traitorous lips moving and forming themselves into the words.

"My taco truck broke down. And now I'm panicking to find someone else to come cater the opening."

Sebastian's response was swift and certain.

"Don't be silly," he said. "I have a taco truck coming. We can park it midway between the two galleries, and we can share the expense."

Catalina was about to protest. He probably had hired the most expensive truck in town, because after all, as a rich boy, what did he know of budgeting?

"Look," he said, "don't worry. I'll make it fair. I know that the one I got isn't the truck you were originally going to hire. So just tell me how much you were planning on spending, and you can contribute that."

She hesitated, made a calculation in her mind, and told him the number.

"Really?" He asked.

"What do you mean, really?"

She was livid. Was he going to doubt the deal she had gotten, call her a liar?

"It's just that, if I was a dishonest man, I would tell you that you could pay me that. But frankly," Sebastian said, "I found a better deal."

Catalina shuddered. Of course he had. He was going to use terror tactics to force the poor business owners to provide their services at below market value. Forget it. She wanted no part in this.

"You know, thank you for offering," she said, "but actually, I think I might just do a cheese board."

"Suit yourself, let me know if you change your mind. As long as you let me know by the end of the day tomorrow- they'll need some time to get more food if you want to do it."

"Thank you," she found herself saying.

Oh God, the show was just two days away, and she was far from ready.

It was kind, his offer, she supposed, but what did he want in exchange? Or was he just being a good neighbor? After experiencing Eduardo's creepy vibes, she was on high alert. But Sebastian seemed like a good contrast to the other man, at this juncture. Finally, she considered him again.

"Thank you so much for offering. Are you sure it's no trouble?"

Chapter 20

Catalina was just cautiously entering her gallery, relieved that the food situation had been settled, when her phone rang. Putting her bag down on the desk, she quickly picked up when she saw her sister's name on the screen.

"So, did you get your surprise?" she asked Sofia.

"No, not yet. But an article about you came out in *Art News*. Have you seen it?"

Maybe my sister really is interested in art all of a sudden, Catalina thought.

"Not yet," said Catalina. "I can't believe you beat me to it."

"Cynthia told me about it," Sofia admitted. "So...you didn't see it?"

Catalina froze. There was something about Sofia's tone.

"What are you trying to say, Sofia? Is there something bad about the article? They don't talk about me in relation to Sebastian, do they? Please say they didn't."

"No, it's nothing like that," said Sofia, "though there is a longer article about him on the same page."

Catalina rolled her eyes.

"Well, that's to be expected. The journalist pretty much told me about that up front. So, what's the problem with my article? It can't be much more than a blurb."

"Well, I'll let you be the judge of that," said Sofia. "Anyway, the kids are yelling for me. I need to go. We're late to school again."

Catalina hung up and entered the web address for *Art News*, impatiently scrolling to her article. She tried not to focus on the fact that Sebastian's article was accompanied by a photo of him, broodingly handsome, standing in front of his gallery, while her photo was a small thumbnail of her gallery sign. It was better than nothing, she supposed. She quickly perused the article.

Light from Darkness: A Couple's Dream Realized.

Catalina Cervantes Ruiz and her husband Alejandro always wanted to open a gallery. After her husband's premature death, Catalina carried on his vision and has finally opened a gallery named after him in a sleek, reimagined new space on a quiet street in Roma Norte that we predict will soon become a premier art destination. The Alex Black Gallery showcases striking works by contemporary figurative Mexican female painters. The first show opens next Tuesday.

What was wrong with that? Catalina thought. Maybe she had downplayed her own role in picking the artists and securing the space, and the gallery wasn't really named after Ale, but it did make for a romantic, though sad, story that might attract people to the gallery. She didn't know what Sofia was picking up on and texted her a message to that effect.

Catalina: *Other than it being ten times shorter than the article about Sebastian and not having a photo of me, what's the problem?*

Sofia's response came back quickly. She must have been sitting at her breakfast table, having loaded the children into the armored car with the bodyguard and shuttled them off to school.

Sofia: *It makes it look like Alejandro had the whole idea. I'm sorry, but you were far more passionate about the art world than he ever was. I know it's hard for you to hear that, but the dream, and all the hard work- they were all yours.*

Catalina's eyes widened. Her sister never would have dared to say that to her face. But now that she looked at it from Sofia's point of view, she knew that she had a point. Why was she incapable of taking credit for all the decisions and hard work that had gone into opening the gallery? Was this good PR, or was it simply hiding her light?

She sat staring at her phone.

Sofia: *Are you mad at me?*

Catalina: *Never. You know that.*

Chapter 21

That day and the following week were consumed with logistics for the show's opening, social media posts, growing her mailing list, ghost sightings, and trying to avoid Sebastian.

But oddly enough, every time she ran into some small emergency, he happened to be there to help.

Finally, the day before the show, the biggest emergency of all struck: Catalina was in the bathroom, about to go home, when the lights- and indeed, all the power, stopped working. She cursed under her breath. Good thing she had her phone on her. It was pitch dark in the bathroom, and she knew the breaker was in the storage room, which was also a windowless space.

As she turned on her phone's flashlight and got ready to head out, she wondered to herself: had she forgotten to pay the electricity bill? She had set up automatic payments, she thought. And now, with the way things moved at a glacial pace in Mexico City, getting the power reinstated in time for the show was not a foregone conclusion. She opened the door and headed towards the storage room. There, near the fuse box, an odd glow. Was there a light on? But then the glow materialized and faded again. *Dammit.* She froze. Was it Alejandro? Was he sabotaging her? She held her breath and waited. After a few moments, she could wait no longer. She lunged at the fuse box and flipped the breaker on and off. Nothing. Disbelief flooded her brain. She stood there in the dark for a moment more, stunned, and then made her way back into the main rooms of the gallery, which were barely illuminated by the skylights at this hour.

She sat there in the gathering gloom, her head on the desk, crying. What was she going to do now? She felt like such an idiot. If Alejandro, the real Alejandro, had been here, he would have taken charge, and probably would have fixed it. Here she was, so focused on all the superficial aspects of running a gallery, wasting so much time comparing herself to Sebastian, and not even knowing how to take care of the fundamentals.

She might as well cancel the opening at this point, because if there was no electricity, there would be no lighting, no music, just a big fat failure. Suddenly, there was a light knock at the gallery door, followed by a more insistent knock. She chose to ignore it. Especially with the lights off, how could anyone assume there was someone inside? Was this a thief trying to break in? She stood stock still, holding her breath. Then her phone pinged.

Sebastian: *Catalina, are you okay?*

Sebastian: *I saw your light turn off, so I was waiting for you to come out. Are you in there?*

Catalina sighed and headed toward the door, a faint glow from the streetlights guiding her. She threw the door open, making Sebastian jump back.

"Oh, you are here," he said.

"Yes, my *pinche electricidad* just went out."

"Want me to see if a fuse blew?" Sebastian asked. "My power is still on, so it's not a neighborhood-wide outage."

"I already checked the fuse box. I'm not that helpless," Catalina said. "I think it's a more serious problem. And before you ask, I didn't forget to pay for my electricity."

"Damn," said Sebastian. "Just before your opening."

In the streetlight, she could see his serious expression. At least he had the decency not to give her a gloating smile, as some might have done.

"Yes, unfortunately, I'm probably going to have to cancel. If it's something with the electrical company, they seem to be prompt when it comes to cutting off power, but not so much when it comes to restoring it. And I'll never find an electrician in time."

"No, Catalina, you've worked so hard. We have the food truck, and I can help you to fix it first thing in the morning tomorrow."

"But what if it can't be fixed?"

"Worst-case scenario," said Sebastian, "I'm sure I can run an extension cord from my side to power the essential lights, and music."

Catalina considered him. "That's very kind," she said carefully. "You don't have to do that."

"What kind of neighbor would I be if I didn't offer to help you out?"

Catalina nodded. Even though she was jealous of his visibility, his success, and the ease with which he seemed to do business, if Sebastian had been in her situation, she might have had a small moment of triumph, but she ultimately would have helped him, as well.

"Well, it's very kind. Where was that nice guy back when the moving truck was blocking my door?" she quipped.

Sebastian groaned.

"Please don't remind me of that. Not my finest moment. Listen, are you busy this evening? Would you like to go for a drink?"

"I would have loved to," said Catalina carefully, "but I am emotionally exhausted, and there's a lot for me to think about for tomorrow. I need to write a speech, and I still have a few details to clear up."

"Got it," said Sebastian.

Was that disappointment on his face?

"Well, I'll stay here while you close up and walk you out."

"Thank you."

Catalina was relieved. She didn't want to admit it to herself, but she was rattled. What did the ghost want from her?

"Did you drive? I can walk you to your car," Sebastian said as she locked up.

She nodded, and they set off down the street. Soon, they were in front of her orange Volkswagen.

"This is your car?" Sebastian smiled.

"I know it's not much, but I like it."

"I think it's adorable," said Sebastian. "I would have thought that a girl like you would be driving a European car or be driven around by a chauffeur."

"No, that's my sister," said Catalina.

"I think your way is much more fun," said Sebastian. "Good night. I'll see you tomorrow. I'll check in around ten."

"Thank you," said Catalina simply.

She felt awkward waving goodbye to him, standing so close.

"Go on, let me open your door for you," he said. "I want to see you off."

"You're acting like there are brigands waiting to hold me up at any moment," Catalina noted.

"No, I'm just being a gentleman," he said.

"Who taught you that?"

"My grandmother," he said firmly. "Good night, Catalina."

He closed the door behind her carefully and watched her as she started the car and set off, her mind racing. Why was she craving a goodnight kiss from him? Why was her skin tingling as if it had been robbed of contact with him? He had been so kind; his offers of help were so needed. Why was she almost disappointed that he was acting like a better person than his reputation would have her believe?

Chapter 22

The next evening, Catalina stood in front of the largest painting in the show, a street art-inspired piece by Angela Gomez featuring a woman's hands wrapped in a rosary, with tattoos bleeding red ink that splattered onto the canvas. It was a strategic placement. Catalina's navy-blue silk slip dress and red earrings, lipstick, and shoes coordinated well with the art, and it would make for a great photograph for her social media accounts. In fact, a few photographers from various media outlets snapped shots of her. Maria, her official *paparazza* for the evening, was shooting from a different angle, and Catalina winked at her.

"Thank you so much for coming," she told the assembled crowd. "It means so much to me to have you all here, present, to support me on my opening night."

She looked around the room. She had already chatted with many of the people here. There were school friends she had not seen enough of this past year, and friends of Sofia's, who knew it was good to see and be seen at art events if they wanted to stay current. There were a few older friends of the family, which made Catalina worry that her parents might have heard about the event. She would have loved to have her mother, here, to see her achieve this goal. To help her pick out her outfit, to squabble about who to invite. Her father would have shown up and pretended to be involved since day one, but he would have been so proud, she knew. If her parents had still been in the picture, though, she wouldn't have the satisfaction of knowing she'd done this all on her own. They would have thrown money at her project. Of course, that would have made things easier in some senses: Catalina would have been tempted to represent a higher profile roster of artists and rent a more prestigious location. And that was the thing: she loved the artists she had chosen. And the location was perfect. Except for her neighbor, of course. Who wasn't actually that bad. But she wouldn't think of that tonight. Tonight was her night, and hers alone. Thankfully, the ghost had not made an appearance.

Catalina gathered her thoughts.

"This gallery, as many of you know, is a longtime dream come true."

She looked over at Paco, one of the few friends of Alejandro's to have shown up. She didn't have the contact information for many of the people who had been in her husband's life before she'd met him. It struck her, now, that Ale had phased out his original social circle after they'd met. That happened with couples, she knew. Paco gave her a shy smile and moved toward the bar.

"This project has been years in the making," Catalina continued.

She composed herself. She would not cry. She'd worked so hard for this, and she wouldn't ruin it by becoming a sniveling mess.

"I'm so proud to have opened a business in Mexico City, my city, after a long time away. It's such a pleasure to see Mexico at the forefront of the art scene. It's richly deserved. Each of the artists featured tonight, and so many others working today, are revolutionaries and pioneers who I believe will continue to go from peak to peak in their artistic careers."

She gestured at the walls of the gallery, taking in each of the artworks, each one so different, but together with the others, forming a cohesive whole.

"The artists I'm showcasing tonight are all female, and the art is mostly representational. I chose these artworks because not only do they illustrate the condition of women in Mexico today, but they express important universal truths. I encourage you to speak to each of our artists present tonight: Angela Gomez, Lili Canek, Carmen de la Piedra, and Fatima Barbarossa. From Fatima's complex fiber wall hangings that supplant the European tapestries that hung in Spanish colonists' haciendas, to Carmen's hyperrealism, to Lili's dreamy, neoclassical portraits celebrating the

strength of Mayan women, to Angela's graffiti-inspired, yet classical canvases, each of these works explores a corner of our Mexican identity, and of our human experience.”

She'd spoken for too long. She didn't want to bore anyone. She needed to wrap it up and go have a well-deserved glass of white wine.

“Anyway, enough rambling on my part. Enjoy yourselves. Enjoy the art. Enjoy the taco truck, and the wine. And thank you again for being here.”

She realized that she had forgotten to thank Sebastian, who had essentially made the whole evening possible, despite all the setbacks. But he wasn't here to hear it- until she realized that there he was, standing in a corner, near the door.

She was shocked.

He had stepped away from his own opening to stop by hers, and she should have returned the favor, she realized. She was about to open her mouth to say something, but suddenly, she was distracted by something else just in front of Sebastian: two people she had not been expecting to see. A glamorous couple. Tall and slim, both of them. Elegant, but considerably older than last time she had seen them. Her parents.

Her throat constricted. A violent pang pinched her heart. What were they doing there?

Anger flared. Had Sofia invited them, despite her admonition? How dare she? How dare they? This was her night. They had been complicit in their relationship falling apart. Still, she remembered all the times her mother had broken her out of boarding school to take her to Germany, or to London, or to Paris for a weekend, to see an art show or a museum exhibit that she had sworn she couldn't miss. Even her father had been supportive, she had to admit. He had bought her a painting for her *quinceañera* instead of the traditional string of pearls that Sofia and so many girls of their generation had received. Unlike most parents of their social circle, who either thought their daughters should focus on marrying a wealthy man and throw themselves into philanthropy or go to business school or medical school and then marry an even wealthier man, both of her parents had encouraged her to study art at university, something their peers had warned them against. Her father had admitted that he was afraid it would be a useless degree but had told her that he trusted her to follow her passions. Until he hadn't. And that had hurt.

Seeing them here, it was overwhelming. It was too much. Glancing over at Sebastian with one more panicked glance, she turned away and fled towards the back of the gallery, feeling like there was cotton stuffed in her ears and sandpaper in her eyes. She made it to the bathroom, and then the tears came, as she broke into an ugly cry. This was so unfair. This was her night, the one she'd worked on for so long. And now, they had hijacked that night and made it about them. Which wasn't fair of her to think, of course. They hadn't done anything but stand there and listen to her speak.

But still, the pain of seeing them was too much. After everything she'd done, all her hard work, her sister had clearly betrayed her trust. Catalina had told Sofia in no uncertain terms that she didn't want them there. And her sister, who she had thought was on her side, had ignored her wishes. Now, her sadness and frustration turned to anger, which had the beneficial side effect of drying her tears. She was going to give Sofia a piece of her mind. She had no right to ruin her night this way.

She dabbed at her eyes, checked her reflection in the mirror, pinched her cheeks, pasted on a fake smile, and erupted back into the gallery like a tornado. There was a pause in the brouhaha as people noticed her stalking back into the room. But she didn't care. She headed straight to Sofia, who was holding court near the bar, chatting with a group of aristocratic types.

“Sofia, I need to talk to you,” she said, without a glance at the other people in the circle.

“Excuse me,” said Sofia, smiling at her friends. What a fake she was. “We’ll be right back, and then I want to introduce you to my incredible sister.”

She came away with Catalina obediently.

“What is it?” She asked, frowning, once they were out on the street.

“You invited Mama and Papa? How dare you?” Catalina fumed.

“I did no such thing,” said Sofia. “Mama found out about the show in a magazine. She told me they were going to come, and I told her they absolutely should not. After that, there’s not much else I could do.”

Catalina considered this. This rang true. Her parents were stubborn. Determined. She may have inherited a little of that from them.

“Listen, Catalina,” said Sofia, “you can’t blame them for wanting to be there on your big night. You’re their daughter. They still love you.”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” said Catalina.

“Anyway, don’t worry, I saw them leave after you made your little scene,” said Sofia.

“I didn’t make a scene.”

“You did! You looked like you’d seen a ghost, and then you ran away. You didn’t even thank Sebastian Espinosa for giving you the electrical hookup to keep on with the event.”

“How did you know? So, he boasted about that, did he?”

“He actually did not,” said Sofia. “Somebody was asking about the extension cord going from his gallery to yours. He tried to downplay it, to be honest.”

“Why are you suddenly acting like he’s some sort of savior?” said Catalina.

She didn’t know why she was trying to speak so badly of Sebastian, knowing full well that she was hopelessly attracted to him, but she was feeling self-destructive in the moment.

“In this case, he did save your ass. And don’t forget, he’s ridiculously good looking.”

“He’s just OK,” said Catalina.

Why had she said that? It was immature, and Sofia would pick up on it.

“Really?”

Catalina shrugged. She was such a liar, and her sister knew it.

“Oh, come on, Cata,” said Sofia. “It is still just as obvious to me as when I first said it- you have a huge crush on him. Don’t try to deny it.”

Catalina stared at her sister. She’d chalked up their first exchange about this so-called crush on Sebastian to an example of Sofia’s general cluelessness. Sofia had the luxury of not knowing what it was like to lose a spouse, so a little insensitivity about such a loss might be expected. But now, mentioning Catalina’s harmless and unintentional attraction, to an objectively handsome man, twice in as many weeks? This spoke of something else entirely, and Catalina didn’t like it. Sofia had certainly tried while Alejandro was alive, but since his death, Catalina had noticed a few things her sister had said that betrayed the fact that perhaps Sofia agreed with her parents and some of their friends more than she let on. Catalina had suspected it, but she hadn’t wanted to ruin her relationship with her sister. And what it had meant was that she had no one to discuss any of the issues she’d had with Alejandro with. She’d had to pretend that everything had been perfect, to spare herself the *I told you so*.

“Come on,” said Sofia. “Can I introduce you to these people?”

“Thank you for everything you do for me. I’m sorry I accused you,” Catalina said, slightly mollified.

“It’s okay but try to trust me a little bit more than that.”

“I promise,” said Catalina. “By the way, where’s Federico tonight?”

“You know how it is,” said Sofia, evasively. “He’s been busy.”

She brought Catalina back to the group. Two of the people, George and Camilla, were apparently big collectors of Mexican art and interested in the large Angela Gomez painting. Another couple seemed to view art openings as entertainment rather than investment, but they promised to talk about her gallery to friends.

“Oh, there's the ambassador,” said Sofia, looking towards the door.

Carolina whipped her head around and saw Eduardo making a beeline towards her, not even pretending to look at the art. She realized she hadn't yet nominated another gallery to participate in Art Basel with her yet, but as of tonight, she knew she had her candidate. She would nominate Sebastian, despite the fact that she still felt competitive with him. Despite the fact that she felt conflicted about him. This was the way she would thank him for everything he had done for her.

“Mr. Ambassador,” she stammered as Eduardo came closer. She didn't like the predatory, hungry look in his eye.

“You look beautiful tonight. Congratulations,” he said. “But I thought I would have a message from you about your recommendation for the other gallerist for the booth by now.”

“Yes, sorry, I have one for you,” said Catalina, taken aback.

She couldn't believe the ambassador was chiding her in public like a child, at her own gallery opening, no less.

“Too late. I've already found one myself,” he said.

“Oh?”

Catalina's face fell. Her hesitation had ruined her opportunity to thank Sebastian, and now she would be paired with another gallerist, one she might not get along with.

“Yes,” said Eduardo. “Sebastian Espinoza. I just came from his gallery and offered him the spot.”

“Oh,” said Catalina. “Good choice.”

Should she tell him that she had been about to recommend the same person? No, she decided. Better to leave it alone.

Chapter 23

As she scanned the new names on her mailing list, Catalina replayed all the details of the night before- despite all the setbacks and her parents showing up, it really had been a successful evening. She had sold the majority of the paintings straight out of the gate. Journalists had fawned over her art. And this morning, the power had mysteriously been turned back on. Now, she just needed to find a good way to thank Sebastian for all his help.

As if on cue, she heard a knock at the door. A peek at her newly installed security camera told her that it was indeed her dashing neighbor. She smoothed down her hair, making sure that her two braids draped neatly over her shoulders, patted down her embroidered silk dress with a deep v-neck, and hurried to open the door. What was he doing here? She wondered. In any case, his presence made the task of thanking him that much easier. No premeditation and agonizing over a text or thinking up an appropriate gesture. Thanking him in person would be a good start. And then she would figure out whether that was sufficient.

“*Hola*,” she said as she threw the door open.

As he greeted her in return, Sebastian gave her a subtle look up and down that told her that he seemed to appreciate what he was seeing. She didn't know why she cared about his opinion of her outfit. There was to be a working relationship, and despite all his help, she still had zero trust in him or in his family. But the least she could do was be civil. After all, they were going to be partnering up at Art Basel, and it would make things that much easier.

“I wanted to thank you for everything you did yesterday,” Catalina began, but she realized that Sebastian was speaking at the same time.

“I'm sorry, what did you say?”

He smiled.

“No need to thank me. And I believe that I should thank you. Eduardo told me that you recommended me as a partnering gallery for his show in Miami. Why me?”

Catalina froze. Eduardo had told Sebastian *she* had nominated him? Why did he give her the credit for his decision? She decided to play it safe and give a vague answer.

“I think the work we show is wildly different, but complementary, so we can represent very different points of view.”

“I agree,” said Sebastian. “I have to admit that I at first turned him down- I thought it might be difficult to go from an opening to travel so quickly, until he explained that you would be participating as well, and that you were the one who had nominated me. I thought it wouldn't be very neighborly of me to leave you high and dry in Miami.”

Oh, so that explains it, thought Catalina. And now that he mentioned it, she realized what sort of a situation she was putting herself in, being in Miami, essentially alone, within reach of Eduardo, who had made it quite clear that his intentions towards her were far from innocent. Not that she could count on Sebastian to protect her against Eduardo. But for some reason, having him there was making her feel better.

“We should discuss our strategy for which works we plan on sending. It's coming upon us quite soon.”

“Yes. I'm surprised Eduardo didn't organize the details earlier. Not to look a gift horse in the mouth, of course,” said Catalina.

“This does add complication to my life, since I'll be participating in ZONAMACO this winter. Are you planning on that one?”

“I wasn't sure of the timing of the opening of the gallery, so I didn't get a chance to sign up,” Catalina fibbed.

"I'm sure I could speak to the organizers to..."

"No, please, don't worry about it," said Catalina, thinking about the cost of entry. "I'll do it next year."

She did a quick calculation in her mind as to how many paintings she needed to sell to stay afloat until then. She'd perhaps been too optimistic when she'd decided that she was ready to open the gallery with her meager savings. Unexpected expenses abounded. And though her show had done well, she had begun to realize that it wasn't so easy to sell art. But she would persevere. She had to. She had no choice.

"We had a nice turnout last night, didn't we?" Sebastian observed. "Not too shabby for two beginners."

She appreciated how he was lumping himself in with her, but the truth was, he was a businessman who had launched many ventures. And he, at least, didn't have the romantic ideals about the art world that tripped him up and made him forget the bottom line.

"I think that for me, this is going to be a crash course in business," Catalina admitted. "You'll do great," said Sebastian. "I'm impressed by what I've seen so far."

Catalina blushed.

"Is there any way we can meet after the workday today- to start discussing how we want this to work?" Sebastian asked, making her heart flutter in a way she didn't fully appreciate.

"Oh. That would have been great. But my sister is taking me out after work."

Sofia had teased some sort of surprise that morning, probably to show Catalina she fostered no ill will towards her for accusing her of inviting their parents.

"But I could meet you after," Catalina said, before she could change her mind. "Sofia was talking about dinner with her husband, but I would gladly skip that and meet you instead."

"OK," said Sebastian.

She noticed him making a funny expression, like he was trying to repress a smile, but she couldn't make sense of it. She decided that she was paying far too much attention to his face, until she realized that she had basically asked him out to dinner. She struggled to keep from blushing.

"Sure. We can do dinner," he grinned. "Shall we meet someplace, or should I pick you up at the gallery? Where are you going with your sister?"

"I wish I knew. She's picking me up," said Catalina. "Should I text you when we're wrapping up, and we can figure out where to meet?"

"Por supuesto."

As Sebastian left the gallery, Catalina's eyes lingered on his fine form, and the way his shirt tucked into his trousers, highlighting a slim waist and broad shoulders. *Stop it*, she told herself, feeling intensely guilty. She was supposed to be a grieving widow, and here she was salivating over some near stranger.

The rest of the day went by in a blur. Selling the large Angela Gomez painting last night, as well as the majority of the other pieces, had been great, but now she was going to have to get more works for Art Basel. She didn't have time to gather paintings from all over the country. She was going to have to focus on hyper local Mexico City artists. She had decided that she wanted something a bit edgier. She needed to make a statement, to garner more attention. It wasn't just about pretty art, it was about art that said something, that made you feel something. Art that got noticed, not only by the public, but by the press, and by art investors. Art wasn't about what matched your sofa. Though she had to admit that it helped if it did work in people's decor. She reached out to her stable of artists and managed to arrange for them to bring potential works by the next day for final selection.

Maria came by around lunchtime with a few street tacos, which they scarfed down quickly, lest they get interrupted by a potential customer. A few people had mentioned during the show that they would be back, that they might decide to buy something from her catalogue once they had measured their wall, or asked their husband or their decorator, but so far, no one had called or come in. It was early yet, but still, she was freaking out about it just a little. Maria gently suggested that it might be time to consider her Instagram strategy. It was true- Catalina had not been active enough on social media leading up to the show, and she needed to redress the situation.

Chapter 24

After Maria left, Catalina went straight to Instagram to stalk Sebastian's account, which had thousands of followers and high engagement. Of course. He had included a few photos of himself throughout his slick feed, which didn't hurt. But she was being unfair. His real strategy lay in posting regularly and engaging with other accounts, something she could have been doing this whole time, but somehow had lied to herself about, deciding that it would be disingenuous to post before the gallery was open, which was ridiculous. She was feeling pretty down on herself by the time Sofia texted her to warn her of her arrival.

Sofia: *Coming down the street. We'll do a drive by to sweep the area and then pick you up on the second go round.*

Catalina rolled her eyes. Why did Sofia fear so much for her safety, when, if she only called less attention to herself, she could have a normal life, one with much more freedom?

What she wanted to write was, *Guess what? I didn't check my security camera once today. I walked to work instead of driving. I ate street tacos.*

But this was a little bit malicious. And besides, Sofia barely knew what she was missing by never walking through regular neighborhoods. Poor Sofia never got to wander into a random art gallery without her security detail, didn't get to stop and enjoy a drink at the corner bar, couldn't decide to pop into a clothing store just because it looked fun. Everything was always orchestrated, planned and decided. Catalina had never dared ask her sister if this was her husband's edict or her own, but she thought that the longer Sofia spent acting like she was in danger, the scarier life would become.

Catalina: *While you drive around in circles, I suppose I might ask you, what are we doing? What's the surprise?*

Sofia: *Since you're going to be at Art Basel, I thought you needed some new outfits.*

Catalina groaned. *Ay, no.* Saying the sisters had radically different styles was an understatement. She could respond that she had everything she needed already, and believe it, but Sofia wouldn't agree. And she couldn't use the excuse that she couldn't afford new outfits. She knew Sofia would insist on treating. Sure enough, her next message came through.

Sofia: *You're not allowed to say no.*

No kidding. Her sister was incredibly bossy. She'd never been able to say anything to her. Certainly not *no*.

Catalina looked around the gallery, making sure the lights were off, that no ghosts lurked in the corners, and that nothing else was amiss. She set the alarm and stepped into the street, locking the door carefully behind her. Her sister's paranoia was contagious. By the time Catalina turned around from locking the door, one of her sister's bodyguards was at her side, making a show of trying to hustle her into the armored SUV. Catalina raised her eyebrows at him.

"Hola, Juan, how are you?"

"Bien," said Juan.

His responses were always monosyllabic, as if speaking would break his concentration and allow some miscreant access to his clients. He opened the door, and Catalina clambered into the SUV, leaning over to kiss her sister on the cheek. Sofia was seated in regal splendor, not a single blonde hair out of place, her nails gleaming like candied almonds. She was dressed in a snow-white shift dress and high heeled shoes. This was why she needed to be shuttled about in luxury SUVs. A girl of her extreme purity couldn't run the risk of being contaminated by a single particle of dirt from the street or a skin cell or some other effluvium from a local peasant, thought Catalina, uncharitably.

"I'm so excited you could join me," said Sofia.

"As if I had a choice."

Catalina winced. She sounded like an ungrateful brat. She gave her sister a contrite smile and squeezed her hand.

"I've set up three appointments for us, with margaritas at each one. And you're joining us after, for dinner."

"Oh. Sorry- I can't do dinner. I have a business meeting."

Sofia lifted her eyebrows.

"Business meeting? You've never had business meetings before."

"Speak for yourself," said Catalina.

Sofia had never worked, despite having earned an MBA at Harvard. This was possibly why she ran her household like a corporation.

"Well, you never had business meetings at night before."

"That's not true either. What time are you setting me loose?"

"You tell me- you're the one with the *business meeting*," said Sofia. "I suppose that takes priority."

"Of course not. I told him my first plan is with you, and that I would tell him..."

"Him?" said Sofia, lifting her eyebrows. "Is your meeting with Ambassador Eduardo Smith?"

"God, no!" said Catalina.

"Good," Sofia responded. "So...Why don't you tell *him*...that he can meet you for your *business meeting* in Polanco at eight o'clock?"

"OK."

"I hope this *business meeting* is going to be in an appropriately businessy restaurant," said Sofia, doing a terrible job of acting like she wasn't trying to see Catalina's phone.

"Who says it'll be at a restaurant," said Catalina, even though she had literally accidentally asked Sebastian out to dinner. "It could just be a business drink."

"Yeah, right. Not at 8pm," said Sofia. "Unless he's cheap."

"Right," Catalina.

She finally decided not to be subtle about hiding her phone's screen from her sister as she tapped out a message.

Catalina: *Somewhere in Polanco, 8 p.m.?*

The response came almost instantly.

Sebastian: *Pujol, 8 p.m. See you there.*

Catalina sat up ramrod straight. Pujol? How in the world did he get a last-minute table there? Maybe he had a standing reservation. Many of the wealthy businessmen did. But Pujol was known as an omakase-style place, with an eye-wateringly high price. Well, if he had suggested it, he'd better be paying, but that was awkward.

"Looks like you got a response already. Did *he* tell you where you're meeting?" Asked Sofia.

"Pujol," said Catalina, after a brief hesitation. She knew better than to try to withhold information like that from her sister.

"Pujol? Wait a second." Sofia narrowed her eyes. "Who are you meeting?"

Catalina just looked back at her, unblinking, trying not to give anything away.

"Oh my God," said Sofia. "Let me guess. Sebastian Espinoza?"

Catalina nodded, a flush creeping all the way to her ears.

"I heard a rumor that Sebastian Espinoza's art gallery is participating in Art Basel with yours, but I thought that, if that were the case, you would have told me, but... it's true?"

Catalina nodded again.

“We’ll get to the fact that you’re going to Miami with Sebastian Espinoza later, madam, but for now, let’s address the Pujol thing. Are you sure it’s not a date? And you certainly can’t wear that,” said Sofia.

She gestured disdainfully at her sister’s outfit.

“It’s not a date. And why not? I look fine,” said Catalina.

“You look like a *chola* from the village.”

“Wow, that’s offensive, Sofia. You sound like Papa. Also, *cholitas* are more of an urban phenomenon, and an American one, at that, so that shows how much you know.”

Now, Catalina’s relatively good mood had officially evaporated. She was sure that many people in their Eurocentric social circle commented on how the sisters couldn’t be more different- one, that would be Sofia, dressed like a polished, elegant socialite, and the other one, in an artsy style that, granted, skewed more *Chilanga*, not that there was anything wrong with that. She could tell by the way they decreed her outfits *so unique* that they didn’t quite understand. And she knew which one of these two styles Sebastian must have liked better, too. Too bad for him.

“It’s too late now,” she snapped.

“No, *tonta*, it’s not. We’ll just shop for an outfit for this, as well. And by the way, I’m not saying anything bad about your style. You looked amazing the other night, at the embassy. And you looked gorgeous at your opening. You’re just dressed far too casually for Pujol.”

Catalina was silent. Resistance was futile. She shuddered to imagine what kind of get-up her sister would insist on.

“Don’t worry, said Sofia. I’ll help you to pick out things that are in your style, just a little bit ... better.”

For the rest of the ride, they caught up on Sofia’s perfect children and what they were up to, as well as her sister and Federico’s busy social schedule. That evening, they were due to meet up with a few visiting businessmen from abroad, and Catalina was doubly pleased that she’d had an excuse not to join in. These sorts of evenings could be tedious, and her sister didn’t truly need her there. She just wanted her for backup in case things turned boring, but really Sofia was able to make small talk with anyone. She could probably even charm the golden statue of *El Angel de la Independencia* on the Paseo de la Reforma into cracking a smile, if she really set her mind to it.

Of course, they were going to Polanco. There was no other neighborhood, outside of her own gated community and a few of the other *Lomas*, that her sister frequented, unless it was for some appropriately high-end exception or, more recently, a rooftop sound bath in Coyoacan that she had deemed *muy bohemio*.

“Thanks for picking me up. You didn’t have to,” said Catalina. “You went well out of your way.”

“Oh, anything for my little sister. Besides, the kids were driving me crazy. I needed to get out of the house, and this way we get to spend more time together.”

“Are you guys staying around town this weekend, or are you heading to San Miguel?” Catalina asked.

“Not sure,” said Sofia. “Federico’s been very stressed lately. He might have some things in town this weekend, and the rest of us are at his mercy. It’ll be annoying if we don’t go. I had planned a cocktail party for Saturday evening, with the neighbors. But you know how it is.”

No, Catalina did not know exactly how it was, but she nodded sagely.

“Would you and the kids consider going on your own?”

“What?” asked Sofia, as if this was the most preposterous notion.

“With a nanny, of course,” said Catalina.

“Federico wants us with him. He doesn't get to see the kids very much during the week and wants to enjoy them on the weekend. And if he were to go out of town, I would go to Merida. It's more secure.”

That was on Fredo, if he didn't see the kids during the week, thought Catalina, and also if he had some *things* to do over the weekend, he would hardly be seeing the children, would he? But in any case, she decided to stay silent.

Now, Sofia caught Catalina up on her Mahjong league, her golf game, and her tennis. She was also debating the hot button subject du jour: whether she should adopt pickleball or padel. Catalina could think of nothing more boring, but she smiled indulgently.

Chapter 25

They finally arrived in front of the first boutique and waited as the SUV halted and the bodyguard emerged to ferry them out into the street and into the store. As she looked at the shop's vitrine, Catalina was pleasantly surprised. She knew of this designer. She created interesting knits in bright colors that garnered her international attention and clients from all over the world. Her things were generally more form fitting than Catalina liked, but she knew she could potentially find something she wouldn't feel completely uncomfortable in, and the pieces would be easy to pack. She couldn't imagine her sister wearing any of these garments, though she did remember one coat she had bought out of a feeling of obligation, but rarely wore.

Knowing Sofia, she would have had the manager close the shop so they could have a private shopping experience. And as they were ushered in, she realized that her supposition was correct. A tray with a bottle of champagne and two glasses stood at the register- so much for Margaritas- and a little platter of canapés was on the low table that anchored a small seating area near the fitting rooms.

"Those look yummy," said Catalina.

"You're lucky you can eat anything you want," Sofia said, rolling her eyes.

Catalina scoffed. Of the two sisters, she was by far the curvier one, but her sister was constantly exercising and dieting to try to fit into the designer clothing she so worshiped. This was not something Catalina had the time or inclination for, and she chose her garments accordingly.

"Lovely to see you," said the manager of the shop.

After pleasantries were exchanged and a flute of champagne downed, the saleswoman got down to business.

"I've pulled a few things that I thought would be appropriate for your sister," the manager said to Sofia, who had clearly orchestrated this from afar. Catalina wondered what exactly she had said.

"Art Basel, how exciting," the woman said to Catalina. "You're going to want something artistic, but that commands attention and respect, I think."

"Okay," said Catalina, shrugging her shoulders, even though that was pretty obvious.

"She's also got a so-called business meeting this evening," said Sofia, "and she can't very well show up wearing that."

"She looks lovely," said the saleswoman diplomatically.

"Thank you," said Catalina, raising her eyebrows in Sofia's direction.

"So, how many nights will you be at Art Basel?"

"Five, I believe."

"All right, so five daytime outfits, five evening outfits, for drinks, dinner meetings..."

"I'm sure there will be some downtime," Catalina said. She didn't want Sofia to feel pressured into paying for ten outfits.

"And her dinner meeting tonight is at Pujol. With Sebastian Espinosa," said Sofia.

Catalina glared at her, baring her teeth and hissing like Itzpapalotl, which only made her sister laugh.

"*Eres tan afortunada*," said the saleswoman. "Pujol, and Sebastian Espinosa, no less- he's very handsome."

"He's a ..." Catalina started to say, but Sofia quieted her with a furious glance.

"Excuse me," Sofia said to the saleswoman, and dragged Catalina across the room by her arm.

"Ow! What's that for?"

"Listen. The whole city is talking about how you nominated Sebastian to share a booth with you. And some people noticed how he helped you with your electricity the night of the show."

“Who is spreading these rumors?” Catalina spat, blanching. “Do you think it’s him?”

“They’re not rumors, they’re the truth. And I doubt he’s behind the gossip,” said Sofia. “I think people are rooting for you...as a couple.”

Catalina was apoplectic.

“As a *what*?”

“You heard me. And if I were you, I wouldn’t do anything to contradict that. It’s the best marketing campaign for your gallery you could possibly come up with.”

The sisters stared each other down. Catalina’s mind was racing. Her sister had a point. She didn’t need to do anything, exactly. Just not deny it. Was that so hard? And here was the thing: the thoughts she was having about Sebastian were more and more intrusive. She was finding it harder and harder to deny that she was attracted to him. And she hated herself for it.

“Ladies,” said the saleswoman, “can we just try on some clothes? This is supposed to be a fun time.”

“Yes,” said Catalina, “Can we please?”

“Since she’s meeting with the handsome Mr. Espinoza tonight,” Sofia smiled sweetly, “why don’t we try on some sexy dresses first?”

“I have picked something that could work well for a business dinner...” the saleswoman winked at Catalina, “or for an evening at Art Basel. Would you like to see?”

“Yes, please,” said Catalina primly.

She followed the saleswoman to the dressing room and was shown a dress on a hanger. It was made of a glimmery red knit, with seaming that gave the bodice an hourglass shape, and a loose crochet effect past mid-thigh that gave it an artistic edge and probably more than a little sex appeal. She didn’t hate it as much as she might have thought. Maybe she should trust Sofia a little more.

“I think it would look beautiful on you,” said the saleswoman. “But let me go fetch a different size. I must have misunderstood when your sister described your figure.”

Catalina looked to Sofia, lifting her eyebrows. Sofia shrugged, an innocent expression on her face.

“I told her you were voluptuous,” she said.

“That means fat,” said Catalina.

“Does not,” said Sofia.

“Ladies, please have another glass of champagne,” said the saleswoman, emerging from a storeroom with a few more garments including the dress. The look on her face said that she was conscious that she was going to be earning every penny of her commission. “Here, try this first.”

Catalina sighed and yanked the dressing room curtain closed in front of Sofia’s face.

“No peeking.”

She stripped out of her comfortable, artsy ensemble, giving the briefest embarrassed glance at her ratty underwear, and shimmied into the red dress. It didn’t look half bad, she decided, turning one way and then the other.

“Let me see,” Sofia called from outside the curtain.

“Just one second.”

She tugged at the dress and readjusted her underwear. That was a little better. She double checked her reflection again and stepped out.

“*Guapisima*,” Sofia gasped.

At least that sounded sincere. For all the competition and all the unsaid between the sisters, there was real love there, and Sofia was firmly in Catalina’s corner when it mattered.

“You think?” asked Catalina, softening.

“You look absolutely amazing. Everyone's going to fall in love with you. I don't think you should wear this to your dinner with Sebastian. You look far too sexy.”

“You're being too flattering now,” said Catalina. “Somewhere in the middle, please.”

“I agree with her,” said the saleswoman, “though I do think that, in the case of the handsome Mr. Espinosa, I would wear this just to see him sweat.”

Wow, someone's a fan, Catalina thought. She was actually pleased to hear the saleswoman talk this way, because at this point, the more people expressed that he was hot, the less guilty she felt for being attracted to him.

“All right, that one is a definite yes. Now, I have some other things for you to try on, too,” said the saleswoman.

She brought out a tightly knit apple green dress with a scoop neck top and a fuller skirt. This was something that Catalina felt was more on brand for her, with its structured, more modest shape, even though, once she tried it on, she realized that the top was lower cut than she'd thought. It highlighted her assets in a way she didn't frequently choose to do. But Miami was an edgier, more sensual place, and it would be appropriate for most events, especially when topped with a jacket.

The next piece was a silk trouser suit with wide pants in an extravagant orchid and yellow print and a matching blazer. Again, this was something that Catalina couldn't imagine wearing on a day-to-day basis, but it did look interesting. She would have to wear high heels with it, because the trousers were at least two inches too long for her. She knew that Sofia would not consider this to be a problem, but she couldn't imagine walking around a large convention center, teetering on six-inch heels.

“What am I supposed to wear under the blazer?” Catalina asked.

“Nothing,” said the saleswoman and her sister in unison.

“You know that's not happening,” said Catalina. “Would you wear something like this?”

“Federico would kill me.”

“Yeah, well I would kill me if I wore that to a business event. Because let's not forget, that's what Art Basel is for me. I'm not just going there for the party like your friends do.”

“How about this?” Asked the saleswoman.

She presented the sisters with a lilac satin skirt with a high waist that flared out to mid-calf, which she had paired with a green satin bra top and a sheer black off the shoulder batwing overshirt.

“Absolutely not,” said the sisters in unison, finally agreeing on something.

“We'll take the red dress, and the green one,” said Sofia. “Cata, why don't you just wear the red one out of the store?”

“All right,” said Catalina.

She returned to the fitting room and changed.

“I can see your *matapasiones*,” said her sister when she emerged.

“You're ridiculous,” said Catalina.

“I'm not. You've got visible granny panty line. It ruins the effect.”

“Fine.”

Catalina bent over and peeled off her underwear right in front of her sister, relishing her shocked expression, and stuffed it into the shopping bag that had been prepared by the sales girl.

“You happy now?”

“Very,” said Sofia, smiling wickedly. “But nothing compared to what the handsome Mr....”

“Don't say it,” Catalina warned.

They bade goodbye to the saleswoman and met up with the bodyguard on the sidewalk. Catalina hadn't realized that he had been waiting for them outside the whole time. What a waste of resources. But then again, what else did the man have to do? The car was nowhere in sight, which told her that their next destination was probably just a few storefronts down. Accompanied by the bodyguard, they made their way down the sidewalk, trying not to look at the local people giving the menacing bodyguard a wide berth as they passed by, and ignoring the curious tourists who pointed in their direction.

"You know that you really are calling attention to yourself by having so much security," Catalina couldn't help pointing out.

Sofia shrugged. She gestured towards a glass fronted shop with colorful clothing in the window. Catalina had noticed advertisements for this designer in a magazine she'd picked up the other day, and though she hadn't hated the looks, she had skipped past them quickly, knowing that she would never be able to afford any of these garments. But of course, now that she was with her sister, things were different.

Again, as soon as they entered, Catalina noticed a tray with champagne glasses and some little chips on a table in a little boudoir-like area, no doubt originally designed for bored husbands to hang out in while their wives shopped.

"Hello, ladies!" Said an elegant, slim brunette wearing a tailored black suit. "I'm Estrella Lopez, the store manager. It's so nice to meet you, Miss Cervantes."

"Mrs. Ruiz."

"Ah. Sorry," the woman mumbled, glancing at Sofia in confusion. Sofia did not react beyond taking a sip of champagne, so the woman soldiered on. "I see you're someone who loves color," she observed.

"Oh, this," said Catalina, "this is brand new."

"Yes, I know- I recognize it," said the saleswoman. "From just a few doors down. It looks like it was made for you."

"But I do love color," said Catalina.

"Good. Your sister has told me a little something about your needs, and so I preselected a few things, and I believe I will add a few pieces now that I see you in person. You do have a darling figure and dramatic coloring. I wasn't expecting it."

"The figure, or the coloring?" Catalina almost asked, but she knew that anyone who met her sister first was bound to be surprised by how different they were. She and Sofia clinked their glasses together as they waited for the saleswoman to gather more pieces in the fitting room.

"All right, I think I'm ready for you. I've organized the looks from daytime to nighttime. I have a really fun daytime look I think you might enjoy. Try that on first. It's the coral one."

"All right," said Catalina obediently.

She entered the fitting room and tried to work out the logistics of the orange jumpsuit hanging on the leftmost side of the elaborately wallpapered fitting room. It was a beautiful piece, but the straps were beyond confusing. As she wrestled with them, she cursed silently at the droplets of sweat starting to gather on her back. Once she had it on, or at least thought she had it on properly, she considered herself in the small mirror in the fitting room. It did look lovely, elegant, flowy, but it wasn't her.

"Show me!" she heard Sofia bellowing from outside.

"I don't love it," she warned.

"I'll be the judge of that," said Sofia.

Catalina stepped out of the fitting room.

"You look gorgeous," the saleswoman decreed.

“No, Catalina is right. I don't like it,” said Sofia, categorically.

The next piece was a bubblegum pink romper, shorter than anything Catalina was used to wearing, with a keyhole opening at the back. She almost refused to try it on but knew her sister wouldn't let her get away with that. Once it was on, she considered herself in the mirror, noting how the scalloped edges and the darts on the garment were in fact very flattering. It wasn't something she could wear in the evening, but for daytime, with the right pair of wedge heels, it could be a charming piece. She stepped out of the fitting room.

“What do you think?”

“You look like you're 12,” said Sofia.

“I liked it,” Catalina pouted.

Now the saleswoman piped up.

“I like it, too. I think it's all in the styling,” she said. “Look, what if she undid her braids, wore her hair down, added some sophisticated jewelry, and a pair of heels? Wait one moment.”

“I'll undo your braids,” Sofia volunteered, and Estrella set off to fetch a pair of heels from one of the shelves.

As Sofia uncoiled her sister's hair, Catalina could not help but be transported back to when her mother used to do this for her. She took a deep, shaky breath. When the saleswoman presented her the shoes, Catalina slipped them on and now, the look was indeed transformed. Catalina flipped her dark hair over one shoulder, cocked a hip, and struck a pose, channeling her sister. Sofia finally nodded.

“Yes, okay, I see, that does work, but you have to style it that way, promise me.”

“Fine.” Catalina rolled her eyes.

“The next piece I want you to try on is for evening,” said the salesgirl. “It's the copper satin one.”

Catalina had noticed that one on the hanger as soon as she'd entered the fitting room and had almost gasped as she'd noticed the silky fabric, glimmering like copper flames. She'd never seen anything so fine. She was almost afraid to put it on. It was so delicate, like gossamer, with thin straps and a bias-cut shape that somehow draped over her perfectly, especially now that she did not have underwear on. Her bra was messing with the effect. She removed it. The shoes the saleswoman had selected for the romper didn't quite work with this dress, but with a pair of more delicate sandals, it could be magical. She stepped out of the dressing room on her tiptoes. Sofia gasped.

“Oh my god, you're a vision,” she said. “If you had agreed to come out with us tonight wearing that, I would have you married off instantly.”

“I don't want to be married off,” Catalina protested.

“Do you have some shoes for this one?” asked Sofia. “This is a must. We're buying this for sure.”

“Yes, I have some. Let me get them.”

Catalina sat carefully, so as not to pull the fabric, and slid on the strappy sandals. She pirouetted in front of the mirror, self-conscious, now.

“What kind of bra do I wear with this?” She asked.

“You don't,” said Sofia.

“I agree, unfortunately,” said the saleswoman, “but you don't need one. You look beautiful. This is your dress for whatever the most formal evening of the week is to be. You'll blow them all away.”

Catalina took one last look at herself in the mirror.

“All right,” said Sofia, checking her watch. “We've got one more stop to go before your so-called business meeting.”

Catalina paused. She hadn't thought about that in at least a few minutes. But now, her mind raced. How would it go? What would it be like? Especially at a place like Pujol. That was strangely fancy and romantic for a business meeting between two colleagues. But maybe Sebastian simply liked going to Pujol, and it was just convenient for them to be there, because he had no one else to go to dinner with. That was a possibility, but the idea that someone like him had no one to go to dinner with just sounded implausible. She poured herself back into the red dress. It really was comfortable, even though it was ridiculously sexy.

“Put on the romper heels with it,” her sister called into the fitting room.

“All right,” said Catalina.

Now that she had on higher heels, the dress skewed more provocative than it had earlier. Was she really going to wear this to their dinner? It wasn't technically a super fancy dress, she reasoned, and Pujol called for something a little bit special. Sofia had been right- she couldn't very well wear what she'd had on in the gallery. Strange to think that Sebastian hadn't considered that. Or maybe he was just a typical selfish man, and he hadn't given a second thought to her outfit, secure in the knowledge that he, at least, was dressed appropriately. Or the more likely but devastating scenario: since he had a gorgeous girlfriend already, he simply didn't care what Catalina looked like.

Her sister got her rung up, and they spilled back onto the street, back into the care of the bodyguard, and headed a few more doors down. This boutique was even more elegant than the other two, which was saying a lot, considering that everything in Polanco was fancy. But the garments were more artistic than in the other two places, like a sublimated form of what Catalina generally liked to wear. In this shop, sophistication and artistry went hand in hand. Catalina recognized some traditional motifs in the embroidery and beading on some of the pieces, including a beautiful belt that could be tied in several different ways, like an obi, or even worn as a shawl on either side of one's neck.

“That's beautiful,” Catalina sighed. “I love it.”

“You would. It's a little artsy for my taste, but it's exactly your style. I'll get it for you,” said Sofia. “Let's skip the champagne at this one and just get straight to the shopping. It's getting late, and you still need a few basic pieces. I'm glad we saved this place for last. I think you're going to find your everyday things here, and maybe a good cocktail outfit.”

“Okay,” said Catalina, intimidated by the cost.

These were at a price point that only her mother would have bought for her, back in the day. The sisters had both grown up with a family credit card, but with the understanding that parental permission had to be granted for more extravagant items. Of the two sisters, Sofia had always been the one to push it more. And now, despite not making her own money, Sofia had always been generous with spending her husband's cash on Catalina, but this was going above and beyond.

The salesgirl at this boutique was a young employee- eager to please, but probably not as knowledgeable as the previous two women. No matter, Catalina had a good idea of what she was looking for, now, and her sister certainly had her opinions, as well.

“Did someone set up a dressing room for us with the sorts of pieces I described on the phone?”

“Yes,” said the young girl, looking intimidated. “I did it myself.”

Sofia rolled her eyes at Catalina, but the first piece Catalina laid her eyes on was a black halter dress with a structured tulip shaped skirt. She slipped it on, and the salesgirl helped her to zip it up. Catalina stepped out and in front of a larger mirror. The somewhat rigid construction of the dress made her feel like a piece of modern art. It wasn't necessarily sexy, and it was deceptively simple, but it was incredibly elegant, and it showed off her smooth shoulders and shapely arms.

“Absolutely not my style,” said Sofia, “but I can see that you love it. And you do look great in it. That’s a yes.”

“Good,” said Catalina.

“Next,” Sofia decreed.

“Wait,” said the salesgirl, shyly. “I want to show you how you can style it.”

She wrapped the embroidered obi belt in four different ways that transformed the garment, and also discussed how the tie of the halter could be wrapped around to make it less revealing and more casual.

“You’re good,” Catalina observed.

“Thank you. I’m studying to be a stylist,” said the girl.

Catalina tried on everything else in a blur, the sisters finally settling on a bizarre but strangely flattering mustard yellow asymmetrical sleeveless number with a cowl neck, a turquoise and red floral print wrap dress with a puffed short sleeve that could work for day or night, a petrol blue silk jersey maxi dress with a plunging neckline and long sleeves that was deceptively sexy, and a spaghetti strapped orange crepe jumpsuit that could work for night or day, and that could be paired with a fun Oaxacan *otonil* bolero jacket that Catalina loved and Sofia hated, but finally caved on, because it could be paired with half the things they were getting.

“We did it,” said Sofia, with the same satisfaction as if they had just solved world hunger.

“Thank you so much for all of this,” said Catalina. “It was far too generous, but very much appreciated.”

“The least I could do,” said Sofia. “Time for your business meeting.”

Again, she stressed the word business in a way Catalina didn’t like, but her sister couldn’t help it, could she?

“I’ll get settled up. Go ahead, put on the red dress again.”

By now, the garment felt less like a costume, and more like it was something that she’d had in her closet. Again, she was self-conscious that she had no underwear on, but there was no real choice in the matter. The new shoes were higher than anything she’d worn in recent memory, and she felt a slight twinge in her injured ankle, but thankfully, the restaurant was just across the street.

“Wait, what about your handbag?” Asked Sofia when she emerged from the fitting room.

“The one I have is fine,” said Catalina.

“That’s not a handbag. That’s a *mochila*. No, you need something smaller. Quickly,” she told the salesgirl. “You must have something here.”

The salesgirl shrugged.

“I’m afraid we only have this one here. It’s made by an artist.”

She gestured to a clutch sitting on a display shelf, looking like a very elegant bean made of molten metal. It was indeed an artistic object that skewed more sculpture than useful accessory, just large enough to put in one’s keys, lipstick, and telephone, provided one’s telephone was not on the large side.

“She’ll take it,” said Sofia.

“It’s one of a kind,” the salesgirl warned.

Catalina didn’t know how much the bag was, but she knew that *one of a kind* probably meant ridiculously expensive.

“And?” said Sofia, whipping out her credit card, a black Amex Centurion.

The salesgirl didn’t react at all to this. After all, in Polanco, extreme wealth was expected. But Catalina found herself realizing that Sofia was possibly mad at her husband, to be spending on her this way, and then marveling at how Federico seemed to have ramped up his earnings so significantly in the past few years. She was happy for them that they were so successful, even

though she wondered at how she and Alejandro, though so hardworking, could not have dreamed of attaining those heights. But not everything boiled down to hard work only, did it? There was also luck, timing, connections, and how much you started out with.

“Okay, darling,” said Sofia. “I’ll have the car drop you off at Pujol.”

Catalina looked across the street.

“Are you kidding me? It’s right over there.”

“You’re not going to walk across the boulevard, are you?”

Catalina scoffed at her sister’s horrified expression.

“It would take longer to drive around the block at this hour than it would for a turtle to cross the street. And I promise you, there are no kidnappers waiting to snatch me right on Polanco’s busiest street.”

Now was not the time to have a conversation about this, but at some point she needed to talk to Sofia, to find out what the hell was going on. Her sister had always been on the more cautious side, but this was ridiculous.

“Thank you so much for everything. I’ll see you before I leave.”

“*Claro*, I’m going to help you pack,” said Sofia.

“Great,” said Catalina, her lips set in a grim line. Then, registering what her expression must look like, she burst into laughter. “I love you, *hermana querida*,” she told her sister.

“I know,” said Sofia.

Catalina watched her sister as she was shepherded into the SUV. She grasped her multiple shopping bags tightly. As she teetered across the street, she heard the occupants of a pickup truck yell out, “*Mami chula!*”

Chapter 26

Catalina arrived inside the restaurant and gave Sebastian's name to the hostess, who looked her up and down. This young girl probably had a crush on Sebastian, too, and was now comparing Catalina to his supermodel girlfriend and wondering what the heck he was thinking.

"Yes, he's here. I'll have my colleague lead you to the table. Would you like me to take care of those? I can keep them in our coat check."

"Thank you," said Catalina.

She followed a restaurant employee, a young man in a dark shirt and trousers, through the modern space, towards a two-person booth. She noticed the eyes of many of the diners following her as she went. The dress wasn't *that* sexy, was it? No matter, now it was too late. She hadn't had time to braid her hair again, or rather, Sofia had not let her do it. From what she could tell of Sebastian's expression as she approached the table, he was taken aback by something- maybe surprised that she had bothered to change her clothes, though when he rose politely as she approached, she noticed that he had changed, too: into a dark, slim but still classic suit, worn with a white Oxford shirt.

"I'm glad we could do this on such short notice," he said. "Please, have a seat- is this table good?"

She nodded and wiggled into the booth, noticing that she could feel linen of the cushion against her bare skin, through the holes in the dress. She also noticed, when he sat back down, that, depending on how she angled herself, their knees would be touching.

"Nice dress," Sebastian observed.

"Thank you. My sister's secret plan was to take me shopping," said Catalina. "She's only a year older than me, but she loves to treat me as her little doll. Or rather, she doesn't trust me to dress myself properly for Miami, or even for tonight."

"You told her you were meeting me?"

She couldn't read his expression. What was the right answer to that question?

"I told her I had a business dinner here, and she deduced it was with you. Not too many other candidates for that," Catalina shrugged.

"Business dinner, huh?"

"Isn't it?"

"Anyway," said Sebastian, deftly changing the subject, "from what I've seen, you always look great."

"Thank you, but it's not to my sister's standards," said Catalina. "We don't have the same style."

"No, I can see that, and that's a good thing. Her style wouldn't suit you, and vice versa."

"Are we going to talk about fashion all night?"

Catalina winced a little at her own tone. But they weren't friends, and never would be; they might as well just get down to business. Of course, Sebastian was too polite for that.

"I'm so sorry. You're right. Before we talk about anything, we need to get you something to drink. If you want something to drink, that is."

"*Si*. What are you having?"

"Some very scientifically crafted molecular mezcal cocktail or another, full of vapor and foam," he said. "Ridiculous, but good."

"I'll have the same."

"You like mezcal, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes. It took me a while to get used to the taste of it, after drinking American Margaritas all through University. I felt positively un-Mexican. But finally, after meeting some mixologists- if

we're allowed to say that word anymore- in Los Angeles- and coming to Mexico, my taste buds have grown up, and I do quite appreciate it. I could mix you the best Margarita you've ever had, if you're interested."

Sebastian smiled.

"I would love that. Though it may be wasted on me. Up until I was 30, I was drinking Palomas like a teenage girl," he admitted.

Catalina grinned, despite herself. She could just imagine this tall, dark, handsome man sipping on a sweet, citrusy brunch drink.

"You must have gotten teased relentlessly," she said.

"Just a little."

Was that a wink? Whether it was intentional or not, she felt it right down in her nether regions. She shifted in her seat, and her knees brushed his. She jerked her leg away, hoping he hadn't noticed.

A waitress came to the table and Sebastian ordered the drink. Once she had returned with it, Catalina imagined a menu would be next. But the woman simply asked, "What would you like today, Mr. Espinoza?"

Sebastian looked over at Catalina.

"I know it's usually prix fixe, but I come here so much, I just have them bring whatever from the menu is most compelling that day, or whatever I'm in the mood for. Is that OK with you? They can even make tacos."

Despite assuming, earlier, that Sebastian would pay, now, she wasn't so sure. Less food would be better.

She nodded.

"Excellent. The usual," said Sebastian to the waitress.

Once the waitress was gone, they clinked their glasses together and got down to business.

"So, how many paintings are we sending? And are we going to have any sculptures in this show?" Sebastian asked.

Catalina appreciated that he viewed her as the lead in this. As well he should.

"I was wondering about that- I know you have quite a few 3D pieces in your gallery, but I thought- maybe that would be logistically more difficult."

She took a sip of her drink, peering up at Sebastian through her eyelashes to see how he would react.

"Well, for sure we will have at least one mosaic piece, which, granted, has difficulties of its own. It's heavy and difficult to transport, but at least it's on the flatter side," he said.

Catalina sighed. Of course, he wanted his girlfriend's art in the show. She wondered when he was going to ask if she could attend the event, too, or if he was just going to bring her without asking.

"So, you're planning on having works from all the same artists from your opening show for Miami?" Asked Catalina, glad that she'd finally decided to be an adult, and that she'd actually gone to see what he had in there, a few days before their openings. He had an extremely impressive selection, not just expensive stuff- though it was that, but good art.

"I've been re-evaluating and wondering what kind of a statement I want to make," said Sebastian. "This is important. It's not just about sales."

Catalina sat up a bit straighter, pleasantly surprised.

"Me too. I want to represent my country in its traditions, but also in its modern incarnation."

"See? We do agree on something," said Sebastian, with a grin that dared her to contradict him.

"I'm thinking of focusing on things that are colorful, graphic, mostly abstract, of course, especially if you're still going to be covering the more representational side of the equation."

"Yes, I think I will be," said Catalina, "but I may be introducing some abstractions, and yes, definitely color, as well. I wanted to have things that represent a diversity of time periods, regions and influences, but I'm having to stick to Mexico City artists due to time constraints."

"Good point. So how many pieces in all are we allotted?"

"I think 12, maximum, depending on the size."

Catalina wondered, was it more advantageous for her to have more smaller paintings, or fewer larger pieces?

"The good news is, our galleries are next to each other, so when they come to pick up, they can do it in one fell swoop. Eduardo said they could pack our art, too, but I don't trust anyone I didn't vet to do that. I have someone excellent, who I trust, who can crate up all of our pieces, if you like," said Sebastian.

"You do?" asked Catalina, surprised.

Many gallerists selfishly protected their sources for services, from shipping to hanging to photography. She'd been thinking she might ask Francis and Rodrigo but had realized that they were leaving the next day for Colombia; their yearly holiday trip. She would have had to find somebody else anyway, so she might as well accept Sebastian's offer.

"Maybe it's easier if all our crates are uniform," she agreed, downplaying how much this was helping. She didn't want him to get too smug.

There was more to discuss, of course, but now Catalina had gotten distracted by that little divot at the corner of Sebastian's mouth, and now, in the resulting silence, she realized that he had caught her staring. And what was that look in his eye?

With perfect timing, a waiter deposited two small plates on the wooden table.

"*Botana* of quail egg with caviar," he announced.

"Looks amazing. But I hope this is just an amuse bouche," Catalina observed. "I think I was hungrier than I first thought. I've been fueled by nothing but Champagne and a street taco today."

"I can't imagine your sister eating street tacos," Sebastian commented.

"Oh. No, that's not her style," Catalina said. "My friend Maria- the one you met- brought them over for lunch."

"That's a devoted friend."

"She is," said Catalina, again feeling guilty at the imbalance in her relationship with Maria. "And what's your stance on street tacos?"

"They're one of the best parts of living here," Sebastian replied. "My friends always tease me for being willing to eat at any hole in the wall. But I'm always on the search for a good *al pastor*."

"Me too," Catalina said. "Though I have to say, I'm rather excited about this meal. I've heard good things."

"You've never been to Pujol? Really?"

Catalina scoffed. There he was. The Sebastian she knew he had to be. The snob.

"You say it like it's a sign of some moral shortcoming. I've been to Contramar, in case you're about to test me on that next."

"I'm not judging you on where you choose to eat. This just seems like the kind of place your sister would have loved to take you to, the minute it opened. And as for Contramar, I actually like it better than here, because it's more simple, straightforward cooking, but I made an assumption- a correct one, I think, that your plan with your sister was probably going to be taking place on this very street, probably within a few blocks from here, maximum."

Catalina considered him. Damn. So, he was being considerate.

“We were literally right across the street,” she admitted, a little deflated.

“Ha! I knew it,” Sebastian grinned. “No offense, but I know her type.”

Catalina had no doubt he did, and that thought did not make her happy. Also, she might need to tell her sister that her predictability could be a security risk. She wondered where Sofia was eating tonight. She hadn't asked, assuming it was some private room or rooftop that had been cordoned off for their private use.

Two waiters arrived with small plates.

“Lobster tostada with nopales, lamb's head herbs, macadamia crumble, and a white salsa.”

“Wow,” said Catalina, picking up her fork. “So, tell me, Mr. Espinoza- would you consider yourself an adventurous eater?”

She couldn't begin to guess what the combination on her plate might taste like, and she was curious. And hungry.

“When I was a kid, I had such a ravenous appetite,” said Sebastian. “I used to go down the street, trying every taco, stuffing myself, using all of my pocket money, and trying to grade them. That was my excuse- that I was doing research. But, of course, by the end of the street, I couldn't remember which was which. So, the operation had to be repeated the next day.”

“It's a wonder you weren't a chubby little thing,” Catalina smiled.

“Oh, I was chubby,” said Sebastian. “Who told you I wasn't?”

“Do you do sports now?” She asked him, blushing as she realized the implication: *Do you do sports to look the way you do?*

“Some, yeah. I play tennis,” he said.

“Are you competitive?”

“In tennis? I mean, not more than average, I suppose, but I can be competitive in other things,” Sebastian smiled.

“Is the gallery your only business now?” Catalina asked.

God, she was asking him a lot of indiscreet questions.

“You don't have to answer,” she stammered.

“No, don't worry. It's a fair question,” he said. “You probably want to know how serious I am about it, to know if I'll be pulling my weight in Miami. I have a few investments, but the gallery is my main focus.”

“Oh.”

She hadn't been expecting that. Art galleries were hardly money-making machines, so this was what, a front?

“Have you been to Art Basel before?” she asked him.

“Only to party. You?”

“Same. Just once. But I didn't even party that hard.”

“Oh, what a missed opportunity for you,” he remarked. “I could tell you some stories.”

Catalina didn't know why, but she suddenly felt a little jealous. Stories? No doubt he was talking about encounters with the gorgeous models that frequented these events. Had he had some memorable evenings in charming company? She had no right to feel any sort of way. And it made no logical sense. But here she was. Jealous.

“How many times did you go?” she asked.

“I can barely remember,” he remarked. “Maybe three, over the years. They do run into each other. But it'll be exciting being an exhibitor. I can't believe Eduardo managed it. It's incredibly costly and competitive to get into Art Basel. He must have some kind of connection. But I'm not going to question it. I'm thrilled.”

“Me too,” Catalina agreed.

She felt comfortable enough with Sebastian, she noted, if you overlooked the strange feeling of attraction and shyness and jealousy she felt when she was around him. She was glad that he would be there, hopefully as an ally, especially in light of Eduardo's disturbing behavior.

"You just frowned," Sebastian said. "Is everything okay? What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," Catalina lied.

"I don't think it's nothing," he remarked. "Can I ask you a weird, probably indiscreet question? Feel free not to answer. Are you worried about Eduardo acting inappropriately towards you when we're in Miami?"

Her eyes snapped up to meet his. Was it that obvious?

"Maybe," she admitted.

"Listen, if he says or does anything or makes you feel ... you need only say the word and I'll make sure it stops."

"Thank you. But don't worry about it. I can hold my own."

She wouldn't have accepted to participate if she was truly worried about it. Which actually wasn't true. She was worried about him making advances. She was extremely concerned about what he had said about ruining a gallerist's career after they had supposedly wronged him. But she *needed* to participate. She didn't have much of a choice in the matter. And Sebastian probably saw right through her. It made her acutely uncomfortable. She shifted in her seat, refusing to meet his eye, now.

"Hey."

Sebastian reached across the table and put his hand on hers. When she tensed, he removed it. Even though his touch had felt better than she cared to admit.

"I won't say any more, but I'm here for you."

"Thanks," she responded.

Anyway, it would be fine. Eduardo wouldn't try anything in public, in front of his colleagues and constituents. And she wouldn't have to call on Sebastian to be some sort of savior.

"So back to the art. I guess we'll just have to figure out how best to integrate the works on-site," she said.

"Yes, of course. We'll find a way to display them so that everything looks good and cohesive," said Sebastian.

The next dish arrived. Grilled octopus with a potato-chorizo hash, sprinkled with a dusting of cilantro.

"Dig in," said Sebastian, nudging the plate closer to Catalina. "So, you know I'm a regular here, and that Contramar is one of my favorites in town, and I know we both like street tacos. But where do you like to go for a special occasion?"

Catalina paused. There were no special occasions anymore. When Alejandro had been alive, they saved up for birthdays and anniversaries, and carefully selected their destination, a far cry from Sebastian, who seemed to have just picked up the phone and gotten himself one of the most difficult to book tables in town, and who didn't need to worry about the obscene cost of a prix fixe menu.

"There are so many good places in this city," she responded, politely, but vaguely. "I tend to enjoy classic spots, and rooftops, but I find you can hardly go wrong, wherever you go, and I like to explore new neighborhoods when I can."

"What is your neighborhood? Does your family live around here? Your sister, your parents?"

"I live in Condesa. My sister lives in Las Lomas de Chapultepec," Catalina said. She knew that Sofia was very secretive about where she lived, but most of the wealthiest people lived in the same neighborhood, anyway. "My parents live between Polanco, Panama, and Merida."

“I know you and your sister are different, but close. Are you close to your parents?” Sebastian asked.

She glanced at him. Did he know anything about their estrangement? After all, her parents were high profile people. Surely he'd noticed that she was never photographed with them, and never spotted with them at events, not that she went to many events anymore. Had he noticed them at her gallery opening?

“Are you close to yours?” Catalina countered.

“No.”

“Why not?” Asked Catalina, which was rich, considering she didn't want to answer the very same question.

“We don't see eye to eye. Isn't that the same reason for anyone who has decided to cut ties with their family?”

“I suppose so,” said Catalina. “Can we not talk about this?”

“Of course,” said Sebastian. “I'm sorry.”

“It's no big deal.”

“Does your sister have children?” He asked.

“Yes. Three,” said Catalina. “They're sweet.”

She didn't elaborate. Again, she knew that Sofia was very private about these matters and that, even though he was just valiantly trying to make conversation, Sebastian was probably the last person she would want to know anything about her children.

“How about you? Do you have children?” She asked.

“No, not yet. I like to think there's time. What about you?”

She shook her head.

“Your sister already has three,” he pursued. “You didn't want any?”

“I did,” Catalina admitted, “but it's too late now.”

“Too late?” he asked.

She gave him a withering look that thankfully seemed to make his follow up question die in his throat.

“How do you like the octopus? It's incredible, isn't it?” He asked.

Boring, but an acceptable effort to change the subject.

Catalina realized that her decision to forgo any further relationships after Alejandro was not the way everyone else on earth would automatically choose to live their life. Just because Sebastian claimed to have known Alejandro didn't mean he had to inherently understand that Catalina's life was as good as over from now on. After all, some women, she knew, lost a husband and decided that they couldn't go on alone, and found someone else almost immediately, which didn't even mean that they had not been in love before. She pretended not to be one of those, but of course, here she was, lusting after someone that she knew was no good for her. Now, looking at Sebastian, she found herself wondering what their children would look like. Would they have blue eyes and dark hair? Would they be tall? Would they be brown of skin, like her, or a bit lighter, like him and Sofia? *Stop it*, she told herself. Sebastian noticed her troubled expression and gestured to the waiter to pour her another glass of wine. She was already starting to feel tipsy.

“I think I've had enough,” she said.

“Me too, to be honest,” he said. “I guess I'm a cheap date.”

“Oh? Am I paying?”

“Figure of speech,” he grinned. “Don't even think about it. I have an account here.”

“Oh.”

The rest of the meal passed smoothly enough, with several more artistic plates. A few times, her knees brushed against his and she blushed. She found herself watching his long, elegant fingers on the cutlery as he precisely handled his food. Noticing his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed each bite. She didn't remember watching Alejandro with such attention. With him, it had been more of a whole package kind of thing.

As the meal wound down, the conversation went back to logistics.

"We have a lot to do in the coming days," Sebastian observed. "I'll make sure that my crating people are available for us, and hopefully you'll hear from the shipping company for the pick-up. I'm glad for the opportunity to do this, but I'm sorry we don't have more time."

"Tell me about it."

But at the same time, if she'd had more time, Catalina probably would have reconsidered and would have hesitated to participate in something that was so far out of her league, not to mention putting herself in a potentially messy situation with Eduardo.

"Don't get me wrong- I'm looking forward to it, but I'm also looking forward to it being over," she said.

"Oh, yes. These events are the most fun, and the most uncomfortable part of the art business."

"Honestly, if I could just look at the paintings all day and not have to speak to a single soul, I would probably like that. Unless I'm talking about the art. I can tell you like to talk about art, too. So, what is it about abstract paintings you like so much?" Catalina asked.

"It's the possibilities. It's the interpretation. It's the energy. It's that I'm not being told what to see, necessarily. And I feel like I'm part of the equation, that it's teamwork between me and the artist. When you're not depicting something real, no one can tell you it's not good because it doesn't look like a dog or a cat or a cow or a chair. It's more like, have you seized the unseizable?"

"I like how you explained that," said Catalina. "When I was younger, I never liked abstract art so much, but I'm starting to appreciate it much more. What you said resonates. Be careful, I might start selling abstract works as well," she smiled.

"You could- I like to think that we are partners, not competitors," said Sebastian, "but a little healthy competition never hurt anyone."

He gave her a devilish grin that she felt all the way into her groin.

"Did you ever think about painting, yourself?" He asked.

"I tried. I just think it's the most amazing thing that we humans have access to materials that help us to recreate the visions and ideas we have in our heads. It's incredible that we can communicate with people on that level. The visual arts manage to hint at a deeper meaning that would take thousands of words to express," she said. "And of course, that became far too much pressure for me. I decided promoting real artists was more my speed. How about you?"

"I'm good with my hands."

A slight pause, here. Did he intend the double entendre? She gave him a look.

"No really, I'm quite handy. But I'm far better at painting a wall than a canvas, and more proficient at installing a window than at making a sculpture. But I know what I like, and I think I have decent taste, and I love to interpret art. So maybe that is my true talent. That, and business, of course. So, it felt like an art gallery was a good plan."

Catalina nodded. She hadn't expected such a considered and measured response. Sebastian had more depth than one might think.

He grinned.

"It is rather comforting, isn't it, that we've evolved to a point where we feel the need to create something beyond our base requirements. Well, some of us, at least," he said.

"It is heartening," Catalina agreed.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked.

“Sure,” said Catalina.

“I can drive you home.”

She checked her watch, looked outside to the dark street, and remembered her shopping bags.

“I wouldn't mind,” she admitted. “Is it on your way?”

She realized that, for all the talk of where she and her whole family lived, he hadn't said anything about the neighborhood he called home.

“Of course,” he responded.

She had a feeling he was lying, but was thankful for the ride, anyway. He put his warm hand on her lower back, making her shudder, and guided her to the coat check.

Fifteen minutes later, he was parked in front of her building.

“Well, here we are,” she said, awkwardly. “Thank you for the ride.”

“Thank you for tonight. I had fun.”

“Thank you. You're the one who reserved. And who paid. You shouldn't have.”

She went to open the car door.

“I wanted to. Let me open the door- and help you with your things.”

He got out of the car and opened her door. She emerged, shivering in her new dress. He went to retrieve her things from the trunk.

“Here.”

He handed her the bags, and his hand brushed against hers as she took them.

“Thanks.”

She looked up at him and met his gaze. His dark blue eyes were almost black in the glow of the street lights, but they still had the same effect as ever on her. Was he feeling as strange as she was? Impossible. She was being stupid. This had been a business meeting, no more. She realized that another thing they had not discussed that evening, probably by design, was Sebastian's gorgeous girlfriend. But then again, that was none of her business.

“Well...goodnight,” they said, in unison.

They both laughed. Awkward. He leaned forward, going in for a kiss on the cheek, she assumed, but, since she was so nervous, she must have moved in some weird way, because his lips made contact near her mouth.

“I did *not* mean to get that close to your lips,” he smiled.

“Oh, I was going to say...”

“Let me try again?”

Now, he gently put his hand behind her head, and carefully kissed her once on each cheek before pulling back, which felt infinitely hotter to her than an accidental peck on the mouth. As she turned and made her way inside, she could still feel the lingering trace of that hand, and it sent chills up and down her spine. Her skin tingled where his lips had been, and she wondered what might have happened if she'd turned her head just a little bit more, the first time. What would it have been like, to feel his mouth on hers, to tug that plump lower lip of his between her teeth, to press herself against him and run her hands under that tailored suit jacket? What would he have said, if she'd invited him up to her bed? Would he even have said yes?

Oh my God, Cata, stop. What the hell is wrong with you? She made her way up the stairs and let herself into the lonely apartment. Within moments, Itzpapalotl was purring and weaving between her feet, and Catalina picked the feline up and cried into her soft fur.

Chapter 27

Barely a week later, Catalina stood in her kitchen, putting the finishing touches on her dish before putting it in the oven. She felt better than she had in a long time. It had been an incredibly busy few days. She hadn't seen Sebastian at all, and had only texted with him once, to communicate the details of the art pickup. It was both a relief and torture. She didn't want to admit it to herself, but she craved his presence, was addicted to the tension she felt around him. Even the guilt felt deliciously excruciating. But then again, she was thankful for the relative peace his absence entailed. He was probably spending quality time with Bibi, anticipating their almost week-long separation. *Ha. Try being separated for a year*, she thought bitterly. She'd sold a couple more pieces, had selected all the works she was going to show at Art Basel, and had gotten them all packaged and shipped without incident. She'd found out this afternoon that everything had made it safely to Miami, which was a huge relief. She'd even had a drink with an old friend, given another interview, and had gotten her whole suitcase packed in record time. And, best of all, there had been no ghost sightings. She had probably been overwrought in the period around her gallery opening, she concluded, and prone to hallucinations. All would return to normal from now on. She felt confident, thanks to Sofia's generosity, that she would look great during the whole week. Though Sofia had threatened to come help her pack, she had not mentioned it again, and Catalina had thought it safer to let sleeping dogs lie. Her sister was probably busy with her family. Now, all Catalina had to do was celebrate with her best friend before her trip.

She wiped her hands on her apron and made her way to the door of her apartment, smiling to herself as she anticipated Maria's reaction to her get-up. Catalina had learned, after one too many oil-splashed debacles, that she was a bit of a mess in the kitchen, and that an apron would save her clothes from certain disaster. Over time, this had become something of a private joke between herself and her friends, and they gifted her funny or chic aprons whenever they could. At this point, Catalina's collection included the one she had on now, which was a black number shaped like a cocktail dress, complete with a flouncy hem, gifted to her by Maria. She also had a lemon-print one from the South of France, an alpine chic one from her friend Chiara's travels to Switzerland, a linen and leather one that made her feel like a high end gardener in the Cotswolds, a striped Breton style apron for seafood dinners, a Lilly Pulitzer pink and green number from her friends Penny and William, who lived in Palm Beach, and the prized piece in her collection, an apron of questionable taste level featuring a human-size version of Michelangelo's David, complete with the appendage in the anatomically correct location, which had just shown up at her house at a dinner party, and which no one had taken credit for.

Catalina threw the apartment door open and embraced her friend. Maria was lugging a small suitcase.

"Welcome," said Catalina. "Again, I'm so thankful you could do this."

"I hope you know I am risking my life with your house-succubus over there," Maria said good-naturedly, though she stuck her tongue out at Itzpapalotl, who gave her a withering look in response and went back to picking insect wings out of her claws.

"I didn't trust my sister or her husband to not throw open the doors of the house and leave the poor kitty to fend for herself. Sofia thinks she's a demon cat who would try to inhale the breaths and souls of her children."

"I can't say I think she's completely wrong," said Maria. "I'm only doing it for the Lomas de Chapultepec wildlife. I fear for every creature's life if Itzpapalotl were to be unleashed on them. Even the coyotes."

“Very funny,” said Catalina. “She’s not that bad. In fact, I have always felt that she is my protector.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but believe me, cat-sitting Satan’s spawn is a better situation than staying at my house this week.”

Maria’s great aunt was planning on visiting, and it was going to be absolute and utter chaos. Catalina smiled.

“I know you feel responsible for your mother and *abuela*, but when are you going to get your own place?”

“There’s no reason to,” said Maria. “I’m saving money this way. And well, living alone doesn’t sound like very much fun. I don’t know how you do it.”

She stopped abruptly and gave her friend a guilty look.

“I mean, I know you didn’t choose to live this way...”

“I lived alone before Alejandro,” Catalina said lightly. “I liked it, and I don’t mind it now. Of course I would rather things hadn’t turned out this way. But the cat keeps me company and I have my plants to talk to. By the way, you will speak to them, won’t you? You know, it’s good for them.”

Maria rolled her eyes.

“They don’t care about words. It’s just the CO2.”

“Way to rip the romance out of anything,” said Catalina.

It was kind of an in-joke between them, the fact that Maria couldn’t care less about romance. She claimed she had never felt romantically attracted to anyone before, and that she was not interested in it in the least, and that would have been fine- if it was actually true. Catalina hated herself for being judgmental, but she had known a true aromantic in school, and Maria wasn’t it. She suspected that her friend was just not wanting to face a different truth, and worried that she would end up completely alone, and not by choice. Even if Catalina’s theory was wrong, and Maria truly didn’t have any romantic or sexual feelings at all, one day, her mother and grandmother would be gone, and she would need something to fill her time- something more than running her shop. She needed a true passion, one that would consume her and take the place of a relationship. Or was Catalina just projecting her own desires onto her friend?

Catalina relieved her friend of her bag and jacket and led her into the living room. She handed her friend a glass with mezcal, blood orange juice, pomegranate juice, a rim of tajin, and a secret ingredient she had picked up from Pujol.

“You’re trying to bribe me to take better care of your cat, aren’t you?” Maria smiled.

“Who, me? I also made those stuffed *pasilla* chilies and the tomato rice you like.”

The women took a seat on the bottle green velvet sofa.

“*Salud.*” Maria took a sip. “Oh, that’s nice.”

She popped a few spiced peanuts into her mouth.

“Are you going to be able to see Chiara in Miami?”

“I’m sure she’s traveling as always. But I’ll reach out to her once I have my schedule. Eduardo will have us busy with events and dinners, though.”

Catalina didn’t mention that she hadn’t spoken to her boarding school friend Chiara since their argument after Alejandro’s death, something she was going to have to address at some point.

“I wonder how much you’ll need to see Sebastian Espinosa. Probably a lot. You’re sharing a booth, after all. I can’t believe Eduardo picked him, of all people.”

Catalina shrugged. She felt dishonest for not telling her friend that she had decided that she would ask Eduardo to pick Sebastian as the second gallery, too, and that Eduardo had simply beaten her to it. In any case, the end result was the same, so what did it matter?

“Well, I just think it’s a bit of bad luck,” said Maria.

“Frankly, stuck between a rock and a hard place, I think I would choose to spend more time with Sebastian than with Eduardo.”

Catalina realized she should stop saying things like that, or Maria might ask for details. Also, good thing Maria was the way she was, because there would be no bawdy joking about Sebastian’s *hard place*, which would have happened with any of her other friends.

“Really?” Asked Maria, taken aback. “I know there’s not much difference between criminals and diplomats, but it sounds like there’s something more to that statement. Do you care to explain?”

Catalina remained silent. With anybody else, she could have just made an off handed remark about Sebastian being far easier on the eyes than Eduardo. And she didn’t want to worry her friend by admitting that she didn’t feel comfortable around the ambassador.

“Are you sure this whole thing is a good idea?” Maria asked, suddenly very serious.

“It’s Art Basel,” said Catalina, “of course it’s a good idea.”

“What are you going to wear? How terrible was your shopping spree with your sister? I forgot to ask.”

“I was shocked,” Catalina admitted. “I got some things I would actually wear. I believe she understood the necessity of wearing Mexican designers, to represent our country.”

“She didn’t take you to Prada and Chanel and Dior? Her usual salespeople must have been devastated.”

“Don’t worry. It seems she’s been on a spending spree. I’m sure she bought everything in the new collections already.”

“So, I suppose nothing from my shop made the cut.”

“I beg your pardon- I can’t live without my green jumpsuit.”

“Oh good. What else are you bringing?”

Maria liked to talk about clothing almost as much as she liked to talk about food. But right now, Catalina was growing far too preoccupied about the logistics of her trip to Miami to respond.

“You look worried,” said Maria.

“No, just thinking of all the moving parts,” said Catalina.

“Are you worrying about spending so much time with Sebastian Espinosa?”

“I haven’t thought too much about that,” Catalina lied.

If it had been anyone else, they would have called her out on her BS, but in Maria’s case, the lie sailed right past, and was accepted as truth, or something like it.

“You really don’t need to drive me to the airport, by the way,” said Catalina to her friend as they went back to the kitchen to put the finishing touches on the meal.

“I have nothing else to do. I already scheduled Maria Jesus and Ana, and I can’t stand listening to their bickering, and my only alternative is going to the house, to see my great aunt. Believe me, I’m thankful for the excuse. Maybe I’ll see something inspirational and earth-shattering on the way there or back. Maybe this is my path, my destiny.”

“*Callate*,” said Catalina, trying not to laugh. It was true that she was forever lecturing Maria to find a purpose in life, but even though she knew it was having no effect and was a little obnoxious, to boot, she wouldn’t give up the effort. She knew that everyone was happier with either a partner, a project or a passion, or maybe all three, and just because her life had come to a screeching halt, didn’t mean that everyone else should be miserable.

“I hope Eduardo planned a dinner at Nobu for one of the nights,” Maria mused.

“I’m more concerned about trying to sell as much art as possible.”

Moments later, Catalina had loaded her favorite plates, the ones with bold geometric designs on a blue background, with poblano peppers stuffed with shrimp and cheese, and a side of spiced

rice. Once they were seated at the dining room table, Catalina lifted her glass of white wine to Maria's and revisited the same subject she so often returned to.

"Are you sure, Maria? Are you sure that you've never felt any kind of attraction for anyone?"

"Not a twinge," said Maria. "If indeed that sort of thing feels like a twinge."

"Well, it can, and like other things. I suppose you would know it if you felt it."

"I suppose it'll just be you and me, old maids forever, now," said Maria, clinking her glass against Catalina's again. But Catalina couldn't give it up.

"What about that guy at university?"

Maria had gone to Yale, while Catalina had gone to Brown, so they'd had frequent visits and had gotten to know each other's friends.

"Which one?"

"The Spaniard you studied with all the time. The one with the floppy hair. Pablo, I think."

"Are you joking? He doesn't even like girls, and I certainly didn't like him that way."

"What about that guy who makes the leather goods you sell in your shop? You know, the one who's also a shaman yogi sound healer. I'll bet he's extremely wealthy."

Maria laughed.

"No. He's destitute."

"Impossible. I knew from the moment I met him. I thought to myself, no way this guy supports himself with this stuff. He must have a trust fund," said Catalina.

This was a game between them: *find the trust fund baby*. Catalina was excellent at it. Maria's favorite part was trying to trick her into thinking she'd been wrong, for once.

"Oh, all right. He does have a trust fund, and a large one," Maria agreed. "But come on, he's not my type... if I even had a type," she quickly added before Catalina could jump on that statement. "Anyway, he only dates supermodels."

"Typical," said Catalina, dejected. "But seriously. I hope you don't think I'm being insensitive. I just have such a strong feeling that you're destined to meet someone at some point who will turn your world upside down. And love can be...I can't explain, but there's no better feeling."

At this, Maria considered her carefully.

"Yet you have decided that you'll never have another love..."

Catalina scowled at Maria, mostly because the image of Sebastian had popped into her head at that very moment, and she didn't like it one bit.

"I'm just saying, you're such a passionate person. Maybe for you, love won't look like what everyone thought it would..."

"What are you trying to say?"

Maria was definitely getting agitated, but it wasn't in Cata's nature to back down.

"Just because you haven't met that person yet, doesn't mean there won't ever be anyone."

"Believe me, there won't be," said Maria, starting to shut down, now.

"But what makes you so certain?" Catalina pressed.

Was it knowing that she was going away for a week, and that Maria would have time to simmer down, that made her so bold?

"Wait just a second," said Maria, narrowing her eyes.

"What?"

"When you lost your husband, you told me you would be alone for the rest of your life, because you had lost your one person. And I believed you. But now, listening to you, and looking at you, I'm getting the feeling that...something has changed."

"What?" Catalina exclaimed, taken aback.

How did Maria know, and why did she look so disappointed in her? Never mind, of course she was disappointed. Knowing your best friend is an inconstant bimbo who hands over her heart to the first guy with a bad reputation who crosses her path...how could she trust anything Catalina said in the future? She clutched her napkin with her hands and took a nervous sip of wine. Well, in any case, she would snap out of this soon enough.

"Why would you say that? Anyway, we're talking about you right now."

"You don't get to decide who we're talking about. Tell me. What's going on?"

Maria leaned forward and gave her that intense, borderline scary look that usually magically compelled Catalina to spill all of her secrets, but this time, she would hold fast. What she felt for Sebastian was nothing real. It was just a physical thing, and it would evaporate with proximity. The minute she learned more about him, she would be thoroughly turned off, she knew, so what was the use of stirring the pot and admitting her complex feelings to Maria, who certainly couldn't understand something like that, anyway? She felt cruel, thinking like this, but if she was to take what Maria said at face value, it was the truth.

"Never mind. You're right," said Maria, breaking eye contact at last. "Let's talk about something else. I don't want us to argue before you go, and besides, there's nothing real to our disagreement. You're just stressed out about your trip. And I'm terrified of your cat."

"True," said Catalina. "So, what is your great aunt planning on doing while she's here, other than gossiping and meddling in other people's business?"

"Eating, and witchcraft," said Maria. "I suppose I'll have to go over there once or twice, but I'm thrilled to have an excuse to stay safely away from that terrible trio of *brujas*."

Catalina giggled.

"Come on. They can't be that bad."

The women in Maria's family were indeed that bad, but she never got enough of the crazy stories Maria told about them to illustrate it.

"Not that bad? Last time she was here, they held a séance. They wanted to ask my great-grandfather whether he had actually buried gold in the garden. The time before, they tried to cast a spell on a teller at a bank on Calle Regina- don't ask me why. The poor man dropped dead, and I don't know if that's what they intended, or not. They wouldn't speak of it. Years ago, they tried to make me drink a love potion."

"They did? When was this? What was in it?"

"Just before we went to university. I don't know, it tasted like something dead."

"Oh my God, you drank it?"

"Unfortunately."

"I guess I don't need to ask you whether it worked," said Catalina.

"Ha," Maria said grimly.

Catalina could have sworn she had missed a beat, but she had promised to change the subject.

"I can't wait to hear what they come up with this time," she said.

"Maybe I'll offer up your cat as a familiar," Maria suggested.

"No! I would miss her!"

"Maybe they can clone her with their black magic," Maria smiled. "Anyway, enough about that. I'm thinking of going on a buying trip to Oaxaca next month. Do you want to join me?"

"Oh," said Catalina, her heart leaping.

She loved going to Oaxaca. She found the colors so inspirational, and the people a delight.

"I would love to, but I'll have to see how the gallery is going. Right now, I can't afford to have anyone work there, and I can't afford to be closed for too long. Once I hit my stride and can work by appointment, I'll be much freer."

"I know what it's like," Maria said. "When I first opened the store, it was all I could do."
Catalina gave her a look.

"Yes, all right, it's still all I can do, but at least I have a few sales girls who I trust."

The reason you're still there all the time is because you have nothing else to do, Catalina thought, but she decided to keep that to herself.

"We haven't gone on a vacation together in a long time. Once the gallery is going well, we can decide whether we want to go to Todos Santos or maybe even Bacalar or Isla Holbox," Maria suggested.

"Anywhere."

"I admit I'm a bit jealous I'm not going to Miami. I like it there," said Maria.

"If this goes well, maybe we can go together next year."

They finished their meal, and Catalina showed her friend to the office, which, with its daybed draped in embroidered coverlets, also served as a guest room. Other than Sofia, for a few nights in those dark early days, she hadn't had any guests, so it felt good to finally make use of it. The room's navy-blue walls and multiple potted plants gave it a mysterious and magical air.

"Does the cat expect to sleep with me?" Maria asked.

"I don't know what she expects. I keep asking her, but she's not very forthcoming," Catalina smiled. "You can try asking her yourself, or you can just leave the door ajar and see what she decides."

"They say that with vampires, you need to invite them in. So, I think I've found my loophole."

"Smart. Do you need anything? An extra pillow? A bottle of water?"

"No, I have everything. I'll set my alarm for six and see you in the morning," said Maria.

"Gracias."

Catalina hugged her friend and proceeded to her own bedroom, a cozy space with hot pink walls decorated with a collection of photos of architectural wonders by Luis Barragan and his contemporaries. When she and Alejandro had moved in, she had thought that asking for fuchsia walls would be a hard sell, but he had accepted gladly, deeming it a passionate color, and had helped her to paint the room himself.

Interspersed between the photos of modern buildings were Catalina's collection of *Milagros*, multicolored wood or pressed tin hearts with wings and crowns she'd collected over the years. Each one had spoken to her, each one had come into her life at a time when she'd needed it most, just like real miracles. She could remember when she had acquired each one, and why. The one her gaze rested on now was a deep turquoise wooden heart with a gold pressed tin scalloped surround and flames and a crown emerging from the top. It was the wings that had sold her. Unlike so many *Milagros* that seemed stiff, almost childish, this one had wings that, for some reason, appeared to be in motion. She couldn't explain it, but she'd had to have it, and this was the piece she had bought right before opening the gallery. She had felt like she could almost hear Alejandro's voice as she'd selected it from a stall at the market that she had never passed by before. She had returned to the market later, hoping to find another similar one, but had not been able to find the vendor, and had left feeling dejected. At least she had this one. Now, she directed her prayers and thoughts to it, hoping in her heart of hearts for a peaceful and easy trip to Florida, with no complications of any kind. Of course, just thinking of complications summoned the vision of Sebastian's handsome face. She pushed it out of her mind as quickly as it had come. Noticing that Itzi wasn't in her usual spot on the bed, she opened the door to the hallway to see where she was. But the cat was not visible in the dark. Maybe she had been thrown off by Maria's presence. Catalina closed her eyes, got into bed, and waited for sleep to claim her.

Chapter 28

Even in her dream, she knew it was a dream, but she didn't want to admit that to herself. Because she was looking down at a dark head between her wide-spread legs. She could feel hands placed on each inner thigh, massaging them, but also opening her to him as far as she could go, so he could ravage her with his tongue. The first time Alejandro had gone down on her, she'd begged him to stop, because she'd been ashamed. It was nothing she'd done before, nothing she'd discussed with her sister or her friends from school.

"Why do you want me to stop?" He'd asked.

"Because it's ... it's disgusting," she'd said.

"No. You're delicious," he'd responded, and that had been that, and she'd learned to like it. He obviously enjoyed it, and it did feel good, really good, even if she did prefer the main event, and always ended up pulling him up her body, reminding him to wipe his face as he went, which he obediently did, mostly on her breasts, before entering her like she wanted.

But this time, in this dream, it was different. His tongue was going deeper, rougher, and his hands were doing things they didn't normally do. He reached up and squeezed a breast, but at the same time, she could feel a long finger, then two, make their way inside of her, working her into a frenzy, along with that mouth, a mouth that had certainly learned new tricks since last time, the way it sucked on her, and teased her, making her gasp.

Shocked, she looked down, as if to confirm what she already knew. No tousled brown head between her thighs, but instead, slicked back black hair. Sebastian. This time, no guilt made its way into her dream self. With so much pleasure, there was simply no place for it. She threw her head back and lifted herself up to allow his fingers to go deeper.

"More."

He obeyed, until she was half mad with sensation, and when she begged him to, he made his way up her body, not wiping his face at all, oh no, but instead wetly suckling at her, kissing her belly, her breasts, using his mouth to tease a nipple, and then, when she knew she could wait no longer, he entered her, roughly, filling her completely like she'd asked. At the same time, he kissed her. It was messy. It was wet. It was wild and raw and, yes, delicious. She could taste herself on his tongue. She bucked her body to meet his thrusts, relishing how deep inside he was, how tight she felt around him, rubbing her hands on his back, with its hard muscles and hot skin, until he took her wrists and pinned them down above her head. All she could do now was focus on her own sensations. The hot weight of him as he ground into her. His sharp teeth on her neck. He would leave a mark, surely, and she welcomed it. She felt the pleasure mounting, mounting and cresting.

Once it was all over and she lay awake in her bed, trying to catch her breath, she hoped she hadn't cried out. Try explaining that to Maria. She would have to tell her she'd had a bad dream. But she hadn't had a nightmare at all. It had been amazing. Almost worth the guilt, which she further beat down by reminding herself that this was just an innocent trick of her subconscious. It was surely nothing she could control. And also, it would remain in the realm of dreams. No way would she ever act on it. She drank some water from the carafe on her bedside table and tried to go back to sleep.

Chapter 29

Catalina had thought Sebastian would be on the same flight as her but wasn't. Maybe he had miles on a different airline, or maybe he wanted to travel first class, or maybe he was bringing his girlfriend, and didn't want to make it too obvious. But whatever the reason, when she landed in Miami, Catalina had a text from him letting her know he'd already arrived at the hotel. She waited for her luggage, went through customs, and finally got herself onto the sidewalk, and into the line for a taxi.

The heat of Miami felt good after the chill of the airplane. She had refused the car service that Eduardo had proposed, not wanting to owe him more than she already did. She wondered if Sebastian had gotten the same offer, and if so, if he had accepted. She checked her phone, but there wasn't anything from Eduardo with any more details, nor were there any further messages from Sebastian. She texted her sister to let her know that she had arrived, if only to imitate all the people in the taxi line, who were glued to their phones. She thought again of texting her friend Chiara but knew that she was going to have to take the time to craft an appropriately eloquent apology, after so much water under the bridge. She thought about what she needed to do in the coming days. It was overwhelming. But for now, she was exhausted. She hadn't slept a wink after that dream and hadn't been able to relax on the plane. She wanted only one thing, which was to take a shower, and take a long nap. She would worry about the rest later.

The taxi battled traffic on the way to downtown South Beach. Finally, she arrived at one of the hotels that served as the unofficial ground zero for all things Art Basel in Miami: The Faena. She was impressed that Eduardo had sprung for this, but thankful, too. She had been here a few times before, for drinks, dinner, and parties, but not in the past few years, and walking into the lobby, she was struck anew by the incredible quality of the modern art on display, from the giant Juan Gatti mosaic mural in the lobby, to the numerous sculptures by Damien Hirst throughout. She would have fun exploring the full collection and the grounds, once she'd had a nap. For now, she was uniquely focused on checking in.

She arrived at the front desk and gave her name at the counter.

"I have a reservation under Catalina Ruiz," she said.

The woman at the desk gave her a concerned look. "Uh, no, I'm sorry. Do you have another name you might use?"

"Oh. Yes. Catalina Cervantes?"

How annoying that Eduardo had not respected her wish to be known under her married name. She waited, only mildly worried as the woman went through her computer, frowning at the screen. This was nothing. A simple question of the woman spelling her name wrong. It would be resolved, and she would be in the amazing waterfall shower she just knew the bathrooms had to have in no time.

"I'm sorry, Miss. I can't find it."

"Are you spelling it right? C-a-t..."

The woman rolled her eyes.

"Unless you have a very original silent letter in it, I know how to spell your name. Might it be under someone else? Did someone make your reservation?"

"Oh, yes," Catalina almost laughed with relief. She wasn't used to business travel. Surely, this was par for the course.

"Well, it would have been his secretary, I suppose, but Eduardo Smith?"

"Ah, yes! Here it is."

Catalina breathed a sigh of relief. She'd been ridiculous for thinking there was a problem.

"Mr. Smith is here already," said the woman. "You can just go up to the room. He checked you both in already and took both keys."

"No, I'm afraid there's a misunderstanding," said Catalina, starting to sweat. "He would have booked three rooms in all, I think. A room for himself, yes, a room for me, and a third one for another gallery owner in our group. Sebastian Espinoza."

"Ah! So, you're sharing a room with Mr. Espinoza?" said the girl, happy to have solved this conundrum, but still confused. "Strange, I thought..."

"No," said Catalina. "We each have a room."

The girl double-checked her computer screen, tapping at some more keys with brightly colored fingernails.

"No, I'm sorry, there are only two rooms total under Mr. Smith. One for two people, his, and one for one person, Mr. Espinoza's."

"Okay, listen," said Catalina. "There's been a misunderstanding. I'm sure we can get this fixed. I'm very tired, so can you just put me in a different room, and I'll work it out with Mr. Smith when I see him?"

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," said the girl at the counter. "We're booked solid."

Catalina stared at her, as if willing a different answer to come out of her mouth.

"OK, thanks," she gritted out, maneuvering herself and her luggage to a corner where she could try to regroup.

What was she going to do? She had no doubt that all the hotels were full- and besides, she didn't have the budget for anything else. She only had one friend in Miami. But even if Chiara would deign to speak to her, after their last conversation, she was probably out of town. Over the years, Chiara had made it a habit to flee Miami during Art Basel, to escape the chaos. They had been so close, once, but after their falling out, it didn't feel right asking her for that kind of favor. Except, she didn't have much of a choice, did she? She was going to have to bite the bullet. First, in desperation, she went into her phone, looking for a discount last-minute hotels app that she had used with some success on previous vacations with Alejandro. But either the app was not working properly, or Art Basel really had claimed all the hotel rooms, because nothing was coming up. Tears came to her eyes. What now? There was no way she would bunk with Eduardo. She should have known, should have been wiser than that, but she had assumed it would all be okay. Even Maria and her sister had seemed to believe that it would be fine. Then again, she had underplayed Eduardo's behavior when describing it to them.

And now here she was, in Miami all of one hour, and already at a loss. Tempting as it was, she couldn't just abandon everything now. She'd worked so hard to get here. A sob escaped her lips as she uploaded the Expedia app, knowing full well it wouldn't help either, and cursing how much of her international data she was already using up on her phone.

Suddenly, a hand on her shoulder. She jumped and spun around.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

She looked up into Sebastian Espinoza's ridiculously handsome face. The face that haunted her dreams.

"Are you OK? What's going on?" he asked. "Did you already check in?"

"No," said Catalina, sniffing. She was mortified at herself, embarrassed, but too emotionally exhausted to beat around the bush and protect her pride. "It seems that Eduardo decided that he would share a room with me."

"What?" asked Sebastian, his full lips drawing into a thin line, fury burning in his eyes. "Surely there's some mistake."

"I hope it is a mistake," said Catalina coldly. "But considering his behavior towards me- I should have known. It's my fault. But now I'm here, and I'm screwed."

"This is not your fault," said Sebastian. "And we won't let him get away with this. But for now, we need to find you a place to stay."

She took some comfort in his use of *we*, but she knew that even the confident and connected Mr. Espinoza would have a snowball's chance in hell of scoring accommodations anywhere near Miami this week.

"It's not looking good."

"With the art show, I imagine things have gotten quite full," Sebastian conceded.

"I even considered renting a car and sleeping in it, but there were no cars available when I checked."

Sebastian looked at her, puzzled.

"I got a car."

She gave him a look. OK, so maybe there were no cars available in her price range.

"I know that doesn't help. And I'm not going to offer to have you sleep in my rental car."

"Thanks a lot."

"You're funny. It's far too hot, you would asphyxiate in there. Listen, worst case scenario, you could share my room."

Catalina straightened.

"Your room? That's..."

"Yes, I know you think that's hardly a step above sharing a room with Eduardo, but at least with me, I hope you believe me when I say I can promise you that I will be a gentleman. I do have a couch in my room, well, it's more of a bench, but..."

"I can't accept."

"You might not have a choice."

"If I do, I'll sleep on the bench," said Catalina.

"That seems fair," Sebastian smiled. "Thanks for not making me give up the bed. It's a nice big King. Looks comfortable."

"I'll keep trying to find something. Surely something will pop up, something last minute."

"You know it won't," said Sebastian. "Anyway, we'll barely ever be in there."

Catalina shook her head.

"I can't believe this. This sucks. I'm so tired."

"I can imagine. I'll speak to him, if you want me to."

"No, I can defend myself."

"Fine, but in the meantime, just accept my offer. It's your best option right now."

She considered him. It was indeed her best option.

"Thank you. If I wasn't so exhausted..." she said, weakly.

"Don't worry about it- let me get an extra room key, and we'll get you settled in," said Sebastian.

Catalina stood by as Sebastian suavely explained to the hotel employee that there had been a misunderstanding, but that, as old friends, they would be better off sharing the room. She wondered what his girlfriend Bibi would think if she got wind of this.

They entered the elevator and stood at opposite sides of it. Catalina carefully avoided his gaze. What was she doing? This was stupid. They were going to be in the same room, after the dreams she'd had about him. Granted, he had no way of knowing what was going through her mind. Anyway, he had a girlfriend, and he did seem innocent enough when it came to his intentions towards her, despite the chemistry she'd imagined they had. But still- they would be sharing a

room, and a bathroom. She imagined him showering and coming out in his towel. Hopefully, this was not one of those modern designs where the bathroom was completely transparent. Was it?

"It's going to be okay," said Sebastian. "I'll be a perfect gentleman, I promise. You can trust me."

She scoffed. Sure, she could trust him, but could she trust herself?

He used his key card to open the door to a large room with an ocean view.

"Wow, Eduardo really pulled out all the stops for you," said Catalina. Her eyes swept over the space, taking in the narrow bench at the foot of the bed. The compact desk chair and ottoman. Sebastian saw where she was looking, probably read her mind. She blushed.

"You never know, maybe you had a wonderful suite with him," Sebastian grinned.

"That's not funny. And I don't want to find out," she said. "If this wasn't some horrible mix-up, how do I face him?"

"It's too late for him to do anything to you now, so at least you're participating in the show, and we'll figure out the rest later. Why don't you freshen up?" he said. "And now that you've seen the bench I was talking about, you can even choose which side of the bed you like."

She considered this for a moment. Looked at the bench again. It truly was tiny.

"All right," she said cautiously.

"I'll give you half the closet too," Sebastian smiled. At this, she smiled back a bit. "My husband used to hog three quarters of the closet, so I suppose that's a pretty good deal," she replied.

"Yes, Ale was always quite the clotheshorse," said Sebastian.

That's right. She'd forgotten that he had claimed that he had known her husband, but she didn't want to talk about that. She still couldn't really believe that they would have had any close relationship. Maybe he had the wrong person. She changed the subject.

"I never asked- have you ever been married?"

"No," said Sebastian. "I wanted to make my own way before I officially brought somebody into my life."

"And haven't you made your own way now?" she asked, opening her suitcase and pulling out her carefully packed outfits.

"I'm getting there," said Sebastian. "It's taken a while, you know?"

No, she didn't know. Perhaps he wasn't aware that she had researched his business experiences, from the restaurant to the bar, to the hotel. He hadn't had to make his own way at all, had he?

True, there had been a break about four years ago, but that was probably pandemic related, and Sebastian was someone who would always have a safety net. To be fair, she technically probably had one too, but she didn't want to ask her parents. Not after all this hurt, and all this time.

"I'm sorry," said Catalina, "you were on your way somewhere when you bumped into me in the lobby. I don't want to keep you."

"Oh, I was just going to go check out the hotel. Why don't I let you get situated and we reconvene for dinner? We can strategize then, unless Eduardo requested your company."

She looked at him. The way he'd said it, it was almost like he thought she'd been well aware of Eduardo's expectations, and had only gotten cold feet at the hotel, but would go right back to toeing the line. She was insulted.

"Wow, really? Is that what you think of me? What if I don't want to see him? If he didn't let you know about a dinner plan, there's no reason for him to have one with me."

"I can think of some reasons," Sebastian said quietly, giving her a look.

She glared back at him, until he was forced to look away, which was a good thing, because her anger was getting all mixed up in something else. Something far more complicated.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'm being insensitive. Why don't I come back here in a couple hours, and we'll find somewhere to go. If you're OK with that, of course."

"You're letting me share your room. Taking you out to dinner is the least I could do," said Catalina.

"OK. I'll be back in a bit," said Sebastian.

She waited until the door clicked closed, took a deep breath, and headed to the luxurious marble bathroom, where she stripped off her clothes. Gratefully, she stepped under the waterfall showerhead and let the water pummel all of the anxiety and stress out of her body. She was lucky that Sebastian had stepped in with an offer to share his room. Her gut told her he would be better than Eduardo, but his family's reputation was disturbing. At least, all of his actions up until this point had been nothing but honorable. Perhaps she could grant him just a little bit of trust. He certainly deserved it more than some people did.

She finally got out of the shower, toweling herself dry and slipping into a hotel bathrobe, and texted Maria to let her know she had arrived, omitting the tiny details of Eduardo booking a single room for them, and how she was now sharing a room with Sebastian. And then, though she knew she shouldn't do it if she wanted to sleep well that night, she got into the bed, falling asleep the moment her head hit the pillow.

Chapter 30

When she woke up again, it was night. She opened her eyes and stretched. The bed was deliciously comfortable. But suddenly, alarm bells went off in her head. She saw something move in the penumbra. There was someone in the room with her- or had Alejandro's ghost found her?

"Hello?" she cried out into the darkness.

"Don't be scared, it's me," said Sebastian, flicking on the desk lamp.

"You were sleeping so soundly I didn't dare disturb you. And, well, I fell asleep in the chair."

"What time is it?" she asked.

"It's only eight. We can still go out for dinner."

She thought about this. She was ravenous, but groggy. Her hair had probably dried awkwardly inside the towel turban she had made, too.

"Should we just get room service?" Sebastian asked.

She hesitated. It sounded perfect. But it also felt like a weirdly intimate thing to do. Then again, it meant zero chance of running into Eduardo. She nodded.

"Is it OK if I sit on the bed, and we look at the menu?" he asked.

"You're going to be sleeping on the bed tonight, so you don't need to be so precious about asking me," she smiled. "I should in fact be on that bench right now."

"We've already established that you're sleeping in this bed tonight. I'm just trying to keep you comfortable," he said. "Consent is important."

Well, he'd just made things a thousand times more awkward, because now, her mind had gone directly to a daydream of Sebastian asking if he had permission to kiss her and do other things to her. If anyone could make consent hot, it was him.

He sat down on the bed, and she suddenly became aware of the fact that she had fallen asleep wearing nothing but the hotel's bathrobe and the towel turban. She decided not to call attention to it. She would try to find something resembling pajamas once they had ordered. She hadn't planned on sharing a room with anyone, so she had not packed anything to sleep in. Worst case scenario, the bathrobe would have to do.

They finally both settled on burgers and fries.

"We are in America after all," Sebastian cracked.

"Exactly," she said happily. She really was ravenously hungry.

They also ordered a bottle of wine. Maybe not the most cautious move. But she was looking forward to it.

Once they'd put in the order, Sebastian got up and rummaged in the drawers in the closet. He went into the bathroom, presumably to change, and emerged wearing a t-shirt and gray athletic pants, which were loose, but hinted all too clearly at what was underneath. She had to force herself not to stare. Sofia had told her once how she and her friends always welcomed the beginning of gray sweatpants season at their fancy private gym, and little naïve Catalina had not understood what she'd meant until Sofia had shown her a series of videos. *Muchas gracias, Sofia*, she thought.

"Do you want to get into something comfortable?" Sebastian asked. "I can see what's playing on the TV. Or we could watch a movie."

"I ... I didn't bring anything to sleep in," she admitted.

Was she dreaming, or did he have a slight flush on his cheek?

"I wasn't planning on sharing a room," she specified.

"So, you normally sleep naked?" he asked. "Sorry, I don't know why I asked that. That's inappropriate and you don't need to answer."

She was definitely not going to answer. But now, she found herself wondering; what would he think if he did see her naked? If her bathrobe fell open? If he surprised her coming out of the shower, or getting changed? Was she even his type? She'd seen the gorgeous mosaic artist at the embassy. Clearly, that was more the type of girl he normally associated with. In fact, where was she, and what would she think about the fact that he was sharing a room with her?

"By the way, I won't mention anything to your girlfriend about this, in case you don't want her to know," said Catalina.

"My girlfriend?" he asked, looking at her quizzically.

"Nice try, *amigo*," she said. "You can't deny it. I saw you with her. You introduced us, remember? At the embassy? Bibi, artist and supermodel?"

"Her?" he started laughing.

"What's so funny?"

She saw something waver in Sebastian's expression. Was she dreaming, or was he dying to change the subject?

"What about you? Have you been with anyone since Ale?"

"What kind of a question is that?" Catalina snapped.

She didn't want to hear Alejandro's name in Sebastian's mouth, didn't want to mix together these two, especially not after the way they'd been conflated in her dreams.

"Did you have a good marriage?" Sebastian asked, insistent.

"Yes," she responded, curtly.

"Were you in love?"

"Why so many questions?" she asked. "Of course we were in love."

"Were you truthful to each other? Faithful?"

"Of course," said Catalina. "Listen, you clearly didn't know my husband."

"I knew him quite well," said Sebastian.

"Really? How? You didn't say, before."

"We grew up together," said Sebastian.

"That's impossible," said Catalina.

"All right," said Sebastian. "Maybe I only knew him from afar, then."

There, now that sounded more truthful.

Sebastian's playful tone had evaporated. But he didn't let up.

"So, he made you happy?"

"Enormously."

Except for at the very end, but if she hadn't even told that to Maria or Sofia and had barely been able to admit it to herself, she was certainly not going to bring it up with this man.

"Good," said Sebastian. "So, would you consider having another relationship? Maybe it's too soon, but..."

"Of course it's too soon," Catalina snapped.

But she knew she was lying. Despite the fact that Sebastian was infuriating and confusing her right now, she couldn't help where her thoughts went. But unfortunately, or maybe thankfully, he was taken.

"You're lucky you had that," Sebastian finally said, more kindly. "That kind of love is sacred."

"You don't have that with Bibi?"

A knock on the door saved him from having to answer. She didn't want to hear his response, anyway.

"Room service."

Gracias a Dios thought Catalina.

"I'm going to pop into the bathroom," she said.

"Take your time. I'll set everything up. You want to eat on the bed?"

"No, I'll take the chair."

A few minutes later, Catalina came out from the bathroom, her bathrobe tied tightly around her waist. Other than a pair of panties, she hadn't located any potential sleepwear.

"I found one of my favorite movies to watch," said Sebastian.

"And what might that be?" asked Catalina, smiling.

"Moonraker."

"Sure. I always enjoy an old James Bond. But tell me- what is it that you like so much about it?"

She smiled, settling into her chair and digging into her hamburger.

"Beautiful people, beautiful cars, beautiful locations. You're going to say that makes me sound superficial. But really, I always thought it would be wonderful to be an international man of mystery," said Sebastian.

"Who was your favorite James Bond?" Catalina asked.

"What kind of question is that? Sean Connery, of course."

"What do you mean, of course?"

"Don't tell me you have a different favorite. If you say Daniel Craig, I may be disappointed in you."

"Of course not. My favorite was Pierce Brosnan," Catalina responded, lightly.

"Oh? Is he your type?" asked Sebastian.

Catalina glanced up and blushed, because she'd just realized: that's who Sebastian reminded her of. A slightly darker Pierce Brosnan. Slightly hotter, too, if she was honest with herself. That was what Sofia had been alluding to when she'd talked about her type, back at the gallery opening. Catalina vividly remembered the posters of the actor that had decorated her room as a young teenager.

How mortifying. It was too late to lie. Maybe Sebastian didn't know he looked like the actor. That was wishful thinking. There was no doubt that someone, somewhere along the line, had told him. But at least she could pretend that she didn't see the resemblance.

"He *was* my type. When I was younger. My tastes changed, obviously. Go ahead, start the movie."

She didn't want to talk anymore. As the opening scene began to play, she finally relaxed. Once they'd finished eating, Sebastian poured her another glass of wine and said, "Wouldn't you rather watch from the bed?"

It gave her pause, the way he said it, but she nodded.

"There's something decadent about drinking wine in bed, don't you think?"

"Indeed. So, you make a habit of that, as well?" He asked, teasing.

She didn't want to think about Sebastian in bed with Bibi, drinking wine, or doing all the other things they probably did. Not that she had any reason to be jealous whatsoever. She had no interest in him, did she? *Si, claro*. She was such a liar. But if you're going to lie, best to lie to yourself, she reasoned. That's how you did the least damage.

"You seem to have chosen your side," said Sebastian, gesturing to the unmade part of the bed, the right side, where Catalina had taken her nap.

"That's always my side," she said.

"Oh," Sebastian said, the understanding washing over his face.

Catalina grew quiet. She hadn't realized what she was saying, either. They were talking about Alejandro again. She hadn't seen his actual ghost here, yet- maybe it was too far to travel, but he was still between them, all the same.

"I want you to know," she said, "that I'm okay. I was lucky to have known love at one point in my life. And to have known pain. And it's not easy, but I'm moving on. I really am. Some days I wake up, and I don't think about him for hours."

For that, she could thank her all-encompassing work, and the occasional rogue thoughts of Mr. Espinoza.

"Right," said Sebastian. "But no one will ever be able to compare to him."

Was that a sarcastic tone she detected? What exactly was he trying to say? Like he even cared what she did with the rest of her life.

"Probably not," she said, gritting her teeth.

She got into bed, noticing how Sebastian sat on top of the covers, well on his side. Just as he pressed *play* again, she said, "You don't have to stay on top of the covers on my account. I think I can trust you to be a gentleman."

Sebastian looked at her and said nothing.

"What's that look for?"

Something had passed between them, but she didn't quite know what or didn't want to admit it to herself.

"What?" she asked. "You have a girlfriend, and you're just doing me a favor."

"It's a bit old fashioned to assume that it's only the man who might try to make an inappropriate move, isn't it?" he asked.

Her eyes flew to his face, reflexively, but she forced herself to at least pretend to watch the screen. Her mind was racing. Was he teasing? Or was it that obvious that she was attracted to him? So attracted to him that she couldn't help herself? *Wow*. They'd had some looks pass between them, and she'd thought maybe the attraction was mutual, but that it was understood that it wouldn't go any further than that. Now, she was offended and mortified. She tried to concentrate on the movie, but she was only more conscious of Sebastian on the bed, as far away as he could be, but really not so far from her, at all. She could reach over and touch him, if she wanted to. And of course, now that he had basically accused her of lusting over him, it was all she could think about, with the devastating twist that he would not welcome it.

Thankfully, after a short time, fatigue overcame her, and she turned her back to him and snuggled down into the bed, trying to get as close to the edge as possible. She closed her eyes, not knowing whether she should say goodnight or just give him the silent treatment.

"Are you falling asleep?" he asked. "I can turn off the TV."

"No, you keep watching," she said. "The noise helps me to sleep."

"Alright." He went back to watching.

Catalina dozed off. Of course, she dreamed again, dreamed of Alejandro, dreamed they were arguing. And like so many of her dreams, this one was a memory, too. The last time she'd seen Alejandro, they'd had a disagreement, an explosive one. Their last interactions had all been arguments. She'd never told anyone about this, because it might have justified her parents' opinion. Because it was so much easier to be the grieving widow with the perfect husband. And he *had* been perfect. Almost. They'd had so many good moments.

The dream went on, the argument turning more and more fierce, until she pushed him. She felt his wiry, muscular chest under her hands, and then, he was backed against the wall, begging for her forgiveness as she hit him, again and again, and then, he was gone, the door slamming behind him with an air of finality that was amplified because she knew what happened next.

And now, she was crying, bawling, shaking, lying on the floor of the apartment. Suddenly, darkness. She had the sensation that she was awake now, but the shaking continued. Where was she? What was happening?

She realized with a start that she was in the hotel room, in Miami, tears still running down her face. Why was she still shaking? Someone's hands were on her. For a brief moment, she had the crazy thought that it was Alejandro. He had come back. All was forgiven.

"Catalina, are you okay?"

It was Sebastian. Sebastian, who had offered her to share his room. Sebastian, who thought she had the hots for him, but who had a girlfriend that he, at least, was faithful to.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to wake you, but you were crying. I was worried. Are you okay?"

"No," she admitted. "I had a horrible dream."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She realized he was in the bed, propped on an elbow, looking down at her. He reached over and smoothed a damp strand of hair away from her cheek, a strangely intimate gesture that made her shudder.

She looked into those eyes. How easy it would be to just dive into those eyes, kiss him, make him make her forget, use him to heal the hole in her heart. But that would be wrong. Even if things were different, even if he was attracted to her, which he wasn't, she would feel guilty, for more reasons than one.

"What do you need? What can I do for you?" he said.

"Can... can you just hold me?" she asked.

She immediately felt stupid, and pathetic, and like he might think she was trying to make a move on him. But without a word, he wrapped his arms around her and tucked her in with her back against his chest, his slow, even breathing helping her to calm down. Within moments, she had fallen asleep.

Chapter 31

When she woke up that morning, she realized they had moved during the night. Now, her head was on his shoulder, and her hand, she realized in horror, had found its way under his tee shirt and onto his chest. He had an arm protectively wrapped around her, and she realized that her bathrobe had pulled open, to where a breast was exposed. As soon as she'd realized the full extent of the awkwardness of the situation, she sprang away from him. What had they done? This was a nightmare.

He woke up, rubbing his eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"I, I shouldn't have done that," she said. She wanted to crawl under a rock.

"What are you talking about? You didn't do anything," he said, "you had a bad dream. I just held you. We all need that, sometimes. Nothing happened."

Nothing had happened. Right. Maybe he hadn't felt her hand on his chest. Good. That was some consolation. But the worst thing was, it wasn't for lack of wanting on her part, and she had to admit that to herself.

"OK. Why don't you get ready first? I need to check in with my friend to make sure my cat hasn't sucked out her soul."

Sebastian gave her a look.

"I'm sorry- what? Never mind, forget I asked. I'll be quick, and I'll go try to figure out where our art and our booth are while you get ready."

Once Sebastian had finished getting ready and was out the door, Catalina took the quickest of showers and got ready, preemptively dreading the prospect of confronting Sebastian about snagging the most advantageous placement for his artworks- of course, she had no way of knowing whether he was really doing this, but she had given him the time advantage, after all. She was also panicked at the idea of running into Eduardo. What would he say? How would she explain that she'd found another place to stay? If he had booked the one room for them on purpose, he would be pissed off. Had she led him on? At the very least, she was starting to see that she had willfully ignored the very strong signals he'd been putting out, and now she was terrified that, slick as he was, at some point, he would catch her alone and make her pay.

She went to the closet, going through the clothing she had hastily hung up, and selected a comfortable pair of cropped wide-leg jeans, which she paired with a mustard silk tank top and comfortable but stylish dark purple sandals, something she could move in and work in as necessary, but which would still look polished and distinctive. She topped the look with a cream linen blazer, and the obi Sofia had bought her, worn as a scarf, in case the sea breeze was fresh, and in case she needed to go someplace where she needed to cover up.

She parted her hair in the middle and decided to wear it in a long plait down her back, weaving in a green and purple ribbon. She selected a pair of large brass earrings from Maria's shop that looked like a modern art mobile, something she had gotten many compliments on in the past. A quick swipe of mascara and red lipstick, and she was ready to go. Her heart was beating triple time as she helped herself to a free cup of coffee in the lobby, checking her phone for how to get to the conference center. Just then, her phone pinged. A message from Sebastian.

I don't know if you checked your email this morning, but we got a fun little surprise from Eduardo.

What was that supposed to mean? Her phone pinged again.

Head to the big white tent on the beach nearest to our hotel, not the main convention space.

Her head spun. Had Eduardo lied to them? Were they not actually participating in Art Basel?

Apparently, he signed us up for one of the satellite fairs, not the main event. Whatever. We'll make the best of it.

Catalina raced towards a large white dome, which resembled one of the circus tents her parents had taken the family to, once. She remembered Sofia squeezing her eyes shut and sobbing in terror as three motorcycles spun around in a metal cage, knowing that any error on the part of the drivers could result in a grisly, fiery death. This situation didn't feel that different. Actually, she was being dramatic. She knew that there were plenty of reputable smaller fairs that piggybacked on the main event, which was rife with party people and looky-loos. Sometimes, participating in the satellite fairs could be more interesting and lucrative than being distracted by everything surrounding the main event. But still. It wasn't quite Art Basel now, was it?

She noticed that she was feeling lightheaded, probably the effect of too much caffeine, too little sleep, and the high anxiety level she now felt. She was starting to spiral when she almost ran headlong into Sebastian.

"I was looking for you," he said. "Our booth is over here. The art was delivered to it already- just dumped there. I was stupid. I assumed Eduardo would have used a reputable art shipper, but I think he made do with a crew of amateurs."

Catalina was silent. She hadn't even thought about the importance of these logistics, and she should have known better: Chiara had explained to her on several occasions the complicated and costly logistics of shipping art.

"What's done is done. We need to strategize how best to display what we have," Sebastian said.

She was relieved and heartened that he did not seem too upset about the bait-and-switch. She also noted his use of 'we', and both thrilled at it, and almost scoffed at it. As if they really were a team. *Stop it, Catalina, you're being a bitch*, she thought. He had given her no reason to mistrust him.

"Come," he grasped her elbow, and she couldn't help but notice that the very touch of his fingers on her arm made her shiver. It was good that they were springing into action right away. It helped to cut down on the awkwardness of what had happened the night before.

The tent was a hive of activity. Midway down one of the aisles, Sebastian waved his arm in the direction of a nondescript booth like so many of the others. All around them, people were busy setting up their own little corner of the art world.

"This is it?" she asked, as they arrived in the middle of the generic little space. She was surprised to note that none of Sebastian's paintings were up yet. He had a mosaic placed in the corner, and there were various canvases leaned against the walls of the booth. She noticed that hers were mixed in with his.

"I didn't know if you wanted to separate out our galleries, or if you wanted us to try to group things thematically," Sebastian said, giving her a look that made her insides liquefy. So, he hadn't tried to make a grab for the best real estate. Had she underestimated him again? What exactly was he playing at? Again, she had to remind herself: nothing he'd done up until this point had shown that he had any ill will or a sense of vicious competition towards her at all.

Then again, he could afford not to play hardball. He had far more resources, clout, and connections than she did. And she had essentially brought him this opportunity on a silver platter, even if it wasn't quite of the status of ZONAMACO, the art show only one of them would be participating in in Mexico City in mere months.

She tried to push these thoughts from her mind and stay in the present. What would be the best way to display their art? Faced with the inconvenient reality that Eduardo had not provided them with professional hangers, they discussed the proper height and spacing, knowing they would need to do it once, and do it right.

"This should be OK," said Catalina, standing back and trying to imagine the works up on the wall in their proper locations.

It was OK, but it felt bland. There was something missing from the display. She just couldn't figure out what it was.

"I think it looks great," said Sebastian.

But he sounded as lukewarm as she felt. He checked his watch.

"Why don't we walk around, rest our eyes for a bit, and come back with a new perspective before I go pick up some hanging hardware? We have some time. Eduardo said he'll meet us here to check out the booth at six o'clock," Sebastian said.

"Oh?"

Catalina regarded him suspiciously. She hadn't received anything- Or was Eduardo pissed and acting out against her already, cutting her out?

"He emailed it right before you showed up," said Sebastian. "And yes, he sent it to both of us. Come, let's go see what other people are showing."

Catalina was relieved to be able to step away from her thoughts and start focusing on the art. She really did love looking at art. This was why the gallery had been such a dream for her, for such a long time. Even though she had briefly tried her hand at painting as a younger person, she had come to realize that her strengths lay in collecting, curating, and promoting other artists' work, and she was okay with that. She'd noticed that, with a few notable exceptions, gallerists who were nothing more than failed artists, or who were trying to sell their own work, seldom did as well as those who truly loved the business of art. In fact, Catalina still needed to educate herself more on that. Her research, time working in the Venice Beach gallery, and conversations with her friend Chiara had been a great education, but there was always more to learn, and things were changing constantly.

She pointed at a piece made of shattered glass, back painted with a street scene.

"That's interesting, but a little messy," she told Sebastian.

"Yes, but I think the artist was inspired by the looting that went on in Los Angeles during the latest race riots," Sebastian responded.

"Still. I feel like the initial impact feels diluted, somehow," Catalina remarked.

"I can see what you mean. I'm really responding to this one here," he said, indicating a pitted plaster surface with a hand emerging from it. "I feel like that sometimes," he noted, sardonically.

"Me, too," Catalina admitted.

Without realizing what she was doing, she nudged him with her shoulder, gesturing towards another piece of art, a glossy cube with lights inside. She froze. That shoulder nudge was how she used to interact with Alejandro on gallery visits. Other than the attraction, they'd always had an easy camaraderie, a non-verbal communication. They had understood each other implicitly, and she'd loved the way they'd once moved as one through art galleries, and through life. And for a moment, just now, it had felt so comfortable, so familiar with Sebastian, too.

Again, the guilt came crashing in. How could she feel this way about this man she'd literally just bumped into on the street one day, and that she barely knew? She was just projecting. It was just wishful thinking, trying to make something work, knowing that he was not the type of person she should be with, knowing that he had a terrible reputation- well, at least his family did, and knowing that he was taken. Was this her twisted version of playing it safe? She was probably attaching herself to him because she knew that he was a bad idea, and that she would ultimately never go for him. Not that he would even have her. The gorgeous girl that she'd seen him with was obviously his type, and he clearly cared for her. Catalina herself was too tall, too dark, not petite enough, or willowy enough. Even though the way Sebastian had looked at her on a few occasions had initially

made her think that, maybe in another lifetime, it could have been possible. But as things were, it didn't even bear thinking about.

After moving through a few more booths and chatting with a few gallerists, they returned to their own spot.

"I don't know," said Catalina. "There's something missing. We're Mexican. We're about color. We're about drama. And I feel like this is falling flat. This isn't the main event- so I think we can have fun with it."

"OK. I'm listening."

"I mean, think about our galleries in the city. You have your mosaic. I have my mural up front, setting the tone. All up and down the street, we have brightly painted walls, and incredible plants on the facades of the buildings. Is there any way we translate that feeling to our booth here in Miami? Is there a way we can apply some color to our display, something to set us apart?"

"You're a genius," said Sebastian.

"I didn't see anyone else painting any of the walls, so I'm guessing it's not allowed. But what about some color somewhere? Like the hot pink or orange Luis Barragan loved so much. Maybe it could be a sign with our gallery names. Everyone else is doing boring stick-on vinyl letters- let's bring it up a notch."

"Brilliant," said Sebastian. "I hadn't even thought of that."

"I guess I'm good for something," said Catalina.

"Good for something?" he replied. "You're the one who brought us this entire opportunity."

"Well, that was only because—" she interrupted herself.

She would learn not to be self-deprecating, even though she had the crushing certainty that she knew exactly why Eduardo had presented this opportunity to her. Sebastian was lucky, because he got to participate free and clear. She resented, yet again, how the art world remained a man's world, in so many ways.

Sebastian was already scrolling through his phone.

"I found a plastics store that claims they do acrylic signs. Here, let me call them."

As he dialed, Catalina glanced at her phone, thinking she would have heard from Sofia or Maria. She hadn't. No news was good news, she supposed. She checked her emails and read Eduardo's message for herself, growing anxious again. There was something Sebastian hadn't mentioned. Eduardo had written: *Dear Mr. Espinoza, and Ms. Cervantes, if you indeed made it to Miami...* How was she going to deal with this? She started spiraling again, the blood rushing in her ears.

Sebastian got off the phone.

"All right, I talked them into a quick laser etching," he said. "We settled on a sign, transparent fuchsia, and we can backlight it. They told me to come pick it up in an hour."

"How big is the sign?" Catalina asked.

"About three feet by two feet," he said, "as large as they could make it."

"Wait- how did you list our gallery names on the sign?" she asked, preemptively narrowing her eyes.

"Actually," said Sebastian, "I struggled with that, since everyone else has a single gallery name..."

Catalina's eyes flew to his. *No*, had he left her off?

"I decided not to overthink it. Both names, yours on top," said Sebastian. "Was that OK?"

"Brilliant!" she said.

She would have done the same herself- except, she might have actually put his gallery name first, to be gallant, and then she would have resented it. She tried to imagine where the sign would hang in their booth.

"Okay, hear me out. What if we get some fake ivy and plants and put them on the back wall and place the sign in the middle of that? Then we reorganize the paintings to be on the two other walls. It would be a bit more crowded, but it would have more of an impact. I didn't see anything like that in the whole space. I know that maybe it will not come off as so serious- it's probably not appropriate for the main event, but in this case, it's an opportunity to set us apart."

"I like it," said Sebastian. "You're right. This isn't about ego. This is about sales. And something like that may attract the buyers who can't afford the blue-chip art but are ready for the next tier."

They reorganized the paintings into groupings organized by color and theme on the two remaining walls and stood back. Bibi's mosaic would have pride of place, against the green wall, under their gallery sign, and Catalina found that she was OK with that.

"Okay, let's go buy that greenery and hanging hardware, and then we'll pick up the sign," said Sebastian. "We go together, right?"

"Sure," Catalina shrugged.

They would have to. They could have divided and conquered, but they had to both agree on the look. It would also be more fun this way.

"We also should get our price lists printed out," said Catalina.

"I have mine already formatted on my phone," Sebastian said.

"Me too. Once we have the sign, we can go to an office store."

"Exactly," he responded.

She looked at him, briefly, not so long that she would get distracted, and gave him a quick nod. What a pity that this man came from one of the most corrupt families in the country. What did it say about her that she felt so in tune with him? In any case, it didn't matter. They were just here for five days, and then they would go back to having a semi-contentious neighborly relationship. Nothing more. Just two galleries among so many others in Roma Norte.

As she got into the front seat of his rental BMW SUV, which they had retrieved from the hotel parking lot, Catalina again noticed the difference in their budgets and lifestyles. He had rented a luxury car, probably without thinking twice, and she was just relieved that she wouldn't have to split the cost of Ubers with him for this particular errand.

They stopped at the craft store first, picking up a cartful of fake vines, which happened to be on a 50 percent off sale. Some had flowers on them, in the same or similar shades they were used to seeing in their city. Sebastian grabbed some hanging hardware and clear tape, just in case.

They proceeded to pick up the acrylic sign in North Miami. The traffic was building up but was still not too bad. But there was no parking to be had in the industrial strip mall where the plastics shop resided.

"Why don't I double park, and I'll jump out. I'll leave you the keys in case somebody comes," he said. "I'll be right back."

Catalina watched him leave, admiring his body as he jogged into the shop. The broad shoulders, the muscular back, the dark hair. Such a striking man. She checked her phone. Eduardo would be at the booth at six o'clock. They were cutting it close. Maybe this errand was superfluous. But she stubbornly wanted to make sure that, despite Eduardo's egregious trick, the faith that he had put in them was worth it. It wasn't cheap to reserve a booth like this, even if it wasn't the main event. They had been given the opportunity to represent their country, and that had to count for something.

Sebastian came striding back with a paper-wrapped package, which he placed in the back seat. He got behind the wheel.

"It looks fantastic," he said. "You're going to love it."

Catalina watched him navigate the car expertly through traffic, cutting through back streets.

"You know this city well," she observed.

"I spent some time here in my twenties," Sebastian confirmed. "I had some cousins who went to school in Miami and, well, it was a great place to party."

"I can imagine," said Catalina.

She had visited Chiara a few times over the years, and had always felt that the pace of Miami was too frenetic, more so even than that of Mexico City, or LA. She wondered what kind of business Sebastian would have been conducting in Miami back in the day. It couldn't have been good. She didn't want to ask. They chit-chatted about other things, while she simultaneously worried about what she would wear, because she noticed the time marching inexorably on.

"Listen," said Sebastian as though reading her mind. "You look perfect to me, but I'm sure you were hoping to get freshened up or change for dinner. I can wear exactly what I have on now. Why don't I put the booth together, and you get ready? You can meet me back there just before 6."

"You sure?" she asked.

Could she trust Sebastian to do it all the way she would? She should be pulling her weight, too. But then again, he had offered, and what good would it be to nitpick and micromanage, if she showed up at dinner wearing jeans? Miami was a dressy town, especially for women, and she needed to present herself to her best advantage.

"It's no big deal," said Sebastian. "Seriously. This way, I'm out of your hair while you get ready, I'll have something to do to keep me out of trouble, and we'll reconvene. It's fine. I owe you, remember?"

"Right," she said. "I'll make note of that."

He responded with a grin that made her heart do a little flip-flop.

He pulled into the Faena driveway, and she grabbed her bag and her jacket and got out of the car. Before closing the door, she gave him one last look.

"You sure, right? You're not going to resent the fact that I'm going to smell so much better than you?"

"I will scare off the competition," said Sebastian.

She'd been joking, of course. His masculine scent, which she'd noticed in the room and in the car, was addictive. She closed the car door and headed into the lobby.

Chapter 32

Once in the room, Catalina hurriedly took a shower, deciding that she didn't need to wash her hair. Instead, she brushed it out into rippling waves. There had been a little breeze, so she selected the petrol blue scoop-neck dress, as it had long sleeves and was modest in length, despite the fact that it showed off the cleavage that had seemed to so entrance Eduardo. She selected a pair of gold wedges with an ankle strap, which were deceptively comfortable and contrasted nicely with the color of the dress. The same brass earrings she'd been wearing all day provided a nice touch of bling without being over the top, and a red woven clutch completed her ensemble. Spritzing a bit of perfume behind each ear, she gave herself one last look in the mirror and left, finding herself wondering what would happen tonight when they were both back in the hotel room that night. Without the excuse of jet lag, would it be even more awkward between them? They'd had a nice time working together. Hopefully that trend would continue. And then what?

When she arrived at the large tent set up on the beach that housed their show, she was impressed. The pavilion, which had looked a little sad and pedestrian earlier in the day, had been transformed. Up lights washed the canvas in a purple glow. Palm trees had been installed on either side of the entrance, and a dark blue carpet had been laid out on the walkway leading up to the pavilion. So much had been done in the few hours that they had been away. It boggled the mind. She could see catering vans parked alongside the building, white uniformed workers hustling about. Some galleries must already have been hosting cocktail preview parties. It was incredible, all the moving pieces that went into the building of an event on the scale of Art Basel and everything that surrounded it. She felt excited to be a tiny cog in that wheel.

Again, her heart was beating with apprehension and excitement, and a bit of panic, at seeing Eduardo for the first time since the room debacle. *He's going to ignore it*, she reminded herself. *He's too much of a diplomat to show his hand*. She would just make sure that he didn't catch her alone. Easier said than done, but she would manage it. She hoped he didn't try to ask where she was staying. Things might get awkward. She headed down the aisle where their booth was located. The whole space was now almost unrecognizable. Galleries had brought in flowers on pedestals, lighting, and other effects, and she was relieved that they had decided to go the extra mile with the green wall. Hopefully, Sebastian had managed to put it all up the way she imagined it. When she stepped up to their booth, she gasped. He had gone above and beyond. The back wall looked like something out of a jungle, and the sign glowed in the middle, over the mosaic piece, which served as a perfect focal point, without taking away from anything else. She felt so proud to see the name of her gallery on a wall at a show in Miami, even if it wasn't officially Art Basel.

Sebastian had ensured that the track lighting shone evenly on each piece, and everything looked more professional than she could have imagined. He had even found the time, somehow, to go out and get a bouquet of flowers for the table in the back of the space. He had placed a bottle of champagne in a bucket, with a few glasses next to it.

But of course, the thing her eyes focused on then was Sebastian. He was looking at her, too, judging her outfit, maybe.

"What?" she asked. "Is there something wrong with my dress?"

"No, you look perfect," he said, looking away. "Are you ready for this? Eduardo should be here any minute."

"Ready as I'll ever be," she said, taking a deep breath.

"Listen, I want you to remember, this week, at this event, we're on the same team. Okay? We're here for each other, no matter what happens."

Why was it still so hard for her to believe him? Then, there was Eduardo, striding up, wearing a light khaki linen suit, his gray hair slicked back. He cut an elegant figure and looked every inch the ambassador. But she couldn't help but shudder when she reminded herself that the room fiasco may not have been an accident. Should she give him the benefit of the doubt? She wasn't sure. But then, as soon as Eduardo spoke, she knew.

"Where have you been?" he asked, as soon as he was within earshot.

"Excuse me?" said Catalina.

"The room- you didn't check in."

Catalina startled. So, it had been on purpose. He knew that he had only gotten one room for her and for himself. She couldn't believe he was being so blunt, so crass, right in front of Sebastian, no less. She opened her mouth, not knowing what to say, but then, there was a flash of movement at her elbow, and Sebastian stepped forward.

"Of course we checked in. Thank you so much for reserving," Sebastian said. "Our room is quite comfortable. And what a view!"

"Our...?"

Eduardo, normally so suave, seemed to be having a hard time composing himself.

"And don't worry about the mix-up," Sebastian said. "We set them straight."

Eduardo's eyes were bugging out as he tried to figure out what in the world was going on. Catalina held her breath. Hell, she had no idea what was going on, either.

"I was worried for a minute that you hadn't heard that Catalina and I are together, now, and that you were going to waste your money on an extra room," said Sebastian. "But thankfully...well, it's true that all of Mexico City is gossiping about how we fell so deeply in love, and so fast."

Catalina realized what Sebastian was doing, now. He was giving Eduardo an out, a way to save face. Eduardo blanched for just a moment, and then the diplomat in him took over.

"It's a small world. And I apologize- I assumed you two would want to be together. I should have asked."

"No, it's quite right," said Sebastian. "It's like a little romantic getaway for us, isn't it, darling?" he said, pulling Catalina close and giving her a kiss on the temple that left her trembling and slightly sweaty. She was infinitely thankful to him for trying to take the awkwardness out of the situation, but now, and Sebastian had no way of knowing this, they were going to have to convincingly act like an item, or risk Eduardo's ire. After all, he had made it abundantly clear that he was a man who did not take kindly to being lied to, especially if it meant being made a fool of. She would need to warn Sebastian, when they were alone again.

"I just want you to know," said Sebastian, "we were absolutely not an item when she nominated me. There was nothing untoward about it. It's just been a whirlwind, you know?"

"Yes, of course," said Eduardo quickly, as if dying to change the subject. "Well, your booth looks phenomenal."

They spent the next 45 minutes drinking champagne and discussing the finer points of the art on display, explaining to Eduardo the significance of each piece and the biography of each artist they had so carefully selected for this show. The ambassador nodded, clearly learning what they'd said by heart so that he could explain it to his friends and contacts and look knowledgeable. Ever the politician. Catalina's heart was beating. What Sebastian had done for her was kind. It was selfless. But it was impetuous, and now, it put them in the awkward position of having to act like a couple. It also meant Sebastian would have a lot of explaining to do vis-a-vis Bibi the supermodel, because there was no way she wouldn't catch wind of it. As Eduardo had said, it was a very small world. She thought of what Sofia had said, about how people were rooting for Catalina and Sebastian as a couple.

Eduardo checked his watch.

"Well, I suppose we should get going. We're meeting with a cultural attaché and a few collectors at Nobu. Just be your charming selves, and I'm sure it will be a lovely evening," he said. "However, I want to go a bit earlier and make sure of a few things. Shall I let you close up, and see you there?"

"Yes, absolutely," said Catalina, relieved that they didn't have to share a car to the restaurant.

Once he was gone, she finally relaxed a little and faced Sebastian. "You didn't have to do that," she said.

"I believe I absolutely did," he responded, his eyes blazing. "That pig, he really did do it on purpose. How dare he think that you were an object, there for the taking?"

"Welcome to the world of being a woman."

"I'm sorry. I detest that."

Ha, Catalina thought. Sebastian's family owned so many young girls. No doubt indentured servants, sex workers, and the like. How dare he try to expound on women's rights? She also blushed as she remembered what he had said, about men not being the only ones who might make advances. But perhaps his heart was in the right place at this very moment, and she wasn't going to start an argument. She sighed.

"Shall we go?" he asked. "Nobu's not so far away. We could go on foot, if you're able. The fresh air would do us some good."

"Sure. I purposely chose shoes I could walk in," she said. "Unless I trip, which I've been known to do."

Sebastian smiled.

"I know. I remember earlier that day- I had noticed you across the street, and I was wondering whether you were opening the gallery next door."

"And were you thinking that would be a good thing, or a bad thing?" she asked as they set off to the exit door. His response surprised her.

"A little bit of both, maybe?"

She would have asked why, but she had something very important to communicate to him before they got back to Eduardo.

"It wasn't a good idea to tell Eduardo that lie," she blurted out.

"Why? It worked, didn't it?"

"You don't understand. He hates it when people make a fool of him. He detests it. He warned me."

"So, he gets annoyed. What can he possibly do?"

"He told me how another gallery owner did something to him that he didn't like, and he boasted about how he retaliated. Apparently, it was career-destroying."

Sebastian gave her a look.

"Really? You knew this and...never mind. I get it. This was a great opportunity. Don't worry. We'll pretend really convincingly. It's just four more days."

"OK..." she responded; doubt writ large in her tone.

"I mean, in your mind, what do you think we need to do to convince him?"

"Well, the good news is, we're in the United States, and it's a work situation. I think we're talking more simmering undercurrent than tongue down the throat," Catalina said.

"Got it. No tongue."

At that, Catalina made the mistake of looking straight at Sebastian. She could imagine him, in her mind's eye, tipping her head back and stroking her neck with his fingertips, his lips hovering over her mouth before claiming it in a toe-curling kiss. She could almost feel it. Her breath came

out in a shudder, and she blushed when she realized that Sebastian had noticed. He was now staring back at her.

“Oh, that’s good,” he said.

“What?”

“That’s exactly the way we should look at each other, isn’t it? Let me try.”

She almost scoffed at him, but he stopped them right there on the sidewalk and turned to face her, his eyes delving into hers. The color started to rise in her cheeks, and she began to feel a prickling all over. He was looking at her lips, her throat, her cleavage, and back up. She started feeling weak in the knees. She held her breath. It was all she could do to hold back from pressing her body against his and begging him to do any of the many things he had done to her in her dreams, right there, right then.

“How’s that?” He asked, his voice gruff.

God, he even sounded like he was getting excited. If she hadn’t known he was just pretending, she would have sworn he was getting hard by now.

“That’s good,” she said, gulping and licking her lips, trying to tear her eyes away from his mouth. “You may have missed your calling. Do you have any tips for me?”

“Easy. I have a very good imagination, and I let it run wild.”

Catalina swallowed hard.

“Oh. Well...you’re a very good actor.”

“You think so? Thank you.”

They resumed walking, heading up the street, their steps in sync, as she noticed they always were. But there was a strange awkwardness between them, now. What had he meant, that he had thought it was both a good thing and a bad thing if she had the gallery next to his?

She started worrying anew about the insta-love narrative they had fed to Eduardo. Did that even happen to people in real life? With Alejandro, it had hardly been love at first sight. They had been friends first, meeting accidentally one too many times, first at an art gallery, then at the coffee shop they both frequented, and over the course of a few weeks, their conversations had led them to finally deciding to go out to dinner, which had led to a kiss that had sealed the deal. Because technically, Alejandro hadn’t really been her type. But he had said all the right things. He’d loved all the things she loved. And they had been so much on the same page that they were almost like two halves of one whole. And that, over time, had created an attraction that was bound to be much longer lasting than something that might ignite quickly, then flame out.

With Sebastian, she felt like there were whole worlds separating them, but some kind of twisted chemistry tempting her to try to bring him closer. Not that he was available. And this was not like her; she did not fall for bad boys- not anymore, she reminded herself. She’d already had enough heartbreak in her life. And having known love, true love, no matter how briefly, she could live out the rest of her days alone. She could be a good *Tia* to her nieces and nephews. She could have good friends. Maria had it right. Not bothering with a partner was the best way to have peace in life, wasn’t it?

But at the same time, she knew that she wasn’t Maria. The desire she’d felt when she looked at Sebastian, when he touched her shoulder, or took her elbow, when she’d felt the weight of him in the bed next to her, when she’d dreamed of him, and yes, when he’d absolutely ravaged her with those navy eyes, all of those things told her that no, she would not be content to have a life without at least a lover. Alejandro was gone. He would never know whether she’d moved on or not. As much as she wanted to believe in an afterlife, despite the ghost she had conjured up that haunted the gallery, she knew they would not be reunited, at the end. No matter how many prayers she’d said, no matter how alive she’d tried to keep the man he’d been in her mind and in her heart, he

was never coming back. This pretending thing with Sebastian, it was certainly a bad idea, but it was also a gateway drug of sorts that might give her some practice, to allow her to build a real relationship with somebody else, later on.

"What are you thinking about?" Sebastian asked.

"Nothing much."

"You don't strike me as someone who's content to just space out," said Sebastian. "Don't lie to me."

"What?" she replied, faux-casual. But she was starting to panic. What the hell was this? Did he think he owned her, just because they were fake dating, now?

"Relax, Catalina," he smiled. "Since we're pretending to be so in love, you should practice being truthful with me. You can simply tell me 'none of your business.' You're allowed to have your own secret garden. You're allowed to be your own person. Whether it's with a friend or with a lover, you're allowed to keep some things private."

"Tell that to Alejandro," she scoffed, before instantly regretting what she had just said.

"Alejandro?" Sebastian asked, giving her a funny look.

"My late husband?"

"I know that" said Sebastian. "Did Alejandro really know everything about you? Everything you thought, everything you felt?"

"Pretty much," she said, "or at least, he certainly wanted to."

She winced. She was making him sound controlling, and it wasn't like that. Well, not exactly.

"And you think that he shared everything with you?"

"He did," she said defensively. *Liar.*

A shadow passed across Sebastian's face, a funny expression she couldn't quite place. She wanted to ask him what that was supposed to mean, but he was the one who was expounding on the fact that people didn't need to tell each other everything. So why would he tell her why he'd made that face? And she didn't want to hear Alejandro's name in that gorgeous mouth again. But if she told him that, and they argued, it would be that much harder to convincingly pretend to be in love. She needed to change the subject, and fast.

"Anyway," she said, "have you been to a Nobu before?"

"Yes," he replied. "New York and Malibu. I'm looking forward to dinner. I'm very hungry."

"Me too," Catalina admitted. "I almost never skip lunch, and today I guess we forgot."

"Listen," Sebastian said, as they approached the Nobu Hotel. "We'll sit next to each other. All right? If he says anything or does anything that bothers you, and I miss it, you nudge me, and I'll take care of it."

"Okay," she said.

It was good to have someone in her corner, someone defending her. Yes, she was an independent, strong woman, but it felt good to be taken care of. It had been too long. When she'd been with Alejandro, she'd felt more like they were on equal footing, not like she had a protector, and she'd been proud to be so modern. But there was something to be said about an Alpha male, she realized.

Chapter 33

They stepped into the lobby and followed the signs to the restaurant.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready as I'll ever be," she replied. She smoothed down her hair, and they stepped up to the hostess.

"We're here with Eduardo Smith," Sebastian said.

"Absolutely," said the hostess. "I'll have my colleague direct you to the table."

They followed a young woman who was doubtless an aspiring model to a table in the corner. The ambassador was seated, deep in conversation with another silver-haired man, this one heavier and even more predatory looking than the Eduardo. This did not bode well.

"We're in this together," Sebastian whispered.

He took her hand, and she stiffened in surprise before relaxing and going with it. It felt good.

"Ah," said Eduardo, "they're here. These are the gallerists I was talking about," he said to his companion. "Catalina Cervantes and Sebastian Espinoza, let me introduce you to Ramon de la Rivera."

"Pleased to meet you," said Catalina and Sebastian almost in unison. She made sure not to correct her name.

"Please have a seat," said Eduardo.

Sebastian slid into the booth next to him, and Catalina noticed the ambassador frown only slightly before pasting a pleasant expression back on his face. Catalina slid in next to Sebastian, shuddering as she felt her leg press against his. She pulled away a bit and composed herself.

"We're still expecting a few more people," Eduardo said. "Ramon is the cultural attaché. I also have a few reporters and some employees of the consulate, as well as the official representative of the Mexican community in Miami."

The evening went by pleasantly enough; the sushi was delicious, and the questions prompted an interesting conversation about the place of Mexican art in the modern world and the influences they were noticing in the work of many contemporary artists. They'd almost gotten through the dinner when the cultural attaché said, "So what's it like to be two competing gallerists in a romantic relationship?"

"Oh, you know," said Catalina evasively.

"We try to support each other," said Sebastian, "but sometimes there's a little friendly competition that adds... spice."

He winked at her and put a warm, firm hand on her thigh.

One of the journalists gushed, "I can't wait to publish an article about this. People are going to love it. You make a dashing couple, and your story is so romantic."

Catalina held her breath. Where would this article be published? Would her parents see it? Would her sister see it? Would Bibi the supermodel see it? She felt like a fraud. It was like they'd created a monster with this fake relationship, one that could go out of control and hurt many more people than they had anticipated. She was mortified, but it was too late to rectify the situation. If they did, Eduardo would unleash a punishment she did not want to imagine.

"Do you think you'll get married? Maybe in one of the galleries? With artists giving you custom works to celebrate your love?" Asked the Mexican representative, a woman with glasses and a brunette bun who sounded like she watched too many telenovelas. In fact, Catalina decided that she looked like the nerdy secretary character who then seduces the boss by loosening her bun and removing her glasses and revealing red lingerie under her strict suit jacket. *Now who's the one watching too many telenovelas?*

"You know," said Sebastian, "I suppose we are as committed as it gets- I own the building, and Catalina has a long lease, so I hope we get along for a good long time. Otherwise, it may grow awkward, right darling?"

He gave her a wicked smile.

"Yes, that does add a layer of complication," she said weakly.

At the end of the evening, the group said goodnight to each other, and Eduardo took his leave abruptly, she noticed. He seemed annoyed, but that wasn't really her problem, was it?

"I'm exhausted," said Sebastian. "I'm glad that's over. Tomorrow's going to be a big day."

Yes, the next day, there would be much schmoozing and chit-chatting with various collectors and art world types. Catalina realized now how much she had counted on Alejandro's gregarious nature, while she was more of an introvert. But now that she was on her own, she would have to step it up. This temporary state of affairs, where she and Sebastian were a unified front, was only going to last the next few days. When they came back to Mexico City, they would be back to being competing art galleries, and she would still need to pay the rent. And he, as he had so helpfully pointed out, owned the building.

"You're serious, all of a sudden," Sebastian noted.

"I'm just tired, too," she responded.

"Listen, I want you to know that I don't expect that, just because I'm pretending we're together for Eduardo, there's going to be any hanky-panky."

"Ha. I didn't at any point think that," she said, primly.

"I'm sorry I even mentioned it," he grimaced. "Now I've made it awkward."

"It's fine."

But of course, it was awkward. When they got back to the room, they had to awkwardly discuss who would brush their teeth first. And then, Sebastian decided to awkwardly take a shower. As expected, imagining him in there got Catalina feeling a bit weak. She lay in bed, wearing the hotel bathrobe, anticipating the sight of this gorgeous man emerging from the bathroom, his skin still hot and damp, his hair curling over his ears. And obviously, when he came out, it was exactly as she'd anticipated. The intimacy of the situation struck her, and she found herself not knowing what to say when he gingerly sat on the bed, as if he could sense that something between them had changed.

"I want to thank you again for saving me ...from a potentially difficult situation," she said.

"You're welcome. You would have done the same for me."

"You wouldn't have gotten yourself into anything of the sort," said Catalina.

"Only because I'm not Eduardo's type," Sebastian cracked. "Seriously, it's no big deal. Come on, let's sleep. We have a long day in front of us."

"Good night."

She closed her eyes and tried to convince herself to go to sleep. She was exhausted, but when she felt the bed moving, felt him lift the covers and lie down, just a foot away from her, and felt the heat radiating off of him, she held her breath. She felt him turn around, to face away from her. She listened for his breath and waited, hoping that sleep would claim her, but it didn't. The thought of him so close to her- there was something about it. She felt him shift again. Was he facing her, now? She couldn't tell, and she was afraid to look.

"Catalina," she heard him say.

"Yes?"

She turned her head, and then there he was, his face far too close to hers. And then, she didn't know what the hell came over her, but next thing she knew, she was turning her body, angling it towards him, and putting a hand to his cheek, feeling the stubble and the firmness of his jaw. And

now, even though it was dark in the room, she could feel his eyes on her. She imagined that he was looking at her in the way that he had demonstrated earlier. Or was that just her imagination running away with her? Still, that look had made her weak in the knees. It had made her wet. And just thinking about it, she found that her mouth was on his, and it was as if she'd been waiting for this ever since she'd seen him for the first time. Thank goodness, he was reciprocating, taking her face in both of his hands, and kissing her deeply, and she was pressing herself against his body, feeling the heat of him, the hardness of him. She breathed him in, savoring his masculine smell. His breath was growing more labored now, too, as he sucked on her lower lip, and explored her mouth with his tongue. His hand slid under her bathrobe and moved to stroke her shoulder, then cup a breast. She gasped as his thumb brushed against her nipple, and as he dragged his teeth against her throat. Now, it was her turn to slip a hand under his tee shirt, delighting at the feel of his hot skin. What would he do to her next? She didn't care- all she knew was, she didn't want it to stop. But then, as suddenly as they had come together, he pulled away.

Why?

She was so turned on. This was an expression she'd first heard at university, in the States- and it hadn't quite made sense at the time. But now, it did. Being close to Sebastian, it had turned something on in her- made everything bright again, intense again, and she didn't want it to be turned off.

Then, she remembered. He had a girlfriend. *Oh, God.* It was one thing to perform for Eduardo's benefit. They could play-act for the journalists. But in this room, this behavior was just her acting on her selfish desire, just her taking advantage, and it wasn't fair. He'd probably been turning towards her to ask what time they should set their alarm for, and she'd gone and reacted like this.

After Alejandro's disappearance, she hadn't imagined that she would ever be able to reclaim the excitement and the pleasure she'd found in physical connection, nor had she wanted to. But the rest of her life, she was starting to realize, was a very long time. With Sebastian, even though she barely wanted to admit it, she had found the same spark, the same desire, the same want, as she had with Alejandro. Maybe, if she was truthful with herself, even more of it. Because Sebastian seemed tailor built for her. This made her feel silly because, in truth, she couldn't imagine any woman who wouldn't find herself weak in the knees when coming across someone like him. And for now, at least, he belonged to someone else.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "This was wrong. It won't happen again."

"No, I'm the one who is sorry. Good night."

He shifted far over, over to the very edge of the bed. She lay there, mortified, trying to get her breathing back under control. He was a kind person, she reasoned. He wouldn't hold this against her, would he? And even if he did judge her for it, she had the feeling that he wouldn't tell anyone what had happened. It wasn't in his interest to do so. How was he going to explain everything to Bibi? He probably had spoken to her already, maybe when Catalina was brushing her teeth before bed. Sebastian and Catalina would have to fake a break-up, once they got back from Miami, and Bibi would have to be OK with telling people they had been on a break. It would be mortifying for her, and Catalina felt horrible that the glamorous mosaic artist had been dragged into this. Surely Sebastian would make it up to her, though, a thought that made Catalina feel jealous. They would probably get engaged soon, to make people stop talking. That thought shouldn't have hurt, but it did. Because after just a little taste of Sebastian, she was hooked.

Chapter 34

The next morning, Catalina opened her eyes. She startled. Sebastian's face was so close to her own. His dark lashes curled on his high cheekbones. His lush lips gently closed, his chest rising and falling, she could see, as he breathed. So peaceful.

She herself had been woken by a nightmare, not a memory of her life with Alejandro, but rather something new: a terrifying vision of what could happen when she came back home, if she failed in this art business endeavor that she had launched herself into with too much impetuosity and no safety net. She'd come so far, she really had, but her financial runway would be running out, crumbling beneath her feet. And here was this man lying next to her, who had helped her in so many ways. And she had barely been appreciative of it. She hadn't stopped to consider the time, the cost, and the energy that he had given her, with no expectation of anything in return.

And now, her very presence in this room, she realized, was taking away from him. After all, he was nearly engaged, wasn't he? At the very least, he was in a very serious relationship with the gorgeous creature she had seen at the embassy. Sebastian had been reluctant to speak of Bibi, but probably because it was none of Catalina's business. He had no intention of having Catalina be part of his life, his real life. She was just his neighbor. The owner of just another Roma Norte art gallery that would probably fail, like so many others before it. Nothing else. The favor he had done her here in Miami was pure kindness, and a testament to what kind of person he really was. And to think she had been so quick to assume the worst of him...

His eyes fluttered open, and she hesitated. What to do? Pretend to be asleep? Pull back? It was all too late. He'd caught her staring at him. The awkwardness of the situation struck her.

She started to pull away.

She had pretty much thrown herself at him the night before, and now she didn't know how to interact with him without making it strange and uncomfortable.

"Good morning," he whispered, as if there was someone else in the room who might possibly hear them.

"Good morning."

"How are you feeling?" He asked.

"Why do you ask? I'm fine."

"I think you had a little too much to drink last night."

Oh, so he thought it was the tequila talking, did he? Not her burning attraction to him. In fact, she was barely hungover at all. She'd been completely in her right mind when she had given in to her desire for him. Thank goodness he had put a stop to it. It was mortifying, but probably better than the alternative.

And now, they had another three nights here at the hotel. Maybe he would ask her to stop sharing a room with him. She wouldn't blame him. Not that she knew where she would go. Not that it was even really an option, for her, at least. Also, if Eduardo realized they had pulled the wool over his eyes, he would make them pay. The idea made her tremble.

"Do you want to get ready first, or shall I?" Sebastian asked.

"Whatever you want," she said.

Yes, this was going to be awkward and strange, wasn't it? The energy between them was all wrong. Any easiness or friendliness or spirit of collaboration that had been there the day before had evaporated, and it was all her doing.

"I'll get ready first," she said. "I'll go get a coffee, and then I'll go check out what's going on at the booth. I can man the morning hours. You join me when you're ready."

“*OK genial.*”

He turned onto his back and closed his eyes again, and she scrambled to exit the bed and take herself to the bathroom, trying not to let her gaze linger on the shape of him under the sheets.

“Actually,” he called out, as she headed towards the bathroom, “May I use the restroom for a moment, and then it's all yours?”

“Of course.”

She hung back and watched him as he got up and headed towards her.

She couldn't help it. Her eyes traveled down his torso, taking in the thin tee shirt that outlined his pectoral muscles and the loose workout trousers that did nothing to disguise the presence of spectacular morning wood. Of course, he saw her looking. She felt the blush creeping from her chest, up her neck, and across her face. There was nothing she could say to excuse herself. Anyway, at this point, the less said, the better.

“I'll just be a moment,” he said, tersely.

“Of course, take your time.”

She slumped against the wall, closing her eyes and berating herself. What was wrong with her? The attraction was purely one-sided. He was not available, and even if he was, she was probably not his type at all. He had just been charitable about the room and was playing a role that cost him far more than it did her, to help her out vis-a-vis the stupid situation she had put herself in with Eduardo.

She heard the toilet flush, and the faucet turn on. He was brushing his teeth. This forced intimacy was so bizarre. When she'd moved in with Alejandro, the first weeks and months of cohabitation had been such a heady time. It had been so strange and so thrilling, learning to share a space with somebody. And here she was, in the same situation, but not the same at all.

Sebastian emerged from the bathroom. She had to say something. She needed to pierce the abscess. A gulf was growing between them- she could feel it. And it was all her fault. She was the one who had to do something about it, because if it went on like this, Eduardo would be able to tell that something was wrong between them in a millisecond. When she opened her mouth, she didn't really quite know what she would say, but anything was better than this awkwardness.

“Hey, Sebastian?”

He raised his head, looked at her. The devastation in his expression made her heart sink. He was a good guy. She had forced herself on him, and now he was stuck trying to work out what that meant for Bibi.

“Last night was a huge mistake,” she said.

“I know,” he said, his lips forming a straight line.

Oh, this was worse than anything she could have imagined. He seemed not only upset, but disappointed. She'd really messed up, hadn't she? She was so selfish.

“It was inappropriate. It never should have happened,” she began.

“I know. I'm so sorry.”

She stared at him.

“What do you mean, you're sorry? I'm the one who's sorry. I overstepped the bounds,” she said.

Ay, Dios. She'd thought nothing would be more awkward than waking up after what she had done the night before, but this long, drawn out apology process was a nightmare.

“I appreciate the sentiment,” he said, carefully, “But this is all on me.”

“Listen, I'm doing everything I can to apologize,” she said. “The least you can do is just accept it and believe me when I promise that I'll try to do better in the future. I'm not just going to try, mind you, I...it's not going to happen again.”

She noticed now that he had come much closer. They were almost touching, in fact. She was against the wall, her back pressed against the grass cloth wallpaper, looking into those eyes of his. His proximity was making this so hard for her. She held her breath. What did he want from her? What was he doing? Her knees were weak. He came even closer to her now, if that was even possible. She knew that she wanted what they had done the night before again. More than that, she wanted him to do to her what he had done in her dreams. But that wasn't what *he* wanted, she thought.

Until he leaned in, placing his hands on the wall on either side of her head, and pressed himself against her. *Oh.* He was hard, and hot. She couldn't help but feel a little burst of satisfaction at this and notice how it made her body react instantly. He claimed her mouth. Gently at first. Then more insistently, suckling her lower lip, biting it, then twining his tongue with hers. She gasped, and found herself reciprocating, just breathing in his breath, relishing the feel of his chest against her breasts, his torso pressing against hers, his crotch grinding against her pelvic region.

She was conscious now of her bathrobe, all too hastily tied.

This was a mistake, a big mistake. He wasn't hers. But how she wished he was.

"You don't want to do this," she said, against his mouth, even though she didn't want him to stop.

"Tell me *you* don't want it, and I'll stop."

That did it.

She had thought that she was the only guilty party, but he had not only reciprocated. He had come onto her this morning. Which meant he was a cheater. He was someone who didn't think twice about stepping out on his beautiful girlfriend. He was not a good man, after all, not worth the yearning and the fantasies she had indulged in. This had to stop. She found the strength to push him away. The hurt in his eyes as she did so gave her pause, but she steeled herself, calling up every shred of resolve she could find.

"We'll talk about this later," she said, panting.

She locked herself in the bathroom and slid against the door, feeling weak. Part of her didn't care if he belonged to someone else, didn't care if she was just his side piece, didn't care if this was just something that would last the next few days. But then, there was the other part of her- the part that had once known true love, the part that had had her heart broken. And that was the part that made the decision that, if she was going to open herself to love again, she couldn't half-ass it. She owed it to herself not to throw herself into something that wasn't real.

Yes, it was true that Sebastian had turned her on. He had awoken things in her, having barely touched her, that she hadn't thought would be possible again. Now, she knew that at least the potential was there, and that someday, maybe, she would find someone who could truly be hers. For now, she just needed to survive the next few days in Miami and figure out how to keep her gallery open without complicating her life further with a relationship that could never be.

"Can we talk about this?" Sebastian called through the door.

"Later. I need to get ready."

"Fine," she heard him say. "As you wish."

Ha. Things were far from fine. And she didn't really know what she wished. Or maybe the truth was that she wished for lots of things. She wished Alejandro was still alive, that things were the way they had been at the beginning, and that she didn't have to even deal with this bullshit. She wished that her art gallery was not already in danger of going under. She wished that Eduardo hadn't tried his crap on her, and that she hadn't been forced into this charade.

But above all, she wished she could have Sebastian. Wished she didn't have to hold back. Wished he could claim her, fully. Wished she would have no regrets. But wishes were for little

children who believed in miracles. Today wasn't even her damn birthday. She had no stupid candles or shooting stars or ladybugs or eyelashes on hand, either.

Stepping into the shower stall, she lathered herself up, trying not to think about what could have been. She quickly washed and conditioned her hair and gave herself a rinse with cold water to calm herself down and freeze out any further unwise ideas she might have.

When she was done, she wrapped her hair in a towel, dried herself off, and draped herself back into the bathrobe that she had worn into the bathroom. When she opened the door, she gasped, surprised. Sebastian was still standing by the door, waiting for her.

"We need to talk about this."

"No, we don't."

"You're mad at me for something- Is it going to be hard for you to put on the act in front of Eduardo today?"

"You think you're the only good actor around here? Let me by. I need to get ready."

She attempted to push past him, but he was blocking her way with his arm. With his other hand, he spun her around to face him.

"What's the issue? Is it your husband's ghost you're worried about?"

That was it. If the idea of him being a cheater hadn't been enough to turn her off, those words broke the spell completely.

"How dare you?" She pulled away. "Step aside."

"I'm sorry. That was inappropriate."

The devastated look on his face told her he was sincere.

"It certainly was," she replied, her heart beating in her chest.

But in reality, the spots of color in her cheeks were not so much out of being offended, but more about being excited by the possibility of giving in to the intense desire that she felt for him. Being offended at whatever he had said about Alejandro was a handy excuse, and he probably knew it, too. If he really had known Alejandro, he knew that her late husband hadn't been the perfect angel she had painted him as. Also, if he had really been close with Alejandro, was Sebastian also involved in some of the less savory things she had found out about before her husband's death?

Without another word, Sebastian stalked past Catalina and slammed the bathroom door behind him. She heard the shower turn on, and of course instantly imagined him in there, rivulets of water running along his chest, down his body. What wouldn't she have given to be in there with him? She shook herself, trying to free herself from those thoughts. It wasn't constructive. She should focus on picking an appropriate outfit for the day, something that would set her apart.

She chose the orange crepe jumpsuit. Large blue and white ceramic earrings and cobalt sandals completed the look. Her hair was wet, but the hairdryer was in the bathroom with a very naked Sebastian, so she decided to pull her locks into a high, tight ponytail that would dry on its own throughout the day. Her toiletry kit was in the bathroom as well, so makeup was out of the question. Thankfully, she had a tomato red lipstick in her handbag, so she applied that to lips that still felt swollen from that last kiss and dabbed some on her still-burning cheeks. Her naturally dark eyebrows and eyelashes would have to hold their own today. She gathered her things, including the obi scarf and a jean jacket, to break up the color and warm her up in case the morning was cool, and set out. Of course, considering her luck, she ran into Eduardo just as she was pouring herself a coffee from the station in the lobby.

"Oh, hello," he said. "Where's Sebastian?"

"In the shower."

She noted a funny, maybe suspicious expression on Eduardo's face. True, who in their right mind would leave a man like that in the shower alone?

"I'm just going to head to the booth and see if there are any early visitors," she said.

"Ah. Good idea," said Eduardo. "I'm going to be bringing by a delegation, so try to be as charming as possible when they arrive."

"Of course," said Catalina, ignoring his patronizing tone. "See you there."

Chapter 35

As soon as Eduardo left, she grabbed herself a banana, wishing she could pause for some eggs or a biscuit, but at the same time, her stomach was tied up in knots. She walked to the pavilion, observing the passerby. There were many well-heeled people out enjoying a morning jog or walk, perhaps strategizing which artists they wanted to see later in the day. Catalina hoped she would have the opportunity to go see the main event at some point, maybe when Sebastian was available to man the booth. It would have been fun to go with him, though.

But really, this fantasy of going and looking at artists was a waste of time- it was just curiosity, and not something that would concretely help her to keep her gallery open. She needed to strategize on partnerships and on more ways of making money if she wanted to stay afloat.

A text message came in.

Sebastian: *I might go check out the main convention center.*

Catalina: *Of course, take your time.*

Of course, she tried to be casual about it, but envy raged in her heart. Sebastian was a wealthy gallerist who could afford to do the superficial things. He could afford to play the game, whereas she was struggling and couldn't network aimlessly. Did she need to be a bigger picture thinker? Did she need to find investors? She didn't even know. She hadn't anticipated the challenge of competing with the other galleries in town and hadn't anticipated some of the ancillary costs of running a gallery. Obviously, she couldn't have guessed that she would have a neighbor like Sebastian. Though in reality, he had objectively made things better for her, not worse. Not only had he helped out in a pinch, but through their conversations, he had pushed her to go beyond her basic assumptions and had challenged her in ways she hadn't expected. She wouldn't even have thought of participating in this show if she hadn't been trying to compete with Sebastian, knowing that he was doing the ZONAMACO show in a few months. He was, in some way, setting a new pace for her, setting a higher bar, which was necessary, if she wanted to survive in the art world. But now that there was this awkwardness between them, she certainly wasn't going to thank him for it. Not at all.

She was going to go back to Mexico City, survive for a few more months, close her gallery, and go to work for someone else. Yes, it broke her heart, but it was the most realistic outcome. At least she had tried.

For the next hour, she tried to interact with everyone who came by their booth. She was speaking with a bespectacled woman with a red hennaed bob, who was pretending to be a large art investor, when she saw a tall form coming towards them. Was she dreaming, or did he have two cups of coffee and a bag of something in his hand?

She had noticed for a while now that she was ravenous. That banana hadn't really hit the spot.

"Sorry I took so long," Sebastian said.

"There wasn't a time limit on your checking out the show. You're free to do what you want."

"No, I'm not," he responded. "I'm sorry I forgot for just a moment that we're partners. But I didn't go. I realized that I would much rather see the art with you. Here, I got you a coffee, and I got us some empanadas. There was a line around the block, so I suspect they must be good."

The faux art collector with the red bob was still standing there, hands on hips, indignant at being ignored, even for a microsecond. Sebastian gave her a stern look.

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

"I was just speaking to your... assistant..." The woman looked over at Catalina, wrinkling her nose.

"Partner," Sebastian corrected.

“Yes, I’m interested in some of the work. But I don’t know if it’s right for me. Would you give some pieces out on loan?”

“Some?” asked Sebastian. “Is this for you, or for a client? Which pieces are you interested in? They’re all quite different.”

Faced with his barrage of questions, the woman soon lost interest and wandered off.

“Thank you,” said Catalina. “I was stuck with her for almost an hour.”

“Never suffer fools and fakes,” said Sebastian.

Easier said than done, Catalina thought. Sebastian handed her an empanada wrapped in a napkin.

“Try this one. It’s mushroom, I think.”

She took a bite. It was succulent, delicious. She nearly moaned with happiness.

“I was so hungry,” she said.

“You didn’t have to come here on your own, and so early. We could have gone to breakfast together.”

She was silent. It was true she had run away, but she had thought the situation might only escalate.

“In any case, I know there must be some interesting artists in the main exhibition hall. I would like us both to go there and look when we have a chance.”

“One of us needs to be here,” said Catalina.

“Not necessarily,” said Sebastian. “I called Eduardo’s assistant. Apparently, he had the poor girl come over from Los Angeles after you didn’t show up. Don’t worry, she elected to stay at a friend’s house when she realized what the accommodations were.”

Catalina rather inelegantly mimed the act of vomiting. Eduardo disgusted her.

“I know. Repulsive. Anyway, she should be here in the next half hour to man the booth, so we’re free until he arrives with his so-called delegation. If they’re all as wonderful as he is, I don’t think we need to be on our best behavior, or even be present.”

Catalina stared at him, wide-eyed.

“He would be livid.”

“What’s he going to do to us? Complain loudly? If he kicks us out at this juncture, it will only make him look bad. I’m not too worried.”

Catalina thought about this. Sebastian was right. Why was she so timid? Eduardo talked a big game, but at this stage, there was nothing much he could do, especially not now that the artworks were there and that they had already been photographed and interviewed for the local papers. Except, he could probably get revenge on her once she was back in Mexico City. Sebastian didn’t have to worry as much about that. He was not in as vulnerable a position.

“Why don’t you go look at our competitors in this tent,” said Sebastian. “You deserve a break. And when our new assistant comes, we’ll go to the main event.”

Catalina wouldn’t have accepted, but there was some residual awkwardness from that morning.

“All right, text me,” she said, and set off, coffee in hand.

She wandered the halls of the convention tent. It was roomy, quite large, maybe almost as large as the main convention center. And it really was impressive, in terms of the artists being shown. There was no shame in being part of this versus the official Art Basel, she decided, and after all, it was all part of the same hype.

As she ducked into various booths, she noticed the difference in how the art was presented, and how the gallerists interacted with visitors. She kept wondering to herself, what would make a difference in her own gallery? What made one gallery successful and another flop? Was it simply money and connections and advertising? Or was it some ineffable quality that made people want to

be part of it? People needed to experience FOMO if they couldn't come to one of her art shows, she decided.

She would need to focus on making each art opening a happening.

Sofia had connections, and so did Catalina, if she really thought about it. And she should work those connections to make her events into something that no one would want to miss. As for her artists, she needed to make them shine, so that buyers felt that purchasing one of their pieces would give them access to an exciting new world, like being a member of a private club.

Some of the booths were lively, and some were absolutely empty, other than a sullen gallerist sitting at a desk.

It had little to do with the quality of the art, Catalina concluded, and more to do with a feeling that one got as one walked by.

Did Sebastian worry about things like this? Or was he such a successful entrepreneur that this was just a vanity project? He seemed invested, she had to admit, and passionate about the art. Listening to him speak on several occasions had convinced her of that. But he didn't have the same imperatives she did, did he?

Her phone buzzed. A message from Sebastian.

She's here. Ready to go?

Catalina's heart started beating triple time as she headed back towards the booth. What would happen when it was just the two of them, walking side by side? Would they talk about what had happened the night before, and this morning? Or would they just sweep it all under the rug?

She arrived at the booth. A young girl with bright blonde hair and dark roots and eyebrows, massive eyelashes and a form-fitting red dress was standing there teetering on high heels, looking like a newborn giraffe, listening intently to something Sebastian was telling her. Of course she was listening intently. He could have been reading the phone book, and she probably would have been hanging on every word.

"Catalina, this is Eugenia, our helper for this week. Eugenia is thrilled to help us out and she wants to learn everything she can about the art world, so she wants to spend as many hours as possible here. Isn't that right, Eugenia?"

"Yes," said the girl, batting her spider-like lashes at him.

Well, she was firmly under his spell, but Catalina supposed that that served them at this juncture.

"All right, we're off. Please text us if there's an emergency. Try to sell something, won't you?"

Sebastian winked at the girl, and she batted her eyelashes back. Catalina felt a little pang of jealousy, despite herself.

Chapter 36

About twenty hours later, Catalina was awakening to an empty room and a note on the other pillow: *Went for a run. See you at the booth.*

She closed her eyes and fell back onto the mattress. This was not how she'd hoped the morning would go. For all her future-tripping, nothing had happened between her and Sebastian the day before. They had ended up barely spending an hour in the main convention tent- they were just starting to stand closer together, to whisper observations about the art into each other's ears, to get back into that easy groove that had felt so good earlier, when Eduardo had called them to let them know that he had relieved Eugenia of her duties, and that their presence was required at their booth, effective immediately. Then, they had endured a marathon of cocktails and an interminable dinner with Eduardo and a few of his more insufferable cronies at a boring expense account spot a half hour from the hotel, which they had ridden to in Eduardo's car, with Sebastian up front and Catalina in the back seat, alone. At the restaurant, they had been peppered with questions about their galleries and their relationship, with Catalina getting the distinct impression that the ambassador was trying to catch them in a lie. By the time they had made it back to the room, she'd been so emotionally exhausted that she'd fallen to sleep immediately while Sebastian was in the bathroom.

Now, she realized that she wished that Sebastian was there with her. She berated herself. What did she want, a replay of the morning before? To be honest, as painful as it was, she craved the tension between them and was *thisclose* to acting on it. So maybe it was indeed better that Sebastian had removed himself from the situation. Was he really such a morning athlete, or was he trying to keep away from her?

She got ready, putting on the pink jumpsuit with the scalloped detail, sent her sister another text message, thanking her again for the clothes that had made it so much easier to get dressed each day, and headed out. On her way to the booth, she checked her phone, surprised that Sofia had not responded, not to that message, nor to the one from the day before. When had she heard from Sofia last? Well, Sofia sometimes got busy. But she would have loved to talk with her about what was going on.

By the time Sebastian showed up at the booth, a coffee for her in hand, Catalina had pretty much convinced herself that she would absolutely resist him. It was only a couple more days, and then they would be back to their real lives, his glamorous one and her lonely one. But of course, seeing him close up, feeling his fingers brush against hers as he handed the cup over, tasting the coffee and realizing that he had added honey to it, like he had noticed her do, her resolve weakened.

"Eduardo has planned a dinner this evening with a few of the high-ranking Mexican business people in Miami," Sebastian warned as Catalina took another sip, afraid to keep looking at him.

"He certainly is milking this event for everything it's worth," she said. "Considering the expense, I'm not surprised."

"I was hoping for a nice, quiet evening, but I know that was wishful thinking. This is what we signed up for, isn't it?" Said Sebastian.

Catalina wanted to know what he meant by a nice quiet evening. Did he want to be alone? Or was he including her? What would happen if they let themselves have another movie night together?

"Get ready to put on your acting hat," Sebastian said. "I heard Eduardo on the phone telling people that we are a charming couple. But I'm getting the feeling he doesn't buy it."

"So, you're saying we need to ramp it up. Got it, use tongue," Catalina retorted.

She said it lightly, but the idea of it made her stomach turn to acid. It wasn't fun anymore, if it had ever been. Acting like a couple, the handholding, the fond smiles, the faking it, it had the unexpected side effect of making it all feel all too real, and the knowledge of how it would all end far too painful.

"We only have a couple more days," said Sebastian, no doubt misreading her pained expression, "and then you can go back to publicly detesting me."

"I don't ... oh, forget it."

She wasn't going to spell it out. It had to be quite clear to him already that she didn't detest him.

"Looks like we're booked solid with art collectors today, which is a good thing," said Sebastian. "We can take turns taking breaks, but now that we've lost Eugenia, one of us needs to always be manning the booth."

"No problem," said Catalina.

She was thinking about the day before; how they had visited the show together, and what a good time they'd had for that short time, even when they weren't making a show of being romantically involved. She had realized that she had been craving that closeness all the more as the day went on. It was much better not to have the opportunity to experience it again.

"If you have something else you'd rather be doing today, I can absolutely put in more time," she noted.

Why did she say stuff like that? She didn't want him to go away.

"I don't have anything better to do," he replied. "I suppose we'll just both be here."

The words, and the look he gave her as he said them, made her heart do a little bungee jump into her stomach, bouncing back up to her throat.

As Sebastian stood in a corner, checking his phone, Catalina settled in behind the table-desk in the corner, waiting for the floodgates to open. Visitors would start coming in 10 minutes. Hopefully, she would impress some collectors- if any came through. Selling out the show would be vastly preferable than having to package things up and send them back home. Financially, this was what her gallery needed, to stay afloat for a few more months.

Catalina had just straightened up the desk when she heard the brouhaha of a crowd beginning to make its way through the convention space. She pasted on a pleasant expression, hoping to attract more people to the booth. A man in dirty jeans and ancient loafers walked in, his disheveled appearance at odds with the carefully groomed look of most of the art patrons here, for whom this art show was also a fashion show. Despite his smudged glasses and unkempt hair, Catalina saw his eyes darting intelligently over several of the pieces.

"Is this your gallery?" He asked as he approached her.

"We are two galleries based in Mexico City," she announced. "I'm Catalina, owner of Alex Black Gallery, and my colleague over there is Sebastian Espinosa, of Espinosa Gallery. Are you interested in Mexican art?"

Catalina had noticed, of course, how the woman working the booth across the way from theirs had sent the man packing. She decided that at the very least, being a decent human being was as important as kissing up to wealthy potential patrons.

"I collect Mexican art. It's always been a passion of mine," said the man.

"That's interesting. Do you have any ties to Mexico?" Catalina asked.

"My late wife," said the man. "She was a Mexican national. I in fact opened a little exhibition space in her honor. We used to collect art during our travels, and Mexico was a favorite. "

Catalina noticed how the emotion made the man's already lined face crumple further. Her heart went out to him. She knew what it was like to have the best part of your life behind you. But at the

same time, she wondered to herself, was it worth it to keep holding a flame and refuse to live just because you had lost?

"I'm interested in the chair painting," said the man. "There's something very special about it. Very ethereal."

"I agree," Catalina smiled. "That's my favorite by far. I've always had a soft spot for it. And you have a good eye. The artist is very talented. I had another one of her chair paintings at my opening show, and it was the first thing to sell."

"I feel like it speaks of loss and emptiness and holding space for someone."

Catalina smiled sadly.

"I think you're absolutely right," she said. "I lost my spouse, too. Maybe that's why we both respond to the series so strongly."

"I'm sorry to hear it," said the man. "If I can tell you anything, my dear young lady, it is that you should keep living your life. Not just to honor the person you lost, but just to honor yourself. Shutting yourself off won't bring them back."

Catalina paused at this. He was right, of course, but she found it painful to hear it.

"Did you do that?" she asked. "I'm sorry if that's too direct a question. Insensitive, perhaps."

"No, and I wish someone had shaken me out of it. I, of course, thought there was honor to living for someone who was gone. And though I don't regret all of it, I wouldn't recommend it."

"Noted," said Catalina.

She looked over towards Sebastian, who was still conversing with the couple. She looked away before he could notice her eyes on him.

"So, what is the price point on that painting?" The man asked.

"Fifteen thousand."

Catalina looked around the gallery, avoiding looking at the man's face. She didn't want to see the disappointment in his expression when he realized he could not afford it. He had mentioned an exhibition space, but of course that could be what he called his living room. The sight of red stickers under several of the paintings heartened her somewhat, but she knew that her strategy in selecting what to show could have been more business savvy. She had picked these works from her heart, not from thinking about her wallet, as Sebastian had no doubt done for his show. His prices were higher, but he had sold just as many of his paintings, as well as the mosaic piece, and had probably garnered more press attention, to boot. But they each still had a handful of artworks left, and she wasn't sure that Eduardo would cover the cost of shipping them back, which would be a huge hit to her bottom line.

She heard the old man clear his throat and her eyes reluctantly turned back to him.

"I'll take it," he said.

Catalina startled.

"You will?"

"I love it."

He took a checkbook out of his pocket and filled out the sum. Catalina watched him, her heart beating in her chest. Was he pranking her? This was her most expensive piece. The largest one, too. When he handed her the check, and his business card, she recognized the name. This man had been modest when he'd mentioned an *exhibition space*. It was a bona fide art foundation with one of the most impressive private museums in the world. His name was in all the art books Catalina had studied at school. He and his wife had been powerhouses in the world of Mexican art. Even more than being flattered that one of her pieces was going to such a legend, Catalina was delighted that it was going to someone who understood her story. As the man walked away, she realized that her first thought was that she couldn't wait to tell Sebastian. She caught his eye, but

then resisted the urge. She needed to keep her distance, even though the worst part was that she was almost certain that Sebastian would be thrilled for her and would want to celebrate with her. And proof of that would make staying away from him all the harder.

Chapter 37

The rest of the day had dragged by. Catalina and Sebastian had tried to keep out of each other's way. She had just returned from a walk around the exposition hall, trying to decide what to wear to dinner, when she noticed Eduardo standing in a corner of their gallery space, inspecting a painting, but more probably waiting for her. His energy seemed off.

"Hey Catalina, can you help me with something over here?" Sebastian said, before she could talk herself into going over to greet Eduardo. Sebastian's tone was so innocent that she instantly knew something was up. She approached the desk where he sat at his laptop, noticing with some unease that Eduardo was staring at them with a strange look in his eye. Assessing.

"What's going on?" She hissed.

"Do you know what this is?" Sebastian asked loudly, his eyes still glued to the computer screen, pretending to point at something on it.

"I heard Eduardo telling one of his cronies that he didn't think we were actually an item and that he was going to find out the truth," he whispered as Catalina leaned in closer, as if looking over his shoulder.

Her blood froze in her veins. This was what she had feared most. But quickly, she tried to reason with herself. What was tipping him off? How could he prove anything? Some people didn't do public displays of affection, especially not at the beginning of a relationship. It could be seen as rude.

"So what? He thinks we should be all over each other?" She hissed back defiantly, though just saying it made the color rise in her cheeks. She forced herself to think of something else, anything other than the idea of Sebastian kissing her, putting his hands on her.

"I was just adding in notes about potential buyers. Is that not how you do it?" she asked out loud, for Eduardo's benefit. She hoped she sounded convincing, and that her voice wasn't shaking.

"Oh. I'm an idiot. I'll start doing that, too," said Sebastian.

He stood and turned to face her. At that moment, Catalina made the mistake of looking deep into those navy-blue eyes, letting her gaze drop to those full lips, the very ones she'd been craving from the first moment she'd seen him, obsessing over since the first time she had felt them against hers.

"Just fucking let me kiss you," he whispered, his eyes burning, like laser beams scorching hers. "Do I have your permission?"

She wavered, feeling weak in the knees, and nodded, holding her breath. He moved closer. His lips were now mere millimeters from hers. She could feel his hot breath on her mouth. She shuddered, closing her eyes. His hand was on the nape of her neck now, making her shiver though his skin was hot, and so was hers. Before she knew what she was doing, she touched him too, her hand snaking between his shirt collar and his shoulders. She felt his breathing hitch as she angled her body closer, rubbing her breasts against his chest, their lips still millimeters apart, as if testing the attraction. She didn't know about him, but she felt what was like a magnet trying to draw her towards him. And then, he was kissing her, was sucking on her lower lip, his breathing growing ragged, or was that hers? It felt so good, but they had certainly gone much further than they needed to, merely to make a point. For a moment, everything had fallen away, but now she remembered that Eduardo was still standing there. She could only imagine the expression on his aquiline face. Against her basest instincts, which told her to keep kissing Sebastian until she completely lost her breath, she put her hand on his chest and gently broke the contact between them. As she pulled away, she saw his feverish eyes, his flushed cheeks, which no doubt matched her own.

“Darling,” she said, as lightly as she could. “No public displays of affection, I already told you. It’s so inappropriate.”

“Sorry, Eduardo,” she said as she went to meet the ambassador in the corner, where he was standing stock-still. “He’s incorrigible. Now, to what do we owe the pleasure of your visit? I thought the cocktail started at five.”

“I was just stopping by to remind you. There’s also dinner. Sorry you... *lovebirds* won’t get any time on your own. This is a work trip, remember.”

“Yes, of course.”

As she watched Eduardo leave, the relief at hopefully having successfully pulled the wool over his eyes once and for all was mitigated by the memory of what had just happened between herself and Sebastian. Was it just her imagination, or had something very real, and very electric passed between them, once again? It didn’t matter, though. He was nothing more than a cheater, and she, nothing more than a liar.

She tried to distract herself by looking at the walls of their booth, letting her gaze run to a few of the other booths in her field of vision. There were visitors here and there, but nothing like the opening days. Despite that morning’s sale, she still needed to get more collectors’ eyes on her paintings. She couldn’t afford to come back to Mexico with any of them. Like an answer to her unspoken prayers, her phone pinged. It was a message from her friend Chiara. Chiara, who had been honest enough to bring up her reservations about Alejandro, and who had expected an honest conversation with her old friend, and who had been rewarded with an undeserved cold shoulder.

Catalina had texted Chiara the day before, with a formal apology:

Catalina: *I’m so sorry I shut you out when I knew that you were right all along. Please forgive me. Your friendship means everything to me. I’m here for Art Basel and would love to see you.*

She had written down her dates and had held her breath, afraid that it was far too late. Chiara had not written her back right away, and Catalina had been resigned to the fact that she had irretrievably broken the friendship. But now, this message.

Chiara: *Sorry, just saw this. Apology accepted. You were in a horrible situation. I wish I could see you on this trip, but I come back the day after you leave. However, I was thinking that I could send you my hubby and some of his art collector friends.*

Catalina considered this. Though she had assumed Chiara would be out of town, she was disappointed. The offer to send Sven to the booth was probably an empty promise. Was her friend really forgiving her, or just saving face? But seconds later, another ping sounded.

Chiara: *Cata, darling, fabulous news! Clients just changed their travel plans- I’m coming back early, so I can see you on your last night in town. Also, Sven said he would love to organize a small dinner with you and his friends, if you’re free tomorrow evening.*

Catalina: *Of course! Thank you! I can’t wait to see him, and you!*

She had already triple-checked her calendar, and they only had a cocktail gathering planned for the next evening, probably because Eduardo was leaving early the morning after that. She’d been fantasizing about what she and Sebastian might do with the mostly free evening, but she was here for business, and also, avoiding temptation with him would make things easier in the long run.

Chiara: *Great. I’ve really talked up Mexican art to Sven and apparently his tech bro friends are nearly salivating by now. Of course, I might have put in a word about the art dealer that has them salivating, too.*

Catalina rolled her eyes. She’d been trying to get out of this situation with Eduardo and now, here again, she was going to have to charm people into buying things from her, rather than having them purchase art for the love of it. But at this point, she was desperate, and she decided that

beggars could not be choosers. She considered her relatively slow sales at the art fair a lesson learned and was now almost glad that she was not going to be participating in ZONAMACO in Mexico City. She needed to lick her wounds and do more groundwork to get a more established client base.

In the meantime, she started feeling a little guilty for planning a dinner with potential buyers and not including Sebastian. Then again, just because they had accidentally made out a few times did not mean they owed each other anything. It meant nothing. Even though she had to admit, as she examined her feelings, she wished that it did. When he had kissed her, even when they were faking it, it had felt like coming home.

Chapter 38

"I have to apologize to you," Sebastian said, just as Catalina was about to head back to the room to get ready.

"Apologize?" she asked blankly.

"For the kiss," he clarified.

"I gave you permission. We were doing it for Eduardo's benefit."

"I took advantage. I went too far."

"I don't think you need to apologize," Catalina said. "I leaned in, too. We should just be happy we put on a good act."

"If you say so," Sebastian said.

She noticed he wasn't meeting her eye.

"We just have tonight, and then that cocktail tomorrow, and then we're off the hook," she said. "We can do this, right?"

"Of course we can," he responded, dully.

What was wrong with him? Was he feeling guilty? How did he think she felt? She was going to say something, anything, to try to clear the air, when Sebastian spoke.

"Apparently, Eduardo has invited a few members of the international press tonight."

Ah. So, there it was. Now she understood. She'd been selfish, only considering her feelings. While each piece of publicity about their fake relationship stood to help her business, in his case, it would make his life harder. She'd thought about it initially, but, once she'd started looking at him as a cheater, she hadn't really considered how serious that would be for him. Now, she owed him at least a little sensitivity.

"Sebastian, are you okay with whatever the articles about us might say?"

"I'm not worried if you're not worried. You're the one who wouldn't want to be associated with me, remember?"

"I...I've put that behind me," said Catalina. "I know you're a good man. You're not like the rest of your family."

He looked into her eyes. An emotion passed there that she couldn't quite read.

"Thank you," he said simply. "And I apologize for coming on too strong with you, when we first met. But I want you to know that I do care about you."

"OK," said Catalina, brushing it away.

She didn't want his caring. She wanted more. She wanted all of him. His caring about her, but still being involved with someone else, someone he would be going back to when they returned to Mexico, that hurt too much. She absolutely needed to start distancing herself. Not with any reactive arguments. No. Those ran the risk of them falling into each other's arms. She would have to be calm and measured.

"Let's just remember that we can absolutely act professional with these journalists," she said. "We don't need to go over the top with any further displays of affection. Maybe just a little, for Eduardo's benefit, but otherwise, we can just act like two colleagues having dinner."

"Deal," said Sebastian.

She held out her hand for him to shake it, but when his palm touched hers, she instantly regretted it. Why did his most innocent touch set her on fire? This flirtatious game was starting to hurt far too much. In mere days, she would be going back to her empty apartment, back to the reality of her widowhood, back to needing to figure out what the rest of her life was going to look like. She no longer believed she could live completely alone, without love, or at least loving

companionship. Maybe she would eventually find somebody who would tick all the boxes. *Like Sebastian*, she thought, and then pushed that out of her mind.

She believed that he was a good man, in most ways, but unfortunately, he wasn't one who could be faithful, even though she mostly blamed herself for any of the transgressions they had made. As much as it pained her to not ever feel him up against her again, not to experience the thrill of him kissing her again, she almost as strongly wanted to believe that he was capable of being faithful- to *someone*. Even if that meant not being with her. It would mean that her emotional compass wasn't irretrievably broken. *How messed up is that?* she thought.

What if he really fell for her, and broke up with Bibi, though? What if he ended up single? What then? No, she couldn't think that way. She had to play by the rules. There was such a thing as relationship karma, and she'd already been tempting fate with her dreams and her thoughts and her actions. Surely, she could resist the draw of Sebastian for just a few days more, and then they would figure it out. Was there a chance that he would be single at some point, and that they could try to see if something could work out between them? *Maybe*. But right now, that wasn't the case, and so she needed to put it out of her mind completely.

"Are you going to get changed before dinner?" Sebastian asked, putting an end to her rumination.

"Obviously," Catalina said, gesturing to her pink jumpsuit. "I look like Barbie's little Mexican sister."

"If you're Barbie's sister, you're the sister she's jealous of."

"What do you even know about Barbie? Stop jumping to conclusions," said Catalina, starting to grin but then reminding herself that sharing cute banter did not serve her at this time. "Anyway, I don't want the journalists to describe me as *that disheveled gallery owner from Mexico*."

"That would never happen," said Sebastian, his eyes lingering on her for just a moment longer than they needed to. She noticed how he lifted a hand as if to touch her, but then put it back down awkwardly. *Ay, Dios*. She wanted him to be a better man and not cheat on his girlfriend, but she also very much wanted him to cheat on his girlfriend and be with her. And she didn't just want him with her for a little bit. Having observed what kind of a person he was, she could see herself building something with him, finding out more about him, and trying to make a go of it. But she was probably just thinking that way because her dreams had led to a trick of the mind where she felt like she had already slept with him and therefore felt oddly bonded, even though the reality was they'd had a few hot and heavy make-out sessions. But those were over now, so she could stop being so crazy.

"I think you look absolutely beautiful, but if you want to change, I get it."

"Do you need to change? There don't seem to be very many people around. I'm sure we could both step away for a minute."

"I'll be fine. You go. Freshen up in peace," said Sebastian. "You've got some journalists to impress."

Catalina nodded. Was she reading into it, or was he trying to pull back as well, no doubt realizing that they had overstepped a line that would be very hard to come back from? She realized that she was already looking forward to the feel of his skin against hers when he would inevitably take her hand at dinner.

She started walking away, but then turned back around.

"Sebastian," she said.

"Yes?"

He turned back, an expression in his eyes that was...what? Hopeful? She was being stupid. But she'd suddenly gotten a self-destructive desire to clarify things, to try to ultimately protect her heart.

"I know you're not as dependent as I am on this... charade... for your livelihood, and I really appreciate your keeping up the pretense. I understand it's not easy for you."

"It's very easy for me," he started to say.

"Right," she said. "Well, I'll see you later."

She walked off as quickly as she could. As thrilled as she was to hear him say that it was so easy to pretend to be entranced by her, it didn't speak very much for his authenticity. And as much as she wanted him to forget all about Bibi, she also wanted him to be a better man, which was super self-defeating when she thought about it. Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe she was standing up for wanting someone with integrity, this time. She thought she'd had that with Alejandro, and clearly had been proven wrong. The worst part was, not only had she stayed, but she had also been complicit in the lie that their relationship was perfect. Not leaving, at least not right away, could have been understandable, but she hadn't even been strong enough to tell anyone about what was happening. Not her parents, not her sister, and not Maria. Maybe she'd whispered it into Itzpapalotl's fur on a few very dark nights. But that didn't count, did it?

She, Catalina Cervantes, to hell with the *Ruiz* part, needed to start living her life with more integrity, as well.

She walked back to the hotel room, thinking about what she would wear that evening. Maybe she would put on the shimmery copper dress that she'd been saving for something big. She sniffed for Sebastian's scent when she opened the hotel room door but could only detect the floral room fragrance. How she wished they didn't have plans that evening. How she wished things were different and that they could watch a James Bond movie, wearing their bathrobes and eating French fries.

She went through her wardrobe and talked herself out of the copper dress. Too sexy. She would save it for the day when she finally went on a real date. Instead, she selected the mustard-colored dress. It was perfect, because the high neck made it elegant and artsy but not too seductive. She freshened up and made sure to put on a pair of underwear that was not lacy or overly sensual. She carefully did her makeup with a very bright red lip, courtesy of Constance, her friend who had used the make-up technique to try to ward off her dashing ex-boyfriend. Then again, that hadn't quite worked for Constance, had it? Constance and Lorenzo were currently expecting their first child. But in any case, Catalina wanted to look unforgettable and striking, just in case the journalists came with a photographer.

She also, not so secretly, wanted Sebastian to find her unforgettable and striking as well. She couldn't compete with Bibi in terms of her figure or her youth, but she could leave a lasting impression, or so she hoped.

Chapter 39

After one last look in the mirror, Catalina headed back to the convention tent, where Sebastian was already holding court with a trio of people, all of them sharply dressed and hanging on to his every word. Eduardo was not there yet.

"Darling," said Sebastian, "you're here. Everyone's been so impatient to meet you. Especially after everything I've told them about you, about your apprenticeship in Venice galleries and your international travel and experience. Now that they're meeting you in person, I'm sure they will be even more impressed."

Catalina smiled and blushed at the flattery, and at the realization that he had really listened to her, and that he knew more about her than she'd assumed.

"Here, I have some Champagne for you," Sebastian said, giving her an easy peck on the cheek as he handed her the flute.

She struggled to get her breathing back to normal and faced the trio of strangers. Sebastian introduced her.

"At last, the impressive Catalina Cervantes ...Ruiz."

"Just Catalina Cervantes will do," she said, forcing herself not to look at Sebastian.

The woman closest to her extended her hand for Catalina to shake and introduced herself.

"I'm Sandra. I work for one of the culture magazines here in South Florida."

Catalina admired the woman's peacock blue tulle skirt, worn with a men's suit jacket and high heels. It was an artistic, 1980s-inspired ensemble that nevertheless skewed professional.

"I know we're small potatoes compared to John over here."

Sandra gestured with her chin at a tall man with russet hair and dark brown eyes.

"She flatters me," he said. "John Andrews. I'm with Art News."

Catalina shook hands with him, too, and stood up straighter. Art News was a huge player. Being featured in its esteemed pages meant that one had made it.

"Sebastian wooed me away from the main Art Basel festivities" John was saying, "and I'm glad I listened. I love the points of view of each of your two galleries. It makes sense that you two are partners in life and in love. I can see the synergies, and I'm excited to see how you will continue to collaborate in the future."

Sandra was nodding pensively.

"Oh, thank you," said Catalina, pleased but at the same time mortified.

Their fake breakup when they returned to Mexico City might have devastating long-term effects on her career, she was realizing, but they couldn't keep up this game forever. At least, maybe they would get an article or two out of it, to give her a little extra momentum before she was forced to stand on her own two feet.

The third person held out his hand. "Dimitri White," he said. "At first, I thought your name was Black," he said.

"No, black is the color that saved me," said Catalina. "It's something of a long story, but I'd love to tell it to you sometime."

"No time like the present. I'm with Condé Nast- an editor at large, and I'm looking for a good angle for my Art Basel story. This could be a good thematic organizer."

"Oh, it's..." Catalina stammered, not believing her luck, but not wanting to monopolize the conversation.

"You never told me that story, darling, about the black," said Sebastian.

The three journalists visibly moved closer, hungry to hear this detail.

"You know," Catalina said to them, "our relationship is so new, we're still learning things about each other."

"Especially now that we know he doesn't know, we're all waiting with bated breath," said Sandra. Catalina composed herself and took a deep breath.

"OK ... it was about six months after I lost my husband."

"Your husband passed away?" said Sandra. "I'm so sorry, that's devastating."

"Yes, but oddly enough, just when everything was darkest in my life, I saw an Anish Kapoor painting at a show at the Soumaya Museum."

Sebastian took a swig out of his glass of wine. What was that about? Was she boring him? He really didn't care about how she felt after Alejandro died at all, did he? John turned to him.

"Isn't that one of the shows you sponsored, Mr. Espinoza?"

"Ah, I suppose it is," said Sebastian, evasively.

"You sponsored the Anish Kapoor show at the Soumaya?" Catalina exclaimed, failing to mask her horror.

The artwork that had changed the course of her life, the one that had turned her grief around, and had gotten her moving again, that artwork had been there because of Sebastian?

"I was only one of several sponsors," he said.

"You're being modest," said Dimitri.

"Well, in any case, it doesn't really have any bearing on Catalina's story," said Sebastian, in a tone that cut off any further conjecture.

"So, what happened with the Anish Kapoor piece?" Sandra asked.

"It was one of his pieces utilizing Vantablack. Seeing such deep blackness, darker than anything I'd ever seen before, so much so that it absorbed all light- it put everything into perspective for me," Catalina said. "And that's when I was able to start moving forward again."

"That's beautiful," said Sandra.

"I'm using that in my article," said Dimitri.

"I think we all might," John smiled.

Then, a shift in the energy. Eduardo strode into the booth. While the journalists were busy introducing themselves to the ambassador, Sebastian took Catalina aside.

"You never told me that story, about Anish Kapoor," he said.

"As you pointed out, there's a lot we don't know about each other," she responded. "Even more so because we're not in a real relationship."

Sebastian gave her a pained look.

"But I would like to know everything about you," he said.

"Well," she shrugged, not knowing how to respond.

"Lovebirds," said Eduardo. "Can you tell our journalists about some of our artworks we have here? Tell them about the one that represents the disappearance of women on the border, for example."

Catalina had to hold back from rolling her eyes. Eduardo had learned his lessons well, but she saw he was awkwardly steering the conversation in a direction that didn't interest the journalists as much. But she dutifully started talking, and Sebastian, thankfully, stepped out of the way and let her speak. She was still fielding questions when she noticed Eduardo leaning over to whisper to Sebastian. She wondered what he could possibly be saying. She didn't trust Eduardo any further than she could throw him.

A few more people came to the booth. A local influencer, another journalist, and a gallery owner. Most of them wanted to know what it was like to run a gallery next door to one's boyfriend. Catalina was getting a feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach. Was this really all she had to

offer? Did her gallery's art not speak for itself? What would she do to promote herself when their cover was blown, or when they orchestrated their fake breakup? Keeping the pretense up was not an option. She wanted to live authentically, now. In fact, she had been mulling over how she would break the news to Sofia, and then perhaps even to her parents, that Alejandro had not been the man that she had initially hoped and believed he was.

Sebastian squeezed her arm and interrupted her thoughts. How long had she been zoning out?

"We're getting ready to go to dinner," he said.

"Ah, great."

"Why don't you all go ahead," Sebastian told the others. "We're going to close down the booth, and we'll join you."

"Ha, they want to have a romantic moonlit walk, don't they," said John to Dimitri, under his breath, but Catalina caught it.

If only, she thought. She wondered why Sebastian was so anxious to be alone with her. Maybe it had something to do with whatever Eduardo had whispered to him. She hoped it was nothing disastrous.

They let the others go ahead and left through a side exit, heading in the general direction of the restaurant.

"Do I dare ask you what Eduardo was talking to you about?" Catalina said.

"He took advantage of your story about the Vantablack and losing your husband to accuse me of being insensitive, for jumping on a recent widow."

"That's rich," Catalina snapped, "after he put the moves on me."

"Well, he holds himself to a different standard, obviously. But I just want you to know that I agree with him."

"Okay," said Catalina cautiously. "You're saying that perhaps the optics of our so-called relationship are not ideal? So, we should stop talking about that to the press? But people seem to be eating it up."

"That's not it. I want you to know that I fully understand, now, how wrong it was to put the moves on you."

Catalina barked out a bitter laugh and gave him a look. It was too little, too late. Besides, his guilt should have nothing to do with Alejandro, and everything to do with his girlfriend.

"It should have been more obvious to me before," he continued.

"I'm sorry, I'm confused. Are we even talking about the same thing?"

How could he pretend that Bibi didn't even exist?

"I think I've been insensitive. I've not given you time to properly mourn your relationship with Alejandro, whatever I thought about him. Even if I think I'm a better man than he was, I need to let you come to that conclusion on your own."

What good would it possibly do them, for her to come to that conclusion? Anyway, she already had. How much, exactly, did Sebastian know about Alejandro? Catalina was sorely tempted to tell him that she had realized, at the end, who Alejandro really was. She wanted to apologize for judging Sebastian more harshly than she'd judged her own husband. But that was all beside the point. If he claimed he was only hesitating to approach Catalina because he was being sensitive to her widowhood, and not because he was cheating on the beautiful Bibi, any relationship between them was a non-starter.

Even if, when they came back to Mexico City, he decided to make a clean break from Bibi, even if he actually had real feelings for Catalina, which was hard to tell... even if they were mutually attracted to each other, even if he certainly knew how to say and do all the right things, the man was fundamentally untrustworthy, and that broke her heart. Would they even be able to work

together, as neighboring galleries, in the future? He'd said they were a team while they were in Miami, and he'd seemed to take that very seriously. But how much of it was an act?

"Sebastian, can I ask you a question?" said Catalina.

"Of course."

"What's going to happen when we get back to Mexico City? You know... With..." she didn't even want to say it. "With everything."

"What in particular are you talking about?" he said, his eyebrows knitting together.

"Are we just going to go back to our lives the way they were?" she asked.

"Catalina, I—"

He was interrupted by a shrill ring. He took his phone out of his pocket and looked at the screen.

"*Ay, Dios*, I'm so sorry. I need to take this," he said, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment.

"All right."

Catalina was taken aback. She'd thought they were having an important conversation, but clearly he was demonstrating his priorities. Who was calling? Her guess was it was Bibi.

"Are you okay walking ahead?" he asked, visibly flustered. "Wait- no, I think it'll be weird if we—why don't you just wait for me down the block?"

"OK."

Wow, she thought, her cheeks beginning to burn as he took a few steps away, his phone still ringing. He didn't want her to hear the conversation, that much was clear. Well, she didn't want to hear it, either. She hustled down the block, feeling shameful, and looked back to see him holding the phone to his ear. She couldn't hear any of the conversation, thankfully. Not that she was trying to. He was speaking in hushed tones, stress carved into every feature. Before she knew it, though, he had hung up and was hurrying down the block to join her.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"It'll be fine."

The expression on his face was not what she expected. She had expected shame or worry. But instead, it was thunderous. Angry.

"Was that... was that Bibi?" she asked, kicking herself for doing it, for playing the pathetic jealous mistress, the name itself feeling bitter in her mouth. But she had to say it. It was like auto-flagellation. So bad it was almost good. She winced.

"Yes, it was," he responded. "But can we not talk about this? Let's focus on making tonight a—"

By this point, they were almost at the restaurant. She didn't want to hear any more.

"Will you be okay if I hold your hand and if I kiss you in front of them if that's what I feel we need to do?" he asked.

"Oh, you're asking permission now," she said bitterly. "After everything...?"

"Yes, I think I should ask."

"Of course. Do whatever you need. Do I have permission to do the same?"

"I'm all yours," he said.

How she wished that was true, even though she despised him at that moment.

He took her hand as they headed into the lobby of the restaurant, and she exhaled. Why did it have to feel so good, so right? They fell into step, their bodies close together as they avoided the hostess and walked straight into the main room, spotting the table immediately. There were two spots at the booth for them. Catalina knew that meant sitting pressed up against each other, which she knew that it would be both devastating and thrilling for her. She might as well get her fill before they got back to their real lives.

The evening went along swimmingly until dessert, when the questions started coming hard and fast about their future plans, their relationship, and what else they planned to do together.

Catalina shivered, and Sebastian put his arms around her.

"Are you cold, darling?"

"A little," she responded, leaning into him, relishing his heat. It was true. The atmosphere in the air-conditioned room had dropped by a few degrees, causing her bare arms to prickle with goosebumps. But it was the idea of not having a future with him in her real life that truly chilled her to the bone.

"God, you guys are so cute. I can barely stand it," said Sandra. "I wish I had that in my life. Absolute couple goals."

"Isn't it," said Eduardo, considering them with his calculating, shark-like eyes.

This was it. Catalina needed to make a convincing move. Eduardo could still screw her over somehow if he felt he'd been lied to. He could convince the journalists to ditch the article or refuse to pay for return shipping for the art she didn't sell. She nestled her head into the crook of Sebastian's neck. It felt so good. It felt so natural. And it probably looked natural, too. Because both Sandra and John looked at each other and said, "Aw."

Once dessert was over and everyone had said their goodbyes, Catalina felt reluctant to let go of Sebastian's hand for the walk back to the hotel.

"You *are* cold," he said.

The wind had picked up, and she was feeling puny and delicate.

"Do you want my jacket?"

Before she responded, he had draped it over her shoulders, and she sighed into its warmth, and into that scent she craved so much. If only she could steal an article of clothing from him, to remember him by. But she knew that, just like her memories of the good times with Alejandro, the scent would fade, and the memories of their experience here in Miami would slowly retreat into the background, supplanted by new things, new experiences, where they couldn't be together.

"Are you going to have to call Bibi back?" she asked.

"No, I think everything's okay," he responded. "Hopefully she'll fix this on her own."

"Fix?"

Catalina had thought that Bibi was calling because she was upset at the reports of their relationship, but now, this sounded like something else, and she didn't feel entitled to ask.

Chapter 40

Back in the room, Catalina imagined that surely there would be an opportunity for them to talk through what was happening between them. But just as they passed through the door, Sebastian's phone pinged. He glanced at it and his expression turned incandescent, his eyes flashing, and his lips set in a straight line. He rubbed his face with one hand.

He groaned and furiously tapped out a message.

Catalina was pretending not to look. Was he texting with Bibi? Or with someone else? She pretended to be straightening up her closet, all the while watching his reflection in the mirror. He was texting all the more furiously now.

Well, two could play this game, she thought. She picked up her own telephone and checked for a text from her sister, but there was still nothing. Now, the silence was getting weird. Even after one of their explosive arguments, the sisters couldn't give each other the silent treatment for too long. And besides, they had left each other on excellent terms, Catalina had thought? Or was Sofia ruminating over the way that her sister had accused her of inviting their parents to the gallery opening? Impossible. Sofia would have confronted her about it, not let it fester like this. Catalina was also terribly curious about the surprise work of art Sofia had mentioned, before she left. After so much excitement and secrecy, she would have thought she would have heard something by now. And also, Sofia had to be curious about Art Basel, and which ones of her friends Catalina might have seen. She was guessing that Sofia would have had a raging case of FOMO at this point and was surprised at her self-restraint.

Catalina: *Hermana. Todo bien?*

She waited for a bit, but still received no response. This was very strange. But then again, Sofia had mentioned that they were going to be in Merida, and she'd been talking about trying out a silent retreat with a few of her friends there, which Catalina had pointed out defeated the purpose. So perhaps that was it.

Sebastian was still texting, so Catalina reached out to Maria.

Catalina: *Has your soul been sucked out of your body yet?*

Maria's response came within seconds.

Maria: *Yes. But life's a lot easier without a soul, I'm finding. So, I thank the mistress of the dark.*

Then, a picture came through. Itzpapalotl sitting on a lap. Catalina recognized that lap, or at least recognized Maria's favorite trousers, a unique floral corduroy only her friend could pull off. It made Catalina smile, despite her twisting entrails, and her curiosity as to what Sebastian was possibly texting. But then, she noticed a strange detail in the photograph. Was that a blue jeans-clad leg on the sofa next to Maria's? The picture had been cropped, so it was impossible to tell for sure, but she certainly didn't own any denim pillows. She zoomed in.

Catalina: *Do you have a friend over?*

She paused and bit her lip and thought about adding: *It's absolutely okay if you do. I'm just curious.* She tried to think who Maria was close enough to that she would invite her to spend an evening with her at the apartment. Had Maria met someone? She waited as she watched the animated dots on her screen that told her Maria was typing. She counted to thirty before a response came through.

Maria: *No.*

Liar, what's that denim thing? Catalina typed out, then deleted it.

She knew her friend and knew that she would stubbornly back herself into a corner and perhaps lash out, so she abandoned the line of questioning.

Catalina: *Well, it looks like you have a new love.*

Maria: *What's that supposed to mean?*

What was *that* supposed to mean?

Catalina: *Hello? I'm talking about the cat, obviously.*

Maria: *Yes, against all odds. She's not as bad as she looks, and once your soul is gone, you feel no pain.*

Catalina smiled. At that moment she looked up towards Sebastian. He'd been watching her, and now his expression grew inquisitive. Good. Two could play that game.

"Is everything okay?" she asked him innocently. "You seem to have some rather urgent messages."

"It'll be fine," said Sebastian, still uncharacteristically terse.

"Okay, sorry, none of my business," said Catalina primly, making a show of checking her phone and carefully putting it away. "I'll go brush my teeth."

In the bathroom, the chill demeanor she had been cultivating quickly crumbled. She ran some cold water and splashed her tear-stained face, trying to calm herself down. She was done lying, and that included lying to herself. Alejandro hadn't been perfect, far from it. Her attraction to Sebastian was real. It had taken her all this time to realize that it wasn't something she wanted to turn off and ignore, not just some physical thing. And in fact, she'd been thinking she might finally address that tonight, finally tell him how she felt, and talk things out. But now, she had to face the fact that, no matter what she had tried to tell herself, he was still very much taken. He was kind, considerate, and intelligent, and she'd begun trying to convince herself that someone like him couldn't possibly be a cheater, that maybe she'd misunderstood the nature of his relationship with Bibi. Maybe they were family friends. After all, he had never spelled it out, never really said that she was his girlfriend. Then again, the girl had been hanging all over him at the consulate. But some young girls were like that, these days. Maybe it was a PR stunt, much like what they were currently doing, but for different reasons. But that was ridiculous, and now she had to face the truth: when Bibi had texted Sebastian, there had been no question that she was his priority. Now, Catalina's heart was breaking, and the only balm she had on hand was convincing herself that at least she wouldn't let herself fall for a cheater.

She shut off the tap, dabbed at her eyes, and blew her nose. She looked like a mess. On the other side of the door, a sound. Was that the room door closing?

When she came out of the bathroom, Sebastian was gone. She decided to convince herself that she didn't care where he was. But of course, that was another massive lie.

She put herself to bed and screwed her eyes shut, wishing he was there next to her. But as the minutes ticked past, he did not return. Eventually, against all odds, and as a testament to her absolute exhaustion, physical and emotional, she fell asleep.

Chapter 41

Catalina was dreaming again.

She was in her apartment in Mexico City, stroking Itzpapalotl's glossy black fur. She was waiting for Alejandro to come home. She needed to tell him something. Something important. She looked at the hot pink walls of her bedroom, glancing at the photographs of architectural wonders, and the pressed tin and wood *milagros* she had collected.

As was often the case, the dream was a memory, but not a completely accurate one, because the turquoise *milagro* she had purchased after Alejandro's death was on the wall, too, its wings shimmering.

In the dream, as in life, Catalina had found a slip of paper in Alejandro's pocket. It was a bank receipt, for Alejandro's personal account, an account that Catalina did not share with him. Though they had been planning on combining their finances for a long time, they still hadn't done it. Each month, they put equal sums of money into a common pool to pay for things like rent and groceries. But this couldn't be right. The sums on the slip, both deposits and withdrawals, were mind-boggling.

How could Alejandro have hidden from her that he had that much money in the bank? If he had this sort of cash, why were they still having the conversations they were having about saving up, and about him not being good enough to offer her the lifestyle she'd been accustomed to while she was growing up?

Maybe it was just an honest mistake- or he'd picked up someone else's receipt accidentally. But even before she logged into their joint bank account to look at the routing number from one of his recent deposits, in her heart of hearts, she knew. He had been hiding things from her. He had been disappearing at odd hours. He had been acting more closed off. He had even been speaking differently- a bit more roughly than before. His personal style had become slicker. Most disturbingly, he'd developed a dangerous gleam in his eye.

For months, she'd been able to lie to herself and tell herself that it was nothing, that people's personal style evolved, that he was growing a thick skin to succeed in business, that perhaps his employers were demanding too much of him, and that this was his survival mechanism.

But this little slip of paper clinched it. She had to talk to him.

In real life, she knew how this scene ended. She had replayed it time and time again in her mind, the horror of it still just as fresh as when it had just happened.

But in the dream, the potential was there for anything to transpire. Maybe Catalina would speak to Alejandro, and it would change everything. He would reassure her. Let her know that nothing was wrong. And then, like he had so many times, in so many other dreams, he would make love to her, and their life would take a completely different path.

Maybe, as with so many of her dreams lately, Alejandro would turn into Sebastian.

That would be far better than what she knew had happened in real life at this moment.

But the events kept playing out in her dream exactly as they had in life. She shoved Alejandro, and he stumbled, hitting the wall. He stormed out of the apartment. She followed him out, racing down the stairs after him, yelling at him to come back, before deciding that she had more pride than that, and turning back.

In real life, Alejandro had gotten behind the wheel of his car and was already on Avenida Jalisco when it happened, still in broad daylight. But in the dream, the gunshots resonated in her ears, and Catalina awoke crying out, her heart beating a panicked tattoo.

She'd been thrashing about, but then, there was someone holding her, calming her down, enveloping her in a solid warmth.

"Shh," she heard Sebastian whispering into her ear, "it's okay, it's just a dream."

He squeezed her against him and held her, letting his breathing calm hers down. For a moment, she wondered if things would progress, if he would take advantage of their closeness. She wouldn't have refused it, but what she really needed right now was this. To simply be held. To feel safe.

"Sleep," he whispered into her ear, and tucked her in even closer to his chest. Before she knew it, she was able to fall into a thankfully dreamless slumber.

Chapter 42

The next morning, Catalina woke to find that Sebastian was gone again. On his pillow, a note: *no podia dormir, asi me fui a correr*. So, he'd had problems sleeping? What was on his mind? All she knew was, this was yet another thing they did not have in common. Never had she felt the urge to go on a run to clear her mind. She was torn about his absence: she craved seeing him but would be glad to get ready without the ever-simmering tension between them, and relieved that she had a plan with Chiara's husband in the evening. The less she saw Sebastian today, the easier it might be to come to her senses.

She was so thankful, though, that he'd been there to soothe her from her nightmare, without any added expectations. She'd been so unfair to him when she'd first met him, judging him, when she knew very well that her own late spouse had been far from perfect. She should ask Sebastian how he had known Alejandro, she decided. Maybe it would offer some clue as to how Alejandro had gone from the man she thought she'd known, to the man she realized he had been at the end. But how could she broach the subject, after everything that had transpired?

With no easy answer to that question, she checked her email for what would hopefully be the last of the daily instructions she had come to expect from Eduardo each day, with a schedule and patronizing instructions. Thankfully, they still only had that early cocktail party in the booth at four thirty and were open for the rest of the evening. She would be able to attend the dinner with Sven and his friends in peace. She would have preferred to spend this time with Sebastian, but for that very reason, it was better this way.

Once again, she tried to convince herself that it was a relief that this charade they had been thrown into would only continue for one more day. But then, the uncomfortable truth: she didn't want it to end. When this was all over, when she was back home, in Mexico City, she would have to take a cold, hard look at what the rest of her life would look like.

But she still needed to get through today, and the dinner with Chiara's husband and his friends that evening. Catalina wondered how she should best proceed. Could she harness the competitive nature of these businessmen into making them buy more? Should she extend an invitation to Sebastian to join them for dinner?

She would wait and see how their interactions were today and decide later.

She felt guilty for not being upfront with Sebastian. But then again, he hadn't been quite honest with her either, had he?

Today was the final push in terms of selling art. Tomorrow, they would be breaking down and organizing the shipment of the paintings back to Mexico City. It would be so much easier if she didn't have any to ship. Eduardo had still mentioned nothing about any logistics for shipping and she was deathly afraid that was by design.

She carefully considered what she would wear and selected the green jumpsuit from Maria's shop as a good luck talisman of sorts, pairing it with a pair of hammered gold earrings with green glass eyes set into them and a matching cuff from an artist she had discovered in San Miguel de Allende. She had given a similar set to Sofia, but her sister had deemed them creepy and had probably given them to the maid.

She let most of her hair tumble down her back, but created a half-up, half-down style with a braid wrapping around to the side. Before she closed the closet door, she gave one more longing glance to the glimmering copper dress. Now, she wouldn't have an occasion to wear it... unless she did so to impress Sven's friends or blow away whoever was coming to the final cocktail and perhaps leave a lasting good impression on Eduardo. Though it was possibly not the best idea to remind him of what he hadn't been able to have.

She would give the dress more thought during the day and make a final decision closer to cocktail time. She shot off a text message to Sven to confirm the dinner, and he responded with the reservation details: they would be having dinner at Los Fuegos, a restaurant right at the Faena hotel.

Good, that would be easy, thought Catalina. A short walk from the cocktail party in the booth, and an easy return to her bed, or rather, to her shared bed with Sebastian. Their second to last night together.

She wondered if anything might yet happen between them. She wasn't going to make any moves, but if he did, how would she respond? As for the next evening, she wasn't going to invite him along to dinner with Chiara, but maybe she would have him join them for a nightcap, depending on how everything went today.

Could they be friends? After all of this, she didn't know. So much had happened, and still, on top of the burning desire to just go ahead and experience what it would be like to be with him fully, there was almost as urgent a need: to ask him how he had actually known Alejandro.

Once she was at the booth, she received a message from Sebastian.

Sebastian: *Do you mind manning the booth for a bit? I have a few things I need to take care of.* She wondered what was going on, but then again, it was none of her business. It was better like this.

Catalina: *Take as much time as you need.*

She wasn't expecting a reply, but she got one almost immediately.

Sebastian: *Thank you. If you want, I can handle packing up the booth for both of us tomorrow, in case you want to take advantage of your time in Miami.*

So, he was avoiding her. With Eduardo finally leaving town the next morning, they could give up the pretense of being in a relationship, so she called the front desk to see if there was another room available at the hotel. No such luck.

Before leaving the room, she checked her outfit in the mirror one last time. Her sister would have been horrified and would have said she looked like a village woman. But she liked it. And that was all that mattered.

The traffic around their booth had lessened progressively as the week had gone on. Now, the people who were visiting were clearly of the more low-rent tourist persuasion, people who couldn't afford to get into the main event, or who had exhausted all other avenues for entertainment, and had thought they would come by and look. There was not a single prospect when it came to finding a buyer for Catalina's three remaining paintings, which of course were the largest ones. Hopefully, Chiara's husband's friends would be motivated to buy. What could she say to make it seem like an excellent idea? Mexican nationals with a *piéd à terre* in Miami could easily be guilted into buying pieces like these. After all, it was their heritage. But what would motivate these men to choose Catalina's gallery in particular?

Around lunchtime, she was trying to figure out how she could get something to eat without leaving the booth unattended when she spotted a woman with a gray pixie cut and impossibly long lashes, draped in a slick white suit. She thought she recognized her as a well-known interior designer and held her breath as she approached. This might be the solution to her low sales problem. She waited for the woman to introduce herself, just to be sure, and so as not to look desperate.

"Hi, I'm Sarah Hawthorne," the woman said, extending her hand, as if expecting Catalina to recognize her. Which of course she did.

"Catalina Cervantes. Pleased to meet you. I love your work."

"Oh? Which work in particular?"

Catalina blinked. It was as though the woman was testing her.

“You did my friend Petra’s pied a terre in Miami, I believe.”

No way was she going to admit that she’d also seen the woman’s work in *Architectural Digest* and watched her star turn on that design show she loved to hate.

“Oh. How do you know Petra? She’s so glamorous, isn’t she?”

“We went to school together in Switzerland,” said Catalina. “And our families have been friends forever. Her father worked for mine.”

“Ah. Well. I see.”

The designer was now desperate to move onto another subject. Obviously, she had realized that Catalina was not some hapless gallery girl, and since she could not compete socially, she was now going to stick to shop talk. *Bien*. There was something about her energy that set Catalina on edge. She wondered how Sebastian might handle her. But of course, it was likely that the woman would fall all over herself in his presence.

“I’ve been looking for a way to differentiate myself as a designer and I’ve found that working within the Mexican community here has been great,” said Sarah, without further preamble.

“Finding artists from Mexico will remind these people of home, while providing them value as well. I think that I can definitely find better deals with Mexican art, since it’s, let’s face it, outsider art, right? Especially if I go directly through you.”

Catalina groaned inwardly. So that’s what this woman was about. Not the artistry, not the tradition, but all about making and saving herself money, on the backs of the Mexican community.

But at the same time, Catalina, too, needed to make money.

“I don’t know how much less expensive our art is. Our artists are quite collectable, and well established in Mexico. This is the first opportunity for someone like you to get access to these artists, as their work is usually snapped up immediately in our own country, during a show, or a studio visit, by those in the know.”

“Oh. Sounds exclusive. Exclusive is good. I can charge my clients more for that. But can you cut me a deal?”

“We have priced these fairly, but you’ll of course save the money you might have paid on transport, if you make a move on the few remaining unsold pieces at this show,” Catalina said, growing annoyed.

“Oh. Is there someone else I can speak with, to make a deal? Your boss, maybe?” Sarah asked.

“I am the boss,” Catalina responded, taken aback.

“Oh,” said the woman. “Weird. Aren’t you with Espinoza Gallery? I heard the owner is Sebastian Espinoza. I’ve been dying to meet him in person. He’s super hot, isn’t he?”

Catalina blanched, then blushed. Of course, this woman wanted Sebastian. Who didn’t?

“Well, that’s awkward,” said Catalina. “We are neighbors, but my gallery is independent. He’s not here.”

“Oh,” said the woman. “Well, maybe I can leave my card and...”

“Sure,” said Catalina, holding out her hand.

The woman made a face, as if she was certain Catalina would tear the card up in a fit of jealousy the moment she turned her back. Which she might have, frankly, up until the phone calls Sebastian had received had driven home the point that there was no chance of them ever being together. This nickel-and-diming designer could be his problem, moving forward. He deserved it, in fact.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure he gets your card the moment he arrives.”

Catalina not-so-discreetly checked her watch. She would need extra time to get ready- not so much for the last cocktail party with Eduardo, but mostly so she could look as polished as possible

for her meeting with Chiara's husband and his friends. Because there was one thing she knew for sure, and that was that she would rather sell those paintings to anyone at all, rather than be forced to negotiate with Eduardo and strategize with Sebastian on the logistics of sending them back.

Chapter 43

Sebastian had never shown up or even bothered to text her, and Catalina had stood by in the booth as long as she could, hoping in vain to make a sale, but eventually, she had realized she was cutting it close. By the time she got to the hotel, she had worked herself into a panicked frenzy. She was sweating bullets. Her hair was plastered to her forehead. Sebastian was probably in the nice, air-conditioned room, putting the finishing touches on a polished ensemble, having relaxed and sweet-talked Bibi all day. What would he think when he saw her disheveled appearance?

But when she got to the room, it was empty. When had Sebastian been there last? She sniffed the air, as if there was a clue to be found in the form of a lingering whiff of cologne, but there was nothing.

She took a quick shower and dried her hair at top speed, letting it cascade down her back. She frowned. She was still sweating, and wished she had more time. Just as she was desperately dabbing at her face with a Kleenex, her phone pinged. Her first thoughts went to Sebastian. But it was Eduardo.

Eduardo: *Taking an earlier flight. Cocktails canceled.*

Catalina frowned at her screen, a maelstrom of conflicting feelings overtaking her. Relief that they would not need to put on that same painful act around Eduardo again. Disappointment that she now had no official reason to see Sebastian. Wondering when and if she would see him. He had pledged to pack up the next day, so presumably he would come back to the hotel room sometime. Adding to Catalina's stress was Eduardo's terse tone, and the observation that he had not mentioned anything about logistics, especially about shipping the paintings back. She knew that Sebastian was on the text chain and wondered how he was feeling about this latest development. Probably thrilled.

She took a deep breath and wrapped herself in the hotel's bathrobe, the one she'd been basically wearing as pajamas this whole week. Now, she would have time to dry her hair more thoroughly and give further consideration to what she would wear. She dabbed at her face and carefully applied her makeup. When she was satisfied with how she looked, she went through her half of the closet, holding her breath to keep from the temptation of breathing in Sebastian's shirts. What to wear? This evening presented a delicate balance between socializing, catching up with an old friend's husband, and of course trying to sell some art. Maybe she would recycle the red dress she had worn for dinner with Sebastian, back in Mexico City, on that night that felt like it had happened months ago. She looked regretfully at the glimmering copper silk dress she'd been saving for a special occasion, stroking its smooth fabric.

Al diablo. She would wear it tonight. This was, after all, her Hail Mary moment. She might as well go all in. She would wear her black blazer over it to make it a touch less sexy. She slipped on her sheerest thong panties and then lifted her arms and let the slippery garment slide down her body, like a snake shedding its skin, but in reverse. She carefully selected a pair of large but delicate earrings shaped like stylized leaves, put on a pair of vertiginously high heels, and put the room key, a credit card, her phone, and a lipstick in her sculptural gold purse.

Que sea lo que Dios quiera, she thought, as she left the room. She was right on time for dinner. She hadn't seen Sven in years. With his height and white-blond hair that might just get lighter until someone finally noticed it had gone completely white, she was confident she would recognize him. Indeed, she entered the restaurant and spotted the group right away. A foursome of handsome, polished men, all of them wearing well-cut, high-quality shirts, all of them with very expensive haircuts, at least in the case of the three of them with hair. But even the bald one was attractive enough, with a chiseled jaw. *So that's where all the handsome, single, wealthy men are*

hiding, Catalina thought to herself. *Miami*. When she'd been married to Alejandro, she'd never really paid attention to other men, but now somehow, it was as if being in contact with Sebastian had started a flow that would not be stopped. Of course, if she was to compare these men to Sebastian, at least in terms of looks and charisma, not a single one of them could hold a candle to him. She hated herself for thinking that way.

"Catalina, it's been such a long time," said Sven, standing up.

She went in to give him a kiss on both cheeks, the traditionally European greeting she remembered he preferred. She was wondering whether he would say something about Alejandro's passing, or offer his condolences, but he did not, and she was glad for it.

"Here, let me introduce you to Ben One and Ben Two, except Ben One is Benjamin and Ben Two is Benicio ... and Aaron."

Hello, said Catalina, giving each of the men a handshake. She could tell that Ben and Benicio, at the very least, seemed charmed by her. Or maybe by the dress. Well, she would see where it took her. This was her last chance, as far as she knew, to make something happen, and her best opportunity not to have to fire sale her paintings to the insufferable interior designer from earlier in the day. As she sat down at the table, she heard a muffled buzzing from her bag but chose not to answer. If it was Sebastian, wanting to make plans, he should have reached out earlier. And if it wasn't him, it wasn't important right now. The conversation flowed easily, despite repeated bouts of buzzing from her telephone. Catalina chit chatted with everyone, asking them about their business activities and their hobbies, about their vacations, about their families. Apparently, Ben Two, Benicio, spent part of his year in Mexico and was already a connoisseur of Mexican art, even if he hadn't taken the leap to purchase any pieces. In the course of the conversation, Catalina learned that he had heard of Sarah, the decorator she'd struggled with earlier in the day, but had opted not to use her, something which endeared him to Catalina. Still, there was something edgy about him that put her ill at ease. She chose to remain polite, but turned her attention to the others, now. It was clear that Aaron was simply attending the dinner for entertainment's sake, and because he'd been told by Sven that Catalina was a pretty girl. Realizing that, Catalina decided that perhaps she could leverage his attraction into some sort of competitive painting purchasing.

"So, are you a collector?" Catalina asked Aaron, batting her eyelashes at him, hating herself for doing it, but feeling that it was necessary.

"I collect watches and cars."

"What?" Catalina scoffed. "You don't collect art? You know that that's what the truly wealthy do now, right?"

"It's one of the best investments," Sven commented, chiming in. "Having an in-demand artist makes you part of an exclusive club."

"You're saying having art would make me look more sophisticated? How is it in terms of attracting the ladies?"

Catalina struggled not to wrinkle her nose, but Sven smoothly observed, "How do you think I managed to hook Chiara? She thought I was just a boring finance bro until she saw that I actually owned a few pieces of blue-chip art. That's how we got to talking."

"You're punching way above your weight with her," Aaron said, in a tone that sounded insulting, not like friendly ribbing.

"Exactly. I rest my case," said Sven, unruffled.

Catalina discreetly winked at him. Chiara had trained Sven well. And he was head and shoulders above Aaron, she could already tell that much.

"What about you, Ben One?" asked Sven. "Your place looks like a bachelor pad. A piece of art would make you look like less of a frat boy."

“Hmmm. But whenever I invite a lady over, they never seem to stay long enough to appreciate the art,” Ben One smiled, in a genuinely self-deprecating way. Catalina decided she liked him, after all.

“Well, maybe having something more compelling to look at than your ugly mug would change that,” Sven smiled.

Catalina could tell that they were probably good friends, and that Sven felt closer to him than he did to the others.

“So... how do you all know each other?” Catalina asked, deciding to ease up on the sales talk and let the idea of owning art percolate.

“Ben and I have known each other since boarding school,” said Sven.

“Andover, right? That’s the closest type of relationship, isn’t it? Chiara and I met in boarding school as well. Le Rosey.”

“What about you?” Catalina asked, turning to Aaron. “How do you know Sven?”

“Uh, we’ve worked together, but I make more money than he does,” he grinned.

Catalina couldn’t tell whether this was a badly phrased joke, or whether it was true, and therefore even more disgusting. But she smiled indulgently.

“How about you, Benicio?”

“Everyone knows Benicio,” Aaron interrupted, not wanting to give up the spotlight. “And he knows everyone.”

“Oh?” said Catalina. What was that supposed to mean? What was he? A trainer? A drug dealer? Hard to tell.

“I know everyone who matters,” said Benicio. “In fact, I even know your boyfriend.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” said Catalina, offended, and even more offended that the image of Sebastian instantly popped into her head.

“Oh, don’t you? Then what do you call Sebastian Espinosa?”

“I don’t call him,” Catalina started to say, but she was interrupted by Benicio, who was now grinning like the cat that ate the canary.

“And in fact, here he is,” he said.

Catalina froze, not wanting to give Benicio the satisfaction of seeing her take the bait and turn around to look in the direction he was. But soon enough, she gave in and turned her head, just enough to see Sebastian striding into the restaurant. What was he doing here? Had he followed her? She was flattering herself. This was the main hotel restaurant. He was probably just coming down for a bite. When Sebastian spotted her, his eyes met hers and his lips set into a grim expression. She stared at him, blinked, and the next moment, he was gone.

What in the world had just happened? His appearance and subsequent disappearance had changed her whole mood. Now she found herself uniquely focused on selling those paintings and getting out of there. Sven, to his credit, seemed to sense the shift in energy.

“So, gentlemen, let Catalina show you what she has, because these things are very in demand. I had to beg her to hold off on releasing them. There are quite a few people clamoring to get their hands on these, and as I said, this is the last opportunity you’re going to get for a while.”

“Sure, show us,” said Aaron. “Do you have pics on your phone, or do we get a private tour?”

Catalina didn’t bother answering. She retrieved her telephone from her bag. Sure enough, she had missed calls, all of them from Sebastian. There were messages too, which she didn’t have time to read, but she assumed that they were asking her where she was. She didn’t owe him anything, unless there was some emergency that he had needed to talk to her about, but right now she was in the business of selling some paintings. She flipped into her photo albums, locating the folder with

photos of the paintings, and presented the phone to Aaron first, since he obviously had the biggest mouth.

"I put hearts on the ones that are still available, so don't fall in love with anything that's already sold."

"Nice," Aaron said, flipping through. "Do you have any nudes on here?" He asked, giving her a wolfish grin.

She didn't validate that with any kind of reply and waited until he designated one of the paintings.

"This one's nice."

"You have good taste. This one here is by a female artist. She's very young, but she's been producing some amazing work. One of her pieces is in the Rosewood in San Miguel de Allende. She had a one woman show recently in San Miguel and she sold most of her paintings on the opening night at my gallery. Her work explores the concept of motherhood for Indigenous women."

"Oh, you had me up until that," said Aaron. "Imagine me explaining that to a lady friend at my place. She'll think I'm some kind of pussy."

"God forbid," said Catalina, frustrated.

"Let me see," said Ben One.

Catalina hoped her first assessment of him had been accurate. Hopefully he was going to be slightly more intelligent than Aaron.

"That's really beautiful," he said. "What is the size of that?"

She told him, as he flipped to the other paintings. He came back to the original artwork.

"Actually, I think this might work perfectly."

He gave Aaron a long look.

"I would ask how much, but considering Aaron seems to be having problems with his wallet today, maybe I should ask in private, so as not to embarrass him, you know?"

"No, go ahead. Tell us," said Aaron. "How much is it?"

Catalina took a deep breath and told them. She wished she could inflate the prices for these idiots. But that wasn't ethical. At least, she certainly wouldn't release the paintings at a discount, as she would have needed to do with Sarah. She would give them the price that was printed on the price list. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Done," said Ben one. "I'll take that one."

"Well, if you took one, I'll take two," said Aaron, shrugging.

Catalina raised her eyebrows.

"Great. Which ones?"

Aaron took the phone and flipped through the photos.

"Looks like I don't have a choice. The ones that are left."

"Fantastic. Do you want me to tell you more about them?" Said Catalina.

"Nah, it's fine," said Aaron.

She almost wanted to take her dignity back and tell him she wouldn't sell him the paintings if he couldn't even pretend to care about them. But then, she decided that that ship had sailed. She needed the money, and so did the artists.

"We break down the show tomorrow. I'll take payment tonight. I can take a card, or even Venmo, or a check if you have one, and you can have someone pick them up, or I can have them delivered to you."

"I'll send my assistant," said Aaron.

"And you?" she asked Ben.

“If you could arrange delivery, that would be excellent. I’ll text you the address.”

Catalina took their information and sent them receipts. They wrapped up the meal quickly after that.

“Thank you,” she whispered to Sven as they took their leave.

“My pleasure. I know you get to see Chiara tomorrow; she’ll give you all the gossip about your new collectors. You can’t make this stuff up.”

Catalina was too bone-tired to even be intrigued. All she wanted to do was get back to the room and maybe figure out what was going on with Sebastian, and hopefully get a good night's sleep without too much residual awkwardness.

Chapter 44

Catalina let herself into the room quietly, expecting Sebastian to perhaps be watching something on TV or asleep, but she could tell at first glance that there was no one there.

He must have gone out, and stayed out, after spotting her with Sven and his friends. She could still see in her mind's eye the look of disappointment, maybe even disgust, on his handsome face. What had made him react that way? She had assumed he would come up to the table and introduce himself, maybe even save her from the situation—though it wasn't his job to save her from anything. Was it possible that he was jealous? She had known that pretending to be in a relationship might make things messy, but she hadn't been prepared for the depth of her feelings, for how real it felt, and for how devastated she would be when they went back to their everyday lives in Mexico City. She didn't know how she would face being neighbors with Sebastian in Roma Norte, just another gallery, and perhaps a failing one, at that. At this juncture, failing at her gallery endeavor would almost be a relief; she would go to work for one of the hundreds of family offices in Polanco, helping them to invest in art, and she and Sebastian wouldn't need to see each other anymore. But, of course, the idea of that felt like two dreams were dying at once.

She wished Sebastian had been in the room, she realized. If only they could have spent their penultimate night in Miami decompressing together, recapping how things had gone, discussing how they would orchestrate the breakdown of their booth. And she was still debating whether she was going to invite him out for a nightcap with Chiara after their dinner the next night. She felt guilty for having jumped to conclusions when she first met him. Now, she was quite certain that he was a man she admired, someone she could trust, at least in most respects, someone she craved spending time with. He was smart. He was ridiculously handsome. She would have been so proud to introduce a man like that to her friend.

If only things were different.

He was a cheater. She couldn't move past that, nor should she. She had caught herself on more than one occasion, reasoning that perhaps the forced proximity they'd experienced in the hotel room was more than any normal man would have to endure. Perhaps she had thrown herself at him. She had to give herself at least part of the blame. But how could she help it, when she found him so damn irresistible?

She sighed and walked over to the closet. She regretfully touched the silky fabric of her shimmering copper dress and risked one last look at her reflection in the mirror behind the door. She couldn't help thinking that she'd wasted her prettiest outfit. How she would have loved to go out for a night on the town with Sebastian while wearing this, but then she realized that it would have had to be a night when they were pretending to be together, because the real thing could never happen. Who cared if it was fake, when it felt this good, even if it hurt more than anything? She could imagine his eyes on her, almost feel his hands on her. And just as she was lifting the dress over her head, she heard a noise behind her and felt a pair of hands on her hips. She froze, then relaxed as she recognized the warm, musky, woody scent of Sebastian's fragrance. Couldn't they pretend, just one more night?

"Put that back on," he said. "I can't believe I'm saying that, because you look so beautiful now too, but I didn't get to fully appreciate you in that dress."

She did as she was told, letting the dress slide back over her hips. She was going to turn around to face him, but Sebastian pulled her back towards him. She sighed and let herself relax against his chest, breathing him in. It was better this way, not having to look at his face, not having to see the lie in his eyes. It felt so natural. He wrapped his arms around her, enveloping her exactly the kind of warm hug she needed, right then.

"I missed you so much," he said, and she wanted to believe him. "You worried me."

"Why didn't you come to the table?"

"When I saw you there, I felt guilty for invading your privacy. I have no right to do that. But you know that Benicio Alvarez is bad news."

"So why didn't you come to protect me?"

"You were holding your own. I would love to be the man who is there to defend you, to protect you. I would love for you to be mine, but I know that's impossible. So, I forced myself to leave. I've been walking around, convincing myself that I should go, find another place to stay, and take myself away from this situation. But I'm sorry- I can't. I don't want to."

Catalina turned around.

"I don't want you to go, either," she whispered. "I want you here, with me."

"Say that again. Please," Sebastian groaned.

"I want you here. With me," she said, her voice carrying more conviction now.

She couldn't lie to herself anymore. She had suffered so much, and she felt like a monster thinking this way, but why couldn't she have a taste of him, just this once, while they were still in the glamorous bubble of Art Basel? It was wrong, but it felt so right. She would let him be the better person, the one who put a stop to it, if he felt guilty enough.

His only response was pulling her closer to him. She could feel his warmth as he pressed himself to her. Maybe nothing else would happen. Every instant, she believed that he might break it off. But then, Sebastian's hands moved to push her hair aside so that he could kiss her neck. When she responded by pressing herself even closer to him, she could feel his hardness between them.

"I think we should talk," he said, while nuzzling her neck. "We need to clear the air."

"Not tonight. Please, just be with me," she begged.

"You don't know how long I've been dreaming of that," he groaned, cupping her ass in both hands and pulling himself even closer to her. "It's been impossible, having you in bed with me and not having your permission to ravage you."

"I wanted it so much," Catalina admitted. "Didn't you know that?"

"I thought it was my own wishful thinking," said Sebastian.

His lips barely caressed the sensitive skin of her throat again, raising goosebumps, and she tried to repress the groan that spilled from her lips. She threw her head back, as if begging him to use his teeth on her, to let her feel his tongue on her throat.

"Who were the other men at the table?" he growled.

"Are you really jealous?"

"Desperately."

"Why?"

Sebastian loosened his grip on her waist and ran his hands over her shoulders, then down to her breasts, his thumbs dragging over her erect nipples through the thin silk of the dress as he caressed further down her body.

"How in the world could you ask me that? Don't you know?"

Was she dreaming, or did he actually have the audacity to look hurt? She could have answered, could have protested that he was not available, that they shouldn't be doing this, but she was being selfish, for once. She wanted this. Needed it so badly. So instead of answering, she kissed him, sucking on that lower lip she hadn't been able to tear her eyes away from, tasting his mouth, breathing him in, loving the feeling of their tongues twining together. Now, he ground against her, cupping her ass in both of his hands, squeezing her to him, bringing her in close, pinning her against the wall. She wouldn't have been able to get away from him now, even if she'd wanted to.

And she really, really didn't want to. She could feel the throbbing starting between her legs. The wetness.

"I can't get enough of you. I want to be even closer to you. To feel every inch of you," he whispered, breathing into her neck.

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked.

She looked up at him, finally making eye contact, which made it feel so much more real. So much more personal. They were both breathing hard now, into the narrow space between them, their eyes shooting sparks at each other, as if daring each other to make another move. Something that would change everything.

"Do you want it?" He asked. "Really?"

"Don't ask me anymore," she said. "Just take. Take me. All of me."

It was as if she had unleashed a tiger. Sebastian lifted her up, pushing the dress up around her hips and forcing her to wrap her legs around him. She could feel the hot bulge of his member grinding against her. She had already soaked through the thin silk of her panties. It felt so good, but she wanted more. Now that she was pinned to the wall, he had one hand free to push the thin fabric of the dress aside and cup a breast. He lifted her up higher, to greedily suck on the nipple. She let out a gasp. She wanted more of him. As hot as this was, to be pinned to the wall by him, as much as she loved the idea of him taking her standing up, she also wanted to take her time. If they were going to do this, she might as well get her fill. Because when they went back to Mexico City, it would be over. She forced herself not to think about that. It hurt too much. Suddenly, he released her, and her feet found the floor. She looked up at him. Was he coming to his senses? But the look in his eye was feral, wanting.

"Take off your panties," he growled, "before I tear them off."

Relief and desire swept through her as she stood there on shaking legs, already missing the sensation of him against her. She quickly obeyed, pulling the undergarments down and kicking them across the room.

"What about you?" she asked.

Without a word, Sebastian undid the buckle on his belt, unzipped his trousers, and pulled down his boxers, his manhood springing forth. She pulled him to her, and he gave her another deep kiss, his hot shaft throbbing against her belly as he pressed against her.

"Now, take off that gorgeous dress," he instructed.

She stepped back again and pulled the delicate garment over her head, dropping it to the floor. She shuddered when he put both hands on her, on either side of her waist, caressing her with his eyes.

"You're so beautiful," he groaned. "*Ay Dios*, I want to take you every which way."

She thought he might navigate her to the bed, but instead, he cupped both her breasts in his hands, sucking on one nipple, then the other, all the while grinding against her, letting her feel his hot flesh inching towards her most sensitive spot. Now, he kissed her deeply, his hot tongue probing her mouth. She was desperately moving against him now, her whole body begging him for more, with him sucking on her lower lip. She loved it. It felt so good. Her hands ran down his back, feeling the hard muscles there, the hot skin, and as she breathed in deeply, the smell of his sweat, a woodsy animal scent that drove her wild, tickled her nose. One of his hands made its way further down her body at last, making its way between her legs. Now, he teased her, found her clit and rubbed in circles with a finger, making her gasp and angle herself towards him, which he correctly took as an invitation to thrust a finger inside her. She gasped, savoring the sensation. It was a good start. A great start, in fact, but she wanted more. But she threw her head back and focused on enjoying what was happening right now. He was biting her neck now, the fingers of one

hand pinching her nipple, those of the other fucking her hard, and it was all she could do to not call out his name.

“You're so wet,” he groaned into her ear.

She reached down to stroke his cock, just for the pleasure of feeling the hot, smooth flesh on her hand. She needed it.

“And you're so hard. Please, please,” she begged, at last.

Sebastian eased his fingers out of her and stepped back, giving her an eyeful of his gorgeous body.

“Why did you stop?” she panted.

“I need something,” he said.

“Oh,” she said, comprehension dawning.

“Come with me.”

He took her by the hand, leading her to his nightstand. He opened the drawer and retrieved a gold wrapped condom.

“I want you to know, I hated myself for buying these. The other morning, I had hoped this might happen between us, and then, once I had gotten them, I felt guilty for even... though I told myself that if I ever had the opportunity, I didn't want to lose it because I needed to make a trip to the pharmacy.”

“Shut up and put it on,” Catalina said.

No ruining the moment with guilt. Not tonight. In a quick movement, Sebastian tore open the wrapper and slid the condom over his shaft.

“You scared me,” he said, being out with someone as dangerous as Benicio, not telling me where you went.”

“I didn't think I needed to tell you where I went. Why was it any of your business?”

“Because I care. Deeply.”

She wanted to reply, say something snide, but he had already turned her around and pitched her forward, so her hands were on the bed.

“I think you should be punished for scaring me,” he said.

“Oh? And how are you going to do that?” She asked.

She hoped he wasn't one of those twisted guys who liked to play cruel games. Then again, she was far too excited not to see where this would go.

“I get to dictate exactly how I take you today.”

“Oh,” she gasped as he entered her in one smooth motion.

She cried out. She'd been waiting so long for this, and feeling him filling her, knowing her swollen, hungry lips were squeezing him, pulling him deeper inside of her, gave her deliciously intense sensations that made her cry out again. Sebastian bent over her, taking her breasts in his hands, squeezing them and thrusting in deeper. She gasped.

“Are you OK?” he asked, breaking character. She decided she liked this game. It was easier to play a game than to get hurt by being too raw with him.

“I'm not feeling sorry yet,” she panted.

“Really,” he said, thrusting harder. “Be careful what you say. I can go on like this all night if you're not careful.”

“Is that so?” she asked, her question ending in a gasp as he slammed back into her. Bursts of pleasure began to radiate from deep inside of her to every nerve ending. She felt an irrepressible sensation start to build inside of her.

“Ay, *Dios*, don't stop... I think I'm going to...”

At that moment, Sebastian slowed down.

“No fair. Please,” she begged.

And just as she'd asked, he slid back into her hard, taking her feet in his hands now, angling her so that he hit the sweetest, deepest spots inside of her. She arched her back and cried out, backing into him, urging him to increase his rhythm, which he did, taking her cue, thrusting over and over again, angling himself to rub her deliciously with each stroke. She didn't think she could take any more, but she didn't want it to stop.

“Please, please, please,” she begged.

He obeyed. She felt herself clench him with her insides, paroxysms of pleasure shaking her whole body as the orgasm swept through her with a rush of heat and additional wetness, giving him extra lubrication to fuck her even harder. Because this was definitely not making love. This was *fucking*. And she loved it. The orgasm just kept coming and coming, and Sebastian didn't stop, just as he'd promised.

“Are you feeling sorry now?” He asked.

“No,” she cried.

“You want me to stop?” He asked.

“No.”

“I felt that” he whispered into her ear, bending over her and pulling her back against his chest. She felt their slick sweat coating their skin, the heat of his body feeling so good against her back.

“You came so hard.”

“Yes,” she gasped.

“OK, I'm done punishing you.”

“No!”

The cry escaped her, surprising her, but she knew it was true: she never wanted this to end. Sebastian started withdrawing himself from her, and she gasped in disappointment.

“Lie down,” he told her, his voice gentle, now.

She lay back on the cool sheets, the smooth cotton feeling so good against her slick flesh. She watched him as he lowered himself onto her, giving her a slow, delicious kiss, stroking her skin, devouring her with his eyes.

“You're so, so beautiful.”

She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, trying to believe that he meant what he said, trying to pretend that she was the only woman for him. But she couldn't. This was all a lie. She almost told him to stop there and then, but she couldn't do that, either. She was too far gone. She would take what she could get. And now, he was kissing down her body, before using his mouth between her legs to tease her almost to the brink again, stroking her quivering thighs.

“You taste so good,” he groaned, giving her a few last laps and making his way back up her body, kissing his way up, nuzzling between her breasts.

“Please,” she begged again.

Not only did she know how delicious it felt to have him deep inside of her, but she craved that closeness. She was addicted to it, and wanted it now, even if she was terrified of how she would feel when that closeness was ripped away from her. He positioned himself between her legs, slowly sliding his shaft into her, inch by inch, as she begged for more. He started moving inside of her again, this time more slowly, more carefully, watching her face intently, as if to read every micro-expression, to see which movements gave her the most pleasure. This felt different. She let herself look deep into his eyes, and he gazed back. How could he look at her like that? How could he be so convincing, when she knew he belonged to someone else? It almost broke her heart into a million pieces, but when he cupped her face in both hands and gave her a long, soulful kiss, never ceasing his movements inside of her, she focused on the pleasure that started to build again. Now

he was teasing a nipple, then the other, stroking her whole body, inside and out, kissing her neck, her chin, her nose. A moment ago, they had been fucking, but now, she would be deluded to call it making love, but it was as if he was telling her that he felt a lot more for her than just *caring*. Real or not, that was what it felt like. And even if it was not to last for more than this evening, she was going to take it.

Once she got to Mexico City, back to her old haunts, her old habits, her friend, and her sister, the ghost of Alejandro would no doubt become powerful again. It had no pull, here in Miami. The miles had lessened its influence. So, just for now, she would relish not thinking of it. She squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them again, only to find Sebastian still looking at her in that way, the one that made her want to believe it was all real. Now, she focused on all the sensations: Sebastian's lips on hers, his tongue twining with hers, his hands stroking her body, his cock plumbing her most intimate depths. Finally, she was almost fully in the moment, wishing it would never end, and that reality wouldn't have to return.

"Please, don't stop," she whispered.

"I don't want to stop," he said, but he now pulled out of her again, right when she was on the brink of another orgasm. He pulled her legs towards him towards the edge of the bed, where he stood between her thighs and pulled her to him, so he could enter her as deeply as possible. She lay back, savoring this new angle, and watching him, his gorgeous abdominals flexing with each thrust. She arched her back in ecstasy and was almost taken by surprise by the massive orgasm that shook her whole body, making even her toes tingle, making her nipples stand at attention under his palms.

"You're too sexy," he moaned. And then, she could feel him throbbing inside of her, hear a growling in his throat. She watched his gorgeous face as he gave in to the pleasure.

When it was done, he collapsed on top of her, kissing her lips, her chin, her neck, before carefully sliding out of her. She let out a little whimper.

"Do you have to?"

"I wish I didn't."

This would have been the moment to say that she wasn't to worry- that they would do this again soon. That he had chosen her. That he had told Bibi it was all over between them. But he didn't say it. And she didn't say anything, either. She didn't ask what would happen when they went back to their lives in Mexico City. Soon, they were falling asleep in each other's arms. And when she woke up in the morning, he was gone.

Chapter 45

Catalina grabbed her cell phone, hoping for a note from Sebastian. *Something*. But there was only a message from Chiara.

Chiara: *Can't wait to see you.*

Yes, it would be lovely to see Chiara that evening. But Sebastian was the one she really needed right now. Where was he? She shook her head, angry at herself. She was doing it again. Wishful thinking. Sebastian did not need her. He would never be with her. Last night had been a beautiful mistake.

Then, the door was opening, and Sebastian was letting himself into the room.

"Oh. I was hoping to make it back before you woke up," he said, swooping in and giving her a kiss, in perfect imitation of a man in a real relationship.

"I got us breakfast."

Catalina felt wobbly. She tried to paste on a normal smile, sat up, and settled herself against her pillows.

"Empanadas?"

"Fried chicken and waffle benny from Big Pink," he grinned, holding up a bag and a drinks carrier with two coffees in it.

"You're a bad boy," she said, trying to maintain a playful tone.

"Only if you like bad boys," he answered, lightly.

But then, he turned to peer at her.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. A bad dream," she lied.

"Breakfast in bed is the perfect antidote for that."

He put down the bag, handed Catalina her coffee, and placed his own on his side table. He peeled off his sweatshirt. He now had her full attention. But regretfully, his T-shirt stayed on. She realized she was in fact hungry. Sebastian sat on the bed, took two carry-out containers from the bag, and set one up on her lap, handing her a paper napkin and some utensils. Before she could dig in, he gave her another kiss, one that left her strongly considering the idea of casting the food aside in favor of other pursuits.

"Eat."

She did as she was told. What had happened the night could be blamed on too many cocktails. With both of them sober, in the bright light of day, it would be far more difficult to forget. Would she even be able to face having the gallery next door to his in Roma Norte, after all of this? Would he want her as a neighbor, once the guilt set in? For now, he seemed oblivious. And strangely happy.

"I love this," he observed, "spending these little moments with you. I could do this forever."

She loved the idea of it, too. But in truth, she was in agony. How could he pretend this wasn't the last time they would do this? Yes, they had tonight, albeit after her dinner with Chiara. Just thinking about how they might spend that time left her quivering in anticipation. But ultimately, he was lying to her, or to himself, just like Alejandro had. Her flight left early the next morning. There would be no time for a relaxed breakfast in bed or anything else she could imagine. Which meant there was no time like the present. But all of a sudden, she felt shy, and reluctant to make the first move. Because it would hurt too much, knowing he would be going back to his life. Back to Bibi. Unless he was going to break up with her, but even then, he had been a liar. She wanted to express this, tell him she knew they had no future, but she didn't want to ruin the moment. And she wanted him one more time, before having to face reality.

She'd almost finished eating when she saw him checking his watch.

"*Maldición!* It's later than I thought."

"Who cares? We don't have anywhere to be," she protested.

"I need to get our art wrapped up and ready for shipping."

"I sold all of mine."

"I'm glad. But I didn't sell all of mine, and I have to break down the booth ..."

"I'll help," said Catalina, starting to get out of bed.

"No."

He pushed back down, gently, and gave her one more slow, delicious kiss.

"I said I would do it. I owe you. You relax, go see the things you've been wanting to see. I'll text you when I'm done."

Catalina was about to broach the subject of her dinner with Chiara, and the fact that she wanted him to meet her old friend for a nightcap, but he gave her another kiss, full of promise, and before she knew it, he was out the door.

She took her time getting ready, reluctantly getting into the shower and washing off his scent, thinking that maybe if she really took her time, maybe he would come back to the room before she even had a chance to leave. But as she was getting dressed in the red and turquoise dress that set off her coloring in a way she hoped he might appreciate, she received a text message.

Sebastian: *It is chaos at the shipping place they recommended. Looking for other options. I hope I find something. I should have thought this might happen.*

Catalina: *OK. I'm heading out. Hope to see you soon.*

Catalina left the room and took herself on a long walk around South Beach. She tried to call Sofia, but she still wasn't responding. She pinged Harold, her friend Constance's uncle, who owned a yacht design company, and who invited her to lunch at his favorite spot, Joe's Stone Crab. Catalina hesitated, then accepted. Harold might have clients who could use some art, and he was a fascinating character, to boot. Maybe, when Sebastian was done, he could join them.

Catalina and Harold took their time catching up over a bottle of Chardonnay and a plate of crab claws, but when lunch was over, she still hadn't gotten a call from Sebastian. She spent a couple more hours window shopping and visiting galleries, growing increasingly antsy, and then realized that she was going to be late for Chiara.

She hurried back to the hotel, half expecting to find Sebastian waiting for her in the room. But he wasn't there. Now, it was getting weird. She shook off the alarm bells ringing in her head and took a moment choosing what to wear. It was a no brainer. For an evening out with stylish Chiara, the red knit dress she had worn at Pujol with Sebastian would be perfect.

She hoped he wouldn't think her lazy for repeating outfits when he saw her. Where was he, anyway? *Stop it, Cata. He has things to do*, she admonished herself. She left her hair down and flowing down her back, added a large pair of gold earrings, a slick of lipstick, and she was ready.

The bar was mere steps away from her hotel, and it felt good to be walking outside in the subtropical heat before stepping into a spectacular lobby of The Edition. This hotel had been open for a while, but it still felt fresh.

Walking into the bar, she began beaming when she spotted her friend Chiara. Beautiful, blonde, Instagram-worthy, but brainy as hell, Chiara was an impressive package.

"Look at you," Chiara exclaimed as Catalina approached. "Sven said you were glowing even more than usual. He had no idea why, but I have an idea, and don't get mad at me for saying this, but...could that be the look of love?"

Catalina blushed furiously. Was it that obvious? Even though she knew none of it was real, and she was annoyed that Sebastian hadn't gotten back to her, just thinking of him made a warm, fuzzy flower bloom in her heart.

"Let's have a drink and maybe I'll tell you about it," she smiled.

"Falling in love with somebody new doesn't take away from what you had with Ale," said Chiara carefully.

"Let me stop you right now," Catalina said. "This thing that is happening to me right now, it's not love. It's not real. But it's opening me up to the possibilities."

She ignored the painful pang in her heart when she said that. Instead, she focused on giving Chiara the real, in person apology she deserved.

"You were right. I was wrong. I'm so sorry I stopped talking to you- but it was because the idea of lying to you like I lied to so many other people was more than I could bear. Alejandro was not the man he claimed to be. I was blind to it at first, and you were being a true friend in warning me, and I punished you for it."

Catalina took a deep breath, stemming the flow of tears that threatened to burst forth. As if sensing the overflow of emotions, Chiara pulled her into a hug.

"Shhh. All is forgiven. I can't even imagine what you went through."

Soon, they had ordered drinks and clinked their glasses together and caught up on all the aspects of Chiara's multilayered life. Catalina had given her the rundown on her opening and her experience with Art Basel. Until they had stopped speaking for just over a year, Chiara had closely followed Catalina's journey to finally opening an art gallery, and as an art expert, she was heavily invested in the project. Finally, after they had decided to just order dinner at the bar, Chiara leaned in towards Catalina.

"So now... tell me about this guy," said Chiara.

"I don't really know how much I want to say. I told you, it's just a fling...You might still meet him..."

"OK...And who is *him*?"

As much as she wanted to say *Sebastian Espinoza*, knowing that even forming the name on her lips gave her a little thrill, Catalina had to face facts. She and Sebastian wouldn't be anything after tonight. And on the off chance that Chiara knew who he was, she did not want to have her pragmatic friend burst her bubble. She hesitated.

"Fine," said Chiara. "No names. But what's he like? What does he do?"

"Believe it or not, he owns the gallery next door to mine," said Catalina.

"You fell for the competition?"

"It's not like that. He's been really helpful. I don't think I could have done it without him."

Saying it out loud made her start to realize just how true this was. Where *was* he?

"Your knight in shining armor," said Chiara. "Why is it just a fling, then?"

"There are some... things. Things that give me pause. Forgive me if I don't really want to talk about them right now."

"At least tell me this: is he good looking?"

"Devastatingly so," said Catalina honestly.

"Show me a photo," Chiara begged.

Fine. There could be no danger in that. They had posed for numerous selfies in the course of the week. Catalina took out her phone, wondering again why she hadn't heard from Sebastian, an ache beginning to sharpen in her chest. And then, she saw it on her lock screen: a list of missed calls, all from Sebastian's number. And two voicemails. Her phone had been on silent the whole time. Catalina had the bad habit of pretending voicemails didn't even exist. Why couldn't they just

text, like a normal person? She never listened to messages, preferring to just call the person back, and Maria and Sofia knew to keep trying until they got her. But in this case, she would make an exception.

"Ugh. Do you mind if I check this?"

"Of course not," said Chiara, looking at her own phone.

As Catalina listened to the messages, her face fell.

The first voice mail was from just after one o'clock, when she was having lunch with Harold. She must have had bad reception inside the restaurant, and it had delayed the delivery of the message.

"I'm done. I tried to call you a couple times. Anyway, if you get this, let me know where you are."

Great. But that was at midday. Why hadn't he tried to reach her again? Then, a second voicemail:

"I'm back at the hotel. It looks like you just left. I can still smell your perfume. This afternoon has been a mess, and I wish I could have caught you, but ..."

The blood started rushing in Catalina's ears, threatening to drown out the rest of the message: "Something came up with Bibi," Sebastian was saying. "Of course, you have the room for tonight. I ... anyway, see you in Mexico City."

The room was spinning. Catalina thought she might be sick. What was wrong with her? Why had she started to entertain these fantasies of what might be, when she knew damn well that their relationship was doomed from the start? Talk about a toxic pattern.

Seeing her friend's expression, Chiara frowned.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing. But just forget anything I said about the new guy," said Catalina.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. I was an idiot."

Catalina drained the rest of her glass.

"I'm sorry. I don't feel so well. Will you be mad if I need to cut our evening short?"

Chiara's face fell.

"If you need to. Please reach out to me if you need me. I want to be in your life. No misunderstandings from now on."

Catalina nodded, the tears starting to fall.

"I'll pay," Chiara said. "You go."

Cata gave her a hug and rose from her barstool, feeling like she might fall down. The future she realized that she had naively allowed herself to imagine with Sebastian, despite her better judgment, had just imploded, and she didn't know how to face the great unknown that lay in front of her. She returned to the room, despondently opening the other half of the closet, as if hoping that Sebastian's clothes would magically still be hanging there, as if that would change anything, but they weren't. She packed her suitcase, set her alarm, and cried herself to sleep.

Chapter 46

Catalina sat on the plane, her eyes screwed shut. That old despair had returned. The blackness crept into her soul. But this time, it was not the inspiring, hopeful Vantablack. She had gotten a taste of what her future could be like, and then, it had been ripped away from her. Now, she was going back to Mexico City more alone and bereft than ever. But what in the world had she been expecting? She should have been feeling relieved. She and Sebastian had managed to pull the wool over Eduardo's eyes, and orchestrating a breakup had always been part of the plan. But now, the fact that the breakup would feel all too real, the idea that things would be ending after she'd gotten a tantalizing glimpse of how it could have been, that devastated her. Also, how cruel it would be, to be forced to play out a breakup, when she was already feeling dumped in the worst way possible, right after opening herself up to him? Well, she hadn't fully opened up. She had held back a tiny bit. But that was a pitiful consolation.

She had half expected her flight to have been canceled by Eduardo; she'd been stressing out as she arrived at the airport, but when check-in went off without a hitch, she realized that she and Sebastian were far better at pretending to be in a relationship than actually managing to be in one.

How judgmental she'd been of Sebastian, simply for his family's relationship to possible organized crime, when everything he had done had demonstrated that he was on the up and up. Except, of course, for cheating on his girlfriend. Whereas Alejandro never had a family to tie his reputation to. In fact, he had been suspiciously alone in the world, other than a few old friends who skirted around their friendship group, like Pedro, who had shown up at the gallery opening, looking squirrely.

What would have happened if Alejandro had lived? Would Catalina have had the courage to end things? Would she ever have opened the gallery? Would she ever have met Sebastian? She could not imagine that meeting him at any point would not have been like an atom bomb in her life. Even if she couldn't have him, she had to be thankful to him for opening her eyes to what could be.

What was Sebastian doing right now? She wondered. Was he busy explaining to Bibi that he'd had to pretend to look at Catalina with desire in his eyes, and that nothing had happened in their shared hotel room? Would Bibi believe him? Did Bibi have more faith in Sebastian than Catalina had ultimately had in Alejandro, especially towards the end?

The shame burned her cheeks. The fact that she had missed out on a full year of her life, lying to herself and to everyone else—that killed her. It hurt almost more than what had transpired between herself and Sebastian. At least that had turned her on, not shut her off.

Chapter 47

Catalina's plane landed in Mexico City. As she waited at the carousel for her suitcase, her mind was already in her apartment, thinking about whether Itzpapalotl would ignore her when she came in, or whether the demon-cat would greet her like a returning hero. There was no in between. She checked her messages, all the while berating herself for hoping for something from Sebastian, but there were only two missed calls and voicemails from an unknown number. She was going to check them when a text message came through.

Maria: *Bienvenida a casa. I can't wait to see you. But unfortunately, I can't come pick you up at the airport. Something came up.*

Catalina's eyebrows lifted in surprise. Normally, her friend would have dropped anything to pick her up, and she felt momentarily annoyed, but then relieved that she was not Maria's number one priority, for once. She was probably busy with the shop. Though this was certainly inconvenient. She would have to grab one of the taxis at the end of a very long line.

Or maybe she could text Sofia, to send her a driver. Except, her sister still had not responded to her, which was going from strange to downright worrisome. How long had it been since they'd spoken? Catalina had been away for less than a week, but so many things had changed in her heart and in her mind that it felt like she'd been away for a lifetime.

Checking her phone again, she realized it was Sunday. Maria wasn't working in the shop. Well, where was she then? Her great aunt and grandmother had left town that morning. She wasn't required to participate in the usual Sunday meal, as she'd let Catalina know they were having it the day before. Maria was not highly social, and she couldn't imagine what kind of appointment she might have on a Sunday. But Catalina was only mildly curious as to her friend's comings and goings. It was enough to know that she could tease her about it when she saw her next.

Now, however, she realized that she would come home to a nearly empty apartment, to an empty refrigerator, to probably an empty cat bowl, and empty hours in front of her, to contemplate what had happened in Miami- alone. She couldn't bear it. If only Sofia would answer her messages. It would be nice to catch up with her sister and fill her in on Chiara's updates and everything...well, almost everything that had happened at Art Basel.

Once she had retrieved her suitcase, she wheeled it towards the taxi stand and sat in the car, taking everything in as the driver navigated them through the Mexico City streets in the dying light of a cool December day.

Christmas decorations lined the streets, and Catalina realized that the holidays would be there soon. It would be her second Christmas since losing Alejandro. The first one, she had been completely numb and hadn't even noticed the date, but now, she wondered what she would do. She didn't feel like spending it alone. She didn't want to force Maria to spend time with her, away from her extended family. She told herself not to think about what Sebastian would be doing, because there was no question that he would be taking Bibi somewhere romantic. As for Sofia, she and her family always went to their parents' place in San Miguel. A tidal wave of regret subsumed her. Again, she felt a pang of longing for her mother. Her mother had been right, hadn't she? Whether she'd had concrete proof that Alejandro wasn't who he said he was, or whether it had just been a feeling, her mother had ultimately been right. And it was unfair of Catalina to hold a grudge when her parents had only been trying to protect her.

She even missed her father.

His stupid jokes, his overconsumption of food and alcohol at every holiday, his memories of growing up, and his poverty exaggerated for effect so that he could impress everyone with how he had pulled himself up by his bootstraps. His multi-millionaire wife was just a small part of the

equation, according to him, but she had understood it must have been difficult to live in her financial shadow.

Perhaps Papa had not been good enough for his in-laws as well, but he had proven himself, and Alejandro could have too, except he didn't. To be honest, maybe Catalina had already felt that, when she cut off contact with her parents. It would have been such an easy thing to say, *If you love me, you'll trust that I've chosen the right one*. It would have been quite plausible that her parents would have accepted this if they thought there was any chance of him making good, but they hadn't. And she hadn't. She had blocked them on her phone, so even if they had tried to reach out to her, she wouldn't have known it. And now, the desire to call them started creeping up into her brain like an itch she couldn't scratch. Or could she?

"*Estamos aquí*," said the cab driver.

She thanked him, paid, and dragged her suitcase to the front of her apartment building.

Opening the big door, wheeling into the courtyard, and then lugging her suitcase up the narrow stairs, she realized how much she had missed her apartment. She had missed her city. She'd missed her gallery, even though it was apparently haunted by the ghost of her late husband. But still, most of all, she missed Sebastian.

The good news was, with three of those things, she would soon feel that she could get her fill. Three out of four wasn't bad, was it? She finally arrived at the top of the stairs and, panting, turned the key in the lock of her door.

A black tumbleweed came barreling down the hallway, straight towards her legs. Catalina burst into tears.

"Itzpapalotl," she cried as the cat threw itself into her arms. She buried her face in the cat's warm black fur. "I hope your Auntie Maria took good care of you. I think she eventually fell in love with you too, didn't she?" she told the cat. Itzpapalotl considered her with serious yellow eyes. "Maybe you're the biggest love Maria ever had," Catalina whispered to the cat.

Itzpapalotl seemed to understand and gave her a disdainful look.

"So, it's true, is it? Maria finally met someone special. Was that a leg in blue jeans I saw in the photo she sent? Oh, Itzi! If only you could speak!"

As she thought of ways to broach the subject with her best friend, if she was ready, that was, Catalina busied herself, taking her clothes out of the suitcase, hanging up the pieces that did not need to be dry-cleaned, and separating out the things she could wash by hand or in the machine. After all, she had nothing else to do.

She would need to go grocery shopping. But just because a little magical thinking never hurt anyone, she checked the refrigerator, just to make sure. Inside, there was a carton of milk, some eggs, a casserole dish, a bottle of wine, and a little Post it note. She smiled and held back the tears that threatened at the corners of her eyes. How kind of Maria to do this for her. She was lucky to have her, and from now on, it was Catalina's turn to be more of a support, should Maria need it.

She read the note to see what Maria had left as reheating instructions. Within 45 minutes, she was seated on her green velvet sofa, eating a delicious *tinga de pollo* that she recognized as Maria's grandmother's recipe. This taste of home almost made her cry fat tears, but having her sweet demon cat next to her and being in her lovely apartment balanced out the emotion somewhat.

Should she text Sebastian? She should not. Would she wait until she ran into him at the gallery, as she packed things up and closed up her business? During the plane ride, she had made a painful decision: She couldn't be Sebastian's neighbor anymore. It would hurt too much. She would have to find someone to take over her lease, someone who would be OK with a haunted gallery. Was she being stupid, though? Was her dream really dead? Would she give up that easily? Would that be enough to get over Sebastian?

Just then, a phone call came through again, from that number she did not recognize. She might as well pick up, she decided, if only to speak to another human being.

"Catalina," she heard, and her eyes opened wide. She took in a sharp breath.

"Mama?"

She had missed her mother so much that it physically pained her. But why in the world was she calling her now? Now, she realized that the call was certainly no coincidence. Panic gripped her insides. There was something wrong with her sister. Was she ill? Was she in the hospital? Had she had an accident? Catalina had been stupid to waste these precious years without her parents, and she hoped she would be able to make up for it somehow, but for now, her priority was the one family member who had truly stuck by her side through thick and thin: Sofia.

"My darling girl, I hear your voice at last, and I'm sorry it's under such circumstances," her mother said, bringing tears to her eyes.

"Is it Sofia? What's happening? Is she all right?"

"Yes. She'll be fine. But Fredo has been tied up in something rather scandalous."

"What has he done?" asked Catalina, "and what can I do?"

"I believe you're... friends... with a certain Mr. Espinoza..."

"Sebastian?" asked Catalina, fury building in her very core.

What had he done? After everything they'd gone through, she'd thought she could trust her judgment on Sebastian. And now, here he was tied up in an unsavory affair, one that touched her family. Had he tried to hurt Sofia? Had he been involved in dishonest business dealings, with Fredo, of all people? Fredo, the perfect son-in-law? It made her sick.

"Yes. I think Sebastian Espinoza the only one who can help us," said Catalina's mother.

Catalina let out a shuddering breath. She was almost dizzy with relief. But then, she realized that him being able to help did not necessarily mean he was fully innocent.

"How?"

"*Parecería que* Fredo was involved in money laundering. Alejandro was helping him. I had a feeling about Alejandro, but no idea about Fredo. And I apologize. You must have thought me so unfair for being judgmental about who you married, and being blind to your sister's choice of spouse."

Catalina would unpack all of that later. Now that she knew her sister was OK, there was just one thing she needed to know.

"So, what does Sebastian have to do with this? Was he working with them?"

"No, of course not. Fredo was having an affair with a relation of Mr. Espinoza's, and I believe that he can use his influence," her mother was saying, but Catalina interrupted her.

"A relation of Sebastian's? Who do you mean?"

"Some *fresa* so-called artist named Bibi."

Catalina's thoughts flew in a million directions. So Fredo was having an affair with Bibi. Bibi was cheating on Sebastian. Not that it made what he was doing with her okay, but maybe there was some way of salvaging this. Selfishly, for just a split second, she thought that maybe this meant they could start over with a clean slate. But no. He was still essentially a cheater. A man without honor, even though he had acted like a gentleman in every other way. She deserved better.

She forced herself to focus on what was happening now, though. Sofia needed her.

"But... why would Sebastian want to help us? And how?"

"I know that Mr. Espinoza managed to get himself out of a very sticky situation with his family's business dealings, and completely distance himself from them, so I thought maybe you could reach out to him and ask him if he would be willing to consult us," said Catalina's mother.

Catalina's mind was reeling.

So that was confirmation that Sebastian was now honest in his business dealings, at least? And again, the recurring thought: maybe his relationship with Bibi was over? Again, Catalina felt guilty, feeling this spark of joy when her sister was obviously in some kind of danger.

"And you're sure Sofia is safe for now?" she asked.

"Yes, but I don't want to speak about details on the phone."

"All right," said Catalina, "I'll try to reach out to Sebastian."

She would swallow her pride. This was for her family, not for her.

"Whatever you can do," her mother said. "And darling, I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you," Catalina stammered.

She didn't have time to dwell on it, but the sentiment warmed her heart. She dialed Sebastian's number. There was, unsurprisingly, no response. She sent off a text message.

Catalina: *I understand you're dealing with a lot right now, but as you can imagine, my family is in a difficult spot, too. Please call or text me back.*

The message seemed so dry, in contrast to the things they had gone through, the things they had done in the past few days, but she couldn't use her personal hurt to avoid getting to the bottom of this. The number one priority right now was her sister. She held her breath and waited. Nothing. She got up from the sofa and started putting the contents of her bowl back into the refrigerator. She had lost her appetite. However, a glass of mezcal would not hurt. At the very least, it would help her to sleep. A text message came in just as she was taking a bottle down from the shelf. It was from a number she did not recognize.

Unknown number: *We need to talk.*

Catalina: *Who is this?*

Unknown number: *No names. It's not safe.*

Catalina shouldn't even have responded. The cartels had a way of tapping into phone systems, and phone scams were very common. But she was feeling punchy.

Catalina: *It's not safe to talk to strangers, either.*

Unknown number: *I'm far from a stranger.*

Catalina: *Prove it.*

Unknown number: *I hold you when you have nightmares, and I want to keep holding you for as long as you'll let me.*

Catalina froze. Was it really Sebastian?

Catalina: *I'm still not convinced. Tell me something only you would know.*

Unknown number: *Your favorite color: black. Favorite films: Bond. Do I need to state your favorite position?*

Catalina: *Who said I only have one?*

She could feel her heart hammering in her chest.

Unknown number: *Come downstairs. I'm picking you up.*

How did he know where she lived? Would Itzpapalotl be okay if she left her again for a moment? Where was Sebastian taking her? Could she trust him? Considering her mother's phone call, she thought that perhaps he was on the good side, but his relationship with Bibi and whatever may or may not have transpired with Fredo might complicate things. But of course, she found that her desire to see him far outweighed any wariness. She bent down and stroked Itzpapalotl, who was already glowering at her suspiciously, grabbed a leather jacket and her handbag, and went out the door.

As soon as she was on the sidewalk, she spotted it: a black BMW, a luxurious but unassuming SUV with tinted windows. Through the windshield, she could see the unmistakable features of the man she had grown to love. She started towards the car. Sebastian jumped out and went to give her

a hug, but she stepped back. She couldn't open her heart to him this way. Not anymore. Or not yet. Hell, she didn't know what she wanted.

"My mother wanted me to call you," she began.

"I already contacted your family. I'm taking you somewhere safe, so we can talk."

"Safe?" she asked. "How did you know where I live?"

Nevertheless, she got into the car. As she buckled her seatbelt, Sebastian got in and pulled away from the curb.

"Your address is in the public record. And I had it from my driver, when he took you home, the first time we met." At this, he sent her a sideways glance. "Until we get to the bottom of this, I think your entire family needs to exercise added caution."

Catalina shuddered. Was it really this serious?

"Why are you helping us? You're probably devastated right now. Your girlfriend was cheating on you... with my brother-in-law?"

"Catalina," said Sebastian, "Bibi's not my girlfriend. She's my cousin, and my ward. I do feel responsible for her, but this trouble she's gotten herself into, it's serious."

Catalina's mind short-circuited. Bibi was Sebastian's cousin. Not his girlfriend, after all. He was not a cheater. And maybe, if she hadn't completely pushed him away with her lies, she could have him, one day. Relief flowed through her veins, but she didn't have time to dwell on that selfish sentiment.

"What did she do?"

"She stupidly posted something about your brother-in-law and his business. I told her to take it down, but the damage is done. Bibi is not always of the soundest judgment. I'm so sorry that someone related to me did this to your family."

"Fredo isn't exactly innocent in the matter."

"True, but Bibi went too far. She does like to push buttons. She was playing a dangerous game."

Catalina groaned, remembering how Sofia had been so excited about the mosaic art surprise she'd thought Fredo was planning for her. Her sister must have gone through such an emotional rollercoaster.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To my house just outside of town, if that's all right. I would have taken you to my apartment in Polanco, but, just for tonight, I thought we would be safer behind the gates."

"I'm still trying to understand the extent of Fredo's dealings. My mother says Alejandro was also involved," Catalina asked.

Sebastian gritted his teeth and gave her a sidelong glance.

"Yes, unfortunately."

"And how are you supposed to help? Are you friends with these people?"

"Far from it," Sebastian said, his fingers squeezing the steering wheel to where she could see white spots on his knuckles. "I knew Alejandro from when we were young. He had started out as a runner and a factotum for one of my uncles. He had potential. He was smart. He was ambitious. We developed a friendship. When I decided to get out of the family business, I asked him to join me in my new venture. To build success more honestly."

"And..." Catalina gulped, but she had to know. "What happened?"

Sebastian glanced at her and then focused back on the road, his dark eyebrows knitted together.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter."

"Tell me."

Sebastian clenched his jaw.

“Listen, Catalina, I’m not going to speak ill of your husband...I’ve already said too much. And done too much. I’m sorry.”

This was it. It wasn’t really the time or the place, but she had to tell him the truth. If she didn’t do it now, it might be too late.

“Sebastian. I’m the one who needs to apologize. I lied to you, and to everyone. Over and over. I knew Alejandro wasn’t perfect. Sorry. That’s a huge understatement. I knew, at the end, that he was up to something really bad. The day he died, I had finally made the decision to try to move on. But then, he was killed, and I kept acting like the grieving widow, because it was the easy way out. So much easier than admitting I’d made a massive mistake, easier than facing the truth that I had driven away my family for this man that I hated, in the end. And that lie made it easier to try to resist you, because I thought you were taken. I was so stupid.”

Sebastian was quiet. Catalina hadn’t expected anything more from him than to listen. Even that was a kindness. It was ridiculous of her to expect him to understand and forgive, just like that. But then, his eyes shifted from the road to focus on her for just a brief moment. The glint of joy she saw in his expression gave her hope. But right now, she needed answers. She needed the truth.

“So, what happened? When you offered him a job?” Catalina asked.

“I hate to say it, but he refused.”

“Oh.”

Catalina sat silently, trying to process the emotions. She had known Ale had turned to less honest work, but it was hard to hear that he’d had other options and had still chosen poorly.

“You have to understand,” said Sebastian. “There was too much risk for him, breaking away for something that wasn’t guaranteed. I tried to convince him a few more times, especially when he got back from the States, but the next thing I heard, he was engaged to a girl from a good family. And at that point, I decided to back away. I’m sorry.”

“You’re being too kind. There’s nothing for you to be sorry about,” said Catalina. “It was his choice. I can’t believe I was ever so naïve.”

“When did you start to suspect?”

“Not in the first years. Once I started seeing the signs, I kept telling myself I was being paranoid. We started to argue...I wasn’t sure I would stay, but I’d alienated my family and friends, and I kept trying to convince myself that it wasn’t that bad... that I was imagining things. Until finally, I became completely certain.”

“I’m so sorry, Catalina.”

“Don’t be. This is on me.”

Now, the truth was flowing out of her and would not be stopped. She told Sebastian everything, including how, after Ale was shot, she started lying to herself - telling herself that she’d been wrong - that he’d been caught in the crossfire, and was not the target. Once he was gone, it had been easy to forget her suspicions and the bad parts.

“It’s messed up,” she said.

“It’s not messed up, Catalina. People tell themselves the stories they need to tell themselves to keep moving forward. Life is hard. And I admire you - it couldn’t have been easy. You must have felt so alone.”

Sebastian took her hand. It felt so good to be heard, to be understood. The relief of it almost made her cry.

“Your parents are on their way to my house, as is Sofia,” Sebastian said. “I’ve hired extra security. People I can trust. We’ll come up with a game plan, but I have the team that helped me to separate myself from any illegal activity. They specialize in preventing retaliation and rehabilitating your reputation. It’s not easy, but Sofia can do it.”

"What about Fredo?" asked Catalina.

"If he wishes, I can try to help him," said Sebastian.

"Are you sure we're all safe at your house?"

"We have security. And the last place these people would look is at the home of Bibi's relative."

Catalina felt like she had emotional vertigo, like her heart was a pendulum. She was going to see her sister. Her sister was safe. She was going to see her parents. Though she was devastated for Sofia, maybe this would be a fresh start for all of them.

Sebastian navigated his car through a set of gates.

"Oh, you're almost neighbors with Sofia," Catalina observed.

"Yes, how convenient for Bibi," said Sebastian with a grim expression.

"Where is Bibi now?" asked Catalina.

"I've sent her to Switzerland until this blows over."

"And Fredo?"

"Whereabouts unknown."

They pulled through a second set of gates, this one also with a guardhouse manned by security guards.

"You certainly live like the patron of a cartel," Catalina observed.

"I don't have this much security all the time," said Sebastian. "These structures were built by the previous owner of the home. I simply left them where they were and hired the personnel for today. These are men who've worked with me for a long time in other capacities. They're honest. I know I can trust them. But of course, it's also useful to have someone who's an excellent marksman. For example, Pepe back there. He's more of a big game hunter than a bodyguard, but I would call those overlapping skills."

When they pulled into the view of the house, Catalina gasped. She recognized this house. She'd looked at it every night before bed. It was pictured in one of the photos on her bedroom wall.

"You live in a Luis Barragan house?" she asked. "This is one of my favorite buildings of all time."

"Mine too," said Sebastian. He gave her a little grin before returning to his serious demeanor. "I can give you a tour, but that will have to wait."

He got out of the car, and a white-uniformed butler opened the door for her. Sebastian greeted the man and showed Catalina inside.

In a spacious living room with a massive skylight, Catalina found her sister Sofia sitting on a curved sofa. As they entered, she rose and threw herself into Catalina's arms.

"I'm so sorry I wasn't there when you needed me most," said Catalina. "Did you have any idea of what was going on?"

"None, at first" Sofia replied. "Until I started suspecting."

Catalina knew the feeling.

"What tipped you off?"

"You're not going to believe me, but several times, I thought I saw the ghost of Alejandro. At first, I was terrified, but then I felt that it was leading me to the proof that Fredo was double crossing me. It showed me where to look."

Catalina froze. The ghost was real? Other people could see it?

"I know it sounds crazy," Sofia shrugged. "But I swear it's true."

"I saw him too," said Catalina, giving Sebastian a sidelong glance. "Where did you see him?"

"In my dreams, at the embassy, in your gallery ... in front of your apartment, but I feel like he couldn't get in ..."

Catalina's mind was reeling. Maybe Itzi had been her protector in more ways than one. And, when she really thought about it, that flash she had seen, the one that had distracted her and made her trip on the sidewalk, the evening of the Day of the Dead...had Ale been trying to make up for what he'd done to her?

Sebastian's phone pinged. "Your parents are coming through the gate now," he announced.

Catalina smoothed down the front of her jumpsuit, glad she had made an effort with her traveling wardrobe. Her parents rushed through the door, embracing both sisters.

Catalina's father had tears running down his cheeks. She had never seen him cry.

"Mr. Espinoza, you're going to help us, aren't you?" asked Catalina's mother.

"Of course, Signora Cervantes, anything for Catalina's family," Sebastian replied, making eye contact with Catalina, sending a thrill through her body. "Please sit down. I'll have Alvaro bring us drinks. What can I serve you?"

After a moment, they were seated around the coffee table, and Sebastian laid out the situation.

"This decision can't be reversed. Once one cuts ties with the cartels and other dishonest people, one must always remain vigilant. By being associated with him, especially at the beginning, you are all in danger, especially Sofia and the children. You'll have to determine how to protect yourselves. The good news is, Fredo was not a drug runner or weapons dealer. He made improper financial deals. With my lawyer, financial advisor, and a few well-chosen donations to social causes, he will be rehabilitated in no time. The only question is if that's what he wants."

"I don't want anything to do with him," Sofia suddenly announced. "He lied to me and put me and the children at risk. I want to live a normal life. I want to drive a Vocho around like Catalina."

Catalina smiled.

"You don't need to be that extreme."

"I can't imagine the extent of everything that Fredo was involved in. But despite his bodyguards and all his displays of vigilance, he was not truly careful. Cheating on me was just one mistake among many. I don't know what I'm most angry at him for—his selfishness, his lies, or his complete disregard for me and the children. But it doesn't matter. I want to start over fresh," said Sofia, holding her head up high in the way that Catalina should have done when she'd found out about Alejandro's double life.

"All right," said Sebastian. "The best course of action is a fast, public divorce, and then maybe going abroad for a time until it blows over. It won't be pleasant or easy, but I think you're tough. You share that with your sister."

They all listened as Sebastian outlined a plan for Sofia and the children to hunker down in their parents' Polanco apartment until she could make travel plans.

"Catalina, you should come with us too," said her father.

But Catalina didn't want to be separated from Sebastian, if he would have her.

"I have Itzpapalotl and—"

"Don't worry," said Sebastian. "I'll make sure Catalina is safe, too."

Catalina noticed he hadn't spelled out his plan for her. But it gave her hope.

"All right," her father said, as if hesitant to leave her. It would take more effort on her part, and some time, for their relationship to heal, but she knew her parents loved her unconditionally. Catalina gave each of her parents a long hug.

"I'm so sorry for pulling away from you."

"We're sorry we let you," said her mother. "We'll put this behind us."

"Yes," Catalina promised. "I'll make it up to you."

She and Sebastian stood side by side, watching her family leave. He nudged her with his shoulder and she nudged back.

Chapter 48

When everyone was gone, Catalina and Sebastian moved closer to each other, drawn to each other like magnets, until she was in his arms.

"I really missed you these past couple days," he said.

"Me too. Why didn't you tell me what was going on with Bibi?"

"I hoped I could deal with it before it truly blew up. I wanted to spare you. But that was wishful thinking."

Catalina gave him a look. That was not what she was asking.

"I mean, why didn't you tell me that Bibi was your cousin, not your girlfriend?"

"Oh. When I met you, I fell for you hard. But I saw how you had built up Alejandro in your mind, and I thought I would never measure up. I wanted to respect your mourning. But when we had to pretend to be together, I couldn't trust myself not to make a move on you. I hated myself for that. So, I thought that your assumption that she was my girlfriend would make you compensate all the more for my weakness. I still hate myself for acting like that. It's like I have no moral fiber."

"You saw how well that worked out," Catalina scoffed. She turned serious when she saw Sebastian's wounded expression. She turned to him, looking him in the eye to drive her point home.

"And you're not weak. You're twice the man he was. Never doubt that. If I hadn't thought you were a cheater, I would have thrown myself at you far earlier, and far more frequently. And I could beat myself up, too: even though it was against my code of ethics, I still did it."

"Now that we know we're not bad people after all, why waste any more time?" Sebastian laughed, the relief evident in his voice. Catalina thought her heart might burst. He took her back into his arms and gave her one of those kisses that made her insides quiver.

"Hey. You promised me a tour of the house."

"I suppose we can do that. I'll tell the staff to leave..."

She tried to repress her smile as she caught his meaning but failed.

"How much staff do you have?" asked Catalina.

"More than I need," said Sebastian, "but I try to hire more people. Everyone who's willing to work an honest job."

"That's incredibly generous, but incredibly silly," said Catalina.

"I know," he smiled. "I'm trying to be more discerning now. Many of my staff are aging out and will retire soon. I just wanted to give them a fresh start."

"Go ahead, then. Give them the evening off," said Catalina. "Maybe I'll make us a drink?"

"Yes, you promised me the best margarita I'd ever had," said Sebastian.

"I did," Catalina smiled. "Do you have the ingredients?"

"I hope so," said Sebastian, mock-seriously. "Or I'm firing an employee or two. They usually keep the kitchen well-stocked, and there's a lime tree in the courtyard."

"All right," said Catalina, "just direct me to where I should go."

Sebastian led her by the hand down a hallway into a large, modern kitchen with a huge center island.

"This can't be the original design, can it?" asked Catalina.

"It is. Barragan was very modern," said Sebastian. "The refrigerator is there, hidden behind paneling. The liquor cabinet is over there. Over there is salt, *tajín*, whatever you need, please make yourself at home. I'll be back."

"Wait," she said, pulling him back toward her.

He bent down and kissed her, squeezing her towards him, leaving them both breathless.

"I need to tell them to leave now. I won't be able to stop next time," he said.

Sebastian left the room. Catalina happily occupied herself with her margarita making. She found some blood oranges in addition to the limes, some agave syrup, fine tequila, a splash of mezcal, Cointreau, tajín, and even some herbs for garnish. She combined the ingredients and was just pouring out two glasses when Sebastian returned.

"We're alone now," he said.

"Here's your drink. Where do we start the tour?"

They clinked their glasses together, and Sebastian took a sip.

He raised his eyebrows. "I could get used to this."

"Good," said Catalina. "I've got a few other cocktails up my sleeve too."

"I look forward to tasting them," he responded. "But first, I'd like to taste you. Shall I show you the bedroom first?"

"Conventional place to start," Catalina smiled. "Now remember, there's such a thing as delayed gratification. You promised me the tour. I thought you were a man of your word."

"Damn that reputation. Fine. Come, I'll show you the office first. This is where I spent a large part of my workdays, before the gallery."

He led her to a room not far from the kitchen. A large glass door opened out onto a courtyard with a reflecting pool and citrus trees. A desk spanned the room, neat wooden bookshelves set into sand colored plaster walls on either side, a striking light fixture, and a clean-lined desktop.

"You know that a neat desk is a sign of a sick mind."

"Oh, is your desk messy?" Sebastian smiled.

"A little," Catalina admitted.

"That's a shame."

"You're judging me for being a little messy?"

"Never. It's just because, if your desk is messy, you can't do this," he said.

She gasped as he picked her up and placed her on the desktop, so she was straddling him as he stood between her legs.

"Oh, I see," said Catalina.

"You know what I see?" said Sebastian. "You're far too clothed. Any chance you might want to take off one or two things?"

"I'm wearing a jumpsuit," she said, "so once I take that off, there's not very much left."

"Perfect," he responded, nuzzling her neck. "Here, I'll take that." He took her drink from her and placed it on the desktop. "Do you need help?" He reached behind her and unzipped the jumpsuit. She got off the desk and let the jumpsuit fall to her ankles, stepping out of it. Sebastian's eyes grew wide as he took in her matching set of transparent black mesh underwear.

"I told you that once I took off one thing, there was barely anything left," she smiled. "But what about you?"

Sebastian shrugged off his blazer and then lifted up his arms, giving Catalina the opportunity to lift his t-shirt up and slip it over his head, running her hands on his chest as she did. He then undid his belt and kicked off his shoes, then unzipped his trousers, letting them fall to the ground and stepping out of them.

"You have to help me with my shoes," said Catalina, lifting up a foot.

"No problem," said Sebastian. He stroked her leg and then unbuckled one shoe, then another.

"What now?" asked Catalina.

"I don't like to mix work and pleasure, unless, of course, I'm Art Basel adjacent," said Sebastian. "So why don't I show you another room?"

"Are we just leaving this here?" Catalina gestured at their clothing on the floor.

"Yes, we can always retrace our steps later," he said.

Next, he led her into a library. It had thick wooden shelves lining the plaster walls, rough-hewn herringbone floors, and a yellow beamed ceiling. Numerous tomes were displayed on the shelves. Catalina could see that among them were architecture books, history books, and literature books.

"Are these just for decoration, or do you actually read them?"

"You're suggesting that I bought books by the yard?" Sebastian smiled, leading her to a Barcelona chair in the corner. She thought he was going to make her sit down, but instead, he sat first and pulled her onto his lap.

"What do you think is a fair punishment for assuming that I don't read? I'll have you know I've read every single one of these."

"Well done," said Catalina, looking into his eyes. "Beauty and brains are a heady combination."

Sebastian's only response was to reposition her so she could feel how hard he was for her already. Just the thought of it made her brain go in a million very tempting directions.

"What is going to happen between us now? Now that we don't have as many obstacles keeping us apart?"

"I don't think those kept us apart that much," said Sebastian, "but what do you mean, as many? We still have obstacles?" he frowned.

"Oh, I was just talking about our underwear."

"Don't be impatient."

He repositioned her again so that she was straddling him again, giving her access to his lips, which she greedily kissed. She would never get sick of this. He cupped her breasts, and she could feel the palms of his hands through the thin mesh of her bra. She groaned into his mouth.

"Can I tell you something?" Sebastian whispered, suddenly serious.

"Yes," said Catalina. "What?"

"Those days in Miami, with you? That was the most torture, and the most fun I've had in a long time."

"Did you really have fun? I was so sorry you needed to save me from that *cabron* Eduardo."

"You didn't need to be saved, Catalina. You're so strong. I knew that you would figure it out on your own. But I wanted you to need me."

"I need you right now," she said, kissing him again.

"First, let me show you my favorite bathroom," said Sebastian.

"All right," said Catalina, letting him lead her out of the library. She took a sip of her drink. "I did a good job on this, didn't I?" she said.

"I would never lie to you," he responded. "Or at least, I never will. It's the best I've ever had."

"You promise?" said Catalina.

"Oh, it absolutely is."

"No, do you promise that you'll never lie to me?"

"Yes," said Sebastian, looking into her eyes. That was all it took, from him. He was not Alejandro. He had shown her who he was, time and time again. So, she believed him.

"Thank you," she said, squeezing his hand.

He squeezed back and led her into a bathroom. A waterfall shower head had been installed with cross beams spanning a skylight. There was a private courtyard that the shower looked out onto with a glass door so that one could shower with the fresh air, weather permitting.

"It's beautiful," Catalina sighed. "It must be magical to take a shower in this room."

"That can be arranged."

"The tour," Catalina reminded him.

“I think it's time for me to show you just my bedroom, for now. The rest of the house can wait.”

Catalina had to agree. Now that he could truly be hers, she was impatient to give herself to him completely, to give in to the desire that was consuming her, yes, but also to take the time to explore each other's bodies and souls, to not have to hold back.

He took her hand and led her to a large room with light ochre walls that seemed to glow from within. If, just a month prior, someone had told her she would be inside a Luis Barragan house with the man of her dreams, she never would have believed it. But now, here she was, and the architecture, and even the incredible artworks that lined every wall- those were secondary. She only had eyes for Sebastian. Maybe someday she would tell him what she had thought when she'd first spotted him, how she'd thought a classical painter couldn't have done better in rendering his face and body, but for now, she didn't need words. She needed to show him how she felt. He led her by the hand, to the bed in the center of the room, which had an antique wood headboard and linen sheets. He turned to her, and they paused, like two divers about to dive off the cliffs in Acapulco. After this, there would be no going back. But she'd already made the leap, in her mind and in her heart. Sebastian stroked her cheek and looked into her eyes. He bent down and gave her a gentle kiss, full of promise and meaning.

“Is this OK? Are you ready?” he asked.

“No more asking for permission. Take me. I'm yours. No barriers.”

And then, they were on the bed. He had unhooked her bra, shimmied her out of her panties, and somehow, he had gotten rid of his boxers, too. She had barely noticed it happening, because she was too busy savoring the sensation of her soul laid bare, the protective layers unpeeled from around her heart. And yes, it felt damn good to be kissing him, to feel him against her, to have his mouth everywhere she might think of, before she even thought it. She closed her eyes, relishing it all, and threw her head back, giving in to his touch. Now, his tongue was between her legs, his fingers, probing and teasing. Two could play this game. When he came back up to kiss her on the mouth, she urged him to lie back, and now it was her turn, to straddle him, and deposit kisses along his throat, his chest, his stomach...she felt a shift in the energy as she moved further down, millimeter by millimeter. He was holding his breath, as if waiting to see what she would do next. She stroked his chest, traced a finger along the trail of dark hair leading down from his belly to his manhood, and grasped his member in her hand. The sound coming from deep in his throat turned her on, and she took him into her mouth, working her tongue and her hand up and down his shaft, getting more excited as he guided her head up and down, adjusting her speed and movements to what felt best to him. She got into the rhythm, relishing the feeling of giving him so much pleasure, but wanting more. As if reading her mind, he pulled her up to his lips.

“*Ven aquí.*”

As he kissed her deeply, his hot tongue exploring her mouth, he guided her hips to where his cock was rubbing against her. She was so wet, so wanting, aching for him. Now, he was sucking on a nipple, gently squeezing the other breast with one hand. She couldn't wait any longer. A small movement, and he had found his way inside. She gasped, feeling his heat and his hardness filling her. She had needed this. She'd been craving it since that night in Miami, but this was different. Better. Closer. More raw and intimate.

“I don't want to stop, but we should...” Sebastian groaned.

“Just a second longer.”

They stared into each other's eyes, feeling the electric connection between them. Suddenly, he grabbed her hips and pushed her off.

“I won't be able to control myself. Just one second.”

Within seconds, he had unrolled a condom onto his shaft and was pushing her onto her back and entering her, kissing her mouth, her neck, burying his face into her shoulder and biting it. As he moved inside of her, waves of pleasure began to lap at her core and radiate out, all the way to her toes. This was even more delicious than the first time. This was something else. Sweeter. Sexier. More intimate. More real.

“Now that I have you, you do understand that I’ll never let you go again,” he whispered in her ear.

The words were like a spell on her, weaving their way from her ear to her heart, to the very core of her being, and as she arched her back to get him even deeper inside of her, the delicious sensations focalized and concentrated. She opened her eyes and looked at his gorgeous face as she rode out the orgasm. When the sensation reached its peak, he accelerated his thrusts, making her cry out, bend over, and bite his neck.

“*Ay, Dios*, you make me feel so good.”

A shudder and a groan, and he pumped harder, giving in to his own pleasure.

When it was all over, they lay next to each other, and he stroked her cheek.

“Is it too early to tell you I love you?” he smiled.

“Is it too late to tell you that I feel the same?”

He kissed her, a delicious kiss full of promises, promises she believed.

“I’m glad you feel that way,” he said. “After all, you’re locked into a rather long-term lease in a building I own.”

Epilogue

Nine Months later...

Excerpt from an article in Condé Nast Traveler's September issue:

“...Calle Colima has become the unofficial epicenter of the Roma Norte cultural renaissance in Mexico city, thanks to the shared vision of stylish couple Catalina Cervantes and her fiancé, Sebastian Espinoza. The glamorous duo, who own an entire city block in what is arguably the most artistic neighborhood in CDMX, have turned their combined creative energy towards the opening of an unparalleled art, shopping, and culinary destination. Two separate but complementary art galleries, Alex Black and Espinoza, anchor the space, one offering representational works, the other, contemporary masterworks by Mexican artists. Anish Kapoor's Vantablack *Mother as a Mountain*, on display in the complex's courtyard, is not for sale, however- it was what Mr. Espinosa gifted his bride-to-be in lieu of a traditional engagement ring. There's also an elevated street food restaurant and bar run by Catalina's best friend, Maria Aragonés, who is on track to receive a Michelin star any day now. A fashion concept store run by Maria's life partner, Lila Ballerés, an outpost of the El Pendulo bookstore and café, and a designer vintage shop run by Catalina's mother and sister, the iconic fashion plates Isabella and Sofia Cervantes, round out the property and ensure that one can spend the better part of an afternoon happily occupied in a single superlative destination. Evil spirits and shoplifters, beware the guardian of the space: an elegant black cat named Itz'papatl, after the Aztec goddess of life and death.”