



WHERE

waves break

THE SEASONS CHANGE

JULIA WOLF

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Editing: Monica Black at Word Nerd Editing

Proofreading: My Brother's Editor

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CHAPTER ONE

JUNE

I LEFT QUIETLY, AS always, stacking my few belongings into my oversized shoulder bag.

A succulent I'd named George.

A framed photo of me with my sister, Iris, and her band, The Season: Change.

Two granola bars I'd never eat because they were dark chocolate chip and dark chocolate was a mistake.

A reusable water bottle from a pharmaceuticals sales rep.

A pair of earrings I had taken off because they made too much noise when I moved my head.

The sweater I kept draped on the back of my chair because it was always minus twenty degrees in here—even in the summer.

And my favorite pen I never used since the ink was purple, thereby unprofessional.

This paltry collection was the only evidence I'd been here, and it had been swept away in seconds. My absence would be noticed, but I wasn't so sure

would be missed.

That wasn't true. Not really. My mother would miss me. Not that working together meant togetherness. She was on her side of the office, I was on mine. And since my father had chosen our desk placement, there was no question our distance was by his design.

My father called me his conscience—and not in a way that was complimentary. With me out of his way, he could do what he wanted. No little angel on his shoulder telling him he was wrong, unethical, potentially doing harm.

As he often reminded me, he'd never sworn to do no harm.

“Come on, June. Don't be so naive. That's a myth. There's no line about doing no harm. That's something patients tell themselves so they're able to put trust in a stranger cutting open their bodies with a sharp tool.”

In the center of my desk, I left my resignation letter. Formal, for a daughter leaving her father's medical practice, but my relationship with him wasn't exactly warm and fuzzy. If I didn't make things official, he wouldn't take me seriously.

I needed him to take me seriously this time.

No one glanced my way as I slung my bag over my shoulder, but that wasn't a surprise. I kept to myself, as did everyone else in this office. When a dictator ruled his *office ladies*, as he called us, with an iron fist...well, that didn't exactly breed camaraderie. Mostly everyone was trying to get through the day without drawing attention to themselves.

My mother lifted her eyes, meeting mine from her desk in the corner. Her lips curved into a wobbly smile. She had no idea I wasn't coming back. I was only supposed to be taking a week off to travel with Iris and her band. If I'd told my mother this was it, our goodbye was final, she would have tried to

convince me to stay, and she was incredibly good at that. Leaving her alone with *him*, was more difficult than I could even say. But I'd given up too much of myself. If I didn't go now, I feared I'd disappear altogether.

I waved at my mother and nodded to Serita, who was on the phone making an appointment for a patient.

And that was it.

After years of working for my father's medical practice off and on, I was leaving for the last time.

There was no relief. I didn't feel unburdened. I'd cut ties with both my parents with a whisper of the door shutting behind me. It didn't feel good to know I would never, ever have a real relationship with my mother or look at my father with respect again.

But I couldn't stay.

I had to go.

When I pushed through the heavy glass door at the front of the building and the summer sun smacked me in the face, I didn't taste freedom exactly. It was something else. Something new and frightening. I closed my eyes, tilted my head back, letting the heat settle on my chilled skin, and filled my lungs.

A horn beeped. Someone yelled, "Fuck you and your motha!" The brake on a bus squealed. Two dogs barked. A person whooshed past me, nearly knocking me sideways.

I opened my eyes to my city and exhaled.

The most dramatic thing I'd ever done in my quiet life was without any sort of fanfare.

And that seemed exactly right.

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CHAPTER TWO

JUNE

“YOU’RE GOING TO KILL me, honey bunny.”

An Iris-shaped shadow blotted out the sun above me. Using my hand as a visor, I squinted up at her.

“Hello to you. How was your flight? Are you jet-lagged? What, oh what have you done now, my darling sister?”

She dropped down to the side of my lounge chair, rubbing her hands on her tattooed thighs. I’d been in Barcelona for three days. All on my own. It was my first time going anywhere alone, and I was loving every second of it. Of course, it helped that Iris had put me up in a luxurious villa with its own pool access to the beach, and an on-call concierge. Tomorrow, I’d be sharing with two members of The Seasons Change and their significant others, but for now, it was just mine.

“The flight was fine. I could sleep for two or three days. And...” she picked at the frayed hem of her cutoffs.

My sister was every bit a rock star. Bold, confident, and badass, she stormed through the world, living out loud. According to our mother, she’d

been that way from birth and nothing our controlling father did while we were growing up could dim her light.

She was my favorite person on earth. I admired her to the depths of my soul, but sometimes, her unpredictability scared me.

“You’re not one to bite your tongue,” I said, scooting upright in my lounge. “Spill.”

“Roddy’s not coming. Hope had some bleeding and she’s on bed rest, so obviously, Roddy can’t leave her.”

I gasped. Roddy, TSC’s drummer, and his girlfriend, Hope, were expecting a baby at the end of the year. A surprise but a more than welcome one.

“Oh god, is she okay?”

Iris nodded. “She’s fine, baby’s fine, but her doctor wants her to rest to make sure everything stays that way—which means no international travel.”

“That’s a relief, but maybe you could have led with that.” I pressed a hand over my fluttering heart. “I still don’t know why I’m going to kill you—aside from your poor storytelling abilities.”

She sucked in a breath. “Without Roddy, we’re down a drummer. The record label suggested a temp replacement, and I took them up on it without thinking it through.”

My fluttering heart vaulted into my throat as dread thrummed in my belly. There was only one drummer she would hesitate to tell me about.

“Is it Diego Garza?” I squeezed out of my tight throat.

Iris nodded. “He’s rad, right? I know you think he kills on the drums.”

“Of course he does.” Diego was an incredible drummer. That was inarguable. I tilted my head to the side. “I’m assuming he agreed?”

She nodded again, more vigorously. “You assumed correctly. He’ll be here tomorrow.” When she winced, I suspected what she was going to say next.

embraced for it. But none of that stopped the breath from being knocked out of me.

“He’s staying in the house.”

“Oh.” I fell back on the cushions. That made sense. Of course Diego would take Hope and Roddy’s place in the house too. One week, living in the same space as Diego...it would either be a disaster or no big deal. Either way, I could handle it. “Well, that’s fine. I’ll be okay.”

I didn’t have a sordid history with Diego or anything. I’d first met him while I nannied for the lead singer of his former band, Unrequited, five years ago. Since then, we’d run into each other another handful of times backstage. Last summer, I had worked up the nerve to wave, but he had looked right through me.

It was safe to say Diego Garza had no idea who I was. I wished I could forget him just as easily.

Iris wrinkled her nose. “There’s more.”

“It would be more kind to rip the Band Aid off in one go.”

She sucked in another breath, this one deeper. “Okay. It turns out Diego has a four-year-old son who always travels with him.” A child? Iris didn’t give me enough time to process that before she continued casually dropping bombs. “But his nanny just moved away and he doesn’t have a replacement who can travel at the drop of a hat...”

I groaned, knowing exactly where this was going.

“You didn’t.”

Her head dipped. She had the decency to at least look contrite. “I did. I told him you’d be here, and since you’ll already be watching Ezra, it wouldn’t be a big deal for you to watch his son too.”

Yes, I’d be nannying for my dear friend Wren and her husband Callum, the

fbassist for TSC, so she could go to his shows over the next week. Yes, loved children and had nannied off and on for years. Yes, watching two four year-olds instead of one wasn't much difference. No, I wasn't looking forward to this.

e "And he agreed?"

l "Of course he did, Junie. He's smart and knows a good thing when it hits him in the face."

1 I narrowed my eyes. "He did a thorough background check and called my preferences, didn't he?"

l. Her eyes flicked away. "Maybe..."

t I snorted. "He did."

She snatched up my hand. "Are you going to kill me? Please say you won't. I'm months away from marrying my Irish dream. I at least need to live long enough to become Ronan's wife and consummate our marriage. A lot. Like, a lot, a lot."

I hadn't seen Ronan yet. Knowing him and his job as private security, he was probably securing the premises or something. Or giving Iris time to beg for my forgiveness. That was the more likely option.

g "Lucky for you, I'm not the homicidal type." I tugged my hand free from hers. "That doesn't mean I'm happy with you. Couldn't you have called me first?"

"I should have, but I didn't, and I'm sorry." She drew an X over her heart

"I swear, I won't ever do it again. I know I'm the worst sister ever."

l "You mean you won't do this specific thing again? You'll definitely never overstep and make decisions for me without asking first."

I'd tried to keep my tone light, teasing, but I'd done a dismal job. I was halfway angry and the other half mortified. When I was uncomfortable,

I curled up tight like a little hedgehog without the spikes. The fact that I was already incredibly uncomfortable and Diego hadn't arrived yet did not bode well for how this was going to go.

Iris reached out to cup my cheeks. She was two years older than me and had always been the kind of big sister to wrap me in her arms and sing me to sleep when I was afraid of the shadows on my walls and my father yelling down the hall. Iris's love was easily forthcoming, and her affection was plentiful. So, when she pressed her forehead to mine and stared at me from so close my eyes blurred, I let go of my anger and shuddered a breath.

"I'm sorry, June Bug. I should have asked and never assumed you'd be willing to take care of his son too. We'll figure something else out, either hire another nanny or find a different drummer. It's okay, bunny. You're off the hook."

I took her face in my hands too. "You're right, you should have asked me first, but what's done is done. I'm happy to hang out with another kiddo, but you have to promise you'll be my buffer when they show up. There's no way I can be alone with Diego and not make a fool of myself."

She pulled back and tapped my nose with her fingertip. "You never give yourself enough credit. You'll be fine."

I tried to snarl at her, but from her rolling eyes, it wasn't very effective.

"Promise me, Iris."

"I promise, babe. I'll be the best buffer ever. All buffer schools will be renamed after me. The Iris Adler Buffer Academy has a nice ring to it."

"You're strange, but I love you."

"To the moon and back," she replied.

I flopped back on my lounge, trying to shove my sister off, but her stubborn butt didn't budge. Instead, she stared at me, her steady gaze

ssweeping over my face intently.

e “Have you heard from him?”

“No,” I answered. “I didn’t expect I would.”

d “He’s going to try to get you to come back.”

o “He won’t. I was pretty explicit in my resignation letter about why I was leaving. That bridge is burned, and I’m relieved.”

s She pushed me over so she could squeeze in, her shoulder fitting snugly against mine. Then she took my hand and held it between both of hers.

“Has Mom called you?”

e “No. I didn’t expect to hear from her either.”

e “Because he won’t let her. You know that’s why, don’t you?”

e I nodded once. “I know.”

“I hate him so much.”

e “Yeah.”

t Before the blackness that came from thinking or speaking of our parents could pull us in too deep, the gate separating my house from the one next door opened, and Ronan walked through. In fitted trousers and a button-down shirt that had to have been custom made to fit his broad shoulders and chest, Ronan was as intimidating as he was handsome. It had taken me some time but these days, I was able to speak to my sister’s future husband without stammering or blushing.

e At first, I’d been worried he was like our father—controlling and somewhat of a perfectionist. In some regards, he was, but Ronan wasn’t mean or vindictive, and while he liked to be in control of himself and his surroundings, he never tried to rule over Iris. I’d seen him go soft as a little lamb around her too many times to be scared of him anymore.

e He strode around the pool, grinning broadly. “June, love, how are you

faring in this beautiful sunshine? Is life grand?”

“Life is grand, Ronan,” I answered back in a terrible Irish brogue. “How are you?”

He towered over us Adler girls, all squished together in one chair. His smile grew even wider seeing us in this position.

“Can’t say I’ve ever been much better.”

“Is the house next door up to par?” I asked.

Iris and Ronan, along with Adam, who played guitar, and his fiancé, who was also my friend, Adelaide, would be staying in the villa next door, which was a mirror image to mine. Iris had tried to get me to stay in her house, but since I was watching Ezra, it made more sense to be in the same house with him and his family.

“It’ll do. Will you have dinner with us tonight—before the chaos arrives tomorrow?”

Iris tugged on the leg of his pants. “Don’t give her a choice. She’s having dinner with us.”

“I was using my manners, pet.” He pushed his sunglasses on top of his head and gave me a quick wink. “I know June will be joining us since it appears she’s forgiven you.”

“As if she wouldn’t,” Iris said with pride and self-assurance.

I laughed, but she wasn’t wrong. Iris could skin me alive and I’d forgive her if she told me she’d never do it again. It was lucky Iris would never do anything like that.

One too many people had taken advantage of my kindness over the years but my sister wasn’t one of them. My father had been the last straw. When

I’d quit my job with him, I’d vowed to use the backbone I definitely had but had too often forgotten.

I slapped my hands on my bare legs. “I’ll fully forgive you if there’s
vsangria at dinner tonight.”

Iris nodded. “Done.”

s Well, that hadn’t been so hard. Maybe I would be able to keep my promise
to myself after all.

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I slapped my hands on my bare legs. “I’ll fully forgive you if there’s sangria at dinner tonight.”

Iris nodded. “Done.”

Well, that hadn’t been so hard. Maybe I would be able to keep my promise to myself after all.

CHAPTER THREE

DIEGO

MY KID HAD STOPPED napping when he was two. One day, I'd laid him down at his normal nap time, and he'd stared up at me with wide eyes.

"No nap, Papá," he'd said.

I hadn't believed him. The kid had run me ragged all morning, like he always had. The second he'd been able to string two words together a eighteen months, he hadn't stopped talking. There had been no way he wasn't going to take a nap. His papá had damn sure wanted a long lie down and some quiet time.

Not five minutes, and out had come a bright-eyed, messy-haired toddler all ready to go. And he'd never napped again. Not once. No matter what. No when he was sick. Not in the car. Never.

Not even on long, international plane rides.

"Do you think that guy is sleeping?" he whispered at the volume only a four-year-old could: loud as fuck. "He's loud."

You're one to talk, kid.

"Yeah, bud, everyone's sleeping. It's the middle of the night."

He got on his knees in his extra-wide, upright, plush seat—for a normal kid, it would have already been leaned back in a bed position—and craned his neck. He'd been interested in the man in the pod across from ours since he'd boarded the plane in Baltimore.

The moment Camilo had spotted him, he'd screamed, "Walrus! That guy's a walrus!"

To be fair, the man did have a mustache with long, thick handlebar curling under his chin. A walrus-style 'stache. I saw the connection. I got why Camilo had made it. What would've been nice was if he'd made it in an inside voice, in private—not in the first-class cabin before a ten-hour flight across the ocean where there would be no escape.

¹ The man had pretended not to hear, but Camilo's interest had only been piqued and he'd been spying on him ever since.

"Why's that guy making so much noise if he's sleeping?"

² "That's called snoring. Some people do it when they're asleep."

^t He cocked his head, curious as always, trying to solve all the world's ^t mysteries as quickly as he could.

¹ "Do you snore?"

"I don't know. I can't hear myself when I'm asleep. I guess I probably do when I have a stuffy nose."

^t He grinned, and I knew what was coming. "When you have boogers!"

The thing no one told you before you had kids was that you pretty much laid it all on the line for them. They asked questions, you had to come up ¹ with an answer. They wanted to know about what was up your nose, they were going to find out. I didn't even blink at Camilo's massive invasion of privacy anymore. Maybe I never had. He'd been in my business since he could focus his eyes and hold his head up.

l “Yeah, dude. When I have boogers. It’s just part of life. Bodies do gross things and make weird noises.”

e He craned his neck again, his expression growing serious. I braced myself. When Camilo started thinking, we were usually in a world of trouble. He was slucky to be as cute as he was. Small for his age, his big, brown eyes and mop of black hair that never lay down, even if it was freshly combed, got him out of a lot of trouble.

t A flight attendant making her way down the aisle caught his eye, and he waved at her. Smiling, she came to him, bending to be at his eye level.

t “Hi, honey. Don’t you want to sleep?” she cooed.

“No.” He shook his head. “I don’t nap.”

l “Well, it’s nighttime, honey. Everyone’s sleeping.”

His little brow puckered as he took in what she said. “You’re not sleeping.”

She let out a breathy laugh, glancing at me. “That’s true, but I’m working so I have to take care of the passengers.”

Camilo pointed to the man across from us. “That guy has boogers.”

The flight attendant covered her mouth, clearly biting back a laugh. “Oh, really? That’s an interesting observation.”

“Yeah.” My son nodded. “He needs a tissue for those snores. They’re *loud*. Do you have tissues? You could put them on his nose.”

l *Jesus Christ.*

e I covered his mouth with my hand. “Thanks, we’re good. We don’t need anything,” I told the flight attendant. “We’re gonna be nice and quiet and please leave the other passengers alone.” I cut my eyes to Camilo in warning.

e Her shoulders shook as she walked away. She’d have an amusing story to tell later. An even better one if she recognized me. She hadn’t given any sign

that she had, but I'd traveled first class enough to appreciate most flight attendants in this section practiced discretion. That wasn't to say I hadn't signed an autograph or two or been slipped more than a few numbers, but it had all been done without a lot of fanfare, which I appreciated.

Especially when I was with my son—which was more often than not.

Where I went, Milo went. He'd traveled more in his first four years of life than I had in my first twenty. It would have been a lot more than that for me but the band I used to be a member of had signed a record deal early and our rise had been stratospheric.

That was my old life. I looked back and barely recognized myself. That was a good thing. There wasn't anyone who'd known me then and now who'd argue it.

My tired son yawned and let his head fall back against his seat. I peered down at him. His blinks were becoming a little longer, thick lashes dusting his round cheeks. If I asked him if he was tired, he'd deny it and turn into a frat boy on stolen Adderall during finals week.

I stayed quiet and unmoving, barely even breathing. If I didn't call his attention to the fact that he was falling asleep, he might actually let himself go. If he got even an inkling there was something more interesting going on, it would all be over.



By the time we reached the house we'd be staying in for the next week, Milo was cranky, wired, and swinging back and forth between tears and babbling nonsense. I wasn't any better. My T-shirt was sticking to my back. My eyeballs felt like they'd been sucked dry. My head pounded like someone had taken a hammer to it.

t The house was big and white. Between my flailing kid and the vis
tsqueezing my skull, that was all I noticed. Milo flung himself out of the car
tsuddenly reanimated like he'd been zapped with lightning. He was on hi
toes, trying to peer over the solid black fence surrounding the property as i
slid open.

e “Can we go in? Please, Papá?”

, “Yeah, we can. Hold my hand and stay with me while we check it out.”
rHe'd tucked his hand in mine before I'd even finished my request, and I wa
grateful for it. I didn't have much more energy left, let alone enough to ge
tinto a heated argument with my four-year-old.

v I tapped the code I'd been sent into the keypad on the front door, and i
swung open to a bright, open space pulsing with loud, ear-splitting music
lOur driver followed us in with our bags, leaving them in the foyer.

g Milo tipped his head back to say something to me, but I could barely hea
ahim over the grating beat of some Spanish song coming from the kitchen. My
skull rattled like a banged gong, and I was having trouble not losing my shit.

s Scooping up my son, I carried him toward the concert going on in the
fhouse we were promised would be *quiet, family friendly*. That appeared to be
, a bald-faced lie. It was only noon and the party had started.

Camilo tucked his face in my neck as we got closer to the source. I wishe
I could have tucked my head somewhere soft and quiet. Hopefully I'd be abl
to as soon as I took care of whatever was going on here.

Turning the corner, I expected to find the worst. Instead, I found mysel
confused.

Three people were in the kitchen, singing, dancing, and cooking. Two wer
small, silver haired, and wore aprons. They were either husband and wife o
brother and sister. They looked alike, but I wasn't going to guess thei

relationship. The third was considerably younger. Long, black hair spilled down the back of her loose floral dress. When she spun in a circle as she stirred a wooden spoon around a large bowl, she smiled, eyes crinkling behind overly large wire-framed glasses.

At least, they had been crinkling—until she caught sight of me and my son standing at the entry of the kitchen. Her good humor fell away as the bowl nearly slipped from her hands.

Pain pulsed through my temples. Milo squirmed in my arms. He'd slept exactly two hours. I'd slept maybe fifteen minutes. I needed silence, a bed and darkness. He needed it too. Our sleep schedule would be jacked, but we weren't going to make it much longer.

Except there was a party in our house, and the longer I stood there, the music blasting, being stared at by a gaping cook and her possible twin or possible married sidekick, the tighter my chest became. My temper was a lit fuse, and it was coming to the end.

The man flew into action, picking up a remote from the counter to turn the music down.

"Turn it off," I gritted out.

He moved fast, pressing another button. Finally, the house was blessedly silent. Then the woman dropped the bowl on the counter, the clatter echoing off the walls.

And that was all it took. I didn't yell—I was holding my son and would never yell with him in my arms—but I lost it, leveling the young cook with a glare full of venom.

She sucked in a breath. "I'm sorry. We didn't think you would be arriving until this evening."

I chuffed. That was pretty damn obvious. "You work here?"

d Her head lowered. It wasn't exactly a nod, but I took it as one.

e "You don't own this house, do you?" I pressed.

g "No, but—"

"And you knew it was rented, yeah?"

1 She wrung her hands in her dress, drawing it dangerously high up her thighs. "Of course—"

My eyes narrowed to slits, and I winced. *Fuck*. Even the movement of my eyelids was killing me. "I don't know what you think you're doing in my house, but if you'd like to keep your job, you need to work hard on being seen and not heard. Maybe not even seen. My son and I are going to find our bedroom, I'm going to take some Tylenol so my head doesn't crack in two when we're going to get some sleep. It would be in your best interest not to be here when we wake up."

t A long beat of silence, then the older man stepped in front of the woman tipping his chin at me.

e "Very sorry, sir. I am Daniello. I take care of the property with my wife Milagros. I will bring your bags to your room," he said, his English thickly accented. "Please follow me."

y Something knotted in my gut. Maybe regret at being harsh. I was too damn tired and achy to contemplate anything other than how long it would take me to get Milo in his pj's and crash out.

d Spinning on my heel, I followed Daniello upstairs, my drooping son still in my arms.

If the start of this trip was any indication of how the rest would go, I was in for a long, painful week.

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CHAPTER FOUR

JUNE

THE HOUSE WAS CLOSE enough to the ocean that if I was really, really quiet and listened hard, I could hear the waves breaking.

That was what I'd been doing the last few hours. I'd pulled a chair—silently—to the part of the yard farthest from the house, dropped down into it and closed my eyes. It had taken some time for my hands to stop shaking and my heart to return to its normal pattern.

I was calm now, but it wouldn't last. As soon as Iris came back from her meeting on the opposite side of the city, I was dragging her over here to be the buffer she promised she would be. So far, she was failing at the job. Then again, Diego wasn't supposed to be here yet.

The sound of the patio door sliding had my eyes flying open and my shoulders jerking up around my ears. Instead of a grumpy man, a small boy stepped out, rubbing his eyes against the sun. Checking behind him, I only saw empty space.

He padded outside, turning his head left and right. When he spotted me across the yard, he waved and started toward me through the grass.

“Hello,” he called in the tiniest voice.

“Hi.” I waved back.

He was adorable. In all the commotion earlier, I hadn’t gotten a good look at him. On the tiny side for his age, he had silky, chocolate hair mussed from sleep and wide, brown eyes surrounded by thick lashes. His small, round face made my stomach swoop.

He stopped in front of me and looked around again. “You live here?” he asked.

“No, I don’t. I’m staying here this week, just like you. My name is June. What’s your name?”

“June.” He scrunched his nose. “I don’t know that name.”

“You’ve never met anyone named June?”

He shook his head, that button nose staying wrinkled.

“Well, now you have. Isn’t it nice when you do something you’ve never done before? Today, you met someone named June, and *I met you*. I wish I knew your name.”

His grin was wide, pushing up his round cheeks until his eyes were half their normal size. Such a sweet smile.

He put his damp hand on my arm. “My name is Camilo Garza. My papa says Milo.”

I covered his little hand with mine. “Which one do you want me to call you? Camilo or Milo? Or maybe some of each?”

“I don’t know.” His nose scrunched again, followed by his forehead. “Can I sit in your lap?” He didn’t wait for an answer before climbing up my leg and positioning himself right where he wanted to be.

“Well, hello there. Did you take a nice nap?”

“I don’t nap.”

“Of course you don’t.” I’d met enough four-year-olds to know not to argue when they made blanket statements. “Did you have a nice sleep?”

κ He yawned and stretched his arms over his head. “Yeah,” he sighed. “My papá is sleeping in the bed. He’s not snoring, but the guy on the plane was snoring because he has boogers. The lady put a tissue on his nose ’cause he was *loud*.”

e “Oh!” I jumped as if surprised. “I’m so glad the lady helped him. It’s terrible not to have a tissue when you need one, isn’t it?”

. His nod was solemn. “That guy was a walrus.”

“Was he? Did he have big, long teeth that stretched all the way to the ground?”

Camilo laughed, tossing his head back. “No! He didn’t!”

“Did he have thick gray skin and a tail?”

r He snickered harder, shaking his head like I’d lost my marbles. His laughter caused me to giggle.

“Did he clap his fins together and make a funny sound?”

f His eyes went wide. “That guy snored really big.”

“Like a walrus?” I ventured.

á “Yep. Like a walrus,” he agreed.

I smoothed his hair away from his adorable, silly face. “Does your papá know you’re outside?”

“No. He’s sleeping. He can’t see me.” Then he rolled his eyes like I was the craziest person for even asking. “I’m hungry. Can I have breakfast?”

s He’d said breakfast like “bress-kiss,” and it was in the top ten cutest things I’d ever heard. There was something about this kid that plucked at my heartstrings, and we’d only just met.

“You can definitely have something to eat, but just so you know, it’s

almost dinnertime. What if we find a snack? Then, when your papá wakes up you can have dinner with him. Is that a deal?”

I held out my hand to shake. He looked at it, tilting his head, then slipped his hand in mine, giving it a firm grip.

“Okay, June. That’s a deal.”



Camilo had an appetite, and he wasn’t afraid to try anything. Earlier, I had made fresh hummus and chopped up veggies and fruit while Milagros had cooked. Camilo had devoured everything he could dip into the hummus, and now he was eating a bowl of blackberries.

His face was a mess, and his hands had seen better days, but I’d let him go to town. It could all be cleaned up when he was finished.

I had nannied since high school. Before that, I’d babysat neighborhood kids. Children were easy for me. Their minds were beyond fascinating, and I got a kick out of witnessing their thought processes and watching them take on the world. And sure, they could be brutally honest and I’d had my feelings hurt by an observation on my appearance a time or two, but the brutal honesty made me like them even more.

So, I sat there with my new, temporary charge, listening to him telling me all about the people he’d met on the plane ride here. The knot in my belly loosened without conscious thought. It was hard to be stressed when a cute kid covered in blackberries and hummus regaled me with his observations. Apparently, a flight attendant had given him a Sprite while Diego was sleeping and he’d managed to drink the whole thing before his dad woke up.

“My papá got some cracks on his face and he crunched my Sprite can.” Camilo made a growly face and balled his little hands into fists. “I drank

,water after that.”

I sucked in a breath. “You did? Water is my favorite. Have you ever put a slice of orange or lemon in it? It’s so delicious.”

That idea stunned him, his lips parting in awe. “Can I try that?”

“You can. While you’re here, we’ll try all the fruit in your water and see which one you—”

A bellow from upstairs stuck my tongue to the roof of my mouth. “Camilo
Camilo, where are you?”

Diego’s panicked cry shot straight through my chest. I hopped up from my chair and pressed a hand to my chest, pushing my voice as loud as it would go.

“He’s down here,” I called out. “He’s with me.”

One beat. Another. The thunder of footsteps on the marble stairs. Diego skidded into the kitchen a moment later, frantic, eyes wild, hair sticking up at all angles, shirtless, heaving for breath. His eyes landed on his son sitting at the kitchen bar, and he went straight for him. Taking Camilo’s face in his hands, he peered down at him.

“Hi, Papá,” Camilo said merrily, not a single care in the world. “You were sleeping and I was hungry.”

“Fuck,” Diego breathed, gripping his son in a fierce hug. “You can’t do that, Milo. You can’t leave the room when I’m sleeping. You know that. You know you can’t leave me.”

“I’m sorry. I was hungry,” he repeated. “I ate some hums.”

Diego pulled back, still clutching his son. The wild look in his eyes hadn’t abated as he examined Milo more closely, landing on his messy face. That was when his attention was dragged to the bowls on the counter in front of him, then me.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “Did you give him food?”

a The force of his attention felt like a cartoon safe falling out of a window. was flattened beneath it, still alive, but all wonky and unable to inflate my lungs enough for speech.

e He glared at me like I was a criminal come to steal his son away from him. As if my hummus and carrot sticks were crack and handguns.

! “Jesus,” Diego hissed. “Do you even speak English? Who are you? Why are you in my house, giving my son food without my consent?”

γ My mouth fell open, and some sort of sound came out. I hated being spoken to like this, but years of conditioning prevented me from telling him to stop. If I stayed quiet, it would be over sooner.

Sweet little Camilo stopped his father in his tracks.

ο “That’s June, Papá.” Camilo tugged on his dad’s arm, drawing his eye back to him. “She gave me hums and she likes drinking water.”

t “With oranges in it,” I managed to squeeze out.

s Diego stiffened at the sound of my voice then swiveled his head in my direction, pinning me with a hard gaze. I couldn’t have moved if I’d tried.

e “June.” Not a question. He repeated the name, rolling it around on his tongue. “June, Iris Adler’s sister? The nanny?”

ο Forcing myself to behave like a normal human, even while the heat of a thousand volcanoes burned my cheeks, I nodded.

“Yes. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to introduce myself earlier. I’m June Adler. And you’re right, I should have asked if I could feed Camilo, but he was hungry, I knew from his info sheet he doesn’t have any allergies, and I didn’t want to wake you. When you arrived, you seemed utterly shattered. I thought you needed the sleep.”

“You’re not my nanny. My sleep isn’t something you should be concerned

about.” He patted Camilo before letting him go and turning to face me fully. I
Some of his anger eased, but his stare remained just as heavy and
yassessing. Uncomfortable, I fidgeted, winding the fabric of my dress around
my fingers.

. “Of course. Well, I gave Camilo hummus, pita, carrots, and blackberries.”
I smiled, looking at his food-covered face. “As you can probably tell by
ylooking at him...”

“My fingers are squishy. It feels so funny and delicious,” Camilo said
gmaking jazz hands at me.

1 I raised an eyebrow. “Make sure you don’t bite them. Fingers aren’t fo
eating.”

He cackled. “I know that! I’m not gonna eat my fingers.”

s I scrunched up my face like he had earlier. “Oh, thank goodness. I wa
worried you would have had to change your name to Camilo ‘The Finge
Eater.’ Honestly, that’s way too long for a name.”

y He held his little tummy, laughing at my silliness. Unable to help myself,
giggled along with him, despite his father’s weighty stare.

s “It looks like the two of you made friends while I was sleeping.”

“We did,” I agreed. “He’s a friendly little boy.”

a He crossed his arms over his chest, the tattoos on his solid, muscular pec
rippling, reminding me he was standing in front of me shirtless. Not that
.hadn’t been aware, but I’d been momentarily distracted from the reality of the
ssituation.

t Diego Garza was huge. Not just tall but broad in his shoulders and chest
this torso tapering to a tight waist. Prominent hip bones pushed against hi
golden skin. The thick line of his V disappeared beneath his gray joggers
dAnd he was absolutely covered in tattoos. Swirls and geometric design.

patterned the flesh on his chest and arms. Some of it disappeared into his pants right along with his V.

I was standing in front of Diego Garza. He was shirtless, staring at me possibly still pissed off at my existence—and I had to act normal so he would trust me with his son.

“Too friendly. Sometimes he forgets not to tell his life story to people he doesn’t know.”

I swallowed hard and tried to smile as sweetly as I could. “Camilo and I had a nice conversation about the people on the plane. He must have saved his life story for next time.”

“That’s a first.” Diego rubbed the stubble on his jaw. “I’d planned to speak with you in private before leaving you with my son. I’m not in the habit of being friendly with strangers either.”

“Well, that explains why you haven’t been friendly with me.” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I wanted to suck them back in. It wasn’t a good idea to sass the grumpy, surly man who was my boss for the week.

But Diego wasn’t mad. From the way the corners of his mouth tipped, he might have even been amused. Something inside me unfurled at having been the one to put that minuscule smile on his face.

“You have a point, June Adler.” He nodded, giving me one long, final look before flipping back into dad mode. “All right, kid. You’re a mess. And since June has forbidden you from eating your fingers, I think it’s time to clean you up.”

He swooped Camilo into his arms, giving him a loud kiss on his cheek. Camilo snuggled into his dad, throwing his messy hands around his neck. They disappeared around the corner, Camilo’s little voice carrying back to me all the way up the stairs.

s I fell over, elbows hitting the counter, and blew out a sigh of relief.

I had survived my first real conversation with Diego and hadn't melted
, Without my sister as a buffer. I'd even almost stood up for myself. Sort of. *A*
little.

It was better than nothing.

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CHAPTER FIVE

DIEGO

BY EVENING, THE HOUSE was full. Callum Rose and his family were staying in the opposite wing of the villa. They were chill and quiet, but wouldn't have expected any less. I'd been on a couple tours with The Seasons Change, hung out with the band after shows, so I had a grasp on their personalities. Callum was an oddly silent ghost of a person, though he'd been a lot more present since marrying Wren a year ago.

They had a four-year-old son too, whose presence made Milo flip his shit. Then again, my kid had never met anyone he didn't see as a potential bestie.

We'd eaten dinner together, and now Milo and Ezra were running laps in the yard. I was hoping Milo would tire himself out enough to forget about his middle-of-the-day respite and fall asleep tonight.

I was sitting with Callum on the patio, sipping a bottle of water, watching the two boys run tirelessly.

"You always travel together?" I asked.

"Always."

"Does Ezra do well with travel?"

Callum didn't turn his gaze away from his son. "He does all right. Yours?"

"Yeah, about the same. He does all right." Craning my neck, I caught sight of Wren and June inside the house, pouring sangria into glasses. "June: watched Ezra before? She's good?"

Callum nodded once. "I wouldn't trust her if she wasn't. You worried about her takin' care of your son?"

I rolled my shoulders back, wincing at the soreness on the right side—the ache that never fully went away.

"I worry about anyone other than me taking care of him. It's only the two of us, you know? I've seen too much ugliness not to be jaded by it."

He smoothed a hand down his thigh. "I hear that. For years, I had so much ugliness in my life. But I've known June almost as long as I've known Iris. They're good people. Ez is pretty well obsessed with June. His list of favorites are, in this order: his mom, Bob Ross, and June."

I chuckled. "You don't rank?"

He shot me a quick grin. "I come in right after June. If I make him pancakes for breakfast, my position moves up to tie with her."

"That's a pretty high compliment." I shook my head, mulling over his words. "I can guarantee you Milo's never heard of Bob Ross. Little before his time."

Callum's steady gaze slid to mine then back to his boy. "Guarantee he'll have gotten more than an earful before the week is out. You'll be buyin' him his own easel when you get back."

"Worse things have happened." His granddad would probably try to replace a paintbrush with a wrench, but that was a thought for a different time.

I swiped a hand over my face, releasing a heavy breath. June and Wren

made their way back outside. Wren sat beside her husband while June sat as far from me as possible. Perched on a padded deck chair, her spine and neck as straight as an arrow, her attention was on the little boys chasing lightning bugs like maniacs.

1 “June,” Wren called.

June turned her head, a smile tipping her lips. “Yeah?”

2 Wren held up the sangria pitcher. “Do you want a refill?”

“No thanks.” Her gaze darted to mine then away just as quickly. “I’m not working tomorrow. The last thing I want is to spend the day with a headache. They make me so cranky.”

3 I almost laughed out loud at what I was ninety-nine percent sure was a dig at my cranky ass.

4 Wren laughed. “I can’t imagine you ever being cranky.”

“Oh, it happens. Not around the kids I’m watching, though.” Another furtive glance then she swiveled back around.

5 Under normal circumstances, I would have never accepted the job as fill-in drummer. The notice was too short and leaving my kid with a nanny I didn’t know was pretty much unthinkable.

6 But Iris Adler had a way with words. She’d made a bad idea sound like a good one. Three shows, one a televised awards ceremony, low stress. We’d all be in one spot the entire time, no worries about traveling from location to location.

7 Even with Iris’s hard sell, the answer would have been no if it hadn’t been for the timing. My last nanny had had a whirlwind romance, got married in a rush, and moved with her military husband to Germany. I’d taken the week off to interview replacements. The handful I’d met had been unacceptable and I’d been ready to throw in the towel and say fuck it all when Iris called.

s She and I weren't much more than acquaintances. I had been on the outskirts of the music business for years since I left my former band Unrequited, but still took drumming jobs, made appearances with Unrequited, sat in with other bands—I'd heard the talk, met people, knew a thing or two.

What I had gleaned was Iris Adler wasn't an addict or a toxic mess. Her band was functional, and other musicians trusted and respected her.

1 When she offered up her little sister as a nanny, I'd balked at first. But the facts were, June had been a short-term nanny for the lead singer of Unrequited, Mo, and his wife, Mic, and they'd had nothing but praise. Mic had dubbed June Mother Goose in the flesh. I'd called other former bosses and gotten more of the same from them.

Everyone loved June. Kids, parents, old ladies, fuckin' priests. So, I took the job, packed our bags, flew with my kid to Spain.

And acted like an ass when we got here.

1 My excuse was sleep deprivation, being taken by surprise, and the deep-seated need to protect my son. When I stepped back into the music business for short-term gigs, I always ensured the lifestyle didn't come with it. I'd lived that, had thrown myself headfirst into it, and it had nearly killed me. I wouldn't be exposing Milo to it.

2 I was self-aware enough to know I was overly sensitive because of my past. If I'd stopped, listened, paid attention, I would have immediately known there hadn't been a wild party going on in my house. When I had seen what was going on, I should have taken a breath and gotten myself under control before I spoke.

3 But I was an ass. And I'd continued to be so much of an ass, June was halfway across the patio, practically in the neighboring yard.

e I had no idea how to make things right. Or if I could. My old man would have been ashamed of me. He'd had this code he'd drilled into me and my brother, Santiago, from the time we could understand it.

a - Always throw the first punch.

- Carry a knife at all times, but don't pull it out unless you're prepared to use it.

- You want a woman, you fight for her. She says no, you take that as her final answer.

f - Work every single day. Nothing in life is free.

c - This world doesn't owe you a damn thing. Never act like you're entitled to something you didn't earn.

- Women are fucking treasures. Treat them as such, whether they want to fuck you or not.

- Family is number one.

- Never let a woman walk home alone at night. No exceptions.

- Eli Garza was as rough around the edges as he could get, had done hard time, wore his history in his scarred knuckles and the shaky, faded tattoos on his skin, but he was a good man and had raised me to be one.

I Now, I hoped to god my punching days were over, and I hadn't carried a knife since Camilo had come into this world, but I worked my ass off and treated people well—especially women. If my pops had heard the way I'd spoken to June, not to mention Danielo and Milagros, he would've tanned my hide.

l I'd apologize, make it right. My impression of June was she wouldn't hold my behavior against my son, but that didn't mean I could let how I treated her slide.

Pushing up from my chair, I crossed the patio, nodding to Callum and

Wren, who were snuggled up together, talking quietly. Since there were no chairs beside June, I crouched beside her, bringing myself down to her eye level. She jumped, a hand flying to her chest, making a squeaking sound.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to sneak up on you. I didn’t even know I was capable of it.”

“That’s okay.” She leaned away from me, meeting my gaze from behind sunglasses too big for her face. “I don’t suppose you’re usually very stealthy.”

“No. I’ve never been accused of it.”

“You were probably making a lot of noise so don’t apply for ninjahood. It’s just...I wasn’t paying attention. I was listening to the waves.”

“The waves? Are we close enough to the beach to hear them?”

“Mmhmm. If you concentrate. They’re louder at night.”

I cocked my head to the side, but all I heard was my boy and his new friend laughing over the lightning bugs and whatever secrets they were sharing.

“Ah, it’s not happening. I came over here to say something anyway.”

“Okay. Go ahead.” She pressed her lips together and knotted her dress around her fingers. It was a habit, a tell, broadcasting she was uncomfortable.

“Stop.” My hand came down over hers, working to unravel the flimsy fabric. “There’s no need to be nervous, June.”

“Oh?” The word came out as more of a gasp.

Her dress flowed free from her fingers. I flattened my hand over hers on her thigh, giving it a firm press.

“That’s a good girl.” It came out as a murmur, a knee-jerk reaction that was entirely inappropriate. June blinked at me as if she wasn’t sure she’d heard what she thought she had. I came to my senses, putting us back on the safe ground we should have been on from the start.

o “I came over here to tell you I’m sorry for barking at you when we arrived and then when I woke up. It was uncalled for. You didn’t deserve it.”

Her head dropped, and her eyes focused on my hand covering hers. “Thank you for saying so, though I already knew that.”

I tilted my face until I was in her eyeline. “I’m relieved to know you knew that.”

She nodded once. “If that’s all, I think I’ll be going upstairs now. From what I’ve learned about Camilo, he’s going to keep me busy tomorrow.”

l. “He will.” I rose with her hand still in mine, pulling her to her feet. “Good night, June,” I said, finally releasing my hold.

Her head was still dipped. “Good night, Diego.”

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CHAPTER SIX

JUNE

CAMILO FOUND ME WHILE his dad was still sleeping again. By the time Diego ran down the stairs in a frenzy, Camilo and I had cooked together, eaten breakfast, and he'd helped me arrange fruit on a platter to look like a flower garden. He was currently sipping on orange-infused water and playing in a bin of dry beans and rice, calmly enjoying himself.

His father, on the other hand, was the opposite of calm. As soon as he came upon us, he shoved his hands in the sides of his hair and groaned.

“Camilo.” His jaw was tense as he leaned over his son. I held my breath. Diego wasn't just worried, he was angry. “What did I tell you?”

Milo looked up, unbothered by his father's harsh growl. I was able to let out a little air knowing Milo wasn't afraid of his dad, even when he wasn't happy.

“Good morning, Papá. I cooked some eggs and made a garden with fruit.” Then he held up his reusable bottle of water. “This is better than Sprite. Jun told me that.”

“Good morning, Milo.” He exhaled, dropping his head. The tautness of his shoulders slipped away, and he rubbed the back of his son’s head. “I’m glad you’re having fun with June, but she’s not supposed to be working yet. Why didn’t you wake me up? I told you not to leave the room without me.”

“I don’t know.” He poked out his bottom lip. “You were sleeping and I was all done. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. I just need you to listen to Papá, okay? Don’t leave the bedroom without telling me. I need to know where you are.”

Milo nodded. “Okay. I’ll remember.” He dunked his hands back in the rice and beans. “June made this thing for me.”

Diego finally looked at me. I’d frozen in place. Angry men had a tendency^e to do that to me, especially angry fathers. And though it was obvious Diego’s anger came from a place of fear, my body didn’t understand that. I was back^a to my hedgehog form, staying as still as I could so he wouldn’t notice me.

3 “You should have woken me up,” he gruffed. “I could have made him breakfast.”

^e “I was already up and remembered you telling me I’m not responsible for your sleep. Besides, I was making eggs for myself. It wasn’t that hard to add one more. Next time, I won’t.”

He stared for a long time, sweeping his gaze over me. All I’d brought on^t this trip were flowy sundresses and bathing suits, so that was what I was^t wearing again. It did no favors for my body, not that that should have mattered. But standing in front of this beautiful, grumpy man, I couldn’t help^{,”} wishing I was sexier, prettier, something exciting to look at.

^e That was a ridiculous wish on every level. Mostly because Diego was my boss, so nothing was ever going to happen. But even more, there was no

sinterest behind Diego's glare. He was assessing me, but not for a possible kiss. No, he looked like he was deciding if I was fit to watch his child.

y "That's a good girl."

Last night, when he'd said those words, I'd started to bloom. A long neglected, husked-out part of me had become quenched, expanding to its proper size. Then common sense had taken back over, and it began withering again.

My fingers twitched, grasping the front of my dress. Diego shook his head at me. My breath caught, and my hand opened, releasing the fabric so it fell down the front of my legs.

y His mouth curled at the corners then smoothed out just as quickly. If not for his change in demeanor, his shoulders relaxing, his light-brown eyes as warm as melted chocolate, I would have thought I'd imagined it.

"It's fine for today. Next time—and knowing Milo, there *will* be a next time—make sure I know where he is. It's not fair to you to start working before you're on duty, and it absolutely terrifies me to wake up and find him gone. Are we square?" he asked.

l "Sure. We're square," I agreed. "But just so you know, I enjoyed having Milo as company this morning, and he was a great helper. It didn't feel like work, having him with me."

s Diego's lips curled slightly again, and he whispered to himself, barely loud enough for me to hear. "Mother Goose in the flesh. That's some shit."

o I didn't want to know what that meant. Even if I did, my chance was lost by Iris and Ronan bursting into the house via the patio door. Trailing behind them were Adam and Adelaide.

o I'd met Adelaide last year when she and Adam had become a thing. We were complete opposites looks wise—she was tall, glamorous, stunningly

gorgeous, and could talk to a brick wall and have a great time—but from controlling fathers to living in a famous relative's shadow—her mother, my sister—we understood each other on a deep level.

- She wrapped me in a hug. “Hey, girl. How was your solo Spain time?”

s “Better than I thought it would be. I did nothing but eat, swim, and walk on the beach.”

“Perf. You deserved the break.”

, Her arm hooked around my waist, she turned to the two people she hadn't greeted and held her hand out to Camilo.

“Hi there. I'm Addie. Are you Camilo?”

t He paused playing to look at my friend, his eyes going round. “You know my name?”

“Yep. June told me she was hanging with the cutest little boy she'd ever seen. Since you're the only cute little guy here, it has to be you.”

g Milo started to agree with her, then his head cocked and he pushed himself up to his knees in his chair. “My friend is Ez-wa. He's a little boy too.”

Adelaide smacked her forehead. “You're right. You and Ezra are tied for the cutest boy ever. But since I've already met Ez, I knew you had to be Camilo.”

Milo snorted. “My papá's cute too. Do you know him?”

l She raised a brow and gave my waist a squeeze. “He *is* cute, but he's not a little boy.” She tapped the side of her head. “Don't try to trick me, pal. I use my brain to figure you out.”

l That sent Camilo into a fit of giggles. Addie's husband separated from Iri and Ronan, coming over to us.

e “I heard my name mentioned,” he said.

y “We didn't mention you,” Addie replied.

1 He kissed her cheek. “You said something about the cutest boy alive. Since that’s me, my ears started burning.”

She shoved his face away, smiling at him. “Shush, you.” Then she focused on Diego. “Good morning, by the way.”

1 He dipped his chin. “You too.” His brow furrowed. “We’ve met before haven’t we? I remember you.”

My ephemeral pride shredded at the bullets of his words. Of course Adelaide’s mile-long legs and work-of-art face were memorable. She was striking. More than that, she was friendly, funny, and kind. Yeah, my best friend made an impression. The way Diego hadn’t even hinted at recognition of me just went to show how little of an impression I made.

It bothered me more than it should have. I hated how much it bothered me. Adelaide lifted a shoulder. “We’ve met backstage a couple times. Though I’m surprised you remember me. I thought you weren’t great with faces or names since you’ve met June on multiple occasions and you ignored her the last time we passed you backstage and she said hi. I guess you thought she was fangirling or something. Anyway, I’m Adelaide, Adam’s fiancée. You know *him*, don’t you?”

Instead of answering, Diego turned his scowl on me. “We’ve met?”

I tried to clear the knot from my throat, but it was useless. I shrugged, making his scowl deepen. To tell the truth, before this moment, I’d been wondering if he would remember me once we spent a little time together. I’d had no intention of ever bringing it up, but my Adelaide had been insulted for me. Clearly, she was still miffed Diego had snubbed me. The moment we were alone, I was going to step on her toes.

I did *not* want this.

“June?” Diego uttered. “When did we meet?”

e Before I was forced to answer, Ezra came barreling into the room followed by Callum and Wren, who entered much more subdued. As soon as the boys spotted each other, they took up the spotlight, and I was off the hook.

, Adelaide wasn't. I dragged her around the corner, and Adam followed like the shadow he was.

e "I don't think June's very happy with you, Baddie," he quipped, like this was all hilarious.

t Adelaide clutched my bicep. "Don't be mad at me. I knew you'd never bring it up and that dick owes you an apology. I can't believe your sister set you up as his nanny. The little boy is super cute, but come on, that's just cruel."

, "I wish you hadn't said anything. Things between us have been awkward enough." I palmed my forehead. "Can I melt? I'd like to melt and slither my way into the sea."

e "Sea sludge." Adam rocked back on his heels, amused by all this. "You can't become sea sludge, June. We'd miss you too much."

"Why are things awkward?" Adelaide pressed.

"Mostly me."

l, Her brow winged. "And?"

1 "We had some misunderstandings when he first showed. But I get it. He's really protective of his son." I rushed the last part out because Adelaide was protective of *me*. If she knew how big of an asshole Diego had actually been, she would have unleashed on him. Since breaking from her own controlling father, she didn't put up with men who felt the world should and did revolve around them. That was a good thing, just...not right now.

, “I feel like you’re leaving out some important details,” she said.

s “I might be, but this dynamic is temporary. There’s no need to make waves.” I reached for her hand, giving it a squeeze. “I love you for caring.”

She leaned into her man. “I’m sorry he ended up being like this. They say it’s better to never meet your heroes...or long-term crushes.”

I huffed a laugh. “Or maybe it’s *better*. The reality of him will cure me from dreaming about him anymore.”

I wasn’t entirely sure I was telling the truth, but I hoped I was. Carrying an impossible torch for a man out of my reach who would never look twice at me had become a burden I was more than ready to rid myself of.

t Adam hooked an arm around Adelaide’s neck, his gaze softening to adoring. “I’ll make sure my wife behaves from here on out.”

l She shot him a sharp look. “Oh, you will? And how will you do that?”

y He wagged his brows. “You’ll like it in the end.”

And just like that, they were wrapped up in each other, not even noticing when I slipped away.



Three days passed in a blink. Wren, Adelaide, and I hung out while Diego had rehearsals with TSC. We went to the beach, took them out to lunch, had pool time. I learned Milo didn’t like to nap. He also didn’t get cranky, so it wasn’t a hardship, but he *did* exhaust me. The summer sun and how busy we’d been each day might have also added to it.

’
l. Tonight, I had both boys on my own while The Seasons Change performed at a Spanish music awards show. We kept it mellow—dinner, sensory playtime, and bed. I also learned because Milo didn’t nap, he crashed hard at bedtime. His head hit the pillow and the kid was out like a light.

Now, I was curled up on a lounge on the patio, relaxing with my orange infused water and a book in my lap. I had baby monitors for both boys beside me, just in case, but I hadn't heard a single peep.

y As much as I wanted to turn in and crash like Milo, I made myself stay awake until Diego, Wren, and Callum got home.

e Wren and I had been texting all evening, keeping her up to date on Ezra. When she and Callum arrived, they waved to me through the window and headed upstairs. Diego gave me a curt nod and ventured up after them, surprising me. I'd been sure he'd want a report.

Oh well. Exhausted, I turned off all the lights and made my way to my bedroom. After I changed into baggy shorts I'd had since high school soccer and a tank that had seen better days but was too soft for me to even consider throwing out, I scurried across the hall to the bathroom to brush my teeth and get ready for bed.

g Our bedrooms were spread out enough that if anyone was awake, I couldn't hear them. Still, I carefully opened the door and started to tiptoe out, stumbling when I realized Diego was in the hall waiting for me.

"Hi," I whispered.

o He held his hands up. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you...again."

l That pulled a wobbly smile out of me. "You're getting stealthier."

t "How'd tonight go? He looks like he passed out."

y Diego and Camilo were sharing a bedroom. Camilo had looked tiny in the center of his very own queen-size bed, but he'd burrowed down in his piles of pillows and blankets, snug as a little bug.

y "He did. We read a few stories, and he was a goner."

t "He didn't give you any trouble about going to bed? He's picky about his whole routine."

- I shook my head, my heart fluttering. The hall was dim, and with the two of us standing face-to-face, the space felt smaller, more intimate. It wasn't the situation I'd expected to find myself in with Diego, and I couldn't help my reaction. Hopefully, I was hiding it well. If the light were any brighter, I was certain he'd notice the pulse in my neck going wild.

l. "He was perfect, Diego. No trouble at all."

d "Good." He rubbed the corner of his jaw, hesitating like he had something else to say. I knew what it was. I'd been careful to avoid being alone with him in the aftermath of Adelaide's bomb. I didn't want to discuss it. It would only serve to make things even more awkward and embarrass me to epic levels.

r I should have taken that moment to escape. I didn't.

d "How did the show go? Was it nice playing drums again?"

His hand paused beside his mouth. "Two songs went fast, but it was fun at thehell. It always is, being on stage behind my kit. And TSC is tight. Their music is a pleasure to play."

I swallowed. That was a lot more of an answer than I'd expected.

"Iris works them to the bone."

He chuckled, dropping his hand to his side. "I didn't miss that. But it pays off. She's a good leader."

"She is," I agreed. "She always has been. When we were kids, she bossed me around. She still does at times, and it can be annoying, but that's what sisters are for." I glanced toward my room. I was tired, nervous, and ready to escape before I said something I'd kick myself over in the morning. "I should ___"

s "You don't like being told what to do?"

His question came out of nowhere, surprising me into answering him

honestly. “Not by my sister. Other times...I don’t mind it.”

a “Do you ever *like* it, June?” The tone of his voice had changed, softened while also taking an edge. I was suddenly alert, aware of the narrow space between us. My pebbled nipples pressed against the thin fabric of my tank. Diego’s clean scent mixed with a little bit of sweat. “You like being told what to do?”

g This was the strangest, most intoxicating situation I’d ever been in. Why was Diego acting this way? Asking me these questions? Practically growling at me? And why was it affecting me so?

c Then it hit me.

Intoxicating.

I was so dumb. He had to be drunk. There was no other explanation.

Embarrassment clogged my throat. “Please excuse me. I really have to go to bed. Good night.”

r Whirling around, I ignored his harsh whisper of my name and hurried to my bedroom, closing the door behind me. Oh god, how could I have thought he was genuinely flirting with me?

I flopped face-first on my bed, mortified at my own brain.

s I was a twenty-six-year-old woman with a master’s degree, not some simpering little girl. It was time to pull myself together and stop this ridiculous behavior.

t My only saving grace was Diego hadn’t been able to read my thoughts or feel how desperately wet I was between my legs.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

DIEGO

SEVEN YEARS AGO, I got shitfaced and took a fall. I'd been so shitfaced hadn't noticed I'd broken several bones in my hand, wrist, and elbow. It was hours later the excruciating pain wormed its way through the muffling of the alcohol and narcotics in my bloodstream.

It wasn't always easy to look back and pinpoint a single moment as life changing, but I could. The fall didn't end that night. I kept falling and falling for the next couple years until I hit the most desolate, miserable rock bottom.

I wasn't at the bottom anymore. Far from it. But I'd never reach the place I'd been before I fucked up.

Three days of rehearsals and performing, and I was feeling it. The raw ache in my bones, the overworked muscles that had to compensate for my diminished range of motion. I slid down in the back of the SUV returning us to the villa. Iris and Ronan were in the row in front of me. Adam and Callun were in the car ahead of us.

Iris turned around, scanning me with a curious expression. "Are you okay? You look like shit, Garza."

So, I wasn't hiding it as well as I thought. In my case, that was a good thing. I'd been a professional at masking my pain and addiction. So much so that when I'd checked into rehab the first time, I'd taken my band and family by complete surprise.

Along the way, I'd learned shadows and lies were where addiction lived ready to sink its claws into me again. So, I didn't lie, and all my shit was in the light, ugly as it was sometimes.

"I'll live. Need some time with a heating pad before tonight, but I'll be all good after."

"You're out of practice," she observed. "Not used to playing for hours anymore, are you?"

I "I'm not, but I know my limits. Being a full-time musician isn't in my cards anymore."

e She tsked. "That sucks. You still have the sound, though. You picked up on our music like it was nothing. Do you miss it—being part of a band traveling, getting on stage?"

3 I huffed a laugh. I didn't really like to talk about myself, but Iris was distracting me from the feeling of my bones grinding together, so I'd give a little.

"I miss playing with my brother. I miss the days when we were starting out, sweating in Mo's garage during rehearsals. But I'm good with where I'm now. I'm home with my boy most of the time. I like my job, and random drumming gigs feed the musician in me that will always be hungry to be behind my kit."

? Ronan, who looked like a suit but seemed to be pretty chill, had swiveled around in his seat while I'd been talking. He picked up Iris's hand, toying with her fingertips.

l “I didn’t catch it. What do you do for work when you’re not drumming?”
ohe asked.

y “I don’t broadcast it, to be honest. I like to keep my life at home separate
from the road.” I let out a dry laugh. “Since I doubt either of you is going to
,sell me out to the press, my old man owns a garage. I help him run it
nworking on the restoration side.”

“A mechanic?” Iris asked.

l “A mechanic,” I confirmed. On the days I was feeling myself, I was an
automotive restorer. My old man would smack me upside the head if he
sheard me saying that, though.

“Doesn’t bother your injuries, then?” Ronan nodded to my hands.

y “No, not in a way that would prevent me from working. Differen
motions.”

o Iris cleared her throat. “Cool, cool. So, anyway, isn’t my sister amazing?”

l, I reared my head back, startled by her whiplash change of subject. “Uh
yeah. Camilo loves her. She has an easy way with him.”

s Iris preened like a proud parent. “June’s always been that way with kids
aeven when she was a kid. I always tell her she needs to write books
Hopefully she’ll use her education for something other than wasting away in
gour father’s office and watching other people’s children—no offense.”

I “She likes nannying, though.” It wasn’t a question, but Iris nodded.

1 What she’d said had rankled me. I barely knew June, knew less than
enothing about her education, but I did know she liked nannying Camilo and
Ezra. She was calm, creative, and seemed to innately understand how to
drelate to the boys. It didn’t seem to be like she was wasting away. But Iri
ghad ideas for her sister—ideas that didn’t include being a nanny or whatever
she’d done for her father.

” I didn’t like that. June should do what made her happy, not be told she wasn’t doing *enough*. Who got to say what enough was? That should’ve been June’s decision.

” “She should be a hell of a lot more than that,” Iris said like it was fact.

” “Who the fuck are you to say that?” I was more riled than I should have been. From the protective way Ronan grabbed Iris’s arm, he thought so too.

“What?” Iris breathed out. “Are you getting pissed at me?”

” “Nope.” I held both hands up, ignoring how badly it ached just to lift one of them. “Forget it. My temper gets short when I overdo it. It’d be better if you ignored me for the rest of the drive.”

Ronan gave me a long look that clearly telegraphed his girl wasn’t to be fucked with. He had nothing to worry about since I had no intention of fucking with Iris Adler. Her relationship with her sister was none of my business.

,



” In my old days, my ritual after a big show consisted of drinking bourbon to take the edge off, shoving whatever I could find up my nose that would take me back to the edge, then fucking myself and my girl into oblivion.

” That was a lifetime ago.

” I used the adrenaline coursing through my bloodstream when I stepped off stage for good instead of evil. My driver took me to a private gym where I worked out until sweat poured from every one of my pores and my muscles were loose and weak.

” It was past two in the morning when I returned to the villa. The halls were perfectly still, a couple dim lights left on in the kitchen and the upstairs

ehallway. My mouth curved into the barest smile knowing June had probably
1been the one to leave them on for me. *Thoughtful.*

Camilo was fast asleep in his big bed, looking even smaller than he was
Brushing his hair aside, I kissed his forehead. He'd be awake in about four o
efive hours and I was going to hate life. Peering down at his sleep-slackene
face, little puffs of air coming from his parted lips, I couldn't find it in me to
give a damn.

e I stood there for a while, watching my son sleep, then I grabbed a showe
fand threw on a pair of joggers. Before I could climb into my bed, something
scratched at the back of my mind. Something was off, but I couldn't pinpoint
ewhat. I wouldn't rest until I made sure all the doors and windows were locke
fand the house was secure.

y Striding down the hall, I was about to head downstairs when I notice
June's bedroom door open more than a crack. I shouldn't have, but I pushe
it the rest of the way and stepped into the room. As soon as I entered, it wa
clear she wasn't in there.

My stomach dropped. There was no fucking way she would have gone out
I didn't know her well, but I knew that.

Still, I stood there, staring at her bed, letting the scent of lavender cling
to the air make feeble attempts to calm me. The comforter was smooth, th
f pillows neatly arranged. She hadn't been in that bed tonight.

I Moving out of her room and through the house, I checked her bathroom
S then rushed downstairs to the living room and kitchen. Nowhere. She wa
nowhere.

e I shoved my fingers through the sides of my hair, yanking the strands
S trying to revive my brain so I could think. Where the hell could she be?

My eyes snagged on the sliding patio door, slightly open. Crossing th

room, I slid it open the rest of the way and stepped out into the warm, humid night, scanning the yard, the pool, and the chairs.

There she was, curled up on a lounge beside the pool, fast asleep.

Relief warred with simmering anger. What the fuck had she been thinking of falling asleep outside? She had two boys she was supposed to be watching inside. Not to mention, she was vulnerable as hell out here. Someone could have jumped the fence and gotten to her before she'd even opened her eyes.

I stormed over to her, my fingers clenched, digging into my palms. Before I reached her, twin glowing lights on the small table beside her stopped me in my tracks. Baby monitors. Two of them. Adding that to the cracked patio door and her proximity to the house, June had been careful in ensuring the boys' safety.

Of course she had.

Bending down, I turned off the monitors and took in my son's sleeping snanny. She was on her side, tucked into a ball. Her glasses were askew. Her long hair partially covered her face. I should have woken her and lectured her on taking better care of herself and her safety.

But I didn't.

Instead, I scooped her up into my arms and started across the yard. She mumbled, squirming for a moment, then settled into me, her head on my chest, and damn if my dick didn't wake up with keen interest. The small, featherlight woman in my arms was warm from the summer air and so pliant sticking herself into me. Something behind my rib cage stirred too, but I shut it down much faster than my dick. That was a no-go.

I carried June upstairs to her bedroom. One knee on her bed, I carefully laid her down, instantly realizing my mistake of laying her on top of her covers. I paused, my arms still beneath her.

d A hot exhale hit my forearm, then June's cheek rubbed against me for a moment before she went still. A soft whimper fell from her lips, but her eyes remained closed. I stayed still, making sure she was settled, then slid my arms free and leaned over her to fold the other side of the comforter on top of her. Her glasses were still crooked, and I didn't imagine she wanted to sleep with them, so I took them off and placed them on her nightstand.

I did not allow myself to take in any more of her. As soon as she was resettled, I walked out of her bedroom, closing the door behind me. My cock was disappointed to be leaving, but luckily, I wasn't ruled by my urges anymore.

e I was in Spain to work. Nothing more. There was no temptation that would get me off track.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

JUNE

I COULD OFFICIALLY SAY Diego Garza had taken me to bed and it wouldn't be a lie.

Last night, I woke up somewhere between the patio and my bedroom. I'd known he was the one carrying me without opening my eyes. I smelled him, I felt him. It was my choice to feign sleep after that. Yes, I thought it would be easier that way. For us both. But that wasn't the whole truth.

I hadn't wanted it to end. I'd wanted to prolong the moment. Maybe that was greedy or even off the rails, but I'd never have it again so I refused to judge myself for indulging.

We had two more days in Spain. We'd part ways, most likely never see each other again, and that would be okay. Once I was back home, I'd have to focus on my next steps. I wouldn't have time to get stuck in thoughts of Diego Garza—the breadth of his chest, the gentleness of his touch, the care he took in sliding my glasses off my face, how utterly safe I'd been in those silent minutes I'd spent with him.

To be fair, I didn't really have time now. I was stretching under my cover when the door burst open and little feet came pitter-pattering toward me. I grabbed my glasses and shoved them on seconds before Camilo arrived at my bedside.

"Well, hello," I rasped, my words thick with sleep.

"Good morning, June! You still sleeping?"

"I just woke up. Does your papá know you're out of bed?"

He nodded. "He's gonna make me breakfast. Are you hungry? My tummy's empty. I need some hums, some special water, some eggs, some toast—"

I took his hand in mine and squeezed. "That sounds delicious. You're lucky to have a papá who can cook for you. My dad doesn't even know how to find the kitchen."

He tossed his head back and cackled. "He doesn't know where the kitchen is?"

"He doesn't. Can you believe that?" I giggled with him. It was hard not to even though I was barely awake.

A sharp bark came from the doorway, alerting both of us. "Camilo. You were supposed to wait for me in our room, not wake up June."

Camilo sat on the edge of my bed, his hand holding mine. "June was awake! I didn't woked her up."

Diego hadn't left the doorway. His arms were crossed as he peered at the two of us through narrowed eyes.

"He didn't." I scooted upright, pulling the comforter over my chest. "He was telling me what you're making him for breakfast."

"Did he knock before he came in?" From his tone, he knew the answer.

Milo's eyes went even rounder than they normally were, and he started to

rapidly blink. “I’m sorry. I forgot to do that. I came to surprise you.”

I I breathed out a laugh. “You did surprise me, but your papá is right, you should knock before going into anyone’s bedroom.” I poked his side. “’Cause next time, I might be eating cookies I don’t want to share, then we’ll have a *big* problem. Crumbs would fly everywhere—and who likes crumbs in their bed? No one, that’s who.”

Camilo’s momentary worry disappeared in a fit of giggles. I glanced up at his father, who was now glaring at me like I’d told his son to go run with scissors.

Needing out from under Diego’s heavy gaze, I ruffled Milo’s hair. “Okay buddy. Go eat breakfast while I get dressed for the day. Then we can see what trouble we can get up to.”

With a squeal, “Okay!” he darted toward the door, passing his father and disappeared down the hallway. Diego watched him go, telling him to slow down before turning his attention back to me.

), “Come on,” he grumbled.

My head canted. “What? Come on?”

1 He gestured to the hall. “Come. I’ll make you breakfast too. Eggs good?”

“You don’t have to do that.” I wished he wouldn’t.

5 “I know I don’t have to. I’m offering. Do you have a valid reason for turning me down?”

2 His arms were crossed tightly over his chest, the sleeves of his shirt constricting around them to the point I worried about his poor circulation. I inviting me to join him and his son for breakfast made him this tense, why was he doing it?

“I don’t have a *valid* reason. I just...” I tucked a thick chunk of hair behind my ear. “Well, I have to get dressed.”

“Then do that. We’re going to the beach so you might as well put on a bathing suit.” He patted the doorjamb. “I’ll see you downstairs in a few minutes.”

a

r

I found myself up, teeth brushed, hair in a ponytail, wearing a bathing suit beneath a sundress, and downstairs within the five-minute time frame Diego had given me. When he looked up from where he was sliding eggs onto a plate and gave me a pleased smile, I knew why I hadn’t questioned his order.

That.

That smile. That I’d pleased him. That warmth between my legs.

Holy granola, as Wren always said. I was incredibly stupid. I should have calmly said no thank you and stayed in my bedroom. Or taken my time getting dressed, *not* put on my bathing suit, and made my own breakfast. I’d been controlled by my father my entire life. I didn’t need another man telling me what to do.

Except...it didn’t feel like control. Diego’s command had been grumpy but beneath that, it’d felt caring. Then again, maybe I was having flashbacks from last night.

Diego placed Camilo’s plate in front of him at the bar, then two more down beside him. He rounded it and pulled the third chair out.

“Come, June. Have a seat and eat before it gets cold.” He patted the chair raising a brow at me.

My feet moved before I could think about it. When I was close enough, he took my elbow, helped me up into the tall seat then scooted me close to the bar. He took the chair between Milo and me, using up every single inch of the

aspace, his shoulders and elbows flaring out, his legs spreading wide, one
vskimming along my knee.

“Thank you for breakfast. It was unnecessary, but—”

He tapped my hand. “You should have stopped at thank you. We both
know it wasn’t necessary, but I did it anyway.”

^t I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. “Thank you.” I scooped eggs into my
^o mouth and hummed. “It’s very good.”

^a “You’re welcome.” The tines of his fork scraped his plate. “I’m no cook
unlike my pops, but I can make a mean plate of eggs.”

“Your dad cooks?”

He nodded, taking another bite of his breakfast. “He has some recipes his
^e *abuela* taught him. He takes pride in his *caldillio*. He still hasn’t given me or
^e my brother the recipe. I think it’s so we have to come to him if we want it.”

^d “That’s sweet,” I said.

^o “Is it sweet, June? Or is it manipulative?”

“Can’t it be both? You can’t tell me you wouldn’t do something slightly
^r below board to get Camilo home for dinner when he’s all grown and too cool
^s for school.”

He chuckled. “I guess that’s right. The thing is, I work with my old man.
^e I see him day in, day out. I could use a break.”

I speared a chunk of egg before glancing at him from beneath my lashes.
^r His head was turned, watching me.

“Well, you do come with a cute sidekick, who I’m guessing *doesn’t* work
^e with your dad.”

^e “True. You have a point.”

^e He broke from our conversation to check on his son, who was attempting
to squirm his way down from his seat. He hadn’t eaten half his eggs and had

ebarely touched his fruit. Diego was trying to coax him to stay and eat more. Milo swore up and down he was done, done, done. Diego relented, letting him run to the living room where his small collection of toys was.

1 Diego huffed. “Don’t know how he’s gonna fuckin’ grow if he won’t eat.”

“What do you do with his food when he doesn’t finish?” I asked.

7 His jaw rippled. “Toss it. What do you think?”

“I would leave it out for a while. I bet if it’s there, he’ll come back and graze on it.”

He tossed his fork down on his plate. “I wasn’t really asking. I don’t need your opinion on how to take care of my son. It’s been just me and him for a while now, and I can handle all that he needs.”

r I held my hands up. “I didn’t mean to overstep. It’s just that...well, you said ‘what do you think?’ I interpreted that to mean you wanted input.”

He stared at me for a long, unblinking moment. I bit down on my lip to keep from apologizing. I had nothing to apologize for. It was Diego who was in the wrong. Obviously, his parenting was a sensitive subject, one he didn’t want criticized, even if it wasn’t actually criticism.

“You’re right.” He shoved his fingers through his hair, bowing his head. “When people hear I’m a single dad, I get shit advice from every direction. Unsolicited advice. Like I’m some incompetent idiot fucking up my kid.”

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but he pressed on my hand to stop me.

“That’s not what you did. My reaction was knee jerk. You didn’t deserve it.” “To be honest, I could use some advice on getting him to eat. He’s so fuckin’ busy all the time, all he wants to do is go, go, go. No time to eat a full meal.”

I kept my lips clamped tight. No way was I offering another word of advice. No matter what. I didn’t want to inadvertently set Diego off again.

d Diego scoffed. “Now you’re not gonna talk to me?”

I patted my tight lips with my napkin and slid from my chair. “Thank you for breakfast. It was delicious.” I carried my plate to the other side of the island and rinsed it off in the sink. “I think I’ll go next door and see if the others want to go to the beach too. They’re probably still sleeping, but Iri will be offended if I don’t at least ask her. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

I chanced a look up. Diego’s head was cocked as he watched me babble. Needing to escape, I waved at him then rushed out of the patio door. Even if my friends in the house next door weren’t awake, I could hide out there for a bit to get myself together.

I only had to get through today and tomorrow, then I could breathe.

Today and tomorrow.

That was all.

Then it would be over.

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CHAPTER NINE

JUNE

MILO TOOK A RUNNING leap and launched himself through the air. I held my hands out, catching him at the last moment before he went under. I was going to have bruises all over my shoulders from his little hands digging into me, but he was having too much fun for me to tell him to stop.

“Uh-oh!” I tickled his ribs. “There’s a shark coming for us.”

Adam had made a fin on top of his head and was swimming through the pool toward us. Milo squealed, kicking me in the stomach.

“Run away!” he screamed. “The shark is gonna get me!”

Iris jumped in front of us. “Not on my watch. No shark’s going to get you.”

Milo leaned forward to peer over her shoulder at the Adam shark. “He’s coming! He’s going to eat your arm!”

Ronan was leaning on the side of the pool, idly watching our game. “The wee boy has a point. That shark will rend you in half, my love.”

Iris hissed at him. “This shark looks weak. One punch to his nose and he’s out.”

Adam torpedoed up and out of the pool, raining an avalanche of water down on all of us.

“Weak, you say?” He scooped Iris up and raised her high. “Could a weak shark do this?”

He tossed her through the air, and she landed a few feet away in an explosion of expletives and splashes. Ronan had barely blinked. He’d gotten used to Adam and Iris beating each other up like siblings. To be fair, I laughed at seeing my sister in that position.

Adam spun around, narrowing his eyes on me and Camilo. “Are you next Junie-June? Or do you admit I’m the sharkiest shark in the pool?”

Adelaide snuck up behind him and climbed on his back like a pretty little backpack. “Leave them alone, you fool. They’re just trying to relax on the last day in paradise.”

Milo kicked his feet again. “Yeah! Leave us alone, Adam Shark!”

Adam craned his head to kiss Addie’s wet cheek. “I’ll leave them alone if you play mermaids with me.”

She rolled her eyes, but it was clear to anyone who could see she adored him and his playfulness. “Oh, fine.”

They swam off together, and I waded into the shallow beach entry where Wren and Callum were hanging with Ez. Camilo joined them, giving me a chance to sit down and take a breather.

I spun, looking for the best place to sit, and caught Diego watching from the side of the pool. He nodded to the spot beside him on the edge where he had his feet dangling beneath the surface.

We hadn’t spent a moment alone together since breakfast yesterday. Almost everyone joined us at the beach, and Iris played her promised role of buffer. Anytime it appeared Diego and I were going to end up next to each

rother, she'd plopped herself between us. I'd heard Ronan grumbling at her, but she'd ignored him to fulfill her promise to me.

k I didn't really need her to do that anymore, though. It was our last day everyone was in the pool, the vibe was relaxed and easy. Even Diego seemed pretty chill.

1 I walked around the pool, conscious of how I looked in my one-piece IDowdy, matronly, asexual. It was a good suit to wear when I was nannying. In a pool filled with rock stars and their beautiful partners? I was more than aware I stuck out like a sore thumb.

I sat down about two feet from Diego, dropping my feet in the water and wiping my hands on my thighs. He leaned over, his hand coming down right beside my hip to brace himself.

“Ready to go home?” he asked.

“Not really. But we can't live on vacation forever, can we?”

f He chuffed. “You weren't really on vacation. You were working the entire time.”

d “You have a point.” I smiled at Milo using a bucket to dump water on his head. “Compared to my previous job, though, this *was* a vacation.”

e “Bad kids?”

a I laughed. “No. Bad dad.” I turned my head, finding his brow pinched with confusion. “I worked for my dad, in his office. He's not the most pleasant person and an even worse boss.”

e “So, you have to find a new job when you go back. You live in New York?”

. “I do. And yes, I have to start figuring out my life pretty quickly. What about you? Are you ready to go home?”

1 He groaned lowly, brow pinching even tighter. “Like you, I have to figure

tsome shit out too. I'm not looking forward to that. Work, I like. My kid
sleeping in his own room, I like even more. Can't say I didn't have a good
time while I was here, though. Might've been the best gig I've had...maybe
ever."

I tucked my hair behind my ear, laughing. "I won't tell Santi if I run into
him."

He went still. "You see my brother?"

I held a hand up. "Not often, and I was mostly joking. I'm friendly with
Maeve and Mic, and Mo, of course. But we don't hang out or anything, so
you don't have to worry about me spilling your secrets."

"I wasn't worried. You took me by surprise. I hadn't realized how
connected we were." He grumbled a curse. "You still never told me when we
met, you know."

"I haven't. And in case you didn't notice, I've been avoiding that topic. It's
sort of embarrassing for me to be forgotten so completely."

"I meet a lot of people, June."

"I know. And we don't have to talk about it anymore. I won't hold it
against you if you walk right on by the next time I see you backstage."

He exhaled through his nose. "When did that happen?"

"Last summer, when TSC was touring with Unrequited."

His nod was curt. "Last summer I was dealing with a *lot*. I went on tour
with Unrequited to get away from it, but the shittiest part of life is there's no
escaping your own head. If I didn't look at you or wave or smile, it wasn't
personal. Camilo got all my good. I had nothing left."

When I didn't say anything—because I couldn't really think of anything
besides apologizing and I wouldn't be doing that—he tapped the top of my
head.

d *Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap.*

d My spine straightened. My attention shifted squarely to him. My reaction arched his lips, and I swore he mouthed, “Good girl.” But he couldn’t have
Why would he?

d “That obviously wasn’t when we met, though.”

I shook my head. “No. But it was a long time ago, and I’d really like to drop the subject.”

d “Your cheeks are red, June,” he murmured.

d “The sun.”

“Nah. You’re blushing.” He tapped my hand twice more. “I’m not going to forget you after this week. You were incredible with my boy. He’s probably going to be pissed he has to hang with me from now on. You need a reference from me, you got it. Okay?”

s I nodded. “Thank you. I adored every second of my time with Camilo.”

As if his ears were burning, Camilo called Diego’s name, demanding his presence. Diego climbed to his feet, patting my head as he went.

t



It was late afternoon by the time we dragged our tired bodies inside the house. Ez and Milo were watching a movie with Wren and Callum, and Diego was in the kitchen making a snack, so I took the chance to escape for a shower.

d My skin was warm and slightly tender. I hadn’t applied sunscreen as often as I should have, but I’d been having more fun than I’d had in a long time.

g My shower was just a quick rinse and scrub, but I put off getting out
y standing under the spray with my eyes closed. Tomorrow, I’d be on my way home. Back to the tiny apartment in Brooklyn I wouldn’t be able to afford

much longer without a job. I'd have to find one of those. Soon. Iris would help me, or she'd try to pack me up and make me live with her in Ronan in their soon-to-be-wedded bliss. Really wasn't going to happen.

Sighing, I turned off the shower and toweled myself off. This week had gone by faster than I'd anticipated. I'd hoped a week in the sun would spark some kind of epiphany on what I wanted my future to look like, but I'd been too busy to really contemplate it.

At least I could say I'd be leaving Spain a little more settled about my ridiculously unrequited crush on Diego Garza. He was a good guy, a wonderful father, but he would never be for me. Acknowledging that, even inside my own head, made my stomach drop. Disappointment was a leaden thing, heavy like boots in the ocean. But I'd get over it. I practically was already.

I slipped on a sundress—of course—and braided my wet hair.

I stepped out into the hall, and my foot came down on something wet.

A little boy's bathing suit.

Recognizing it as Camilo's, I picked it up and glanced down the hall. Diego had probably already packed their bags since they were leaving in the morning and he was responsible like that. I wouldn't want them to forge these, but they were soaking wet.

If I left the trunks in the bathroom where they could dry, Diego would definitely see them.

Decision made, I walked down the hall to their room and pushed open the door. Normally, I never would have entered their space without permission, but I'd be in and out in a few seconds and he'd never know.

There was a light on in the bathroom, but it didn't occur to me what that might've meant until I swung the door open and billowing steam escaped.

I heard the water running.

Then I saw the naked man standing in the shower, his head tipped back rinsing shampoo out of his hair.

I should have turned around the moment I'd heard the water. Instead, I was standing in the doorway, all of me frozen. Except my eyes. They were roving anywhere they had no business.

The glass shower didn't hide a single thing. Diego was carved from granite. A beautiful, perfectly shaped sculpture. His long, thick legs were muscular and covered with dark hair. He had a tattoo of an octopus on the inside of his thigh, stretching from his hip almost to his knee.

His hands slid over his abdomen and chest, soaping his body with precision. He slid lower, lower until his soapy hand moved over the area I'd been avoiding looking at.

I couldn't help myself. It was as if I was outside of my body, doing something I never would have done if I'd been in full control. As Diego's touch turned from cleansing to something entirely different, my chest constricted, breaths coming in short pants.

His fingers were wrapped around his thick, impossibly long erection. He was rough with it, tugging like he was angry. His groans were low and guttural, but they didn't sound like a man enraptured with pleasure. The sounds he was making were angry, maybe frustrated.

More likely, that was me. I was frustrated with myself for staying. For watching something private, something that wasn't for me. But I couldn't tear myself away.

Diego slammed his empty palm onto the wall tiles. Water sprayed in every direction. His fingers curled into the porcelain, and he released another long muted groan.

I clamped down on my bottom lip to stop myself from whimpering. The heaviness between my thighs was maddening because there'd be no cure. Once I convinced myself to move, I'd carry this heaviness with me, along with the memory of this beautiful man pleasuring himself, and have to live with it.

It was too late now. The shape of Diego's strong body, the savage beauty of his cock, the sounds he made, were all sealed tight in my memory. There was no chance of erasing them.

His fist moved faster, tormenting the release from his body, one vicious tug at a time. His hips were moving, flexing with his violent rhythm. I wondered what it would feel like for his hips to slam into me the same way. Could I even take it?

I would try. I knew that much.

What was I even thinking? I had to go. I'd taken this much too far. I was unlucky I hadn't been caught.

Just as I started to turn, to run away and pretend this had never happened, Diego grunted, and it hit me in the chest so hard I forgot where I was for a split second. I also forgot I was holding Camilo's swim trunks.

They fell from my open hand, landing on the tile with a soft plop.

It should have been too quiet to be heard over the shower. Maybe it was the movement and not the sound that had alerted Diego.

Or maybe it wasn't the swim trunks at all. The only thing I knew was Diego was looking directly at me. Something like angry panic pinched his expression, but a second later, it smoothed into pleasure. His head fell back, lips parting, and oh god, he was coming. He was coming, and he knew I was there, seeing all of it.

That was what it took. Finally, *finally*, I forced myself to turn away and run

back to my room. It really wasn't far enough. If I could have kept going, possibly all the way to the bottom of the sea, I would have. But Iris would have tracked me down and dragged me back, making it even more humiliating than it already was.

Sitting on the end of my bed, I covered my heated face, attempting to regain control of my breathing. My inhaleds were too shallow, exhaleds barely puffs.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, what had I done?

I'd violated my boss's privacy on a massive level and couldn't even say why. I hadn't been thinking, just reacting. That wasn't like me. None of this was.

My door swung open and I gasped. Diego strode into the room in a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. The cotton clung to his wet skin, he obviously hadn't staken the time to dry off.

"What the hell was that?" he gritted out, stopping directly in front of me.

All I could think was how sorry I was for disappointing him. I wanted to show him, make him understand the depth of my remorse.

Tipping my head back, holding his molten eyes, I dropped to my knees on the floor in front of him.

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CHAPTER TEN

DIEGO

ALL I'D NEEDED WAS ten minutes. Ten minutes to jerk my dick, relieve some of the tension that had been mounting inside me all day long. Ten minutes without my kid or anyone else in sight.

I'd almost gotten it.

But then *she* was there, watching me for god knows how long. From her flushed cheeks, heaving chest, and parted lips, it had been a while.

June Adler, my sweet nanny, had openly watched me jack off and I came while our eyes were connected.

The situation was beyond fucked. I didn't know if I was angry at June or if she incredibly turned on.

That was until she dropped to her knees. That clarified exactly what I was feeling, and it wasn't anything close to anger.

My inhale was sharp at the sight of her before me. Her head bowed, pretty little hands stacked in her lap. My dick, which should have been satisfied, leapt to attention.

“June,” I rasped harshly enough to make her jump, her fingers curling into her palm. “What are you doing?”

“I’m so sorry. I can’t even begin to tell you how sorry I am. I never should have been in there, and I shouldn’t have stayed when I saw you.” She reached out and skimmed my pants with her fingertips. “I’m very sorry.”

I went utterly still. What the ever-loving fuck was this girl doing, and why was she doing it so damn flawlessly?

“It was a bad thing to do, June. A violation. You watched me have a very private moment. Why did you stay?”

“I don’t know. I shouldn’t have.” She pressed both her palms to my knees in supplication. “I’m sorry, Diego.”

^e “You didn’t answer my question.”

¹ Her head lowered, and her dark braid fell forward, slapping against my sweats. My hand clenched with the need to wrap it around my fist, tip her head back, force an answer out of her.

^r I wouldn’t do that. I would never do that to her. But the temptation was strong. She was too perfect on her knees, with her soft voice and sincere ^e apologies. The fact that she’d had the nerve to watch me in the shower took me aback. There may have been more to my timid little nanny than I’d first ^r thought.

“I don’t have an answer. It was wrong, but I couldn’t make myself leave ^s I’m so sorry.” Her fingers curled around the loose fabric of my pants. She was trembling all over. My gut clenched at the possibility she was terrified.

^y I didn’t want her kneeling in terror. Though she’d crossed a line, I would never hurt her. She’d surprised me, and I wasn’t fond of being surprised. Too much bad had come from the unexpected. Status quo was where I thrived.

“You should have left, June. You should have run and locked your door.”

put the barest pressure beneath her chin with my knuckle. “Look at me.”

She tipped her head back, showing me her face but averting her gaze. I clapped the side of my leg.

“Look at me, June.” I lightly held on to her chin, keeping her in position.

Her gaze darted to my face. Behind her frustratingly too-big-for-her-face glasses, her blue eyes were bright, almost electric, and swam with tears. I was a hit to the gut. Tears didn’t match her. They didn’t belong.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“You won’t ever do that again. Not to anyone.” It wasn’t a question. I didn’t understand why, but there was a visceral need in my belly to ensure June would behave once I walked out of her life tomorrow. No peeping on other fathers she nannied for. No getting herself in situations where she felt like she had to drop to her knees.

“I won’t. I promise.”

My index finger straightened, stroking from the top of her cheek to her jaw.

“Good girl.” The moment the words were out of my mouth, June gasped and swayed like a buoy in a stormy sea.

It hit me then what I was doing. My son’s nanny was on her knees, my cock was hard and mere inches from her parted lips, and I was complimenting her for how exquisitely submissive she was being. Wildly inappropriate and fully out of character for me. My control was something held with an iron fist. Yet, this girl, who’d been almost mouselike around me all week when she hadn’t been avoiding me, made me want to drop my reins and pick up *hers*.

“Diego.” Not much more than a whisper, my name had never been so loaded. Desire, need, confusion, regret. Three syllables sounded like a

hundred with all she put behind it.

I My hand dropped from her face.

I snapped to my senses.

“I accept your apology.” I took a step back from her, then another. This time, it was me averting my gaze. Because if I looked at her in that position, I was bound to do something I could not come back from, and I was no longer the man who made selfish, impetuous decisions. “Thank you for everything June.”

I Turning on my heel, I strode out of her bedroom without a single glance back.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

DIEGO

CAMILO HAD GONE BACK to his bedroom ten times. Each trip, he returned with another armload. Cars, crayons, superhero figures, a kazoo—which wasn't fucking happening—his iPad, a pair of socks—

“What do you need a pair of socks for?”

He dropped his armload on top of his backpack. “What if my feet get wet? I can't wear wet socks.”

My brow pinched. “That's a good point. Do you think I should bring some spare socks too?”

He giggled. “Nooo...your feet are too big.” Then he turned around and galloped back to his bedroom.

My son confused me, but in a way I couldn't get enough of. I had no idea why my feet were too big to need spare socks, but I believed him.

We'd been back from Spain a day. Our sleep schedules were still wack, but I was hoping that would work in my favor. I had a full day at work, and with no one to watch Milo, he was coming with me. With any luck, he'd get bored

enough sitting in the office off the garage, he'd give in to the sleep he needed but would deny it until his last breath.

"Come on, Milo! We have to hit the road, bud," I called.

Our house looked like our suitcases had exploded all over it, which they basically had. There'd been no time to unpack in a real way. No time to hit the grocery store or do laundry. We'd get it done eventually. It'd been the two of us for a long time. We made do.

My pops was waiting outside the garage when we pulled up. The second Milo had unbuckled from his booster, he sprinted to his grandpa. And my old man, Jesus, he crouched, his arms out, a smile strictly reserved for his grandkids on his face.

^e The first time I saw it, I'd barely recognized him. Eli Garza was grizzled and had been hardened by life. He'd been a good dad to me and Santi, but not at first. He'd had to get his act together, straighten up and fly right.

[?] With Camilo, they'd been buds from day one. My son hung the moon, and to Camilo, my pops had invented the stars.

^e Laughing, I walked up to the two of them in the middle of a hug fest. Milo's tote bag hung heavy over my arm, laden with everything but the kitchen sink.

^l "We were gone a week," I said.

^a "Too damn long." Pops stood, my son clutched in his arms. Milo had his arms wrapped around his grandpa's neck, looking pleased as hell to be in that spot. "Didn't know what to do without my boy. No one to talk to, nothing to do."

^l "I bet Alicia would love to hear that."

^l Pops' cheek twitched. "Repeat that to her and you might find yourself trapped under an engine."

l I held my hands up. “I’m no snitch.”

My old man had married Alicia when I was eleven or twelve. She was more of a mother to me than mine had ever been. She called me and Santi her boys. I had never been able to bring myself to call her Ma, but she didn’t care as long as I knew I was hers.

e I did.

Pops knew he’d married up and did everything in his power to make his wife happy. Stealing my kid from me as often as possible was the biggest bone. They were constantly trying to lure Milo to their place for sleepovers and a lot of the time, I was grateful as hell for it. It helped that they lived right next door so it wasn’t like they were taking him far.

l Pops took Milo to his office, where he’d be spending his day. There was a couch, a TV, a little fridge always stocked with his snacks, and a basket filled with toys. Plus, the bag on my arm loaded with god-knew-what.

l I still felt so damn guilty for making him hang out in an office all day. Hell, since I didn’t have a nanny and my pops and Alicia both had to work, I didn’t know when I’d be able to put an end to this setup.

e Milo couldn’t have cared less. When my old man and I walked out of the office, he started getting his guys set up for a battle, too engrossed to even wave bye.

s Pops slapped me on the back. “How was the trip?”

t I nodded. “Good, good. TSC is pretty sick. They were fun to play with.”

o His eyes narrowed as he examined me. “It was a good environment for you?”

“Yeah. I made sure it would be. They’re like a family, that band. And the lead singer’s sister was Milo’s nanny. He was asking me this morning when he could see her and got pissed when I said I didn’t know.”

He crossed his arms over his broad chest. “Wait a second. Back up. You found a good nanny, one Camilo loves, and you don’t know when he can see her again? Why the hell didn’t you offer her a permanent position?”

e Because she dropped to her knees for me.

She submitted without me asking her to.

Because I’d never be able to forget the impact one simple praise had had on her.

t “She lives in New York. I don’t think she’s looking to move.”

, Even if the...incident hadn’t happened that the last day, I really doubted June would be willing to move all the way to Baltimore to be my son’s nanny. It had crossed my mind to maybe ask her, but that had become an impossibility.

l “You didn’t ask?”

I shook my head. “Nah. I’ll find someone down here. You know I always figure it out.” Turning away from him, I checked out the garage. Garza and I Sons was kept immaculate. Tools were clean. The floors gleamed. Eli had ideas on how his garage should run and implemented them with strict precision.

1 I had to admit, when I’d first started working for him, I’d bucked under his iron fist. I’d been used to doing whatever the fuck I wanted. It hadn’t gotten me far, but it had taken some time to follow the straight and narrow without feeling like I was being strangled.

r Once I got into restoration, things changed. That was my domain. I got trained in things even Eli didn’t know. The guys working with me had been restoring cars for longer than I’d been alive, as they liked to remind me. I had no choice but to educate myself so I deserved my place with them.

“We had something new come in while you were gone.” Eli raised his

eyebrows.

2 “Are you gonna torture me or let it spill?”

“We have a ’Cuda that needs total restoration.”

My pulse picked up. “’70?”

He rocked back on his heels. “’71. Has some rust, but overall, not terrible condition.”

Plymouth Barracudas weren’t flashy, but they were my favorite. They were classic, loaded with muscles but pretty to look at. No two were ever the same. I could restore ’Cudas for the rest of my career and never get bored.

5 “Fastback?”

1 His chin jerked. “Yep. You excited?”

“You know I am.”

He chuckled. “Then why are you still here talking to me?”

8 That was all I needed to hear. I had a car to get my hands on.

1



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t I’d been working for an hour, two at most, when Milo wandered through the garage to tap me on the shoulder.

5 My head bounced off the doorframe I was bent under before I whirled around. “Camilo! What did I tell you?”

1

t He poked his bottom lip out. “Um, I think you told me to stay in the office no matter what.”

t “And did you listen?”

1

1 He nodded. “I listened for a long, long time. But I got tired of listening and I wanted to tell you that I’m ready to go home now.”

1

5 I blew out a heavy breath. A few of the guys around me laughed. I wasn’t finding this humorous.

“We talked about this. I have to work right now. When it’s lunchtime we’ll go to the playground. You just have to hang ’til lunch. Think you can do that?”

He shook his head. “I think I can go to the playground now.”

e “That wasn’t an option.”

His nose crinkled. “Why not? Playgrounds are my best thing. I can take my toys and Grandpa. I have three fruit snacks. One for me, one for you, one for Grandpa. He’s too big for swings. You are too, Papá. But you can watch me. You’ll have fun, come on!”

Unmoved by his cajoling, I palmed the top of his head and turned him in the direction of the office. As we stood there, I took note of all the things in this garage that could have seriously hurt him on his way over to me. We were busy, and the guys weren’t exactly paying attention to a shrimp venturing across the floor. It was dumb luck no one had tripped over him or dropped something heavy.

“Not gonna happen, little man. Back to the office with you.” I scooped him^e up, much to his chagrin, and carried him back where he belonged.

Before we made it, Charlie, one of the mechanics on my old man’s side o^d things, stepped out in front of us. Charlie was young and slick. He thought he was funnier than he was. He flirted with customers and tried to add o^e services that weren’t needed.

Basically, Charlie was a dick. But my old man thought he was a good mechanic, and generally, he was.

d “Hey, Camilo. Did you escape from jail?” Charlie laughed at himself.

“I’m going to the playground,” Milo answered.

t “Oh yeah? Dad’s skipping out on work again?” Charlie’s gaze flicked to mine, making sure I heard his less-than-subtle dig. As if I didn’t have every

,right to take a week off.

1 “Excuse me,” I gruffed. “Need to get by.”

Charlie could be pissed all he wanted as long as he stayed on his side of the garage and did his job. He wasn’t going to get a rise out of me. I wasn’t that guy.

7 “Of course.” He made a big show of stepping aside, swinging his arms like he was a showcase model on an old-fashioned game show. “Have fun at the playground. I’ll be here working.”

“Okay!” Camilo cried. “See you later after the playground.”

1 Needless to say, my stubborn little man was pissed when I parked him in the office. It killed me to do it, but it wasn’t like he was stuck staring at four walls with nothing to do. He had everything he could possibly want, and my old man probably stopped in every five minutes to check on him since his workstation was basically right outside the office. Milo was jet-lagged and not in the mood for following the rules.

1 “June should be here,” he declared when I sat his little butt down. “I want June to come to my house.”

f “June’s far away in New York.”

2 He scowled at me. “I want to call her. She gives me hums and sings and plays fun games. She can drive here, okay?”

I shook my head, my patience wearing thin. Milo wasn’t the only one who was jet-lagged.

“I don’t think she can come here. But maybe, if you listen to me for the rest of the day, we can see if June wants to FaceTime with you.”

His eyes brightened. “Is she in your phone, Papá?”

3 “Her number? Yeah, I have it in my phone.” I patted his head. “But we’re not going to call right now. You have a job to do, and so do I. We’ll talk

about it at the end of the day.”

He agreed, but he sure as shit wasn't happy about it. I wasn't exactly fjumping for joy about how much he was missing June. She was an impossibility for both of us in every way. But if it made him feel better, I'd let him call her, and knowing what I did about her, she'd be glad to speak to him—especially since she'd hidden in her room that last day and only had a brief goodbye with Milo the next morning. I'd had to tear him off her and it had pretty much wrecked me. My kid liked everyone, but one week with June and he'd gotten firmly attached.

l



r

My head was under the hood of the 'Cuda when my heart stopped beating.

y

My old man's frantic shouts from the other side of the garage were the cause.

s

d

And I fucking knew.

t

Without a second of hesitation, I tore across the floor, dodging mechanics and tools, nearly falling over my feet at the sound of my boy's whimpering cries.

d

“Papá! Where's my papá?” So small, but those words, flooded with tears and agony, were enough to bring me to my knees.

y

I didn't stop until I had Milo in my arms, running for my car with my old man beside me, telling me what had happened.

e

Milo had wandered out of the office again, but he hadn't gotten very far. He'd stopped to check out his grandpa's tool bench, picked up a wrench that had to weigh eight or nine pounds, and dropped it on his foot—a foot that had next to no protection in his Spiderman flip-flops.

e

x

My old man got in the back seat with Milo, no hesitation at leaving the garage to go to the hospital with us. I was glad for it. He spoke to Milo and comforted him so I could drive. I was close to losing it but having him there kept me holding on.

“Just one more mile, Camilo. One more mile, then we’ll get you fixed up.”

a



t

It felt like decades had passed, but it was probably no more than a handful of hours. Milo was x-rayed, casted, and now sleeping peacefully thanks to the pain medication the doctor had administered.

I couldn’t stop looking at him. My tiny, broken boy in a hospital bed way too big for him.

e “*Fuck.*”

If I hadn’t had every reason not to, I would have been out of here, my former plug’s number dialed by memory, hunting down something that would take me away from this. But my boy needed me to stay, to handle this situation and make it better. That overrode every single one of my own needs

“He’s okay.” My old man clapped me on the back. Once he did, I couldn’t stop myself from letting my head fall onto his shoulder. He wrapped both his arms around me, patting the center of my back like I was a goddamn baby. And I needed it. “He’s okay, Diego.”

“He could’ve—”

“No, boy. We’re not gonna focus on what could’ve happened. That’s a dead-end road. Focus on now. Camilo’s going to be fine. A couple broken bones aren’t going to keep him down long.”

My throat felt almost too thick to swallow. “It shouldn’t have happened. I messed up. I didn’t do right by him. What was I thinking?”

e “You were doing what you had to do. You can’t beat yourself up, son
, Accidents happen. You hear me? This isn’t your fault. It’s no one’s fault.”

e “It really feels like it’s my fault.” I pulled away from my old man, shaking
my head. “I don’t know what I’m gonna do. I can’t bring him back to the
, office.”

He squeezed my shoulder then dropped his hand to the side of Camilo’s
bed. “No, you can’t. Alicia and I can take a couple days off, but you’re going
f to have to put the pedal to the metal to find him a nanny.” The look he gave
e me was loaded. “Still thinking you can’t hire the nanny in New York? April
was it?”

y I sank into the chair at the side of the bed. “June,” I murmured. “Her name
is June.”

My options were June or a stranger. Leaving Milo with anyone I wouldn’t
y have time to properly vet was pretty much unthinkable—especially now, with
t him injured. But calling June wasn’t a good idea either.

S “Think about it, son,” Eli rumbled. “Think about it long and hard.”

“I will.”

t But thinking about it wasn’t going to get me anywhere or solve the
S problem that couldn’t go on being a problem another day—not when my
, son’s health and safety were up for grabs.

I knew what I had to do.

a

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I

“You were doing what you had to do. You can’t beat yourself up, son. Accidents happen. You hear me? This isn’t your fault. It’s no one’s fault.”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

JUNE

THE MOMENT I'D ARRIVED home from Spain, I'd started networking. I never thought I'd be a person who networked, but here I was, sipping my lukewarm coffee after a brief meeting with a college classmate.

Cora was working as a private therapist for children with ADHD. It wasn't exactly what I wanted to do, but close. Her practice didn't have any openings but she told me she'd put some feelers out. She also gave me the names of a few colleagues she knew outside of New York. I hadn't considered leaving New York before that moment, but I wasn't directly opposed to it. I'd grown up here, and while I loved it, I didn't have to live my entire life in this city. In fact, as I swirled the creamy liquid around the bottom of my mug, the idea of moving interested me more and more.

But that was dependent on a job. While I hoped to start working as a therapist, the field I'd earned my graduate degree in, finding the perfect practice that aligned with how I wanted to treat my patients was a long shot. Right away, at least. I had to start somewhere, though, and that was the tricky part.

Since I couldn't count on finding a therapist position, I also put out feelers for families seeking a temporary nanny. The odds of finding that type of position were much higher. They'd be higher still if I was willing to take a more permanent position.

I wasn't, though. I'd put off my plans, tucked aside my education too long working for my father. I wouldn't do that again.

Coffee finished, I hoisted my heavy handbag over my shoulder and left the café, meandering back to my apartment. Still jet-lagged from the time change, I was trying my best to ignore my fatigue and stick with a normal schedule.

That wasn't so hard. Forgetting what had gone down that last day was proving to be much more difficult.

I was absolutely mortified by my behavior on every level. Not just watching Diego in the shower but what I did after. Oh, I couldn't even think about it without getting queasy.

Then, I also couldn't think about my behavior without remembering how he'd responded. "Good girl."

He hadn't been offended or disgusted. No, on the contrary, he'd gotten hard. There had been no disguising the thick erection beneath his light-gray sweats.

Not that it mattered. Everything that had happened in those minutes had been beyond the pale. I had been a nanny for a long time and had never come close to having an encounter like that with a father.

I hated myself for all of it. One stupid, irresponsible decision had stripped me of the chance of ever getting to hang out with Camilo again. Diego probably thought I was some deviant.

I told myself it was for the best. Though I'd have to live with the memory

sof my humiliation, at least I'd cut ties with my impossible hopes of...well, o
fDiego. Just Diego.

a Pushing my sunglasses on top of my head, I stopped in front of my
apartment building to enter the code on the door.

g "Excuse me."

I turned to the woman standing a couple feet behind me. She appeared to
ebe around my age, with cute horn-rimmed glasses and a pixie cut. Outwardly
eharmless, but I was a native New Yorker, I knew better than to be suckerec
lby cute.

I gripped the handle of my bag tight and raised my eyebrows. "Yes?"

s "Are you June Adler?" she asked, still keeping a good amount of sidewall
between us.

t "Why do you ask?"

κ My defenses were sky high. More than one reporter had tracked me down
to ask questions about my sister, especially when she was injured by he
vstalker over a year ago. They always wanted to know what it had been like
growing up in Iris Adler's shadow.

1 *Cold. Dark. Dreary.*

γ *Exciting. Bold. Colorful.*

There was not a chance in hell I'd ever tell anyone what being Iris's siste
lwas like. The feelings were too complex, and frankly, it was no one'
ebusiness.

"My name is Ashley Flowers. I know, I know, sounds fake, but it's th
lname on my birth certificate." She paused for laughter. When it didn't come
oshel plowed right along, undeterred. "June, I was hoping we could talk. I'n
writing a story—"

γ I held up my hand. "No, thank you. I don't talk about my sister."

f I started to turn back to my door, but Ashley rushed forward, clearing half the space between us before she pulled up short and I jumped backward.

y “Wait! June, wait. I’m not here to talk about Iris.” Her eyes were bright and round behind her glasses. She waited for me to take the bait, to ask her why she was here, but I wasn’t giving her anything else.

o “The story I’m writing is about Dr. Phillip Adler, your father.”

y The frown already tugging at my brows deepened. “I still don’t have any comment. You’ll have to find another source.”

She squared her shoulders, shedding her cuteness like the disguise I’d guessed it was. She was more pit bull now, sinking her teeth in with determination.

“I have quite a few sources, June. Former patients of his, a nurse, medical school classmates. This story is going to blow up. Wouldn’t you like your voice heard? Don’t you want a say in how you’re portrayed?”

r I shook my head. “What? What kind of article did you say this was?”

e She could be spouting total BS, but what if she wasn’t? I didn’t really care if my name ended up in an article—no one knew who I was—but I had to warn Iris. She had people who would help her. People who could snuff stories before they had a chance to grow into an out-of-control wildfire.

r “Agree to talk to me and I’ll explain.”

s “I won’t do that. I don’t have anything to say about my father.”

“You worked for him, didn’t you?” she pressed.

e “I’m sure you can find that out through public record.”

, She bounced on her toes, almost excited now. “You’re right, I can and did. That’s how I know you can probably shed valuable insight into his practice.”

“What’s your angle?” I tried.

She wagged a finger at me. “No, no, no. First, you have to agree to be

fininterviewed on the record—*then* I'll share what I'm investigating.”

Investigating sounded bad. Much worse than research. My father's ethics were pretty much nonexistent, so I could guess what angle Ashley Flower was taking.

“No, I won't agree to that. Please don't come back.” I hurriedly punched the code into the pad on the door, buzzing myself into my building. When I glanced back through the glass doors, Ashley was still there. She gave me a jaunty little wave like she was having fun.

l



l

Ashley returned the next few days. She was relentless. So relentless, in fact, I wondered if she truly had all the sources she claimed to. There was a reason this was valuable to her, and I didn't think it was solely my last name.

r

Coming and going from my apartment had become so uncomfortable I dreaded it. Ashley wasn't being intimidating or rude but seeing her on the sidewalk or getting coffee at the same café made my stomach lurch.

e

By the fourth day, I gave in and stayed inside. Going out had become more trouble than it was worth.

f

As I finished lunch, my phone rang, which was rare. The request for a FaceTime was even rarer, especially since Iris was in town, not on a long tour, jonesing to see my face.

I nearly dropped the phone when I read Diego's name on the screen and clutched it tighter. So tight it was in danger of cracking. It stopped ringing before I could decide whether to answer it, and I wasn't sure if I was relieved or deeply disappointed.

l

Then, moments later, it rang again. Another FaceTime request from Diego. And I just knew he wasn't the one calling me.

e

I pressed accept, ready to smile. When Camilo’s little round face filled my screen, I did just that.

“Camilo! I’m so happy to see you.” My heart fluttered at the sight of him. It had been less than a week, but his hair seemed longer, his tan from the Spanish sun had faded, and he felt way too far away.

“June! I want to tell you something.”

“Oh yeah? Well, good thing I have my listening ears on. I can’t wait to hear what you have to say.”

He fumbled with the phone, panning away from his face, down to his lap then his legs. I gasped at the blue cast running from below his left knee all the way to his toes.

“What happened?” I asked, trying to moderate my worry and keep my voice as calm as I could.

His face filled the screen again, and he grinned. “I got tired of listening and I broked my foot. It hurt really, really bad. I had to go to the hospital and get some shots. The needles were huge. Like a sword. I was a little scared but not that much.”

My eyes went wide at his story. “Oh, Milo. If I had broken my foot, definitely would have been afraid. Did the doctors make you feel better?”

He nodded so hard his hair flopped around his head. “Yeah. And there was a nurse. Sometimes, she frowned, but she smiled at Papá. He didn’t smile at her. He forgot his smile for a long time.”

“I bet he was really worried.”

“He was pretty worried. Papá said I could call you if I listened, but I didn’t listen for long enough, but he let me call you because I got a blue cast. I think he’s still worried, and it’s already been a lotta days since I broked it.”

Camilo and I chatted for a few more minutes—well, he chatted, I hung on

his every entertaining word—before he got bored and put the phone down after a quick goodbye. I was about to hang up when Diego’s face was suddenly there, glowering at me through the screen.

“Oh. Hi.” I bit on my bottom lip, hoping to god he couldn’t see how flushed I felt.

“Hi, June.” His sigh was heavy with exhaustion. “You’re all filled in huh?”

“Yes. I think Camilo covered everything that’s happened since Spain.”

He gave me a long look then a curt nod. “I’m going to cut to the chase. I’d like you to move down to Baltimore and be Camilo’s nanny. It’d be for the summer until he starts full-time preschool in September. You’d have private quarters on the bottom floor of my house and a car to drive if you don’t have one. It’d be Tuesday through Saturday since I work at the shop on the weekend. Maybe an evening once in a blue moon, but most likely not. I know you like my son, and he’s pretty much obsessed with you. I know you’ll keep him safe. I trust you with him, and frankly, we need you. Say yes.”

My mouth fell open to say no, but I stopped myself. First, because he hadn’t asked a question. And second, because I was tempted. Stupidly tempted.

“I live in New York.”

“I know. I’ll pay to relocate you, but it needs to be pretty immediate.”

My hand went to my forehead. “I’ve been looking for another job. One in my field.”

“And I guess that’s not nannying.”

“No, not nannying. I haven’t found anything yet, but I—”

“So, keep looking from down here. I wouldn’t be asking you if I had another solution. My son got hurt because I didn’t keep him safe. I need help

1 I can't do it on my own."

5 Diego sounded absolutely shattered. And when I looked at him, really
looked at him, I saw it in his face. He was agonized over his son's injury. The
6 fact that he still trusted me was astounding, but...

"I want to help you. I do. But I—"

7 He cut me off. "What happened, happened. I can move on from it if you
can."

I didn't really know if it was that simple for me, but I didn't tell him that.
8 I paced to the window facing the sidewalk, resting my head on the warm glass.

9 "I don't know what to say."

9 "Come on, June. It has to be you."

9 He didn't mean anything by it, but that didn't stop me from taking his
10 words and lodging them in the heat of my belly. If only he'd said them to me
under different circumstances.

10 Movement on the sidewalk caught my eye. Ashley Flowers was peering
up, and though I was five floors up, I swore she saw me. I fell back, nearly
11 tripping over my own feet then my coffee table.

11 I'd been on the edge, and Ashley pushed me over. I couldn't keep hiding
out in my apartment. It was untenable. I also couldn't stand the thought of her
following me around, pressing me for information about my father.

"You said you could have me moving down there tomorrow?"

11 He breathed out a heavy sigh, his stare as fierce as it was relieved. "Yeah
June. I'll have you here tomorrow."

I might look back at this moment and regret it, but there was a possibility
I'd regret it even more if I didn't.

11 "Okay. I'll do it."

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DIEGO

JUNE ARRIVED AT NIGHT. The only way I'd gotten Camilo to fall asleep was to tell him she wouldn't be showing up until tomorrow morning.

But here she was, on my doorstep, almost exactly as I remembered from a continent away.

"You're not wearing your glasses."

She touched her face. "No. I usually wear contacts, but I don't like to bother with them when I'm traveling."

"Okay." I didn't know why I'd brought it up, except seeing her here, in my state, at my home, had taken me aback, and the absence of her glasses only added to the surrealness.

Her mouth twitched. "Okay." She tipped her chin to the doorway behind me. "Should I come in? Or are my quarters outdoors?"

She was in jeans too. Another difference. In Spain, she'd been in flowery dresses that'd floated around her body. That must've been a vacation thing too. I wasn't about to ask. What she wore shouldn't have been one of my concerns.

I stepped aside. “No, of course not.”

She picked up her two large suitcases, straining to lift them over the threshold. I took them from her before she could hurt herself and carried them into the house. She followed.

As I strode through the first floor of the home Milo and I had lived in the last three years, I spoke to the trailing June. “My and Camilo’s bedrooms are upstairs. You’ll have the suite on this level. It’s at the back of the house. You’ll have privacy, but I’d lock your door. You know my kid well enough to know boundaries aren’t his jam.”

Pushing open the bedroom door, I took her suitcases inside. This room had been built as an in-laws suite, or so the realtor had told me. There was enough privacy and space she could get away from us, do her own thing, ensuring her off-the-clock hours were really off the clock.

“You have your own living room, bathroom, and bedroom. Our last nanny didn’t live with us, but she used this as a kind of break room and added a small fridge. You can keep drinks and snacks in here if you want.”

I placed her suitcases on the bench at the end of the bed and swung around to look at her. I couldn’t get over how disconcerting it was to see her without her glasses. Her blue eyes were tired but attentive, tracking my every move. I wondered if she was thinking about the last time we saw each other.

I was.

“Was your ride down okay?” I asked instead.

“It was fine,” she answered. She slid the straps of a guitar case off her shoulders, propping the instrument against the wall. “Thank you for hiring a driver. It was unnecessary but appreciated.”

I cocked my head. “How else were you going to get down here?”

She blushed a pretty shade of pink. “I would have found a way.”

“Well, there was no need. I needed you here, I found the way to get you here.” I patted her luggage. “This is all you have?”

1 “I’m having some stuff shipped, the rest is in storage.” She glanced around. “This is very nice. Your house is lovely.”

2 “Thanks.” I rubbed the back of my neck, itching to get out of there while equally itching to stay and dig around in her timid little head. But I knew better. “I’m gonna let you get settled. Camilo’s going to be eager to see you in the morning, but—”

“It’s fine.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “I’m eager to see him too. I’ll be up early.”

3 “Good. You’re perfect.” She sucked in a breath. It was quiet, but I didn’t miss it. Sweet nanny was so praise starved the slightest thing could set her off. I’d have to remember that. “Have a good night, June. I’m glad you’re here.”

4 “I’m glad to be here too, Diego.”

5



6 My boy rose with the sun. He had hobbled into my room, demanding to know when June would arrive. I tried with all my might to get him to lie down with me and sleep a little longer, but there had been no convincing him.

So we headed downstairs.

7 And he flipped his shit at the sight of June Adler in our kitchen. His excitement at seeing him was more contained, but as soon as he was in reaching distance, she had him scooped up in her arms, giving him a tight squeeze. Then Milo launched into every detail of his life since he’d last seen her. June listened with rapt attention even though he was pretty much repeating everything he’d told her during their phone call.

Their reunion was only interrupted by Camilo’s need for pancakes.

1 I stepped into the kitchen. “I can make them.”

June plopped Milo on the counter. “Can I? I promise I won’t usurp your breakfast duties every morning, but I’d love to make it today. For both of you, obviously.”

e I wanted to fight her on it, but there was no real reason other than I didn’t want her to be perfect at one more thing.

1 “Yeah, sure. Thanks. Mind if I go take a shower while you cook?”

She reached over her head, pulling her hair into a messy bun. “Of course not. Milo and I have this handled.”

A sureness about June peeked out every once in a while, intriguing me. She wasn’t always a little mouse. I couldn’t help wondering what the magic key was that got her going.

After breakfast, June and I cleaned up the kitchen while Milo kept himself busy watching Bob Ross—Ezra’s influence, though Milo hadn’t had the urge to actually pick up a paintbrush to paint along with the old TV show.

June stood beside me, wiping the kitchen counters, and I did the dishes.

v “He seems like he’s taking the cast in stride,” she observed.

1 “Yeah. A lot better than I’m taking it, that’s for damn sure. Can’t get his cries out of my head. I’ll never forget it, and it was entirely my fault.”

“Did you break his foot?”

r I glanced at her. “I might as well have. I was negligent.”

1 “I highly doubt that. You’re basically a hover father.”

t I huffed a laugh. “You’re insulting me on your first day on the job?”

1 She laughed under her breath. “You know it’s true. And the point is

1 you’re incredibly cautious with your son. You’re far from negligent. It sucks that he got hurt, but you can’t keep beating yourself up. What’s the point? It’s not a fight you’re going to win.”

“It’s hard to let it go.”

r “Of course it is. But your son is safe and loved. You haven’t traumatized him for life. Trust me, I have some experience in this area.”

“You do, do you?”

I “I do.”

I propped my hip against the counter. “You never told me what you went to school for.”

e She arched a brow. Her eyes were bluer in the morning light. I hadn’t noticed them in Spain. Then again, this was as close as we’d gotten to each other.

c “I don’t remember you asking.”

I inclined my chin. “True. I’m asking now.”

f She nudged me aside to wash her hands in the sink. I moved, but not as much as I should have.

“I have my master’s in counseling. My goal is to work with children using music therapy. While I was studying, I helped lead a group for kids who’d lost a parent. I’ve seen what grief and trauma does to developing minds and how resilient they are. Way more resilient than adults.”

“Thank Christ for that.”

Her lips curved. “I think you and Milo would be a textbook example of that. He’s thumping around in his little cast and you’re looking at him like a forlorn mother who just sent her boy to war.”

I rubbed at the stubble on my chin. “I don’t know if I like that analogy.”

, “You don’t like being compared to a mother?”

s “That’s not a problem.” I handed her a towel to dry her hands. “Don’t like seven for a second imagining sending my son to war.”

She laughed while folding the towel into a perfect rectangle. “Okay.

won't use that analogy again. Just comfort yourself in knowing Milo's fine. I'd like me to talk to him—"

"Yes."

She grinned up at me. There was a little fucking gap between her front teeth. Like her sister. Iris was famous for hers, but I'd missed that June had it too. Now I had the feeling I was going to be fixated on it.

"No worries. I'll have a chat with him when we have music time later."

"What's music time? There was no music time in Spain."

"Well, I didn't bring my guitar there." She mirrored my pose, propping her hip on the counter to face me.

"Do I get to see music time? That's my thing, June."

The apples of her cheeks flushed slightly. "I don't really do music time for adults."

"That's not really fair. I'd like to see what you'll be doing with my son all day."

"I'll tell you."

"June." Lowering my chin, I caught her gaze with mine. "I want to be here when you have music time with Camilo. Let me do that."

She chewed on her bottom lip, her feet shifting back and forth. "Okay. But please don't say I'm a terrible singer or guitar player. It's only for fun."

"I would never say that, even if it was true. Somehow—" I paused until her eyes were focused on mine again. "I doubt you're anything close to terrible. In fact, I bet you're really good."

The pink in her cheeks deepened. I was dancing a fine line right now, but I had control. I wouldn't cross the line with her. Not again.

I tapped the top of her hand resting on the counter and she jolted. Both of us straightened and stepped back. I hadn't realized we'd gotten closer to

begin with.

“I’ll let you settle in before I come around for music time.”

She inhaled audibly and ran her hand over the top of her head. “Thank you
That would be appreciated.”

“All right. I need to get to work. Do you have any questions before
leave?”

She shook her head. “I don’t, but I have your number, your dad’s number
the number to the garage—”

I chuckled. “I get it. I’m a fuckin’ hover father.”

“No, you’re a good father. Milo will be fine with me. I promise.”

She was back to that self-assured woman who’d taken over breakfast. So
self-assured it was easy to believe her promise. I trusted this woman, and my
trust was hard won. Too many shitty people and experiences for it to be
anything else.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JUNE

MY SISTER WAS APOPLECTIC.

And with good reason. I'd moved to Baltimore without saying a word to her. I'd known she wouldn't be happy. She would have tried to talk me out of the decision. So, I simply went without giving Iris a chance to weigh in with her opinion.

I'd been here two days and had finally called to tell her where I was.

"Repeat that again," she intoned.

She'd heard me. She just didn't want to believe me.

"It's for the summer. I'll be back in September."

"September? That's months away. That's the whole summer away."

"It's a season, not a lifetime. And I have days off, as do you. We can visit each other if you can't bear being apart from me."

I'd been joking since Iris had been on the road since she turned eighteen and going months without seeing each other used to be typical. Now that her career had blown up and she had a lot more money, she often flew me out to her or took me with her on trips. We were probably at the edge of being

codependent, but that was what came from growing up in a turbulent household. All we'd had was each other.

She had Ronan and TSC now, and I was trying to find my own life too. That life was about two hundred miles from hers.

"Sure, fine. But I thought you were finished nannying. Why are you working for Diego? You're wasting your time."

"I don't feel like I'm wasting my time at all." While I'd never been able to tell my dad no or that I disagreed, I had no trouble doing so with my sister. "I need to tell you something."

"Are you pregnant?"

"Pregnant?" A laugh burst out of me. "Uh, no. If that were the case, I would have to be an immaculate conception. It's been months since I've had sex."

"That's sad, honey bunny. You're hot. You shouldn't be growing cobwebs downstairs. And it's not like you're going to be getting any this summer."

"Why not?" We were getting off track, but talking to Iris was like that.

"Uh, because you're living with a small child?"

"I have time off. If I wanted to go out and find some random to hook up with, I could."

The very idea made me shudder. Not just because it wasn't easy for me to speak with strangers but because it was even harder to find someone I was compatible with. If I told a suit at a bar what I liked and needed for it to be good for me, I'd probably end up loosely tied to a headboard, being called a good girl a thousand times while getting smacked around.

"But you won't," she said.

"But I won't."

She sighed. "If you're not pregnant, what did you want to tell me?"

t “Before I left, I was being followed by this reporter—”

“June!” she exclaimed. “You were being followed by a reporter and you didn’t think to tell me? You do know what Ronan does for a living, don’t you?”

1 Her fiancé owned a security company that employed bodyguards and planned and installed security systems.

2 “It’s fine. She was relentless, but I don’t think she was going to hurt me. She wanted me to speak with her.”

“About me?”

“Actually, no. About Dad. She claimed to have a big story brewing with a lot of sources but still wanted an interview with me. I don’t know if I believe her, but I thought you should know so you can let your people handle it. Her name is Ashley Flowers.”

5 Iris was quiet a moment, and I assumed she was writing the name down. She was wrong.

“Dad can go fuck himself. You should tell this woman everything she wants to know. Or someone, if not her. Spill everything you know. He deserves to be ruined.”

Iris was seething. While I was disappointed in my father and, honestly, I barely thought of him as my dad anymore, she hated him on a visceral level. They’d clashed since birth. She’d never been one to follow rules or allow herself to be controlled, and our father lorded over our household like we were his property. She’d had nothing to do with him since leaving home at eighteen, but she’d had to stand by while I shrunk under his thumb and our mother all but disappeared.

I understood why she hated him, but I couldn’t find it within myself to feel the same. I was relieved to be free from him, but other than that, I’d sealed

away the part of me that had once loved him. I just...didn't care anymore.

1 "I'm not going to be talking to reporters. If Ashley Flowers has the source she says she does, she'll have a story without me. All she has to do is talk to some of his patients, especially the ones he turned away, and his reputation will be destroyed."

Iris let out an evil laugh. "I look forward to that day."

2 Voices from outside my room alerted me to the arrival of Diego's guests. It was time for me to hang up.

"Can we talk later? I have to go."

a "Isn't it after business hours? Is he making you work tonight?"

e "No, he's not. His parents are here for a cookout and he invited me to dinner with them. Isn't that nice?" I singsonged, trying to make her feel bad for jumping to unfair conclusions.

I "Sounds cozy. You're hanging out with another family while your poor sister is all alone."

e In the background, Ronan growled at her. "Stop guilt-tripping June, pet."

e I laughed. "Tell Ronan I agree with him."

"No," Iris pouted. "His ego is far too big already. He can't handle it anymore, he'll topple over."

3 "Are you talking about me now?" Ronan's voice grew closer until he spoke directly into the phone. "Hi, Junie."

e "Hi, Ronan."

t "I'm tying Iris up now so she can't keep bothering you."

r "Oh, is that why you're tying her up?"

His rumble of laughter was delightful. "That's all I'll admit to. And just so you know, I'll be running a background check on your employer and his family members. That's not Iris's doing. It's for my own peace of mind."

“Thank you, Ronan. That’s entirely unnecessary, but I appreciate you looking out for me.”

“Of course. Talk soon, June.”

1



If Diego was intimidating, his father knocked me on my butt. Diego was big but Eli was massive. It wasn’t just his size that overwhelmed me, though. His face was weathered and pockmarked. His hands bore crisscross scars his faded tattoos didn’t do much to cover. His mouth’s resting state was a scowl. He wore leather and denim and strode through his son’s house like he owned the place.

And when he greeted me, it was with a bark so resonant I had to stop myself from jumping. His handshake rattled my bones, and his crow-black stare made me want to hide.

Everything about him changed the moment Milo came running toward him. The sunken parts of his face filled as he grinned a wide, white smile. The bark softened into almost a coo as he gathered his grandson in arms that seemed like weapons but were obviously made for bear hugs.

That wasn’t to say I didn’t firmly believe Eli Garza could rip a man’s head off with his bare hands. But there was a gentleness to him that reminded me of his son.

His wife, Alicia, was the antithesis of Eli. Short and slightly plump, with apple cheeks and an easy smile, she exuded grandma energy. Instead of a handshake, she’d given me a hug, and she smelled like roses.

We were outside now, Diego at the grill, Alicia and I sitting together watching Milo and Eli play with a remote-control helicopter. Until Milo came hobbling over to me.

1 “I’m thirsty, June. Can I have my orange water, please?” he asked sweetly.

“Sure you can.” I started to get up, but Diego shook his head.

“June’s not working right now, bud.” He tipped his chin toward his father

“Can you grab Milo’s water from the fridge?”

Eli jogged over to the patio and patted Diego on the back. “Sure. Be right
back.”

S I stared at Diego in surprise, but he turned back to the grill without anothe
S word.

· “Good boy,” Alicia murmured.

d “I would have gotten the water. It isn’t a problem.”

“He’s respecting your boundaries,” she said.

o Milo patted my knee. “Can I sit in your lap, please?”

κ “Of course you can.” I helped him climb up, and he snuggled in, his back
to my front, his little legs stretched out over mine.

d Alicia leaned over and stroked his cheek. “I’m proud of you for asking
first. You’re a good boy, just like Papá.”

t “I know,” Milo said. “We’re both good boys. Is Grandpa a good boy too?”

Alicia chuckled. “Sometimes. But sometimes I have to remind him to
d behave.”

e “Sometimes Papá has to remind me to behave too,” Milo whispered. “But
don’t like to listen all the time, just a little time.”

l I poked his ribs. “Remember what happened when you didn’t listen las
a time?”

He wiggled against me. “A big, big boo-boo.”

r Eli handed his grandson his water bottle. “Do you know there are thing
e floating in there?”

Milo burst out laughing. “I know! June telled me about putting oranges in

my water. We're gonna try all the fruits to see which one's our favorite. June likes limes in her water. She drinks a lot of water, like a mermaid. She has long hair like a mermaid and she can swim like one too."

Eli glanced at me, grinning. "Swim like a mermaid? Wow. Maybe I need to try some fruit in my water."

Alicia rolled her eyes. "You'll have to stop mainlining coffee first."

Eli threw his hands up. "If someone had told me about fruit water, maybe I would have."

She kicked the chair next to her. "Sit down by me and be sweet."

He lowered himself into the chair and took her hand in his. "I'm always sweet to you."

Judging from the last hour, that was true. He'd gotten her something to drink before she had to ask, and whenever he was within touching distance his hands were on her. My parents had been nothing like this. It was nice to see it was possible.

When it was time to eat, Diego had to coax Milo off my lap. I'd tried to argue, but one sharp shake of Diego's head had me biting my tongue and helping his son down.

My instinct was to feel rebuked, but I knew that wasn't why Diego had insisted Milo eat in his own chair. I wasn't on the clock and Diego wanted me to feel like a guest. What he didn't understand was I didn't feel like I was working right now, Milo in my lap or not. I was having a nice evening with new people I was quickly growing fond of and one of the most adorable and fun kids I'd known.

"So, June..." Eli captured my attention. I put down my burger and wiped my mouth. "How does Baltimore compare to New York?"

I laughed softly. "I can only really compare my apartment to this house"

since I haven't been exploring yet. My apartment in Brooklyn could fit in my suite here, but since there aren't any rats in the walls, I think my suite wins hands down."

Diego flinched. "You were living in a place with rats in the walls?"

I held my hands up. "It's New York. There are more rats than people."

His forehead crumpled. "Does your sister have rats in her walls?"

"We haven't discussed it."

He scoffed, throwing his napkin on the table. "She shouldn't have allowed you to live somewhere like that. And alone? She should have been taking care of you."

"Diego..." Alicia admonished, "come on."

"My apartment is small, but it's decent and in a secure building. I'm twenty-six, old enough to choose where I want to live without my sister having a say. And if I *did* give Iris a say, she would lock me up in her spare bedroom and boss me around like she has a tendency to do. That doesn't mean Iris doesn't take care of me. We take care of each other. That's what family does, right?"

"That's right," Eli resounded. "As long as you've got a safe place to go that's all that matters. My boy's view has been skewed by the bank he makes from music. Alicia and I lived in a perfectly nice house. Tidy yard, not too big, good for us. But Diego and Santi, once they had money to spare, insisted we needed more." He pointed to the white house next door. "That's why they bought us our digs. Now, I'm not complaining. I like where we are. But it wasn't a need. We were happy in our small house. Could've stayed there until our last breaths."

Diego had mentioned Eli and Alicia lived next door, but *not* that he'd bought them their house. It was incredibly generous, and I wasn't really

ysurprised he would do something so big for them.

, “You have three garages now,” Diego grumbled.

Eli chuckled. “I said I wasn’t complaining, boy. I’m just saying, Jun sounds like she doesn’t need a lot of space or material goods.”

“That’s true,” I agreed. “Too much space makes me nervous.”

Alicia waved a carrot stick around. “I get you. When I was living on my own, I had a ritual of turning on all the lights and checking all the closets and cabinets every night when I came home from work.”

g “Exactly. The smaller the place, the fewer places there are to hide,” I said.

This time, both Eli and Diego cringed. Milo had tuned us out, happily eating his dinner and sipping on his water.

1 “Wish you hadn’t said that,” Eli mumbled, taking Alicia’s hand in his again.

2 Diego scowled at me as if he was angry I lived in a world where women had to fear dark corners and take precautions against men who didn’t understand the word no.

Fortunately, Alicia was quick on her feet, moving the conversation to places I had to check out in the area while I was here. Since Eli and Diego both worked Saturdays, but she didn’t, we made plans to take Milo into the city to the aquarium.

1 Diego still scowled at me, barely letting up for the rest of dinner. After his parents left and it was time for Milo to go to bed, I blew him a kiss and said good night to Diego, only to get another frown and an angry grunt. That was my cue to lock myself in my bedroom for the night.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JUNE

THE HOUSE WAS QUIET when I padded out of my room. Wired from the evening with Diego's family, I was on a mission for a cup of chamomile tea to calm me down. If I'd been at home and not partially in charge of a small child, I would have added a little brandy to it.

Just tea would have to do.

Hopefully.

If Diego even had tea...

His kitchen was beautiful. Heavy-looking white wood cabinets. Wide light-gray marble counters. Warm-honey wood floors. Modern, yet classic like the rest of the house. It was made for a family. At first glance, all of this was incongruous with Diego's tattoos and rock star status. The more time spent with him, the more I saw how important his family was to him. You didn't move your parents in next to you unless you were really close to them. This home suited who he really was down to his bones.

Rising on my toes, I tried to peer into the high upper cabinets, but couldn't really see what was up there. Kicking my slippers off, I pushed

myself up on the counter, getting on my knees. It was still a little too high even from that vantage. I blindly moved what felt like condiments and spice around until my hand landed on a box that was the right shape. I slid it out of the cabinet like a hockey puck, catching it before it could fall. My eyes lit on the bear sleeping on the front of the box.

“Jackpot,” I murmured, holding it up like a trophy.

“What do you have there?”

I jolted at the low rumble, knocking my head against the cabinet door sending me ricocheting backward. For a split second, I was aware I was about to fall, then it started. I tumbled off the counter without making a sound, my eyes squeezed shut, bracing for impact.

^e But I never hit the floor. I was barely off the counter when Diego was ^a behind me, catching me in his sturdy arms.

^l “Fuck, June,” he muttered. “Are you okay?”

I peered up at him, my glasses almost sideways on my face. He adjusted me in his arms and used his free hand to take them the rest of the way off. I assumed he put them on the counter, but I lost track. I couldn’t see very far without them, so I didn’t even try.

[’] “You scared me.”

[’] His exhale was minty across my face. “You scared me too. I didn’t expect ^s to walk into my kitchen and find a woman scaling the counters.”

^I “I wanted tea.”

^l “Do I have tea?”

^l “You do. I found it.” I twisted my head around, scanning for the box, but the world beyond Diego was a blur. “It’s over there somewhere.”

^I “I’ll get it. Are you okay for me to set you on the counter? I want to get ^l some ice on your head.”

, “I’m fine. A little frazzled and half-blind, but I think I’ll live.”

s Chuckling, he set me down on the counter, and I yelped. He cupped my shoulders, getting in my face.

1 “What? Did I hurt you?”

“No.” I moved my butt from side to side. My sleep shorts were pretty small, so a lot of bare thigh was currently being frozen. “The marble is much colder than it was on my knees.”

; “Ah.” He unfolded a kitchen towel, spread it on the counter, picked me up again, and set me down on the towel. “That better?”

7 “Much. Thank you. Can you give me my glasses?”

“Yeah.” A beat later, he was in my face again, sliding my glasses on. He came into focus, and I couldn’t hold back my smile. His nose was practically touching mine, and there was a deep line between his brows from his frown of concentration.

d “Better?” he asked.

I “Yes. I can see you now. You’re awfully close to me.”

r “I’m checking your pupils. Think you have a concussion?”

“No. I think I’m going to have a goose egg in the morning, though.”

“Shit.” He patted my knees. “Stay here. Ice, then tea.”

t “I won’t move,” I promised.

He returned quickly with a baggie filled with ice then went to work on making me tea. I felt strange being waited on by him. I was his employee, but it wasn’t work hours and this was my home for the summer. The lines were a little blurry, and I wasn’t used to being taken care of in this way.

Of course, since I was his employee, and it was basically his fault I’d hit my head, he was most likely concerned about me suing him or something.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have a kettle or anything.” He placed the steaming mug

beside me on the counter, the tea bag steeping.

7 “That’s okay. I won’t tell a British person you used a microwave. I had a friend in grad school from London. She was, to use her word, gobsmacked. Americans don’t have electric kettles.”

7 He rubbed the back of his head. “Yeah, I can’t even tell you when that tea showed up in my house. I have no use for a kettle, electric or otherwise. But if you need one while you’re here, I’ll order one.”

9 “That’s okay. I don’t really drink tea often. I couldn’t sleep, so I thought a mug might help.”

He propped his butt against the island across from where I was sitting. He was in his pajamas—thankfully with a shirt—but didn’t appear particularly tired.

1 “I’ve gotta admit, I came downstairs to see if you were awake,” he said.

I raised a brow. “Oh? Did we need to talk?”

“Thought I might check in. Ask you how Milo’s doing, how you’re doing if you’re settling.”

I sipped my tea and lowered the mug to answer him. “He’s doing really well. We made up songs about his injury and getting hurt in general. I think he’s processed it and it’s not something he’s holding on to. He’s not going to grow up and resent you for allowing it to happen, so you can rest easy.”

1 He huffed. “Good. He’s gonna have a hundred other things to tell his shrink about one day. Glad this isn’t one of them.”

a I didn’t know what to say to that, and I wasn’t going to ask. If Diego wanted to talk, I would listen, but I wouldn’t pry.

t “As for me, I’m glad I came. I’ve only ever lived in New York. I think I’ll enjoy the change of scenery. Milo’s awesome, you’re okay, and your parents are wonderful.”

He barked a laugh. “My kid gets ‘awesome,’ Eli and Alicia get a ‘wonderful’—I get ‘okay.’ I see how it is, June.”

d “It’s interesting you call them by their first names.”

He folded his arms. “Dodging the question?”

a I took another sip, peering at him over the mug. “I didn’t hear a question but I’m just making an observation anyway.”

He didn’t rush to explain. Instead, he leaned forward, narrowing his eyes at my forehead. “How’s it feel?”

“Like someone spooked me and I knocked my head on some cabinets.”

e He chuckled. “What kind of asshole would do that?”

y “A stealthy one.”

“Yeah,” he breathed, leaning away from me again, the edges of his mouth curving into an almost smile.

The kitchen was quiet. I drank my tea, and Diego turned his head, staring at some point in the dark living room. The silence wasn’t uncomfortable though I wondered what he was thinking.

y And then he told me.

κ “I didn’t meet Eli until I was ten. He didn’t know about me. I didn’t know about him. My mom died and her boyfriend brought me to Eli. He didn’t want to be stuck with a sad, angry, feral kid. Eli didn’t hesitate to take me in. He really should have, though, since I’m not exaggerating about being feral. Then he and Alicia got married soon after, and they became my parents. But I’d spent too much time thinking of them as Alicia and Eli to quit entirely. Plus, I had a mom. So, half the time, Eli is Pops. The other half, I call him his name.”

s I held my mug between my hands, understanding dawning. Diego was famous. Back in my fangirl days, I’d read a lot about him and his brother

tSanti. I'd known they had different moms, but I'd never read anything about Diego not being part of the family until he was ten. I guessed that was a closely guarded secret. And he'd told me. I was awed.

“That makes sense. There are a lot of emotions tied into the titles of ‘mom’, and ‘dad.’” I set my empty mug down on the counter. “You’re close with them.”

t “I am. We’ve gotten a lot closer since Milo came along. I put them through hell from the day I went to live with them until I got sober for good five years ago.”

“And they stuck.”

“They stuck. I wouldn’t have blamed them if they hadn’t. I said that to Alicia once, and she got pissed off, so I don’t say it out loud anymore.”

I held up my thumb and index finger an inch apart. “I have to say, I’m a little jealous.”

, The smile he gave me was slow, growing warmer as it widened and he looked at me, making my cheeks go up in flames.

“Stick around, June, and they’ll adopt you.” He stepped forward and picked my mug up, placing it in the sink. “Did the tea work its magic?”

t I nodded. “I think I’m ready for bed now.”

. He held his hands out, palms up. “Come on. Let me help you down.”

. Our gazes locked, I pressed my palms to his, and he closed his fingers around mine. Pulling me forward, my butt slipped off the counter and my feet landed on top of his.

s “Oops, I’m sorry.” I took a step back but couldn’t go much farther since he was holding my hands and the counter was behind me.

s “Light as a feather,” he said, his thumb skimming over my knuckles. “I’ve been incredibly pleased with the job you’re doing. You should know that.”

t A rush of heat flooded my chest. The signals in my brain misfired. Hearing
aI'd pleased him had me wanting to drop to my knees to show him just how
much *more* I could please him.

' I swallowed the urge. "Thank you for telling me."

1 His dark brows furrowed, heavy over his laser-focused eyes. "Are you
good at everything you do?"

1 "I don't know. I try very hard."

s "I can tell. But I think you're naturally good at a lot of things."

"Diego..."

I should have spoken up and put a stop to the direction Diego was leading
ous. It wasn't appropriate, nor would we end up where either of us wanted to
be. But the stroke of his calloused thumb along my knuckles cleared my mind
aof all logic.

"I know. It's late. This isn't the time." He pulled me forward, keeping one
eof my hands in his as he led me from the kitchen down the hall to my
bedroom. There, he spun us around so I was in my doorway, and he was
loutside of it. He gave my hand a squeeze then dropped it at my side.

Reaching out blindly, I gripped the doorframe for support.

"I don't want you staying up thinking about this. Will you be a good girl
and go right to sleep?"

s My lips parted as a soft, ragged exhale escaped. I nodded.

t "Okay. I will."

He tapped the frame beside my hand, seemingly satisfied. "Yeah, you will
eGood night, June. Sleep well."

I whispered good night to him and gently closed the door. All I wanted to
edo was analyze the last hour and attempt to understand exactly what had just
happened.

g But I'd promised to go right to bed, and it made me feel far too good not to
v follow through on it. My toes curled with anticipation for when I got to tel
Diego I did what he asked.

Tonight, I'd be his good girl.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DIEGO

ELI WAS PEERING UNDER the hood of a Toyota. I stopped beside him clearing my throat to alert him to my presence.

“Hey, boy,” he gruffed. “Hand me a rag, will you?”

I tossed him one of the oil-stained rags he kept folded neatly at his workstation. Pulling out from under the hood, he wiped each of his fingers.

“Busy morning?” I asked.

“Yep. Looks like it’ll be that way all day. Can’t complain, though.”

“Nope. Idle hands are the devil’s playground.”

He tossed the rag at me. “Don’t quote me to me, son.”

Folding the rag the way he liked it, I chuckled. My old man was fastidious to the nth degree. He measured his hedges when he trimmed them and used a level to ensure they were straight. He went to the barber every two weeks, made his bed every morning. His garage was the cleanest I’d ever seen. Anyone who worked here had to keep up with his standards or they were booted.

I'd once asked him if he'd always been that way. He'd told me it had started in prison. He'd owned next to nothing. What he did have, he treasured and took care of. That mindset had stuck with him on the outside. He'd instilled it in Santi and me too, but I was less obsessive about it, much to his chagrin.

"I won't, I won't." I held my hands up. "I wanted to see what you thought of the nanny."

"June? I was worried at first by how timid she was—"

"You aren't a little lamb, Pops. You forget."

He grinned. "Never claimed to be. I didn't forget, but I didn't try to make myself softer for her. If she's gonna be taking care of our boy, she needs to be tough, at least on the inside."

I narrowed my eyes on him. "I hadn't realized last night was a test for her."

"It wasn't a test. If it had been, though, she would have passed. She stood her ground with me, which I liked. I liked it even more the way she was with Camilo. She genuinely likes him. He's not just a job."

It was hard to believe he really thought I didn't know all that. That I hadn't noticed their bond. How Milo sank into her chest when he climbed onto her lap. The way it seemed like it was second nature for her to brush his hair from his forehead or tease him like she'd known him for years instead of weeks.

I'd been in a good mood when I'd walked in, but Eli had flipped me the other way. I needed to walk away before I said something I'd regret.

"Don't test my nanny again. That's not your place."

He rocked on his heels, unfazed at me snapping at him. "Seems you've caught a good one. Too bad you have to throw her back."

My brow furrowed. "She's not a fish."

l “No, it was obvious to me she’s a woman.”

l I shot him a sharp look. “Pops...”

l He grinned. “You’re telling me you haven’t noticed how pretty your nanny is? I find that hard to believe. You might’ve sworn off women, but you’re not dead. Those big blue eyes, all that long, black hair, no way you didn’t notice.”

Of course I’d noticed. Now that June was living in my house full time without the buffer of all the other people that had been around us in Spain, I truly saw her. She wasn’t flashy. She was stunningly beautiful in this quiet classic way that wouldn’t fade. But Eli was right, I had decided long ago I had no space for a woman in my life. It didn’t matter how attracted I was to her.

” But Jesus, fuck, I was tempted. Especially last night. In my kitchen I was wearing shorts that barely covered the curve of her plump little ass, falling into my arms like an angel, reacting to my praise like she had in Spain...

I was incredibly aware June and I had more in common than our mutual adoration of my son. Not that I was saying it.

r “Where’s this pretty nanny now?” Charlie appeared from nowhere propping an elbow on the tool chest beside my old man. “Is she going to be stopping by anytime soon?”

“Fuck off, Charlie,” Eli barked at him.

e The asshole snickered. “Sorry, but your description was too interesting to resist. Is the nanny single?”

I hated this guy. But I’d never wanted to stick his head in a vise and wrench the handle until his brain leaked from his ears and nostrils.

“She’s not available,” I snapped. “Keep out of my business and out of my way.”

Pissed at my old man and Charlie, but mostly myself, I tossed the folder rag aside and stormed off, uttering curses the whole way.

y



t

Camilo was worked up. It was Sunday, June's day off. She'd borrowed one of my cars to go exploring, so it was just me and the kid.

He hadn't stopped moving or talking since his eyes had flown open at six a.m. The cast was finally getting to him. He wanted to run, but it wasn't happening. The hobble walk he'd invented got him around pretty fast, but not fast enough.

"I want to play in the sprinkler," he whined.

"Can't, bud. The cast has to stay dry."

"I don't like my cast."

"It's better than a crooked foot."

"I like crooked feet," he exploded, throwing his tiny arms in the air with pure rage.

"Well, too bad. I don't. I want your feet pointing in the same direction. Let's think of something else we can do that doesn't involve ruining your cast. How about coloring?"

He scrunched his nose like he was considering it, but he wasn't jumping for joy. And I got it. It was summer. We should have been swimming or rolling in the grass or riding bikes. Having a cast in the summer sucked. And I was sucking at coming up with ideas to make this kid happy. When I was a kid, I was plunked outside after a scrap of breakfast and told not to come back before dark so I didn't really have much to draw from.

"Can I do your back maze?" he asked. "With markers?"

"Yeah, you want to? That's fine with me."

l My back was covered in geometric ink that narrowed to a point in the center. Last summer, I'd been outside without a shirt on, and Milo had come up behind me. He'd studied the design for a few minutes then declared it was a maze. Back then, shit had been heavy. He'd lost his mom, we'd been e touring a lot...life hadn't been easy for either of us, so when he'd asked if he could do the maze on my back, I'd said yes without hesitation.

x That's when I'd learned Sharpies and three-year-olds didn't mix. But as much as a disaster that had ended up being, every once in a while, he'd ask to t try to solve my "maze," and I pretty much always said yes.

Why wouldn't I? It gave me a chance to sit down on the floor for a break kept him busy and happy, and once I'd wised up with the Sharpies, the cleanup wasn't difficult.

Tossing my shirt aside, I parked myself on the rug in front of the couch beside Camilo's basket of washable markers. He plopped on his knees behind l me, selected a red marker, then he went to town.

Sometimes when he did this, he was careful, following the lines exactly l. Other times, his art was more abstract.

r "Can we have music time?" he asked as he drew on me.

"Sure. What do you want to listen to?" I got out my phone, fingers poised j to type in The Wiggles or whatever kiddie music was his latest favorite.

r "The Neighbors."

l I frowned. "Is that a new show?"

a "No, Papá! It's June's music. The Neighbors."

e I was still no closer to figuring out what he meant. "June played you music on her phone?"

"Yes. The Neighbors."

I was at a loss. "Can you sing one of their songs?"

e “No.” He patted my back. “You do it.”

e That made me laugh. “I would if I knew any of their music, I promise. I’n
sgonna need a hint here so I can find it.”

1 “Okay.” He started humming, but as cute as it was, it wasn’t helping.

e “How about some of the words? I can Google the words and we can figure
this out.”

s He groaned, like he was just now realizing he’d been stuck with a
oincompetent father.

“Mmmmm...it’s too coooold for you here...That’s all I know.”

, It hit me he wasn’t talking about a kids’ TV show. June had been playing
ehim real music.

I pulled up The Neighbourhood’s songs and hit play on “Sweate
1Weather.” As soon as it got going, Camilo squealed and tried to sing along
dwith it. He knew next to none of the lyrics, but he sang with confidence.

And now, I really wanted to be a fly on the wall for his days with June
.This was something I wholeheartedly approved of.

We were singing along together to “Softcore” when the front door opened
and June walked in, her hands laden with bags. She stood in the entry, at first
dfrozen, then a slow smile spread across her face.

She left the bags by the front door and joined us in the living room
dropping to her butt on the floor by Milo and me.

“You guys are listening to one of my favorite bands without me? I feel so
left out.”

c “Color time and a singalong. I was channeling you,” I told her.

She laughed, eyeing my back. “And you’re the canvas?”

“He’s my maze,” Milo explained. “I’m gonna win it. Want to help me?”

June glanced at me, raising her eyebrows, seeking permission. I nodded

toward the basket of markers.

1 “I don’t think you can say no,” I teased.

She bit her lip, not moving. Did she not want to help? I wasn’t even thinking. Today was her day off. Why would she want to sit on the floor and recolor with my kid when she wasn’t getting paid for it?

“I’m kidding, June. You don’t have to spend your day off with us.”

1 “You didn’t even give me a chance to answer.” She reached for a marker. “I had to choose the color that goes with your skin tone. You can’t rush art.”

My chin dropped to my chest as I grinned. “Right. Don’t know what I was gthinking.”

She shifted behind me to kneel next to my son, one of her hands resting rlike a feather on my shoulder. Any lighter, and I wouldn’t have known she gwas touching me. Then they were both drawing lines on my back.

Eyes closed, I gave myself over to being a living canvas, listening to June .chatter with my son about the places she’d gone today. Their rapport was so easy, and she spoke to him like an equal, like he was worthy of her time and patience. It wasn’t only that, though. Unless I was way off base, she actually tenjoyed spending time with him. I’d never been a kid person. I still wasn’ aside from my own and my brother’s. June was.

, I started thinking back to getting pissed off at Iris in the car in Spain fo wanting June to be more than *just* a nanny. Now that I knew June’s plans fo the future, I could admit I’d been wrong to snap at Iris. I wanted that for June too. Not that I was eager to lose her, and Milo was never going to forgive me when she left, but from my limited knowledge, she would make an incredible therapist.

June’s voice brought me back to the living room. To her hand on my back dMilo’s happy giggles, the markers zigzagging all over the place. She’d been

singing with the music, but her voice was now closer. I turned my head, and she was there, her face practically next to mine, lips forming the lyrics, soft but strong.

It was a shot to the gut. June had the voice of a real singer. It was obvious here, in my living room, barely above a whisper. I'd been in the music business long enough to recognize a true talent.

It took all my willpower not to react. I was afraid I'd spook her and she'd stop. Fuck, how did I keep her singing in my ear all night? It was sweet and pretty.

So. Damn. Pretty.

Like everything good, it ended all too soon. June patted my shoulder, and a breathy laugh replaced her singing in my ear.

"I'm afraid to tell you what happened back here," she said.

I glanced back at the pair of them. "Don't tell me. I don't wanna know."

Milo bounced on his knees with evil glee. "We made a mess! You're so messy. Big messy."

Spinning around on my ass, I scooped up my kid, flipped him upside down, and blew a raspberry on his round little tummy. He squealed and kicked but never once asked me to stop.

"That's payment for drawing outside the lines."

He cackled, and I went after him again, growling like I was going to eat his insides. This time, I got a scream.

"That's for not telling me what a pretty voice June has."

I rubbed my beard on his belly button then slung him around in my arms righting him. He was a giggling mess, slumping back against my chest. I rubbed the top of his head, my chest getting that feeling again.

The first time it had happened was the day he was born. His mom was

passed out. It was just him and me in the hospital. His eyes opened, and I didn't know if he was seeing me or not, but I saw him. I saw him. We belonged to each other. There was this swelling in my chest, like a wave, gaining height, gaining speed and power until I couldn't breathe, staggering from the depth of it. There was no crash, though. It would ease over time until the wave would come back at unexpected moments, swelling again to the pinnacle.

I I'd tried to explain it to my old man once. Had said, "*You know when waves get impossibly tall and you feel like you're holding your breath waiting for them to break? That's what it feels like. Except it never breaks.*"

a He'd only nodded. Didn't argue. Didn't tell me I was stupid for saying that. Not that that was his style. But I often wondered if he'd turned my explanation over in his head, thought about it, understood it once he had.

These days, when I got this feeling, I had a name for it I kept in my head. I rubbed my chest. I knew exactly where I was, so I no longer held my breath.

This is where waves break.

e My gaze flicked to June. She was watching us with a tenderness that softened her already gentle blue eyes. It was probably a trick of the light, but they'd gone almost pastel.

She sucked in a breath and pushed up to her feet. "As fun as this was, I need to grab my bags. I have more in the car. I might have gone a little bananas when I was shopping."

I was on my feet a second later, tugging my shirt over my head. It'd be stained from the markers, but I'd deal with that later.

I "I'll get them."

Her hand fluttered around her face. "No, no. That's okay. I can—"

s I cupped her shoulder. "I'll get them, June. Milo can help you with the

Iones you already brought inside.”

e Her tongue darted out to touch her top lip and she nodded. “Thank you.”

e “Of course. You don’t need to thank me. Makes me feel good to do things for you.”

e Her breath hitched, and the pastel in her eyes deepened, taking them close to midnight. I tipped my chin. She raised hers. My fingertips grazed the skin along the edges of the straps of her tank.

1 Milo pressed himself against June’s leg and wrapped his fingers around one of hers. “I can help, June. I’m good at it. Better than mazes.”

I exhaled, shaking myself out of whatever those seconds were, and dropped my hand to my side. One more pat on Milo’s head, a curt nod to June, and I headed for the door.

As I walked out of the house, I heard her say, “Well, I can’t wait to see you because you’re utterly fantastic at mazes.”

The summer sun hit my face, and I stood in the grass and groaned. I could lie to myself, pretend I didn’t know exactly what those seconds had been. Maybe it would be better if I did. I had no room in my life for all I’d wanted from June. I had no room for what she’d need from *me*.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JUNE

I'D BEEN IN BALTIMORE three weeks, and it was beginning to feel like home. Which was strange. Home had always been the city, with all its noise and smells. Diego's home was on the outskirts of his city, and it was far more suburban than anything I'd ever experienced, but there were a lot of pluses.

I started to think about what I would do when this job was over. I didn't have to go back to Brooklyn. Iris was there, sure, but she'd come see me wherever I ended up. If I stayed around here, it would be an easy trip.

I was getting way ahead of myself. First, I needed a reason that was more than liking the vibe. Like a job. My grad school friend, Cora, had kept in touch, and she was now putting out feelers in this area too.

"June!"

I glanced at Milo in the rearview mirror. "Yes?"

"Let's sing!"

I laughed. I should have known he'd say that. Music was in the kid's blood, and he couldn't get enough of it, which was fine by me. We sang the rest of the way to Garza and Sons, parking in a customer spot out front.

climbed out and helped Milo out of his booster then leaned over the back seat to grab the container filled with cookies we'd baked this morning.

I straightened and turned around, one hand clutching the cookies, the other holding Milo's, as a man in coveralls approached us. He had a wide smile and dirty-blond hair flopping over his forehead.

"Good afternoon. Can I help you?" he called from a few feet away.

"Hi. We're here to visit Diego and Eli." I held the cookies aloft. "We have a treat."

The man cocked his head and did a slow appraisal of me before dropping his eyes to the boy at my side. They flicked back to me, and his smile returned.

^e "I know who you are. I heard all about the pretty nanny Diego hired." He ^sruffled Milo's hair. "How's it going, little man?"

^e "Hi." He pressed into my side, going shy and quiet. "We made cookies for my grandpa and papá."

^t "None for me?"

^e Milo turned his face into my leg, which was uncharacteristic of him. He'd never been shy, even in Spain, surrounded by a lot of new people. But that ^emight have been because his father had been around.

¹ "We made a lot. You might be able to sneak a cookie or two," I answered.

"Rest assured, I'll find a way to sample your treats." He laughed at himself. "That didn't come out right. Let me start over. I'm Charlie, and since I have a sweets addiction, there's not much that could keep me from stealing a cookie." He leaned into me. "Unless you tell me they're the healthy kind ^swith zucchini or something."

^e I pushed out a laugh. "No hidden vegetables. Though you haven't lived ^Iuntil you've tried zucchini bread."

t He held a hand up. “Then I’ll be the undead ’cause that’s never gonna happen.”

r “June,” Milo whined. “I wanna go inside now.”

e I squeezed his hand. “All right. Let’s go.”

Charlie led the way, which I appreciated since I’d never been there and didn’t want to rely on a four-year-old to show me.

e We entered through the garage, which was bustling. I paused at the entrance, taken aback by the sheer size of the place and how it gleamed. Mechanics were like ants on a hill, moving with purpose to build, repair, and work together. Milo tugged me forward, Charlie still in front of him. He turned us toward an office, the door open, and Milo didn’t hesitate to run through.

“Grandpa! I’m here,” he cried.

r Eli spun around in his office chair, not even a beat of hesitation to catch his running grandson. He started telling him all about the cookies we’d baked together, pointing to me hovering in the doorway.

d Eli’s eyes lifted to mine. They were crinkled in the corners. It occurred to me that although his face was weather-beaten and lived in, his crinkles looked fresh, like he hadn’t smiled enough prior to the last few years for them to appear. And maybe that was true. Eli didn’t really strike me as a sunshine type man. His grandson had brought it out of him.

e I stepped into the office and placed the cookies on his desk. “We made way too many and thought the guys here might want some.”

l He popped the lid and took a bite out of one then rounded on Milo. “Did you make this?”

d Milo nodded, wide eyed. “Yes. Is it delicious?”

Eli slowly chewed. “It’s the best cookie I’ve ever eaten. You’re telling me

ayou've known how to make cookies like this all this time and never shared?"

They started teasing each other, so I stepped out of the office, letting them have some time together. Charlie was there, watching me, polishing a tool that didn't seem to need polishing.

d "What do you think my chances of getting a cookie are?"

"Slim to none. But don't give up hope."

e He dropped the tool and came closer, crossing his arms as he leaned his shoulder against the doorframe beside me.

; "You're not from here, right?"

e I tucked my hair behind my ear. "No. Before I moved here with one-day notice, I'd never stepped foot in this state. It's nice, though."

"It's all right." He swept me with a slow, assessing gaze. "Have you done any exploring?"

s "Some, but not enough. I mostly go to kid-friendly places with Camilo. I'm incredibly familiar with the aquarium."

He burst out laughing. "Okay, we've got to get you out at night. You are allowed out, right? Diego doesn't lock you up when the sun goes down?"

s I wasn't sure I liked this guy, but he was kind of funny and I was interested in exploring at night. "No, he definitely doesn't."

- "You strike me as a girl who likes more low-key places. There's a bar I like to go to that does an open mic thing Fridays. The acts are normally really good, and the whole vibe is mellow."

I perked up. "Really? That sounds like a place I'd like."

d Charlie took out his phone. "Give me your number, I'll text you the details. We could meet up there or I could pick you up. Whatever you want."

There was absolutely no way I'd be getting in a car with this stranger. I was shy and reserved—naive I was not. Trusting new people didn't come

naturally.

1 But I did give him my phone number. There was no real reason not to, and the bar *did* sound like a place I'd enjoy.

Finished adding my contact info, he looked up at me and grinned. "There. I texted you so you have my number too. Now I have something to look forward to all week." He bent his head, lowering his voice. "If you get lonely before Friday, feel free to text me. I'm good company."

Just as I was about to put some space between us, a rough hand landed on my shoulder, jerking me backward until I collided with a brick wall. A *shaking* brick wall that smelled like motor oil mixed with peppery spices. Diego's signature scent that had embedded in my senses over the last few weeks.

"What are you doing here and where is my son?" Diego growled in my ear from behind me.

I sucked in a ragged breath, my heart thrashing, climbing from my chest to my throat, making it impossible to answer. I pointed to the office.

"Your sweet nanny brought everyone a treat," Charlie announced, his eyes fixed on Diego. "Wasn't that nice of her?"

Diego's chest rumbled against the back of my head. "Where's Camilo June?"

y "With Eli," I squeezed out.

His exhale was so filled with relief it was difficult to be angry at being tossed around like a rag doll. Well, I still managed, but I could understand. It wasn't me—it was his worry for his son.

"I think he's in good hands," Charlie added. "You could probably stop going ape with June."

e Any calm Diego had grasped was lost as another growl tumbled from the

depths of his heaving chest.

1 “Don’t you have work to do?” Diego barked. “Get back to it.”

Charlie barely reacted to his boss and winked at me. “See you Friday June, if not before then. Remember, I’m always a text away.”

2 Then he sauntered off like he hadn’t just pissed all over me in an attempt to make a claim he had no right to.

Diego spun me around. Red climbed up his neck. His brown eyes were dark and narrowed.

3 “What’s Friday?” he demanded.

4 I lifted a shoulder. “It’s nothing, really. He told me about a place and we might meet up there.”

“Why?”

5 I almost laughed, but his scowl deepened when I didn’t answer him right away.

6 “Why not? I’m allowed to do what I want in my free time, aren’t I?”

His jaw ticced. “You have to work Saturday. You can’t be out all night.”

7 “I know that. I have no plans to be out all night.”

“Charlie’s an idiot. You shouldn’t hang out with him.”

8 I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes, and I wasn’t even an eye roller. Diego’s display of ownership was unwarranted and, in this manner, at least unwanted.

9 “I’m not going to marry him.” Deciding I was finished with Angry Diego, I reached out and stroked his taut forearm. “Milo and I made you cookies. He was so excited to bring them to you and show me the garage. It’s amazing in there. I’ve never seen another shop like it.”

It took him ten complete breaths to unclench and lean into my feathery touch. Another ten for him to meet my gaze and not appear to be on the verge

of tearing apart the world.

Or maybe just Charlie.

“Let me say hi to the boy then I’ll show you around,” he gruffed. “He’s staying in that office with my old man—where he’s safe.”

Diego disappeared into the office for a few minutes before returning with a cookie in each hand. He offered me one, and I took it with a “thanks.”

He consumed half of his cookie in one bite, grunting when the flavor hit his tongue. The other half was consumed just as quickly, then he eyed the one he’d given me. With a laugh, I handed it back to him, and he wasn’t even the slightest bit sheepish about accepting it.

“You bake, you’re great with kids, you handle pissed-off fathers, you have the voice of an angel...what can’t you do, June?”

“I bake three things, and you’ve only ever heard me sing with a song from your phone. I’m not sure I handled you, but if I did, then my ability is exclusive. I certainly never handled my own angry father.” I shuddered at even the mention of his volatile temper. “There are a lot of things I can’t do but I’m not going to list them for you.”

Something had come over his expression. He brought his hand to my shoulder again, and when it came down, it was nothing but gentle.

“I’m sorry for my overreaction.”

His apology settled over me like a balm. I hadn’t known I’d needed it until he’d offered.

“I forgive you. Now, can you show me this place?”

“Sure.” But his hand lingered, and when he finally dropped it, he dragged his palm along my bare arm then skimmed down the back of my hand. My knees shook, but I tried not to show how much his touch affected me.

With his hand on the center of my back, he led me through the garage

briefly introducing me to some guys, pointedly skipping others. After this happened a couple times, I noticed the men he was skipping were the younger, more attractive ones, while the ones I met were old enough to be my dad.

a It was on the tip of my tongue to ask if he had been this possessive of his other nannies, but I could never ask that. Besides, I didn't really want to know the answer.

e We came to his workspace, and he showed me the 'Cuda he was working on. It was getting a complete overhaul. New everything except for the bones.

"It's pretty," I offered.

e "Pretty?" He ran his hand over the sleek hood. "A 'Cuda isn't pretty. It's strong, tough. This baby will face down a lesser car and send it in reverse or insight. Nothin' pretty about that."

s Giggling, I raised my hands in defeat. "Okay, I was wrong. This big strong man car is so intimidating, I can barely stand to be in its presence."

, Diego crossed his arms, his mouth quirking but somehow staying straight

"That's much more like it, June. You learn fast."

y As always, when Diego handed me praise like it was candy, I sucked it down and wanted so much more.

"So, you know how to do everything?" I asked.

l "Nah. We have upholstery guys. Guys who do the paint. My role is to get this bad boy purring."

I swallowed. I needed my pint-sized buffer when I was around Diego. Otherwise, we ended up in these moments that felt distinctly like flirtation.

y couldn't handle it. If I were Iris, I'd flirt back with abandon, no worries about what it meant or what would happen. But I was June. I did nothing with

;

sabandon. I hemmed and hawed and thought things over until I ended up doing nothing at all.

y “Have you rebuilt a car for yourself, or do you only like to take care of other people’s things?” I asked.

s He shook his head. “Never took the time to build something of my own. One day.”

“Do you know what you want? I mean, if you had the time, nothing holding you back?”

Sighing, he turned away from me. “Yeah. I’ve got an idea.” After a beat of silence, he turned back. “You’ve really never had a car?”

s “Never. A lot of people I grew up with never bothered getting a license. My mom pushed Iris and me to get ours, though. She wanted us to have it so if we ever wanted to get in a car and drive, we’d have the option. Thank goodness, since Iris spent years driving around in a minivan with TSC.”

Diego dragged his fingers through the side of his hair. “Can’t say I miss those days, though they didn’t last for years with Unrequited. We were lucky to get a record deal early on in our career and hit with the first album. Still our first tour bus was a tin can with rock-hard bunk beds. The floors were always sticky, and the air conditioning only worked half the time.”

“I bet it was the time of your life. Iris always looks back on TSC’s minivan days with rose-colored glasses.”

“My memories are hazy, but I’d go back and relive it if I could, take one more time at being that young, that stupid, that free. Not that I’d give up anything now. I’d never, ever give up my boy, but when they say youth is wasted on the young, I get it. I sure as hell didn’t appreciate any of it.”

1 My chest was warm and cozy from how freely he was sharing with me. I liked that he was comfortable enough to confide his feelings, even if they

poweren't particularly secret.

"You make yourself sound decrepit," I quipped.

f He gave me an easy smile. "I feel it sometimes. But then, there was a while where I never thought I'd reach thirty, so I'm happy for those years under my .belt." He reached out, snatched a piece of my hair, and rubbed it between his fingers before giving it a light tug. "Now you, you've still got some youth left. Appreciate all the choices in front of you."

"I'm four years younger than you."

f "Ah, but I feel like I'm a thousand."

"You don't look a day over five hundred."

. It wasn't particularly original, but a loud laugh broke free from somewhere deep within his chest. It was beautiful. I'd never heard such an unfiltered burst of humor from him. Pleasure shot through my belly. I'd given that to him.

s I had to tamp that pleasure down. We were boss and employee. Maybe one day we'd be real friends. Or distant friends. But nothing more, and I had to remember that. I'd embarrassed myself enough in Spain. I was fairly certain I wouldn't live through another dropping-to-my-knees incident.

When he stopped laughing, he pressed his hand to the center of my back again. "Come on, funny girl. You dragged me right out of my foul mood. I'm gonna send you off on this high note."

e "Share the cookies, okay?"

p He grunted, but he didn't make any promises. Judging by his rock-hard muscles, he didn't indulge in desserts often, but from his sheer size, I had no doubt he could pack all those cookies away without blinking.

I "I'll make you more if you do."

y His fingers curled against my spine as he dipped his head to murmu

beside my ear. “See? You’re handling me, June. You’re doing it in your own sweet way that would be far too easy to get used to.”

e I willed my eyes to stay open and my knees to remain solid.

y No matter how many times he growled and rumbled and murmured the stype of words that made a girl like me melt like candle wax, I knew the truth and kept it at the front of my mind:

We’re nothing more than boss and employee.

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We’re nothing more than boss and employee.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JUNE

I WALKED OUT OF my bedroom, still trying to slide my earring into my ear. My stomach fluttered with nerves. It wasn't like me to go places on my own, especially unfamiliar bars with unfamiliar men. But I'd Googled, read reviews, scanned pictures, so I didn't think I was being led to a murder factory or a sex den. That was what Iris had warned me about when I'd told her where I was going.

I smiled to myself when I thought about my worried sister. She was having trouble adjusting to me being the one off exploring the world. It amused me to have the tables turned. She owed me for all the times *I'd* worried she'd been sex trafficked when she'd jaunted off to Ireland with her boyfriend as soon as she'd finished high school.

"You look different."

Diego was standing at the base of the stairs, in shadow. Camilo had long since gone to bed, and I had hoped Diego planned on staying upstairs so we wouldn't have to do this.

Tension had grown throughout the week. He'd made it clear he didn't want me going out with Charlie. He kept reiterating Charlie was an idiot. Ever added on "tool" for extra emphasis.

Since I wasn't going to be dating Charlie, his insults rolled off my back.

"Different...well, okay." He wouldn't bait me into asking if different was good. Though...now I was going to ruminate over it all night, which had probably been his intention.

"I need to get to work early tomorrow. You'll have to be up at seven," he gruffed, his arms crossed tight over his chest.

"That's fine."

"I'll pay you double time for the extra hours," he added.

^y "Thank you." I checked the time on my phone then slipped it in my clutch

^y "I have to get going. Is there anything else you need to bark at me before
^d leave?"

^r He stepped forward, his rough hand cupping my elbow. "Be safe tonight."

^d "Of course."

His gaze moved over my face. I was wearing a sweep of sheer red lip gloss
³ and mascara on my lashes. That was it, but for me, it was a lot, especially
^e with my long hair spilling over my shoulders in loose curls and my dress
^d with its short hemline and body-skimming silhouette.

^s "Don't kiss him, June."

Before I could fathom how to respond to that, he dropped his hold and retreated up the stairs. I pinched the inside of my arm, forcing myself to
³ move forward, shoved his order aside—because he had no right to give me an
^e order like that—and headed out the door.



When I arrived back at the house, it was midnight. Later than I'd planned, but I'd been having too good of a time to tear myself away.

Charlie had brought a group of friends close to my age, and they'd been friendly without being overwhelming. I'd predicted he'd try to put the move on me, but he'd been surprisingly laid back. His hand may have grazed mine once in passing, but that was the only time we made contact.

The company wasn't the only reason I'd stayed. Open mic night wasn't all amateurs. The musicians were incredibly talented and obviously seasoned. To learn to get a spot in the show, you had to sign up weeks in advance.

I learned this because Charlie and his friends convinced me to put my name on the list. I couldn't even remember how they'd gotten me to admit that I played the guitar and sang, but once they had, they became relentless.

Perhaps it was the two drinks that had finally convinced me to type my name on the screen. Either way, I'd done it, and I wasn't even panicking.

Not yet, at least. I had a few weeks to work myself into a frenzy.

My rideshare dropped me off at the gate. The porch light was on, and a gentle glow shone from the living room. Diego must have left a lamp or two on for me. It was thoughtful, especially after his final words to me.

“Don't kiss him, June.”

What had he been thinking saying that to me? If I hadn't been so sucked into the music tonight, it would have rattled around in my head until I'd gone crazy.

As I riffled around in my purse for my key, the door swung open, and my head jerked up. Diego circled his fingers around my wrist, pulling me into the house. He closed the door behind me and locked it, then he took my purse from me, zipped it, and tossed it on the couch.

“It's late,” he said without any intonation.

t “I know. I’ll be quiet,” I whispered.

“I was getting worried.”

1 “Why? You didn’t need to be.”

s With his palm under my elbow, he led me into the living room. There, he sat down on the couch and bent forward, grasping my lower calf.

“Put your hands on my shoulders,” he murmured. When I hesitated, he raised his eyes to mine. “Now, June.”

I I did as he asked, and he lifted my foot off the ground, working the delicate buckle around my ankle. When he opened it, he slid that shoe off, lowering my foot to the floor, then moved to the other side, repeating the same motion until I was barefoot and a couple inches shorter.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I breathed out.

y He took my hands from his shoulders, clasping them in one of his, and pressed them to my middle. Then he rose, never taking his eyes off me on the long journey up.

a “Say thank you, June.”

o I swallowed. “Thank you.”

Bending, he picked up my shoes from the ground and purse from the couch. In his hands, they looked miniature. I would have laughed if he hadn’t sucked the breath right out of me.

e What in the world was he doing?

I’d experienced glimpses of this type of treatment before, but never from my father I’d nannied for. If they’d ever touched me like this, the way Diego did without remorse, I would have run from their homes.

e Or maybe he did have remorse, he just never showed it.

And I wasn’t anywhere close to running.

“Are you ready for bed?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Come. I’ll carry these for you.”

He guided me to walk ahead of him, his hand flat on the top of my spine where my dress dipped low enough to reveal a few inches of skin.

At my door, I opened it, then spun around to face him. I tipped my head back, trying to decipher what was going on in his mind. He was impossible to read, exhaustion the only thing showing on his too-handsome face.

“Thank you for waiting up for me. That was really nice of you.”

His head turned slightly to the side. “I told you, I was worried. Charlie isn’t the most trustworthy person.”

“It’s lucky then that we were with a big group of his friends in a public place. I’m sorry you and Charlie don’t get along, but he was nothing but nice to me.”

He scoffed. “Because he wants to fuck you.”

I flinched at his harsh assessment. “I doubt that. It’s pretty insulting for you to say the only reason a man could be kind to me is because he wants to fuck me.”

I tried to tug my shoes and bag away from him, but he held them hostage. It was rare for me to get mad but coming home to this after my great night was making me downright pissed.

“Well, if your theory is right, I guess that explains your exceptionally rude behavior toward me from the very start.”

He shook his head. “No.”

That was all he said. If I’d had any hope of moving his solid, marble statue self, I would have shaken him for all I was worth.

“I have a question.”

“Ask it.”

If I hadn't had two drinks tonight—as a notorious lightweight, I was buzzing—I would have kept my mouth shut and closed the door on his infuriating face. But his moods and confusing behavior were taking a toll and I was done pretending they weren't.

“It's strange, but sometimes I get the sense you're flirting with me. In the hallway in Spain. In your kitchen. In the garage the other day. In Spain, I convinced myself you were drunk, but I don't think you've been drunk the other times. So, are you naturally flirtatious? Is that what this is? I know you probably didn't even realize you were flirting, but that's how it comes off and I need that not to happen. I'd like you to be a little more careful with me please.”

His unreadable expression had hardened to stone.

“I don't drink, June. Haven't in five years. I'm an addict. I can't have alcohol or take any substances. And no, I'm not flirtatious.” He placed my things into my hands. “I'm sorry I haven't been careful with you. All I want is to be careful with you, which is the problem.”

I clamped down on my lip and leaned my head against the jamb, my gut churning at ever thinking he might've been drunk and hating myself for tasking him.

“I shouldn't have asked you that.”

He bowed his head. “You didn't know.”

“Diego...” I tossed my clutch and shoes on the ground behind me so I could curl my fingers around his taut forearms. “I really like being here with you and Milo. I like that you carry my bags and wait up for me and take off my shoes. In most ways, you *have* been very careful with me. And I know I'm not allowed to thank you, but I'm thinking it, and you can't stop me.”

Exhaling a long breath, he peered at me through narrowed eyes. We were

sdancing around the elephant in the room. Me kneeling for him, him reacting
sthe way he would if he was a man who liked his women to kneel at his feet.

, “Good. I like doing those things for you. I told you, it makes me feel good
when I know you’re taken care of.” He tapped the door. “You should get to
esleep. Early morning for both of us.”

I “Okay,” I whispered, slowly closing the door.

e He turned away, and my stomach swan-dived.

1 “Diego,” I called.

, He looked back at me over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

, “I just wanted to tell you—”

“What, June?”

The door was almost closed. That and the two drinks were the only reason
ethe next words slipped from my lips.

y “I didn’t kiss him.”

t The last things I saw before the door clicked shut were his shoulder
slumping and his head falling back. I couldn’t delude myself into calling his
treaction anything other than relief.

r I went to bed picturing him in that final, brief moment. When I arched of
the mattress in pleasure, I imagined he was doing the same right above me
and I was the one on his mind.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

DIEGO

BEFORE TODAY, I HADN'T been to a meeting in a year. Not since Camilo's mother, Sofia, died. I'd been struggling then. Not with the temptation of using but falling back into destructive patterns that might've led me to using. The anger over circumstances completely out of my control, the confusion and helplessness that came with it. I recognized those feelings and knew myself well enough now to deal with them before they grew into something that would destroy everything I'd built.

Going to NA meetings helped me get back to where I needed to be. They flipped a switch I'd discovered at the beginning of my recovery, turning me from a passenger of my life to the driver.

There were always going to be circumstances outside my control. What *could* control was how I dealt with them.

Acting the way I had toward June last week wasn't going to fly any longer. There was a pull between us. It had been there since I'd unraveled her dress from her nervous fingers in Spain.

That pull didn't give me the right to bark at her for going out with Charlie or anyone else. I hadn't claimed her, and I wouldn't. Her being my nanny was the least of my concerns.

My focus was on Camilo, my family, staying sober. There was no place in my life for any kind of serious relationship. Sofia had cured me of ever wanting to try.

Because of the meeting, I was an hour later than normal getting home from work. When I'd texted June my plans, she'd replied she and Camilo had been busy all day and they would start dinner together.

I'd expected to walk in to dinner smells, Milo's endless stream of conversation, maybe some music playing. Instead, I got silence, which^e alarmed me.

^e I didn't panic for long. June and Milo were on the couch together. The^e reason for the silence became apparent as soon as I was in front of them.

['] They were zonked the fuck out. June was on her back, her head propped on^s a couple pillows. My boy lay on his tummy, his head on her chest. She had^j one arm around his back, the other dangling off the side of the couch. His fingers were tangled in her hair, as if he'd passed out while playing with it.

^y I got down on my knees, unable to tear my eyes off the two of them^e Camilo was a gorgeous kid, and that wasn't just my dad goggling talking. I was a statement of fact. Long lashes, plump cheeks, rosy lips parted in his^I sleep. He was perfect. My heart thumped. I brushed the hair off his forehead then flicked my eyes to June.

[.] If not for the rise and fall of her chest, I'd have wondered if she was alive^s Her face was placid, and in this light, delicate. But she held on to my son even in sleep, with ferocity. I bet if I tried to move her hand, she'd wake in an instant.

e “June,” I whispered. “Wake up.”

y Her eyes fluttered open. It took her a second to focus on me. When she did her brow crinkled.

1 “Diego? What time is it?” Sleep coated her words, making them raspy and thick.

“Almost seven.”

1 She gasped, stricken with quiet panic. “Oh my god. We didn’t make dinner. I’m so sorry.”

I chuckled, tapping the hand resting on my son’s back. “No need to be sorry. I’m just sitting here in awe my boy is napping.”

1 The panic fled her as she lowered her chin to peer down at Camilo. A smile tipped her lips, and she brushed her knuckles along his cheek.

e “We were watching a movie and he snuggled into me. The next thing I knew, he was sleeping. I tried to take him to bed, but he started to stir, so we stayed here. I didn’t mean to fall asleep, but—”

d “I get it. He’s like a little heated blanket.”

s “Yeah.” She smiled. “He knocked me out.”



l. Eventually, I woke Camilo up and forced a little dinner into him. He was clingy the rest of the night and grumpier than normal. I wondered if he was getting sick, but he wasn’t hot or sniffly, so maybe it was the nap that had thrown him for a loop.

When it was time for bed, Milo practically begged June to sit with us while I read to him in his bed. That had never happened. Bedtime had always been just the two of us.

June easily relented and stretched out on the opposite side of Milo, and he got this content expression that I rarely saw on him. He snuggled into me while I read, but he kept one hand tucked in hers. She met my eyes over his head, and I shrugged because I didn't know what was going on with him tonight.

June slipped out after story time, and I stayed, keeping my boy in my arms. "You have a good day today?" I asked him.

"One day, I want to have goats." He yawned. "I think we can have two goats in our backyard."

Nothing that came out of this kid's mouth surprised me, but this time, I was prepared for questions about goats. June had taken him to a petting farm and told me he'd spent a long, *long* time feeding and studying them. She'd texted pictures of him hugging one. I had a feeling it was the only one he could get to, otherwise there would've been a whole lot more hugging going on.

"Two?" I asked.

"Yes, two. One goat would be lonely. It has to have a friend."

"I'll have to check the rules, bud. I'm not sure we're allowed to have goats. We can go visit them again, though."

"Okay." His chin quivered, and he pressed his face into my chest. I stroked his back, wondering again what was going on with him tonight. Then he told me in his own way. "There were little babies and they had mommies. Goat mommies with their babies."

My hand froze on the center of his back, and my gut dropped. "Oh yeah? Were they cute?"

"Mmhmm. And the mommies loved the babies."

"I bet the babies felt that. Even if the mommy goat couldn't say it, they felt

dit.”

e His tiny hand gripped my T-shirt. “June telled me baby goats are called kids.”

1 “June’s smart. I’d believe what she tells you.”

“June telled me my mommy loved me.”

. Oh, fuck. He might as well have reached into my chest and carved my heart out with a rusty spoon. I felt it. God, I felt it. We’d talked about Sofia since she died. I’d tried to let him lead, allow him the room to process and answer all the questions he had about her. But I’d never known how much of her he remembered or if she was just an abstract figure, the woman in pictures holding him as a baby and small toddler, the one who’d given him this smile and the shape of his eyes.

e “Oh yeah, she loved you a lot.” That wasn’t a lie, but there was a lot that could have been added to that statement. When he was older, if he asked, I’d tell him all of it.

“She’s gone, though.”

My chest was so tight, it was hard to take a full breath. “She’s gone,” I agreed.

“Not coming back.”

d “No, bud. She’s not coming back. That’s what it means to die.”

d “She’s part of nature now.”

t I paused, frowning. I’d never said that to him. I’d read books on explaining death to a little kid, but it was hard to tell exactly how much he really understood.

“You think so?” I asked.

“My mommy is the wind and the flowers and the sun.”

t “Did June tell you that?”

His nod was small, but I felt it against me. “June telled me everything.”

l “She’s really smart.” I was repeating myself, but I hadn’t prepared myself for this conversation.

“Yep.” He rolled off me onto his back. “Okay. I’m going to sleep now.”

That was it. Eviscerated me with his raw questions, and now, he was going to lay his sweet little head down for a gentle slumber. The hell of it was, I could take it, over and over, so he *could* keep falling asleep without any worries.

,
f
June was in the kitchen making tea when I came downstairs. She stood at the counter, dunking a tea bag into her steaming mug of water. When I entered and headed to the fridge, her gaze followed me.

t “Can we talk about what happened today with Camilo?” she asked.

l “Yeah. I think we need to. Just give me a minute, all right?”

She nodded, turning back to her tea. I guzzled my water, wishing it was something a lot harder. That was definitely not a road I’d be traveling down I’d already done that and knew there was nothing good there. Inevitably, I’d have to turn around, come back, and deal with everything I’d been trying to avoid, only I’d be sick with self-loathing with poison in my veins.

When I faced June, she was holding her steaming mug up to her face, her eyes closed. There were shadows under them, and I wondered if the day had worn on her the way it had Milo.

g “Tired?” I asked.

y “Mmhmm.” Her eyes opened. “Your son is wonderful, but he doesn’t stop.”

Despite my somber mood, I laughed. “Understatement of the year.” I nodded toward the living room. “Wanna go sit down?”

“Yes, please.”

f She settled against the arm of the couch and tucked her legs under her clutching her mug in both hands. Curled up like that, she looked even smaller than she was. And breakable. So fucking breakable.

g “Did he talk to you at bedtime?”

l I nodded. “Told me about the mommy goats.”

“Yeah. It would have been useful for me to know he lost his mother last year. I had no idea, Diego. In a situation like this, you and I should have talked about your religious beliefs, what you had already told him about his mom dying, that kind of thing. But since we didn’t, I answered his question the best way I could. I’m sorry if you feel I overstepped, but I couldn’t leave him hanging when he was vulnerable like that.”

I lowered my chin. I hadn’t decided how I felt about any of this. Anger wasn’t it, that I knew.

s “You’re right. He hasn’t asked about her in months, so it didn’t cross my mind. It should have, though.” I brought my knee up on the cushion, rotating my body toward her. “Can you tell me what you told him?”

o “Of course.” She leaned over, placing her mug on a coaster. “He told me in a very blunt way his mom had died. He wanted to know what that meant, and if she still loved him. First, I told him I think when we die, we become part of nature. We’re the earth, the sky, the flowers, the wind. Then I explained that love never goes away. When he feels a breeze on his cheek or smells flowers or the sun warms him, that’s the love his mom carried for him. I’m deeply sorry if that was the wrong thing to say, but I was put on the spot and—”

“No.” I held up a hand as I swallowed hard. “No, don’t be sorry.”

I “We talked a lot today. He wanted to know all about my mother and he asked me if I’m a mom.” She laughed softly. “I think that’s why he felt

asleep on the couch. All those emotions exhausted him.”

“What you told him—” I shook my head. “Yeah, that’s beautiful, June. I hope that’s what happens. If nothing else, you comforted my boy when he needed it, and I can’t be angry about that. Thank you for being there for him.”

She exhaled. “I’m glad you’re not angry. I was concerned I’d really screwed up.”

“You didn’t.” Cupping the sides of my head, I tried to clear my thoughts enough to explain to her who Sofia was. But my thoughts on Sofia weren’t exactly linear. They were scattered, mixed with hatred and anguish.

When I didn’t say anything, June shifted and swung her feet to the ground, grabbing her mug.

“It’s been a really long day. I’m going to crash. Good night, Diego.”

She started to slip by me, but I put my hand out, pressing on her belly. Startled, she jumped back, giving me room to stand in front of her.

“Camilo’s mother—Sofia—was an addict. We met in rehab. It was my second trip, her third. Her pregnancy wasn’t expected, but it was welcome. We were sober and excited about having a baby. She moved in with me and we got engaged because it felt like the right thing to do. I don’t know. We were happy. She stayed sober for a long stretch. Like any addict, she was good at hiding, but my guess is she started using again when Milo was six months old.”

June shuddered and laid her palm at the top of my ribs. I kept going. She was spending a lot of time with my kid, so she needed to know it all.

“Promises are empty from an addict. Sofia swore she’d stop, but there was no action behind it. The day I came home to her trashed to the point she was barely conscious and Milo was in his crib screaming his head off, I kicked

her out of the house and got full custody. I told her she could visit him if she got sober, though. I know what the pull is like. I know how hard it is not to give in. And I knew she loved her son very much.”

June pressed her hand into me, like she was trying to reach for my heart, to keep it from falling apart. That was what it felt like, anyway. When her hand started to slip, I wrapped my fingers around her wrist, keeping her in that spot.

“Sofia tried. She tried and tried and tried. It’d be months of good visits then she’d backslide. But through it all, she fucking loved that boy, and she always treated him like gold when they were together. It was the times apart that got her. Her demons were big. Bigger than I even knew. Last summer she gave up. She stopped trying for him and I had to tell her she couldn’t see him anymore.” My head fell forward. “She overdosed a week later. Left a note for Camilo to read when he’s older, like that’s gonna replace his existence in his life.”

My eyes were burning. That woman had broken my fucking heart. Dead and buried, she was still doing it. Our boy had to question whether she’d loved him, and my sweet little nanny had been the one to comfort him with her beautiful talk of breezes and the sun. Sofia should’ve been here, teaching him that kind of thing.

The hell of it was, I couldn’t be sorry June was standing where she was now.

“Diego...that’s really heavy.” She raised her palm to the side of my neck. It was silky soft on my heated flesh. “You’re doing right by Camilo. He’s obviously secure with you. You make him feel safe enough to express his emotions. He’s grieving in his own little-boy way, but he’s a happy kid. You’re killing it at being a father. You know that, right?”

e Sniffing, I looked down at her. She averted her gaze, but I snagged her chin, tipping her head back to have her eyes. They were shining, wet for my heartbreak. I hated the idea of her crying. Even more so, crying for me.

o “Don’t cry, June.”

l “I’m not.”

t But she was, and I couldn’t let it happen.

I dipped my head until my lips hovered over hers. Her sharp intake of breath was so sweet I couldn’t stop myself from erasing that last inch and taking her mouth with mine.

t I pressed my lips to hers, and once I did, the ache surrounding my heart eased. My hand moved to her nape. Her nails curled into my shoulder. The harder I kissed her, fitting my lips with hers, the more everything else receded.

r She whimpered, and I took all I could from her parted lips. She tasted of lemon and tea, deliciously warm from her drink. Her tongue met mine in a timid caress.

l Every second that ticked by, my mouth still on hers, I forgot my anger and focusing on the delicate woman in my arms. There was no longer any space between us. Not even a whisper of air. Her breasts were flattened against me, my cock prodding her belly.

s Groaning, I twisted my fingers in her hair and lapped at her mouth. Then I dragged my lips along her jaw to her throat. Her pulse fluttered as I covered it with my mouth, sucking her there. But I missed her lips too much to stay away from them for long.

s She let me have her, giving in to my bites and growls. I wasn’t gentle, not with my kisses or touch. She moaned when I tugged at her hair, tipping her

head back. I cupped her throat and she leaned into me, allowing me to hold her like that.

God, I needed this. Her lips were the perfect distraction. She took me away from my grief and rage and let me disappear into her land of softness and beauty for a while.

Those thoughts were a bucket of ice water over my head. What the fuck was I doing, using my little nanny like this? Was I that selfish?

Breaking our kiss, I moved my hand from her throat to her shoulder pushing her away from me.

“That was a mistake.” I turned away from her, my ears ringing, in an attempt to get myself under control. Each ragged breath was an effort to take in past the glass lining my throat. “That shouldn’t have happened.”

From the corner of my eye, she flinched. “I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault. I was using you as an escape. I should be apologizing.”

The choked sob that came from her had my head whipping around. She covered her mouth with both hands, the tears I’d seen shining in her eyes, spilling over the edge. Big fat drops slid down her cheeks, but she wiped them away as fast as they’d appeared.

“June.”

She darted past me in the direction of her room. I should have let her go. I’d done enough damage. But I’d never been good at doing what I should.

I caught her at her door, claspng her stiff shoulder. She refused to turn around to look at me, but that was better.

“June, I’m sorry for doing that. It shouldn’t have happened, and it won’t happen again.”

She nodded, remaining silent.

“Listen, why don’t you take tomorrow off? Today was a heavy day. I’n

dsure you can use a break. I'll take Milo over to Alicia in the morning. You'll get a three-day weekend."

y It sounded like a bribe to my own ears, but there was no doubt in my mind she was going to need some distance from me after the stunt I'd just pulled. I needed it just as badly to get my head on straight over this woman.

x June didn't answer me. She just continued to nod.

"Okay. Thank you for today. What you did with my boy." She didn't move. I couldn't hear her breathing, like she was waiting for me to leave her alone to finally take in air. "Good night, June."

1 How in the hell had I messed up so epically? More importantly, how was I going to make it right?

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How in the hell had I messed up so epically? More importantly, how was I going to make it right?

CHAPTER TWENTY

DIEGO

TUESDAY MORNING CAME AROUND slower than molasses. The weekend had been long. Camilo had asked for June nonstop, and I'd had to explain a thousand times she was off and he had to leave her alone. Each time I gave him the explanation, it was for myself too.

I wanted her to show up in the kitchen so I could make sure we were square. And if we weren't, so I could apologize to her again.

She never appeared. If she'd left her room, she'd done it while we were out or asleep. I hadn't seen her since Friday night.

It was getting close to time for me to leave for work, and June still hadn't emerged. I was beginning to get pissed. I hadn't pegged June as the type to shirk her duties, even if she was still dealing with what had happened between us. She'd made a promise to be here for Milo, and she needed to follow through on that, no matter what.

Done waiting on her, I stood at her door, knocking lightly. "June? It's getting late. I need to be on the road."

Silence. Nothing but crickets. What the hell was going on? Was she even in there? Did she leave us? She could have. We'd been over at Eli and Alicia's for a few hours on Sunday. She could've packed and vanished like a thief in the night. It didn't seem like her style, but neither did this.

I knocked harder. "June? I gotta go. Come on."

I pressed my ear to the door. More silence. I knew she slept like a corpse but she'd been easy to rouse. If she was asleep in there, I'd have woken her up.

At the end of my patience, I banged with my fist. "June!" I yelled. "Get out here!"

Ear against the door, this time, I heard a thump followed by a soft crash and a faint, ragged moan. Alarm ratcheted up my pulse.

"June!" I hammered at the door. "Are you okay?"

Another moan that was more zombielike than human. My heart thrashed in my throat, attempting to make a break for it.

I couldn't stand here and not do something. Running for the kitchen, checked to make sure Milo was still happily watching cartoons, then grabbed the spare key to June's room from a drawer and skidded back down the hallway.

Before I turned the lock, I hit the door again. "I'm coming in, June."

Swinging the door open, I stood in the entrance, surveying the space. The light was dim, the air stale, as if the room hadn't been opened in months rather than days. The bed was piled with blankets. Some clothes were strewn on the floor. There was an empty bottle of water on her dresser. And on the floor next to the bed came the soft glow of a lamp that had been knocked down.

Another moan came from the lump in the center of the bed. I stepped into

the room, flicking on the overhead light to help me decipher what I was seeing. When I landed on the tangled black hair splattered on the white sheets, I rushed to the bed, dropping to my knees beside it.

“June,” I whispered.

The blankets rustled. Another weak moan came from beneath them.

Slowly, I peeled them back, revealing June’s eyes. She flinched as the light hit her, then groaned, curling into herself.

“June, baby, I need you to look at me.”

It took a beat, then she moved her head enough for me to see her glassy eyes.

“Are you sick?” I asked.

“Mmhmm.” She pulled the covers over her chin so only the top of her face was bared.

“How long have you been like this?”

“What day is it?” she rasped.

Jesus, fuck. My gut clenched.

“It’s Tuesday.”

“Oh.” Her eyes went round. “Milo. I have to get up.” And she tried. She really fucking did. But she’d barely lifted her head off the pillow before she crashed back down.

“June...baby, have you had medicine? When was the last time you had something to drink?”

Her hair was plastered to her cheek. There was a sheen of sweat on her forehead. It was the sallowness of her skin that really alarmed me, though.

Who was I kidding? All of it alarmed me. She’d been sick in this room, not pouting like I’d assumed. And I’d left her in here by herself to suffer. If I’d

)

sbeen any kind of man, I would have checked on her because disappearing the way she had was out of character.

She let out a little cough. “I don’t know. I don’t feel good.”

“I know you don’t.” My hand was shaking as I reached for her. When made contact, I almost yanked my hand back. Her skin was scorching hot like lava flowed beneath it.

“What day is it?” she mumbled.

“Tuesday, baby. And you’re on fire.”

y Her eyes flew open, darting with panic. “Milo. I have to take care of him.”

“No, you don’t. I’m gonna take care of you. I’ll be right back.”

Her quivering hand reached for me, grasping onto my wrist, and she mewled. “No, no. Please, stay.”

I lurched forward, nearly toppling over onto her. It was next to impossible to see her this way. Made me feel weak and helpless. But I wasn’t helpless. I was time for me to be who June needed.

“Okay. Okay, baby. I won’t leave you.” I slipped my phone from my pocket, dialing Alicia.

e All I had to say was June was too sick to leave her bed and Alicia flew into action. She told me she was coming with meds and supplies and would be taking Milo for at least the day. I didn’t even have to ask. But that was Alicia. My mom in all the ways that really counted.

June reluctantly let me leave her side to grab a cool washcloth from the bathroom. Once it was on her forehead and I promised I’d be right back, I ran out to check on Milo. He was so engrossed in his show he didn’t even look at me.

l I stayed at June’s side until Alicia showed up. She had a bag filled with everything I could possibly need to take care of June.

e I must've looked as torn up as I felt because she patted my cheek then pulled me into a hug.

“Take care of her, Diego. I have Camilo. You don't have to worry about anything else besides getting June healthy. Camilo and I will make her soup. We'll bring it by this afternoon. Text me with updates.”

“Yeah. I will.” I was pulling away from her even as I spoke.

She gave me a shove. “Go, go. I won't hold you up anymore.”



The first thing I did was take her temperature. The number on the small screen was alarmingly high. I took it again to make sure I wasn't seeing things.

e Something came over me. The instincts that had guided me when Milo had broken his foot. My body flew into action, even as my mind wanted to deny this was happening.

y I had to sit her up. She was a rag doll in my arms, moaning faintly at being jostled. Holding her, I poured meds into her mouth, coaxing her to swallow. Once that was done, I tried to get her to drink water. All she could do was sip. Each one, her face became more contorted, as if she was in excruciating pain. I got half the bottle into her and she all but passed out.

.. She was still too damn hot.

e She couldn't stay like this.

1 I did the only thing I could think of. Carrying her into the bathroom, I turned on the shower. In the back of my head, I remembered Alicia guiding me when Milo had his first fever. She'd told me to give him a lukewarm bath. Too cool, and it would be a shock to his system. I didn't know if that was real science or mom science, but it had worked.

1 Dressed in my work clothes, I stepped into the shower with June in my arms. She was shaking hard, her teeth clacking and her entire body vibrating. When the water hit her, she shoved her face into my neck, her hot breath scalding my skin.

“Diego,” she whined softly, her lips brushing my throat.

“Let’s cool you down, baby. You need to be cooler.”

She mumbled something unintelligible while she clung to me. I might’ve gone straight to hell for thinking it, but I liked her giving herself over to me this way. There was a kernel of pleasure buried beneath my mountains of worry over her.

3 I didn’t like how fragile she felt in my arms. One hard squeeze and she would shatter.

1 When enough time passed, I climbed out of the shower and placed June on top of a folded towel on the counter beside the sink. Shivers racked her body. I had to get her out of these clothes and warmed up.

3 I stripped her T-shirt off first, aware of her pretty tits bared to me, but I didn’t stop to look. Her shorts came off next, then I had her wrapped up in a towel. She leaned into me while I dried her hair, squeezing the excess water out.

I pressed my lips to her forehead. She felt cooler. We’d have to see if it stuck once she was out of the shower for a while.

1 “I’m going to get you sick,” she croaked miserably. “You can’t stay with me.”

3 “Try to get me to leave.” I picked up her limp hand, placing it on my soaked chest. It fell back to her lap when I let her go. “See? You can’t fight me. Don’t waste your energy trying.”

I carried her into her bedroom and placed her in her armchair, covering her

ywith her comforter. She looked small and fragile, all curled up, watching me
move around her room.

1 I crouched in front of her. “I’m going to put on dry clothes and grab some
clean sheets. Five minutes, June. Give me five minutes and I’ll be back with
you.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

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fThe next few hours were all about getting her over the worst of it. I changed
her sheets, got her dressed in a hoodie and leggings, and held her through the
chills. The meds helped bring her fever down somewhat, but she was still
e way too hot for my liking.

1 Between bouts of restless sleep, June murmured against my chest.

“What about Milo? Did I get him sick?”

“No, baby. He’s fine.”

I “Are you sure? Please don’t lie to me to make me feel better.”

a I almost laughed. “I’m not lying. He’s with Alicia. They’re making you
r soup.”

She tapped her forehead against me. “I’m so sorry.”

t “You’re sorry you’re sick? Did you do this on purpose?”

“You missed work for me.” Her fingers curled into my T-shirt. “You can
1 go.”

“You’re holding on to me awfully hard for someone who wants me to
y leave.”

t “I don’t have control over my hands.”

r I cupped the back of her head, pulling her in tight. “You’re loopy, Ms
Adler.”

e “And you’re snuggly, Mr. Garza. Like a big hairy bear.”

“I’m not that hairy.”

e She nuzzled into my neck. “You should be. You’d be really soft.”

1 “Go to sleep, baby.”

“Okay.”



Camilo and Alicia arrived while June was passed out cold. We’d gone through a few rounds of chills followed by becoming overheated. I’d changed her sheets, gotten her to eat a little pudding—she’d begged me for it and there’d been no way I was saying no—and left her in her room with the door open. I’d hear her if she needed me.

My boy came at me, tears welling in his eyes.

“Is June okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, bud. She just needs some rest.”

“She’s not gonna be the wind?”

1 I shook my head while my insides fell apart. I had no choice but to keep it together. “No, she’s not gonna be the wind for a long time. Right now, she has a really bad cold and her body is working hard at fighting it, making it so she can’t do much else. She’ll be better soon.”

1 He gave me the side-eye like he didn’t quite believe June wasn’t dying. I got it. He’d had the rug pulled out from under him once, then lost a nanny he’d really liked a couple months ago. He had every right to be suspicious another person was going to leave him without warning.

I scrubbed my hands and put on a new shirt before I touched him. June would never forgive herself if I passed her germs on to him.

The three of us ate an early dinner together, then Camilo ran upstairs to pick out a few toys and a stuffy to take to Grandma and Grandpa's house. They were keeping him for the night so I didn't have to worry about him while I took care of June.

"Thanks for all this," I said to Alicia as she washed dishes.

She shook a spatula at me. "Thank me again and you'll get it."

Breathing a laugh, I slumped in a dining chair. My chin fell to my chest^e and I cupped the sides of my head.

^d The water shut off, and a moment later, Alicia's arms were around my ^d shoulders.

^r "You care about her, huh?"

"Of course I do." I squinted up at her. "It isn't like you're implying."

She arched a brow. "You were torn up this morning, Diego. And right now, you look like you want to fall over from the adrenaline crash. You don't have to tell me anything, but I see you."

"Can we not do this right now?"

^t "Sure. I'll just say she's lovely and you could do much, much worse."

^e I scoffed at her. "All right. You said it. You and I both know I don't have ^d room for anything serious. I can't do that to Milo."

"Or yourself."

^I I nodded. "Or myself. So, let me take care of my nanny without you ^e getting wedding invitations engraved. It's not happening."

^r She snapped her fingers. "Fine. I'll cancel the order." She gave me a pat. "love you, you know? Even when you're a grump."

^e I leaned my head into her side. "Love you too, Al."

Alicia had gotten most of it wrong, but she'd been right about me crashing. By the time I said goodbye to her and my boy, I was swaying on my feet.

oThough, it could have had something to do with the lack of sleep I'd had over
.the last three days catching up to me.

1 Didn't matter what it was. As soon as I climbed into bed with June and
wrapped my body around hers, she settled against me, releasing a contented
little sigh. That was the last thing I was aware of before I fell into a hard
dreamless sleep.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

JUNE

DIEGO GARZA WAS SOUND asleep in my bed. If I hadn't taken a dose of medicine and guzzled an entire bottle of water, I would have said I was having a fever dream, but I was much too awake to be imagining the huge man taking up more than half my bed.

A while ago, I'd managed to sit myself up. My bones felt like they'd been scraped clean of their marrow and my muscles were fatigued. I would have believed it if someone had told me I'd run a marathon. But I was sort of upright, which was an improvement from the last couple days.

I wondered what time it was. The room was dark, but the curtains had been drawn, so that didn't mean a lot. I had to use the bathroom, but moving seemed sort of impossible.

So, I distracted myself by studying Diego. He was on his side, facing me. His normal scruff was grown into a short beard. It was dark, nearly black. If I'd had more energy, I might have snuck a touch.

Then again, I knew what it felt like when it rubbed along my lips and scratched my cheeks.

It was better not to remember that. I couldn't really even count it as a kiss. He hadn't been kissing *me*, not really. He'd needed a distraction, and I'd been there. If he'd been alone, he probably would have slammed his fist into the drywall or something equally as destructive as kissing his nanny.

I was using you as an escape.

Most of the weekend was a blur, but everything Diego had said to me, the way he'd looked when he tore away from my lips, breaking that wretched kiss, was branded in my memory.

I squeezed my eyes shut, wincing at the feel of shrapnel behind my eyelids. Peering down at Diego sleeping like a man without a guilty conscience, I sighed in defeat.

^f Oh, I couldn't ignore my bladder any longer. Pushing back the heavy ^sblankets, I eased my legs to the side. My head was woozy and the movement ^eof my body made the room spin, but I was determined. I'd lost enough of my dignity in front of this man. There was no way I was going to piss myself.

¹ A whimper slipped out as I pushed forward. The mattress might as well ^ehave been barbed wire as I slid the backs of my thighs over it.

^f "June?" A heavy hand slapped the mattress behind me. "What the fuck? June?"

¹ "Shhh. I'm just going to the bathroom."

³ The bed shifted, and before I could touch the ground, Diego had rounded the bed and gripped my shoulders, stopping me in my tracks.

¹ "Too hard," I said.

^f He immediately eased up, smoothing his palms down my arms. "I thought you were gone."

¹ "I'm not moving very quickly." I blinked up at him. "But I really need to use the bathroom, so if you'd let me g—"

l. He scooped me up, holding me against his chest as he carried me bridal style toward the bathroom.

e. “No, no. You can’t carry me.”

He grunted. “It seems like I can.”

“If you put me on the toilet, you should just flush me too.”

e. He didn’t laugh, which was fine since I wasn’t joking. What wasn’t fine was he was walking straight for the toilet, and I couldn’t do a thing about it. My head was too spinny, and my legs were too rubbery to make a run for it.

l. He slid me down to my feet, then crouched in front of me, tugging on my pants.

“No!” I pushed at his forehead. “Don’t do that.”

y. He tipped his head back, frowning. “No?”

t. “Let me do it. Please. I need privacy.”

y. He straightened, reaching for my face, and I turned away.

“You faint or fall down, I’ll be pissed,” he grumbled.

l. “I can make it. I’ll let you know when I’m done.”

I couldn’t look at him, but I heard his heavy sigh followed by the click of the door. I knew he was right on the other side, but at least I had the illusion of privacy.

When I finished, I hobbled to the sink and washed my hands, avoiding my reflection. It was no use knowing how bad I looked. I reached for my toothbrush, desperately needing to feel clean.

The door swung open, and Diego swooped in, grabbing my toothbrush before I could.

“What are you doing?” he barked.

o. “I’m trying to brush my teeth. I didn’t tell you I was finished.”

He scowled at me for a drawn-out beat then grunted and picked up the

Itube, drawing a line on the bristles.

“Open,” he ordered.

“What? No. I can do it myself.” As I pulled away from him, another wave of dizziness crashed into me, and I had to hold on to the counter so I didn’t fall on my butt.

His arm was around me in an instant, lifting me onto the counter. “Open. Or I’m taking you back to bed with bad breath.”

I gasped. “That’s not nice.”

“I’m not feeling very nice right now. You’re sick and doing your best to hurt yourself when all you have to do is let me help you. So, open your damn mouth, June.”

I opened my mouth at the same time I closed my eyes. If I didn’t look at him, I could pretend I was at the dentist’s.

His warm hand cupping my cheek while the other carefully brushed my teeth drew me right out of my denial. Diego Garza was brushing my teeth. If I hadn’t already been dizzy, this would have done it.

He patted my cheek then pressed on my back, tipping me over the sink. “Spit, baby.”

I spit, trying not to choke at him calling me baby. What was that?

He handed me a cup of water. “Drink.”

I emptied the cup into my mouth and put it down on the counter. I tried to scoot myself off, but Diego clamped my thighs.

“You need a shower.”

“I think I’m good for now.”

“You’ll feel better with a shower. I’ll help you.”

“No, I don’t—I’m fine.”

He sighed, dipping his head to get close to my face. “June, I helped you

yesterday. I dried you off and got you dressed. I can take care of you without making it anything more than that.”

e My eyes rounded, and I instantly regretted it as the light singed my retinas.

t “I don’t remember that. I was naked?” I squeaked.

“You were. You were also on death’s door and don’t look that much better now. I’m putting you in the shower.”

He spun away to get the water going, and I slumped, too tired to argue. And what did I care? He’d seen me naked, had carried me to the toilet to brush my dirty teeth...and god only knew what other embarrassing bodily functions he’d witnessed over the last twenty-four hours. Besides, he was right. The allure of being clean all over, in fresh clothing, was far too tempting to deny.

I lifted my shirt over my head and tossed it aside, then went to work on my leggings. They weren’t as easy. When Diego turned around, I’d only gotten them around my hips.

His sweeping gaze darkened momentarily—probably irritated I was doing something for myself when he’d forbidden it—then he stepped forward and grabbed the waistband of my leggings, easily sliding them off.

He tore off his own shirt, leaving his sweatpants on, and carried me into the shower, getting in with me in his arms. As soon as the water touched my back, I cowered in Diego’s arms, my bare chest crushed to his. He shushed me in a soothing way, cupping the back of my head, allowing me to hide my face in the crook of his neck.

“The water hurts.”

“Shhh, I know.” He stroked my upper back. “We’ll be as fast as we can but you have to let me put you under the spray.”

1 Now that he was holding me, I trusted him. I believed he’d take care of

time, just as he had over the last day. The energy I'd use to fight him was depleted anyway. He could do with me what he wished.

“Okay.”

He worked efficiently, holding me with one arm while he shampooed my hair with the other. He scrubbed my body as best as he could while I clung to him. My legs were wrapped around his waist, leaving me open, but he didn't take advantage, letting the water rinse me there.

The shower must have lasted only minutes, but it had melted much of the tension in my bones. I relaxed into Diego's hold as he turned off the water and stepped out into the warm bathroom. He propped me on the counter again, fully naked and dripping, then dried me off almost clinically. I was bones and skin and muscles, not a naked woman perched in front of him.

Once he helped me dress in a hoodie and sweats and tucked me into bed, he left to get himself changed into dry clothes. I still had no idea what time it was. I slipped on my glasses and felt around for my phone on the nightstand, coming up empty. It had to be around here somewhere. Climbing to my knees, I started to crawl across the bed, wincing with every movement.

“June!”

By now, I shouldn't have been surprised by Diego's bark. Unfortunately, I still was. My arms gave out, and I collapsed onto my face, writhing around on my belly like an upended turtle until Diego picked me up and righted me.

“What in the hell were you doing?”

“Stop scowling at me.”

He pushed my glasses back up my nose. “Stop moving around. You're still too sick to be out of bed on your own.”

“I wasn't trying to get out of bed. I was looking for my phone.”

“You could have waited five minutes for me to get it for you. Who's so

important you need to call them as soon as I leave the room?” His pinched stare and wild accusation almost made me laugh. Except he hadn’t put me down yet, and he was so soft and warm, all I wanted to do was lay my head against his chest.

o It felt as perfect as I suspected it would.

t Diego sighed. “June, June, June. What the hell am I going to do with you baby?”

e “You could put me down. That would be a start.”

r With an even heavier sigh, he sat down on the bed, holding me in his lap. Then he put something in my hands.

s I opened my eyes, finding my fully charged cell phone. “Oh. It’s Wednesday?”

, “Mmhmm. We slept a solid twelve hours. Camilo’s staying with Alicia and Eli today too.”

, “Oh.” I slumped, weighed down by guilt. “They don’t have to do that. I can be alone now. I’m fine.”

“No. One more day. I’m not arguing.” He leaned forward, his face beside mine. “Your phone was vibrating off and on yesterday until it died. I charged it for you. Someone wants to talk to you.”

d I scrolled through the missed calls. Several were from Iris, but there were at least twenty from a New York number I didn’t have programmed.

“Boyfriend?” he asked next to my ear.

“No.” I scoffed then dialed Iris before he could ask any more questions. She answered immediately.

“Did they dig you out of the cave you were trapped inside?” Not letting me answer, she went on. “That’s the only plausible reason you blew me off fo

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days. Days, June. I was this close to driving down to Maryland to excavate you myself—and you know how I feel about Maryland.”

I ignored Diego’s whispered, “How does she feel about Maryland?”

“I’m sorry. I’ve been sick with a fever. I was really out of it. This is the first time I’ve checked my phone in days.”

There was silence on the other end, followed by a clatter, then Ronan’s voice. “Hello, lovely June. Why is Iris putting on her shoes?”

“I’m going to take care of my sister,” Iris yelled in the background. “Come on!”

Diego took the phone from me. “Ronan? This is Diego. Please tell Iris she’ll be handled. June is in good hands.”

“Don’t take my phone.” I tried to snatch it back, but again, weak arms did nothing against him.

“Shhh. Let me assure your sister.” He stroked my hair, which was still damp and plastered to my scalp. I settled against him, even though I wasn’t happy about being handled.

Diego turned the phone screen toward me, pressing the speaker symbol. “Ronan, please give Iris the phone.”

“I can talk to my own sister,” I protested.

He tickled under my chin. “You’re feisty when you’re sick, huh?”

“Did you just tickle me?”

“Mmhmm.”

Iris’s voice burst through the phone. “I thought you were dying, honey bunny, but now it seems I’m interrupting a tickle fight.”

I tried to laugh, but it came out as more of a hack. “No, Diego is just being overbearing, that’s all. I’m fine, though. You don’t need to come.”

“You sound horrible,” she said.

e Diego wove his fingers through my hair. “What June isn’t saying is she hid how ill she was from me until I broke into her room and forced my care on her.”

e Iris scoffed. “That’s very on-brand for my sister. She doesn’t like to bother anyone and would never ask for what she needs.”

s My already warm cheeks flamed at Iris’s assessment. “You know, your sister is here, listening.”

e Diego tickled me again. “See? Feisty.”

“She’s a terrible patient,” Iris declared. “When she was fifteen, she caught chicken pox. What teenager catches chicken pox in this day and age? Our beautiful June, that’s who. Our father wouldn’t let our mom stay home to care for her, so it fell on me. Poor thing was miserable and all kinds of *mean*. I asked her if I could apply calamine lotion to her bumps and she threw the bottle at my head.”

t “What?” Diego gasped. “June did that?”

“Yep. Then she started sobbing, begging me to forgive her.” She snickered softly. “But seriously, are you okay, honey bunny? Tell me the truth.”

“I’m okay,” I said. “I just need another hundred years of rest.”

“And is your boss going to let you get it?”

I tipped my chin back, peering up at him. “Are you going to let me rest?”

His fingers curved around my jaw. “Of course I am.”

“I think he will. He hasn’t even let my feet touch the ground.”

y “That’s a good man,” Ronan said. “Take care of our June for us.”

“I am,” Diego said. “Now that I know she has a bad habit of hiding away when she’s sick, I’ll be on the lookout.”

They chatted over me for a minute or two while I was content to lay on Diego and listen. The steady rise and fall of his chest, the rumble beneath his

skin as he spoke...

1 Their goodbyes cut into the haze, and I jerked myself out of my near slumber.

r “Wait,” I called. “Iris!”

“Yes, honey bunny?”

r “Have you heard from that reporter, Ashley Flowers? She blew up my phone while I was out of it.”

“I haven’t, but my publicists handle reporters. They keep me pretty insulated. Do you want me to sic them on her? Or are you going to spill, like I told you you should?”

o “I told you I’m not talking to her or anyone else. I don’t know how she got my number, but—”

e “I’ll block her for you,” Diego said. “As soon as you hang up with your sister, I’ll take care of it.”

I exhaled a heavy breath. “Thank you.”

d “Yeah, thank you, D. I can tell my sister is in good hands. June, I’ll have my press team check this Ashley chick out and make sure they’re aware she’s sniffing around in case a big story does break.” Iris made a kissing sound. “Love you, June Bug.”

“Love you, Junie,” Ronan said.

My head was heavy on Diego, but I managed a smile. “I love you guys too.”

Diego hung out, tapping on my phone a few times before setting it down. “She’s blocked. Do you want to tell me what that’s about?”

“Not right now. Thank you for taking care of that.” I slipped into sleep moments later.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JUNE

THE NEXT TIME I woke, the house felt alive. Diego wasn't in the bed with me, but I sensed he hadn't gone far. Checking my phone, I was taken aback to find it was early evening. I'd slept the day away.

When I sat up and didn't feel like I was being scraped raw, I chanced swinging my feet to the floor. Standing was an adventure, but once I got my sea legs, I was able to walk myself to the bathroom and maintain a sliver of dignity.

I did my business then washed my face and hands and brushed my teeth. My hair was a tangled halo around my head—too much work for my level of energy. I swept it into a messy bun and wrapped a scrunchie around it then pressed my hands to my cheeks and forehead. They were no longer burning. I took this as a very good sign. Perhaps the worst of the illness had passed and I really was on the mend.

When I swung the door open, my bedroom wasn't the way I'd left it. The bed had been remade with fresh linens, and beside it were two Garza men scowling at me.

“You’re not supposed to get out of bed without me,” Diego groused.

“I wouldn’t have tried it if I hadn’t felt steady.” Nervous at being stared at by them both, I put one foot on top of the other and twisted my shirt around my hand.

“Come get in bed, June,” Eli ordered gruffly. “You have clean sheets and brought you dinner. You can’t get better eating only pudding. You need something that’ll stick to your ribs.”

When I didn’t move right away, Diego huffed then crossed the room to fetch me. Instead of leading me back to the bed, he lifted me off my feet and carried me. I should’ve protested since I really was feeling better, but I was getting spoiled by him and wanted to soak up these last moments of being in his arms.

He propped me up on a pile of pillows, and Eli placed a tray on my lap. My stomach growled as the smell of the stew in the steaming bowl reached me.

“It’s my *abuela’s caldillo*—the one thing I know how to make. Alicia made the tortillas for you.” Eli folded his arms. “Eat as much as you can, girl. You look like a light wind would knock you over, and we can’t have that.”

“Pops...” Diego groaned at his father’s bossiness.

Eli patted his son’s shoulder. “Go, have dinner with Milo and Alicia. I’ll keep June company.”

Diego’s eyes met mine, and I nodded. Eli was rough around the edges, but I felt safe with him, and right now, between Eli, Alicia, and Diego, more cared for than I’d ever been.

Diego dragged himself out of my room, and Eli pulled up a chair next to my bed.

“Do you need help eating?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No. I think all the sleep I got did a world of good.” I lifted the spoon to my lips, moaning at the savory, hearty stew so full of flavor I had to close my eyes to decipher everything. “I don’t think I’ve ever tasted anything better.”

I Eli chuckled. “One day, if Diego is lucky, I’ll pass him the recipe. He’s not ready for the responsibility yet.”

I smiled at him. “And if he has the recipe, he won’t be reliant on you for his *caldillo* fix.”

I He winked at me. “Smart girl.”

While I ate, he told me about the town his *abuela* was from in Mexico. His family had been relatively well-off. They’d lived a good life, had wanted for nothing, but Eli’s dad had had stars in his eyes. Wanting more than their simple town, he’d picked up and moved to the US. Unfortunately, Eli’s father had never really found his feet without his family’s support, which meant Eli’s life hadn’t been very steady. His summers in Mexico with his *abuela* were the times he felt most secure, and her *caldillo* always brought him back to those days.

“When I make it for my sons or people they care about, I’m sharing some of that.” He patted the bed beside my leg.

My stomach was already warm from the stew, but the comfortable heat traveled to my chest. All I could do was clutch my spoon and try not to cry. Typically, I wasn’t a crier, but these Garza men knew how to press on my tenderest feelings.

“Thank you, Eli. I’ve truly never received such a lovely gesture.” I swiped at my stupid eyes. “Sorry, I think being sick has made me overly emotional.”

“Don’t be sorry. But you’re gonna want to dry those tears up before my boy comes back or he’ll have me in the backyard trying to punch my light

out.”

f I giggled at that ludicrous idea. “I don’t think that would happen.”

r Eli’s level stare sobered me. He cocked his head, the center of his craggy forehead drawing together.

t “My son is a good man. He had to overcome living his first ten years in hell—and that hadn’t been easy—but he stayed good through it all. You know about Sofia?”

I nodded. “Yes. Camilo told me about his mother, and Diego filled me in on the rest.”

r He grimaced. “She put them both through hell. Diego won’t say a bad word about her, but it’s true. That woman made so many promises I don’t think she ever had any intention of keeping. But she’s gone, and the two of them are finally living the steady life I always wanted for them.”

t I had no idea what to say or why he was telling me these things, so I nodded again, and he went on.

κ “You’re the kind of woman who wouldn’t tip their balance. Once your nanny job is finished, things will become more clear. I hope you’re around to see what I mean. My other son lives in New York, and I don’t like it. You don’t need to go moving back there, girl.”

t “I—I don’t know where I’ll end up after this. I was thinking I like it around here.”

y He gave me a close-lipped smile. “Just saying, June. We like you here. You stay around here, you’ll have people who give a damn about you.”

d Oh man. My chest hurt from how hot it was glowing. “Thank you, Eli. That means a lot. When I’m considering my next move, I’ll definitely keep that in mind.”

s He stayed with me for a while longer. I heard Camilo running around and

ached to see him, but I'd never forgive myself if I got him sick. Eventually Eli patted my head and left with the empty tray.

y



1 Diego returned to my room looking freshly showered, wearing a T-shirt and joggers. His hands went to his hips as he stood over me.

1 "You look better."

1 "Thank you. I feel better."

1 His mouth quirked. "I was hoping you'd be feverish so I could coax some secrets out of you."

1 "Did I tell you any secrets yesterday?"

t f "Nah. You were hardly conscious enough for that." He circled the bed and climbed in beside me.

I I canted my head in confusion. "Why are you in bed with me?"

r "You're still sick. Milo's staying next door one more night, so I'm on Jun duty."

o "I can be alone now."

1 "Nope." He settled in like he had no plans of leaving. "I'm staying tonight I need you to let me do that without arguing. Okay? Let me do this."

t "Okay..." Scooting down a little, I turned my head to stare at him. "What kind of secrets did you want me to spill?"

1 "When did we meet?"

1 I rolled my eyes even though it still sort of hurt. "That's not a secret."

1 "Then tell me. Now that I know you, I feel like an asshole for not remembering you since I know I'll never forget you."

I Diego Garza was a cruel man. Not intentionally—he'd probably throw himself into a volcano if he knew I thought him cruel—but it was what he

, was. He said these perfect things that only served to draw me to him, but he didn't actually want me closer. I was a forgettable escape—nothing more.

He reached out and traced along the edges of my mouth. “You got sad baby. Why'd you get sad?”

^d “Why are you calling me baby?”

He blinked at me. “I don't know. It slipped out. You don't like it?”

I love it. I love it so much. I'd give anything to be your baby if you really meant it.

^e “It doesn't seem like something a boss should call his employee.”

“No, but you're clearly a lot more than an employee, June. You think I would have spent the last two days holding you and caring for you if that's all you were to me?”

I turned my head, unable to entertain any of this. “It was five years ago when I was nannyng for Mo and Mic. There was a fight in the recording studio while I was visiting. I got pushed around in the shuffle, and you protected me. You put yourself between me and the punches being thrown.”

“Oh. Shit. I—”

[.] “It's fine. It was a long time ago. I understand if you don't remember it. I was a big deal to me because you're famous, and like I said, you protected me, but—”

“June.” He snagged my chin, turning my face toward him. His eyes were narrowed and so focused on me I wished I could escape. But his hold was too firm. I wasn't getting out of this. “You interrupted me. I was going to say I don't remember that. I just never connected that it was you. You were at Mo and Mic's place too, weren't you? You told us about your college classes. I think you were a junior.”

^e “That's right,” I whispered.

e “You could’ve told me this in Spain, baby. All you had to do was jog my memory. A lot of shit has happened since then. Now that I know that was you, I remember you as clear as day. You were trembling like a little leaf.”

“Probably. That sounds like me.”

He cocked a grin. “See? I remember something you don’t.”

Since he wouldn’t let me go, I closed my eyes.

y “June,” he murmured. The bed shook as he scooted closer. Instead of holding me, his fingertips stroked the lines of my jaw. “June, open your eyes.”

I I did. His face was inches from mine. Too close. The golden rings around his rich-brown eyes were visible, even in the dim lighting.

“Do you hear me when I tell you I won’t forget you? Do you get I never really forgot you in the first place? I’m sorry I hurt you. I want you to forgive me now.”

1 His whispers floated over my lips, soothing some of my embarrassment.

“I forgive you.” I pressed on his chest. “You should move away from me. I’ll make you sick.”

t He caught my hands, cuffing them in place. “I think it’s a little late to worry about that. I’ve been in this bed with you for almost two days. No chance of saving me from your germs now.”

e “I really am feeling better. You don’t have to stay.” I tugged my hands away from him and used my newfound freedom to flip to my other side, giving him my back.

l “June,” he sighed, and his hand landed on my hip.

κ “Don’t.”

“You say you forgive me, but that’s not what this looks like. Why are you shutting me out?”

y “I’m tired, that’s all.”

s His hand slid around my stomach, and he pulled me backward until I was flush with his front. He brushed stray hairs off my face and peered down at me.

“Tell me why you keep shutting down on me.”

The order was soft, but there was no denying it. And I was screwed. My body and my tongue responded to Diego’s commands automatically, even though my brain was yelling at me to shut the hell up.

“I didn’t like being used as an escape,” I whispered. “Not by you.”

d He stilled, his breath catching on an inhale. “Not by me? Would it have been okay with someone else?”

r “Not okay, but better.”

e His forehead fell against the back of my head. “Baby, tell me what that means.”

“You know what it means. You saw me on my knees for you.”

. His hand splayed on my stomach, flexing wide, pressing the tips of his fingers into my flesh. “You’ve been wanting me to kiss you?”

o I shook my head. “No. Maybe. I don’t know. But I’m certain the reason you kissed me was the worst possible one I could have ever imagined.”

“That isn’t the reason I kissed you.” He started rolling his forehead back and forth, back and forth. “I’d been wanting to do that for a while. I stopped, because I was inside my head, thinking about Sofia. It turned into me using you to drown those thoughts out, and that wasn’t fair to you.”

I shuddered at his brutal honesty. I *hated* knowing he’d been thinking of his late fiancée while his mouth had been on mine. I could have gone forever without knowing that.

“No. You’re right, it wasn’t.”

“When I kiss you again, it’s not going to be with another woman on my mind.” His hand slid from my stomach up between my breasts to my throat. He cupped me there, tilting my head back. “Do you understand?”

I blinked up at him. “No, I don’t think so.”

“What I’m telling you, June, is I want you. I want to take care of you, such as your pretty lips, and more than anything, I want to earn the right to ask you to get on your knees for me again.” He stroked my fluttering pulse. “Do you understand me now, baby?”

“Um...” I licked my dry lips. “Diego...”

He dipped down, touching his lips to my forehead. “It’s okay. You don’t have to respond right now. You’re still recovering, and I’m bombarding you with more than I should. I just couldn’t let you carry on thinking I pulled away from you because of anything you did. That was all me. You were perfect. Such a good girl, like you always are.”

Oh god, I didn’t want that to hit me the way it did. His praise caused a simultaneous pang in my core and belly. And he knew what he was doing. I’d revealed myself to him in Spain. Diego was fully aware of the effect he had on me when he said those things.

“Please don’t,” I whispered.

“Okay, baby girl.” He kissed my forehead again. “When you’re better we’re going to have an honest conversation. I’m not going to pretend there’s nothing happening here.”

Even though I wasn’t very tired, I closed my eyes. I wasn’t prepared for any more blunt truths from Diego. My defenses were too weak, and I needed them around this man.

“I’m going to go to sleep now,” I murmured.

He curled his body around mine, keeping his hand around my throat and

his face in my hair. In another life—where he wasn't my boss, where he didn't have a dead fiancée and mountains of baggage, where I could be sure if it was me he truly wanted—it would have been absolutely perfect.

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his face in my hair. In another life—where he wasn't my boss, where he didn't have a dead fiancée and mountains of baggage, where I could be sure it was me he truly wanted—it would have been absolutely perfect.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DIEGO

AFTER ALMOST ANOTHER WEEK off work caring for June and being with Camilo when she couldn't, I was buried trying to catch up. My days were long, and I stayed late to play catch-up. Spending time with the 'Cuda wasn't exactly painful, but it was taking away from my hours at home, which were short to begin with.

That also meant the conversation I'd been wanting to have with June had been delayed. It wasn't entirely my fault, though. Her two days off, she'd disappeared, exploring the area on her own. The nights I'd worked late, as soon as I'd take over Milo duties, she'd shut herself in her bedroom. And today, she'd informed me her friends Adelaide and Wren were coming for a visit this weekend, taking her away from me yet again.

It was beginning to grate on me—and not only because it was blatantly obvious what she was doing. I missed her calm, quiet presence in the evenings. Normally, after Camilo went to bed, I relaxed in the living room and June would sometimes join me with a book, or I'd see her go into the kitchen to make her nightly tea. She'd stopped doing both.

Tonight, after Camilo was in bed, I knocked on June's door. She cracked it open seconds later, peeking at me from behind it.

"Hi." Her face was freshly washed, and those big glasses were back on. I'd come around to liking them on her. I couldn't even say what it was about them I liked. Seeing them on her just settled something wild inside me.

I jerked my head toward my shoulder. "I have something for you. Come with me."

"Oh, okay. One second." She left the door open, and I pushed it wider to watch her. She was dressed in that tank top she always wore to bed. It was shockingly see-through. I wondered if she knew how visible her pebbled nipples were.

³ When she yanked down an oversized flannel shirt from her closet and ^s threw it on, I thought maybe she did. Her breasts were covered, but this look ^a may have been worse. The shirt was long enough to just cover her shorts ¹ which barely reached the bottom of her little ass, so now she appeared naked underneath. My pulse thumped in my cock, and my hands flexed.

¹ We had to talk before I did something stupid.

¹ "Okay." June tugged at the hem of her shirt. "What did you want to show ^s me?"

¹ I tilted my head. "It's in the kitchen."

^a We walked together, and at the doorway, I directed her in front of me. There was a box on the counter waiting for her. She didn't miss it.

^y A gasp, then she whirled around, her blue eyes wide. "You bought me an ^e electric kettle?"

['] I nodded. "Can't have you making tea like a troglodyte."

^e Her mouth hooked at one corner. A cute little smirk. "I hardly think cavemen used microwaves."

t “They would have if they’d had them.”

Her eyes rolled, and she turned back to the kettle. “You do have a point.” She approached the box, bending slightly to read the features printed on the outside. I didn’t know a thing about electric kettles. I’d gone online, found the one Brits deemed the best of the best, and ordered it for her.

e “I don’t know what to say,” she whispered.

I stood behind her, reaching around her to place my hand over hers. “All you need to say is you love it. If you don’t, I’ll buy you the one you prefer.”

s “I love this one. I’ve never had something so nice. I’m certain this will heighten my tea experience to a level I’m not prepared for.” She glanced back at me. “Why would you do this?”

d “I want you to have everything you need to feel comfortable here.”

κ She shifted, turning her body slightly to the side to give me her profile. “This is above and beyond that. And it’s...it’s magenta.”

l “Not your color?”

“No.” She shook her head. “No, it’s very pretty. I’m surprised you’d want a magenta kettle in your kitchen. I suppose I can keep it in my bedroom so—”

“No. I want it here. I don’t give a shit about the color. In fact, it’ll make me happy to see it sitting on my counter because it’ll remind me of you.”

. “That’s—” Her cheeks were a pretty shade of red. One slight compliment and she was in flames. It was obvious she hadn’t experienced the kind of praise on the tip of my tongue I wanted to shower her with.

“It’s the truth, nothing less.” I pressed my chest against her side. “How about we take your new kettle out of its box and try it out? Let’s see if the teakit makes it as superior as promised.”

In her excitement, she seemed to forget she’d been avoiding me for nearly

a week. She bounced from foot to foot, reading the instructions while "cleaned the inside of the kettle to prep it for her to use. It was funny. If it'd been mine, I would have just plugged it in and hoped for the best, but June devoured every last word in the pamphlet.

Finally, she was ready to heat up her water, making enough for both of us to have a cup. Tea wasn't my thing, but I was along for the ride. Watching this woman excited over a gesture I'd made, one that fulfilled a need she hadn't even recognized having, sent heavy doses of pleasure through my system. My dick didn't understand this was about tea. I couldn't stop the erection pressing behind my zipper. Either June didn't notice or she was ignoring it.

It was an eternity before I had a mug of steaming tea in my hands. I didn't drink, though. Watching June take her first sip was an event. She brought the mug to her mouth, the steam fogging her glasses. Her eyes fluttered closed as she pushed them to the top of her head and tipped the mug to her lips. Her sip was slow, and when she swallowed, her tongue darted out to collect the drop on her upper lip.

"Mmm." Her eyes flicked open, slightly unfocused without her glasses. "I don't know if it's purely in my head, but this is the best tea I've ever had."

I sipped mine, and all I got was tea. Just tea. But I grinned at her, pleased as hell at how deeply she was enjoying hers. "The Brits didn't lie, then?"

She shook her head as she raised her mug for another taste. "No, they definitely didn't. They know their tea."

We stood there in mostly silence. June drinking, me watching her. I could've taken the time to talk to her, but now that we were here, I couldn't bring myself to detract from her experience.

I put my mug down and propped my backside on the counter. She'd

I pushed herself onto the counter opposite me, swinging her crossed ankles. She had no idea how sexy she was like that, in her flannel, bare legs, light pink toenails, relaxed and without artifice.

She took her final sip, and I knew I was about to lose her to her bedroom. I wasn't ready for that.

g "Have you heard from that reporter?"

e She placed her mug beside her. "No. Blocking her seems to have stalled her for now, but I'm sure she'll find a way to speak to me. Before I moved down here, she was relentless."

s My brow furrowed, and I gripped the edge of the marble at my sides. "She wants a story on Iris that badly? Is it common for you to be harassed by reporters?"

e "It's not common, and no, she didn't want to talk about Iris."

s "Then what?"

o She sighed and pushed her glasses back onto her nose. "She said she's doing an exposé on my father. I suppose, since I worked in his office, she thinks I have dirt on him I'll hand over to her."

I "Do you?"

One shoulder lifted. "If I believed he was breaking the law, I would have reported him, even though the idea of doing so makes me feel like I'm going to break out in hives. But could I blow up his practice with what I've witnessed? Yes, I think I could."

"What does your father do?"

I "He's a surgeon. He hired me to basically be his bedside manner, which he is completely devoid of. He was the blunt instrument, I was the salve. When he spoke to his patients, I would be in the room to offer comfort or explain things in softer terms when my dad didn't have the patience."

. While she spoke, something clicked in my head. Her last name. He-father's occupation. His manner. His practice in New York.

“Dr. Adler? He's an orthopedic surgeon?”

I She looked at me strangely, her head tilting to the side. “Yes. How did you —” Horror dawned over her. “You went to him. Did he do surgery on you?”

“Nah. This was about seven years ago, right after my fall. You hadn't been working there yet. I got the raw Dr. Adler experience. He told me my case was hopeless and the best outcome for me was learning to deal with the pain then he sent me on my way with my very first prescription for Oxy.”

e She was mortified. It was written all over her taut shoulders, the tension around her mouth. But she didn't appear surprised.

“I'm sorry you ever met him,” she rushed out.

I huffed. “Fuck, June. I am too. He's not responsible for my addiction. I was getting plastered every night before I had the accident. But he took whatever hope I'd had and smashed it against the wall without a second thought.”

June nodded. “That's what he does. And the prescription—he does that too. He hands out scripts for Oxy like they're a consolation prize. He only takes cases he's certain he will achieve perfect results. He especially likes rare, unseen issues that will get him into medical journals. People come to him because they hear about his successes, but his patients are very carefully curated for his own glory. He doesn't care about making his patients well. My father is a narcissist with a god complex and I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am you crossed his path.”

1 More puzzle pieces slid into place. Nothing could change my reaction to meeting Dr. Adler, but I understood it more now. That shit was on him. He was a terrible person. A hope killer who'd dismissed me without a second

thought. Understanding that brought me closure. There was a whole lot of *it's not me, it's you*.

“Eli found a doctor able to do surgery on me. It didn’t eliminate the pain fully, but I could function. I always wondered if Dr. Adler had been right. Now I know he lied to me. He didn’t see any value in me, and that’s why he said no.”

What boggled my mind was that Dr. Adler was June’s father. That callous, cold man helped make this irresistible, sweet creature standing in my kitchen. That was something I’d never be able to wrap my head around.

She swiped at an eye behind her glasses. “I haven’t seen your records, and I wasn’t there, but yeah, that’s probably why he said no.” She slapped her hands on her thighs. “I’m sorry, Diego. I don’t—I can’t believe my father did that to you. I hate him so much, I could scream. I hate myself for staying for as long as I did, but I thought...I tried to help. I thought I could help.”

I let go of the counter, crossing the narrow space between us to take her hands so she couldn’t hit herself again. I pressed them into her sides and held them there.

“I wished you’d been there too. I could’ve used some of your kind of soft back then, but you were just a kid seven years ago.”

She huffed. “I was nineteen.”

“A kid. I’m sure you were just as soft and sweet back then, but if you’d been there, I was such an asshole I would have just tried to get in your pussy and ignored everything else.”

A shudder racked her delicate frame. “I’ve always had a thing for older women. I probably would have been game for that.”

The shudder passed straight from her to me. “Fuck, June. You kill me. Don’t talk to me about liking older men, or any men.”

s She rubbed her lips together. “Then don’t talk to me about what a slut you were seven years ago. I don’t like that either.”

1 “Baby.” I let my forehead fall onto hers. Fuck did I like this woman.

2 “Diego.” She wriggled her hands out of my grip to press them to my chest. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so very sorry for what my father did to you.”

s “Stop saying you’re sorry, or I’m going to get pissed. You didn’t do anything wrong. Your father is not you. Not even close. You are the kind of thoughtful, blazingly softhearted woman that I thought only existed in fiction. I never thought I’d have someone like you right in front of me.” I covered her hands with mine. “Your hands are fine, like bone china. Never seen violence done only ever done good. And they’re on me. They’re touching me, and I’m—”

r I swallowed hard. I didn’t know what I was. This wasn’t the talk I’d been wanting to have with her. Sex had been the one thing on my mind when I asked for a conversation, but this was much deeper.

d She tipped her head back, her nose grazing mine. “You’re what?” she whispered.

t “I’m unprepared for what this is doing to me.”

Her hands escaped mine again, slipping to the sides of my neck to gently caress my straining tendons. “Do you need to get lost?”

d I stilled at her question, which wasn’t a question at all. It was an offer.

y One I could not possibly refuse. Not from this woman. Not now, probably not ever.

r I answered her with my mouth on hers. Not a crash, but a slow slide. She accepted me, opening to let me in. Her mouth was still hot from her tea, slightly sweet, and receptive to my dragging licks and need to utterly feast on her.

1 I broke from her, even though it pained me to do so. “This isn’t an escape
June. I want you. *You, baby.*”

She whimpered and drew me back to her lips. That was her answer to me.

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I broke from her, even though it pained me to do so. “This isn’t an escape, June. I want you. *You*, baby.”

She whimpered and drew me back to her lips. That was her answer to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

DIEGO

WITH A GROAN, I scooped her up. Her legs wrapped around my waist, and I carried her upstairs to my bedroom. As eager as I was to taste every inch of her, I couldn't forget who I was. Her room was too far for me to hear my kid if he called for me.

Having her in my bedroom, though...I'd made the right choice. This was right where I wanted her. I wanted my sheets smelling like her. The anticipation of seeing her long hair spread out on my pillow made me harder than steel.

"Fuck, June."

My fingers dug into her plump little ass while I fisted her hair with the other hand, tipping her head back to bare her throat. She mewled as I sucked her silky skin, her core hot against me. But she didn't writhe or beg. Like the good girl she was, she let me direct what was happening between us, trusting me to give her exactly what she needed.

I walked us to the bed and traced a finger along her jaw. Her eyes were wide, like she was waiting for me to tell her what was next.

Everything was next. Every fucking thing.

“Stand.”

Her legs unlocked from my waist, straightening until her feet hit the mattress. She held on to my shoulders as I unbuttoned her flannel and dragged it down her arms. Her thin tank top immediately followed, leaving her bare. On her slight frame, her breasts were full and round, pebbled nipples waiting to be worshiped. Unable to hold back any longer, I dipped my head to taste her.

The first hit was drugging. I immediately hungered for more. Sucking her nipple into my mouth, I groaned at the feel of her on my tongue. June’s fingers curled on my shoulders. Her chest rose as she sucked in a deep breath and held it. When I bit down on her, nibbling at her pretty tits, she exhaled in a whoosh, and her knees shook.

Oh, my little shy girl liked that.

I held her breasts to my mouth, alternating between them, biting, sucking, devouring her soft flesh until I was dizzy with it. She moaned for me, dug her fingers into me, but she stayed right where I’d put her. She didn’t ask for more, but there was no question she needed it. I was aching to fulfill her needs.

“Lie down, baby girl. Let me look at you.”

I didn’t make her do it on her own. I held her hands and slowly lowered her to my mattress. Her hair spilled like ink on the white sheets, and it was even more perfect than I thought it would be. She hid a lot under her flowy clothes—the swell of her breasts, the flat plane of her belly, the sensual flare of her hips—but she wasn’t trying to hide from me now.

The image of her like this, with bitten tits, swollen lips, and clenched thighs, would be burned into my memory for the rest of time.

From under heavy lids, she watched me yank off my shirt and slip off my lounge pants. Her hungry eyes took me in the same way I did her. I pressed my palm against my erection, and she gasped softly, her gaze following the movement of my hand.

g “On your front,” I said.

l She rolled over, her arms bent, palms flat on the bed beside her face. Her yback arched slightly, probably involuntarily, but it was beautiful. The line of her spine was long and graceful, with twin dimples at the bottom. Christ, how rI liked that.

s One knee on the mattress beside her, I hooked her shorts and swept them off. Her little ass was a peach, round and firm, and when my teeth sank into it, so tender I could have eaten her alive.

“Like that, baby girl?” I licked the curve of where her ass met her thigh and her muscles quivered.

, “Yes,” she breathed. “I like it.”

r I tapped her inner thigh. “Good. Spread your legs for me.”

r She slid her legs apart, drawing her knees up to raise her ass slightly. rknelt between them, gripping her cheeks to spread them too. Groaning at the sight of her slick, pink pussy and tight little back hole, I wondered for a second how I’d gotten this lucky.

l I cupped her firmly. “Is this pussy mine tonight?”

s “Yes. It’s yours.”

y “Good girl.” I leaned over her, my chest against her back. “You’re so eperfect, baby girl. I’m going to eat my pussy now. And when I make you come, I want to hear my name on your lips. Will you give me that?”

l She nodded without hesitation. “Yes. Please.”

Rising up, I gave her ass a light spank, just enough to make it jiggle, then

repositioned myself between her thighs and pushed her knees forward to open her to me.

I held her soaked cunt to my mouth and ate her. I was on fire for her engulfed in her flames. I'd never been so hot for someone, nor had I ever felt this kind of visceral need.

She was so good at staying still. It must have been incredibly difficult not to rock back into my mouth and demand more. June's moans were as pretty as she was. She clutched at the sheets and pressed her face into the pillow.

I swatted her ass. "Don't muffle your pleasure. I want to hear it."

"O-okay." She turned her head to the side.

I swirled my tongue around her clit and sucked it between my lips drawing noises from her. Every little sound went straight to my cock, but they were still too quiet. She may have given herself over to me, but she was holding back.

My teeth sank into the back of her thigh, and she keened, her neck arching hair spilling down her back. That only spurred me on. I lapped at her slick cunt until I was buried between her thighs. My thumbs played with the valley between her cheeks, pressing at her opening there, making her moan even louder.

"Diego," she panted. "Oh, I'm—"

She gave it up then. The tightly wound leash she held herself on snapped and her pussy rocked into my mouth desperately. My name became a chant strung together in one long cry until she fell apart in my hold.

I slapped her ass as she came and licked her still, never letting up. I wasn't even close to done. If this was the only time we got lost in each other, I was going to keep going until I was satisfied.

One orgasm blurred into another. I turned her over so I could watch her tit

shake while her entire body vibrated for me. After a while, she never stopped saying my name. It was mumbled from her swollen lips as easy as breathing.

“Please,” she whispered as her head thrashed. “Please, please, please.”

I kissed her inner thigh, soaked from her pleasure, and crawled up her body.

“Touch me,” I said.

Her eyes flew open, and she let go of the sheets to run her palms over my chest and arms. Then she dipped down, stopping at my underwear, her eyes flicking to mine. I nodded, and she bit her lip as she ventured beneath the waistband to wrap her fingers around my cock.

There was nothing shy about the way she handled me. June paid attention to my expression while she pumped me with one hand, lowering my underwear with the other.

“Talk to me,” I said. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you inside me.” Her back arched, pressing her tits against my chest. “I want you to do what you want with me.”

I frowned at her. “That’s a dangerous invitation.”

“You won’t hurt me. Not in ways I don’t want.”

I skimmed my knuckles over her cheek. “How do you want to be hurt baby girl?”

“I want you to stretch me with your big cock. Fuck me hard enough I’ll still feel you tomorrow. Make me forget everything but you.”

I stopped breathing. Who the fuck was this girl? She gave me this raw filthy honesty in the voice of an angel, and my cock was on the verge of exploding while my heart staggered in my chest.

“June, June, what the hell am I going to do with you?” I stopped her hands from moving with my fingers around her wrist. “You’re going to make me

come with your dirty mouth and talented hand. I need to be inside you before that happens. Let go of me so I can get a condom and fuck you how we both crave. I want everything you just said.”

I mourned her warm hand when she released me, but when I reached for the condoms in my bedside table, my cock nestled between her folds, and never wanted to leave. She drew her legs up my sides and rocked her head along the length of me.

“That feels good.” I cupped her throat. “Everything about you is so good isn’t it? I’m going to be hooked on you, I already know it.”

She bit her bottom lip and nodded at me.

Rearing back, I rolled the condom on and met her glazed eyes. “I want you to guide me into you. Put me where you want me.”

Propping herself on her elbow, she reached for me, taking me in her hand. I followed her until my tip was at her entrance. As soon as she withdrew her hand, I pushed all the way into her in one long, smooth thrust.

June’s head tossed back, and I fell over her, sucking on her throat as she began to fuck her. I had no hope of making this last as long as I wanted it to. It’d been a long time for me, and June was this unexpected vixen, beautiful, and sexy with a perfect little cunt that gripped me to within an inch of insanity.

“I’m gonna go hard on you. Need you to tell me if it’s too much.”

She nodded, holding on to the headboard over her head. She was pushing back when I thrust into her, heightening the impact, taking me so deep, I hit the end of her a few times.

She’d lit me up, and I couldn’t stop. I powered into her, over and over while I sucked on her throat, her tits, biting her tender flesh then licking it to make it better.

e “Goddamn, June, you’re soaking wet. You hear my cock stirring you up inside? Love that sound. Love you drenching me the way you are.” I stroked her hair and cupped the top of her head. “You have no idea how sexy you look right now. You keep your eyes on me. Don’t take them off.”

I She shook her head. “I won’t.”

t “Good girl.”

She shivered, and her walls fluttered around me. I’d never forget to tell her how good she was. It was a fact, and I’d never stop reminding her of it.

My hips slammed into hers, and there was no slowing down. Reason was gone. All that was left were my base instincts. I wanted to fuck this girl, claim her, mark her so everyone would know she was mine. Her chest was mottled where I’d been. It wasn’t enough, but it would have to do for now.

l. “Please, please, Diego,” she whimpered. “I’m really close.”

r “I’ll get you there. Don’t worry, you’re gonna get there.”

Sliding my hand between us, I pressed on her clit and rolled slow circles around it. June’s inner muscles clamped around me, drawing me even deeper. It was too much. This beautiful woman falling apart beneath me, her cries, the scent, the feel of her—it was way too much.

f I yanked out of her, reared back on my knees, and rid myself of the condom. Then my cock was in my hand, tugging hard before I shot thick white ropes across June’s triangle of dark pubic hair and belly. She arched into me, offering herself as a canvas.

t And when I thought there was nothing left in me, she dragged two fingers through the mess I’d left on her, gathered up my cum, and sucked it into her mouth. My body quaked with aftershocks, and I cursed the fuck out of my recovery periods. I wanted to fuck her all over again.

Instead, I fell to the mattress beside her and scooped her onto my chest. I’d

made a mess of both of us, but I didn't give a damn.

l "That surprised me," I said.

l She rubbed her face in the crook of my arm before peeking up at me. "A good surprise?"

"Baby." I dragged my fingers through the sides of her tangled hair. "Hottest thing I've seen in my life. Never expected you to do that, but I should've known my good girl would be naughty."

Her cheeks flamed. Stark naked and covered in my cum, she was back to being her shy, sweet self. I liked that. She was more than a timid little nanny. June was a sensual woman, and I felt like I'd uncovered something she kept hidden from the world. Made me feel about ten feet tall I was the one to do it.

Fuck whatever *older men* had come before me. They didn't exist as far as I was concerned.

Minutes passed, me stroking her long hair, her breath heating my skin. I was more relaxed than I'd been in a long time. I couldn't remember ever feeling this good. Nowhere near sleep, I wondered if June would be up for another go.

Right now, though, I was content as we were.

e June pushed herself up on my chest and patted my shoulder. "Thank you for the teakettle and...this. I had fun."

l She rolled off me and scooted to the edge of the bed, bending to gather her clothes, then shrugged her flannel on before I'd even registered what she was doing.

r I sat up, frowning at her hasty retreat. "You don't need to go."

f She glanced back. "I should. If I stay any longer, I might fall asleep. I'd hate for Camilo to find me here and get confused."

l "June—"

Her lashes lowered, brushing her cheeks. “Good night, Diego.”

She strode out of my bedroom without another second’s pause, and I fell back against my pillows, exhaling a heavy, frustrated breath. It would be an understatement to say this evening hadn’t gone how I’d planned, but nothing could have blindsided me more than June giving me a friendly pat on the shoulder as the final ending.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

JUNE

“I CAN’T WEAR A dress!”

Adelaide threw the fabric at me. “Yes, you can. So you flash a little thong it’s part of the show.”

I threw her clothes back at her. “Absolutely not. I’m wearing jeans. You wear a dress.”

When I’d casually mentioned open mic night to Adelaide, she’d flown into action, making hotel reservations for herself and Wren so they could be here to watch me perform, and my protests had been weak. Having them here with me settled some of my nerves.

Not many, but enough I wasn’t constantly on the verge of throwing up. I wasn’t a performer, but I liked to sing, and once I was actually on stage, I didn’t mind being there. It was the buildup that usually led to me chickening out before I made it there.

Addie and Wren had shown up in Baltimore this afternoon, and Alicia had taken over Camilo duty, allowing me to have more time with my friends. I hadn’t asked—I never would have, especially not after missing a week with

him while I was sick. She overheard they'd be in town and told me I was not allowed to refuse her offer.

So I didn't. And now, I was hanging out in Wren and Adelaide's hotel suite. We'd had dinner together and now I was being pummeled with Adelaide's collection of fluffy designer dresses.

Wren pinched the fabric of her vintage-style, A-line floral dress. "I am wearing a dress. But if I tried to get on a stage in this, Callum would fly down to Baltimore and gouge out the eyes of anyone who peeked even a hint of my underwear."

Adelaide slung her arm around my shoulders. "Fortunately, June doesn't have to worry about the opinions of tyrannical, possessive men. She can flash her thong all over the state and no one will say a peep."

Wren smirked at her. "Spoken like a woman whose man gets off on her flashing her thong. And Callum's not tyrannical. He's protective in a way that suits me. I wouldn't have him any other way."

"He loves you so," I said.

Her smirk turned into a bright grin. "He really does."

Adelaide twirled, one of her pink crinoline dresses held against her. "Fine fine. You're right, Callum is perfect for you, and vice versa. My opinion is slightly skewed given my and Adam's proclivities."

It was no secret among our group the two of them were kink-monsters. They were members of a sex club, and while I didn't know all they got into, I did know they were heavily into exhibitionism.

Wren sighed. "I love you, Addie, but I'm still recovering from last weekend. Can we not discuss your proclivities so I can burn those images from my brain?"

I frowned at both my friends, who were now both looking mighty

tsheepish.

“All right, you two. Someone spill. What happened last weekend? I don’t like being left out of the loop.”

1 Addie raised a brow at Wren. “Should I tell her or you?”

Wren hopped up from her chair. “You tell her. I can’t even think about it.” She scurried to the champagne on the other side of the room. Callum had made sure Wren had it waiting for her, and Adelaide by default, when they arrived.

Addie perched beside me on the chic velvet settee in front of a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the harbor.

1 “Adam and I went to our favorite club last weekend. You know the one.”

I laughed at her exaggerated wink. “Yes, we all know the one.”

r “Just making sure we’re on the same page. Anyway, we decided to try something we’d never done. They have pairs of rooms connected by a window so you can see what’s going on on the other side, and they can watch you. It’s a little more intimate than the big exhibition rooms.” She shrugged like it was no big deal. “We were doing our thing in our room, and the other couple was getting started. I checked them out, and they were hot. I wasn’t really looking at faces, you know? Not at first.”

I groaned, knowing where this was going based on Wren’s reaction. “Oh .no.”

I Addie nodded. “Oh yes. Adam and I were fully going at it by the time I realized who was next door. And they were also going to town. I was so surprised the peachy ass I was admiring was Wren’s, I overreacted a little and I threw myself off Adam and onto the floor. He must’ve thought I was having a spell or something because he dove after me and hoisted me up like a

y

fireman. I was laughing too hard to explain it was his freaking bandmate and this wife in the other room.”

I covered my face. “Oh no, oh no!”

“Yes. And the wonderful part of me freaking out and not thinking clearly” meant I landed right in front of the window—which also meant Adam was directly in front of it. So, he’s standing there, his dick out, me naked and over his shoulder, when Wren and Callum figure out it’s us. Callum tries to cover Wren up while I’m cackling and Adam’s yelling Callum’s name like he’s excited to see him. It was chaos. Not sexy at all. And I think if Wren could have melted into a puddle, she would have.”

Wren waved her champagne glass from the other side of the room. “This is true. Holy granola, did I wish for it with all my might, but it didn’t happen.”

Adelaide giggled. “Needless to say, we are now going to be texting each other before making plans to go to the club. I love Wren and Callum, and I love being watched, but those two loves should never, ever mix.”

“Never,” Wren echoed.

Addie turned to me and pressed her hands to my cheeks. “I’m sorry if that embarrassed you. Normally, I don’t babble about my sex life, but I couldn’t *not* share.”

“I’m not embarrassed.” I grinned at her. “I’m just thankful I wasn’t there.”

She sputtered. “As if you’d ever set foot in a place like that. I think you’re safe.”

Both of us laughed, but we weren’t laughing at the same thing. Addie thought the idea of me going to a sex club was preposterous. I’d never, even tell her the first time I went to one was when I was eighteen with my thirty-year-old boyfriend.

I’d learned about my body in sex clubs, found out what I liked and, more

Importantly, what I didn't.

When I first started, I'd been nearly too shy to participate. But there was something about willingly handing over my power that unlocked my inner confidence. When I had dropped to my knees for the first time and been rewarded with a "good girl," I'd nearly come apart at the seams. I went from sweet, shy June to a *good fucking girl*.

I'd tried almost everything over the years. My limits were firm. Pain wasn't my thing. I didn't like to be degraded verbally. Being blindfolded made me panic. You wouldn't catch me in a voyeurism room. A one-on-one dynamic based on trust was vital to me, as was a partner who understood my submission during sex did not make my entire life open season to him.

I wasn't sure yet if I regretted sleeping with Diego. I probably should have. It certainly hadn't helped lessen my attraction to him. But it wasn't the sex that was a real danger to me.

There were things I needed from a partner outside of sex Diego was giving to me without me asking. His praise made me dizzy. Unbuckling my shoes for me, asking about my day, really listening to my answer, buying me a teakettle, telling me he'd be happy to have it on his counter because it reminded him of me, taking care of me when I was so sick I couldn't stand. We weren't a couple, not even close, and he was doing these lovely, beautiful things for me, taking care of me so thoughtfully, it was nearly impossible not to develop the type of feelings that would break me if they weren't reciprocated.

Adelaide patted my cheek. "Where'd you go? You look like you're a thousand miles away right now."

I focused on my gorgeous friend, and words flew out of my mouth. "I slept with Diego last night."

Her mouth fell open. Wren put her champagne glass down and crossed the room, sitting down on the other side of me.

r “Holy granola.” Wren blinked, taking my hand in hers. “Was it good?”

1 Addie swatted her. “You can’t ask her that.” She shoulder bumped me

1 “But was it? It was good, right? You’re all starry-eyed.”

I sighed and pressed my thighs together. If I moved just right, I could still feel him.

1 “It was...” I bit my lip. “He was more than I’ve ever allowed myself to hope for.”

y That was an understatement. Diego and I hadn’t discussed limits or our desires and we meshed anyway. His instincts on how to handle me had been spot-on. I’d been able to let go and hand myself over to him without a second thought. I had never experienced anything like it, and it scared me.

Addie clapped. “Oooh, I’m really happy for you. Fantasy fulfilled, right?”

3 “Mmhmm. For sure,” I agreed.

s Although, the truth was, I was too much of a pragmatist to ever truly fantasize about being with Diego. I’d idolized him from afar, but I’d never wondered what it would feel like to be swept up in his arms and carried to his bedroom. I’d never thought about him kneeling behind me and spreading me out to feast on me. It had never crossed my mind he could want me in *any* way, much less that we’d be perfectly compatible on the first go.

t “Is that it?” Wren asked. “One and done?”

“I don’t know. It’s probably for the best.” I tucked my hair behind my ear. “I really like working for him, and I adore Camilo. I don’t want to mess things up.”

t “A summer fling could be fun, though,” Addie said. “You both know there’s an end date, no need to worry about it getting serious.”

e “True. We’ll see what happens.” I rubbed my hands over my jeans. “
should get ready.”

Wren picked up a lock of my hair. “You’re still letting me curl this for you
.right?”

I batted my lashes. “Pretty please?”

l She giggled. “Come on. I won’t even demand more details on your nigh
with Diego as payment.”

o I would probably tell her just a little bit more regardless. I couldn’t help it
It was wrong not to share something *that* good.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

DIEGO

IT'D BEEN ANOTHER LONG day. Everything that could go wrong had. The wrong part had been shipped, another delayed for weeks. I'd continuously dropped things and forgotten what I'd been doing.

I was distracted. Not even the 'Cuda could keep my attention.

To make matters worse, it seemed everyone needed me today. My guys were normally self-starters, but they'd been all questions, all day long. Last guy who'd approached me got snapped at. To be fair, he was asking where a certain color of paint was without even attempting to look for it himself.

Channeling Alicia, I yelled at him to look with his eyes, not his mouth.

He would have annoyed me on a regular day, but I'd come into work in a foul mood and it'd only gotten worse.

The morning had started the way it normally did. Breakfast with Milo was fine, uneventful. He chattered, I listened and maybe got a word or two in edgewise. Normal. June had breezed into the kitchen while we were eating, greeting us both with her typical smile and wave. I watched her make her tea and toast, like always, and my stomach started to knot.

I'd spent the night with her on my mind. I'd fallen asleep with her scent on my pillow. And when I woke up, I'd been looking forward to seeing her. Maybe flirting a little, touching when we passed each other, something to indicate that last night had changed things.

That hadn't happened. June had patted Camilo's head and sat behind him like she always did. She'd joined in his chatter, and they'd discussed their plans for the day. She'd told him about her friends who were coming to visit and when I got tired of being ignored and grumped at her, she'd laughed me off.

Just. Like. Always.

We'd be having a real talk tonight, hopefully one that ended with her in my bed again.

^d First, I had to finish up at the garage.

No matter how eager I was to get home, I always made sure to clean up my work area. Eli kept a clean shop, and everyone who worked for him was expected to do the same. I wiped off my tools, putting them away where they belonged. Going through the same ritual I did every night settled me. Which was a good thing. I couldn't blow into my house like a storm. That wasn't fair to Camilo or June.

I started across the garage, wiping my hands on a rag. Eli was in the office and I wanted to let him know about the parts mix-up before I left for the night.

^s My foot snagged on something hard, and I stumbled forward, catching myself on the open hood of a Toyota. I reared around, finding a mallet sitting in the middle of the floor. No one was around, but a hell of a mess was. Tools were out and dirty. Shit on the floor. Not acceptable.

It didn't surprise me at all that this was Charlie's workstation. That little

asshole always tried to cut corners and do less work than the rest of us.

I marched across the garage, cursing that idiot's name all the way to the staff room. A few guys were inside, scrubbing their hands at the industrial sinks. Charlie was beside them, drying his hands off with a paper towel.

"Charlie." He raised his head in my direction, and I motioned him over to me. He tossed his paper towel in the trash can and sauntered to where I stood at the door.

"What's up, bossman?" he drawled.

"Are you clocking out?"

"Yep. I was just about to head out."

"Not yet." I shook my head. "Not until you put away your tools. I tripped over a mallet you left out. Your mess is a hazard. It's lucky for you it hadn't been Eli tripping out there. He'd have your head."

"Sorry 'bout that. You look like you made it out alive." Charlie chuckled, glancing back at his guys. "Listen, I'll come in early tomorrow. I have to blow out of here. I have plans tonight."

"And I have a kid at home waiting for me. You see me disrespecting this garage by leaving it a mess? No. Part of the job is taking care of your shit. You don't clean your tools, they don't last. You leave out heavy objects, someone is gonna get hurt."

He shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you, man. I have to go. Like I said I'll be in early tomorrow." He folded his arms over his chest. "I'm surprised you have time to worry about insignificant stuff like this. Aren't you in a hurry to get out of here too? I'm sure June needs you to get home so she can get ready to go out tonight."

His words rang in my ears, and despite not wanting to give away anything I reacted. My hands curled into fists, shoulders going rigid. Charlie watched

the change in me, and it lit him up like a firework.

“Ah, sweet June didn’t tell you we’re going out again tonight, did she?” His fingers dragged through his hair. “That’s too bad, but I guess you two aren’t close like that since you’re just her boss. Don’t worry, bossman. We’re gonna have some fun but I’ll make sure she’s home before it’s too late.”

My jaw was tight as I barked at him. “Leave without cleaning your station up and don’t come back.”

His brows winged in the center, and all his good humor dropped. “Are you serious right now? You think you can fire me over some out-of-place tools?”

He made me sound like I was in the wrong here, but he was the one being insubordinate and flaunting the rules, not me.

“I think I can fire you over a lot of the bullshit you’ve pulled since you started working here. Clean your workstation before you go if you still want a job tomorrow.”

I swiveled on my heel and stormed out, the door slamming closed behind me. I bypassed Eli’s office, too pissed to have a civil conversation with him right now.

June was going out with that idiot after spending the night in my bed? That wasn’t going to fly. If she wanted to go out, I’d take her. She wasn’t going to be going anywhere with Charlie. If he put his hands on her, I’d have to break them off. There was no way she’d want to be responsible for a man losing his hands. She’d see reason, surely.

The drive home did nothing to calm me, and I *needed* to be calm. As badly as I wanted to grab June as soon as I saw her, take her to my bedroom and spank her until she fucking *talked* to me, that wasn’t going to be happening.

It was a father first. Milo was always watching, and as much as it pained me to

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admit, June had been right. We had to be careful not to confuse him right now. He didn't need any more big changes in his life. He'd had too many.

The first person I saw when I walked into my house wasn't who I'd expected. Alicia waved from the floor where she and Milo were building a tower with his heavy wooden blocks.

"Hey. Surprised to see you here," I greeted.

Milo turned around, giving me a grin. "Hi, Papá. June taked her guitar to see her friends."

I crouched down beside my boy, giving the top of his head a kiss. "Hey gbud. June left with her guitar?" I glanced up at Alicia. "She's not here?"

"No." Alicia chuckled. "I had to push her out the door. Her friends are in town to visit and I was off work early so I told her to go have fun with them."

Sounded like Charlie had been full of shit.

"And she took her guitar?"

"Oh, yes." Alicia's forehead crinkled as she added a block to the top of a teetering tower. "She's singing at an open mic night tonight. Isn't that cool?"

I fell back on my ass. June was singing at an open mic night. She'd never once mentioned anything about it. It struck me hard, right in the solar plexus that fucking Charlie *did* know all about it. That asshole was going to see June singing tonight. She was letting him. And I was supposed to stay here, my dick in my hand, hoping she threw me some scraps when she stumbled in at midnight?

Alicia and Milo's tower fell down in a cacophony of clacking blocks and Milo's delighted screams.

"Grandma's so bad at building towers!" he squealed.

She playfully wagged her finger at him. "I've been building towers since you was your age, *mijo*. I think you might be the weak link."

t He shook his head. “I think it’s Papá. He was breathing too hard and blew it over. He’s like the Big Bad Wolf!” He hopped up, acting out the way the huffed and puffed their tower down.

a Alicia reached over and patted my knee. “Your son is right. You *are* breathing hard,” she murmured. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m good. Just thinking about some things.”

o Her eyes narrowed. “You know, if you want to go check out the open mic thing, I’d be happy to stay with Camilo. We can hang out here tonight. He’ll be in his bed when you get home. I mean, if you want.”

I raked my hands through my hair. “She didn’t tell me about it.”

1 “That doesn’t mean she won’t be happy to have you there.”

’ “She’s going with a guy from the garage. Charlie.”

Alicia sputtered. “She isn’t. She’s going with her friends from New York. Charlie might be there too, but she isn’t going with him. We talked about it this afternoon. Trust me, Diego. I know what I’m talking about.”

I frowned at her, and she laughed, taking a swipe at my face. “I don’t know,” I grumbled.

, “Just go. I know you want to, and I’m certain she’ll appreciate your support.”

k Camilo plopped into my lap. “Are you gonna go listen to June?”

t “I’m thinking about it,” I told him.

“I don’t need to go. June sings to me all day. I’m sorry she doesn’t sing to you.” He twisted so he could pat my cheek in sympathy. “Don’t be sad though. She’s my best friend, that’s why she sings to me for free. If you pay money, she can sing to you too.”

I “Can’t she be my best friend too? Then I can hear her for free too.”

wasn’t about to tell him I *did* pay June good money already. He could stay

believing whatever his little heart desired.

I He scrunched his nose and pressed a finger to the space between my eyebrows. “No, don’t think so. When you’re lookin’ at her, you get an angry line. Friends don’t have angry lines.”

Alicia whispered, “That’s a wrinkle.”

I scowled at her. “I don’t have wrinkles yet.”

c She pointed at me, laughing. “Don’t know how to tell you, but your *angry line* just appeared.”

“That’s because I’m angry you said I have wrinkles.” I peered down at my boy. “But I’m not angry at June, so if I have a line on my face, it might be because I’m trying to figure her out sometimes. I’m never angry with her bud.”

∴ “Good. I don’t want her to leave ’cause she got scared.” He blinked at me and my heart fucking wilted in my chest. He’d seen too many people leave in his short life.

t “Nah, I would never, ever want that either. We don’t scare girls or women do we?”

r He shook his head. “Nope. We’re gentlemen.”

“That’s right. I’ll have to make sure I don’t get an angry line around here anymore.”

There wasn’t much this kid asked for that I wouldn’t do.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DIEGO

I DIDN'T GO TO bars. Hadn't in years. I'd stopped going because the environment was bad for my recovery. These days, I was on sturdier ground but I rarely went out without Camilo, so it was a moot point.

Yet, here I was, walking into a bar for a chance to see June perform.

As soon as I stepped in the door, I heard her. She was already on stage, her acoustic guitar strapped to her front, singing a Florence and the Machine tune.

I didn't know what I'd expected from her, but it wasn't what she was giving. Her eyes were open, engaging with the crowd. She smiled when someone whooped without missing a beat.

There was nothing timid about June standing under the spotlight. Her voice was strong, clear, and sweet. She played the guitar with passion and precision. Iris may have been the star, but June was a born performer too.

She was incredible.

The song came to an end, and she gazed out over the applauding crowd.

"One more?" she asked them.

There were whistles and even louder applause. She giggled, and it rocked me back on my heels.

“Okay, one more. Then we have to give someone else a turn.” She winked and took another scan of the audience. At the last second, she found me, and our eyes connected. Her lips parted, I tipped my chin at her, and she went rosy red.

She cupped the mic, holding my gaze. “The last boy I kissed just walked in the door. Should I sing him a love song?”

Two women in front stood, one tall, one short, both clapping over their heads. Adelaide and Wren. I smirked at their reaction and looked back at June, who raised a brow at me.

^e She surprised me again. I thought she’d choose some Taylor Swift or another Florence song. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

When her fingers played the first sultry riff, I knew I was in trouble. The corners of her lips curved, and her eyes danced as she sang about sex so good ^r it was on fire. I crossed my arms over my chest, simultaneously turned on ^e and irritated by how freely my little nanny was giving away this side of her to a bar full of people who did not deserve to see it.

^s Not that I did. But I wanted it for my own anyway.

¹ When her time on stage was over, I stayed back, letting her friends hug her and give her the accolades she deserved. I wasn’t being selfless. I needed that ^e time to get myself together. I was riled, my veins pumping lava. Angry too ¹ but I’d promised my boy I’d work on that. Besides, I couldn’t even articulate what the hell I was angry about.

So, I stood back until I started to calm. It was working—until someone else hugged June. Charlie wrapped her up in his arms like he had a right to. Like

she was his. A few other people gathered around them. They all settled at a table together. His arm stayed around her shoulders.

She leaned forward, around him, around everyone, finding me. One brow rose then she waved me over. I rocked forward on my toes, compelled to heed her call. When I got close, she hopped up, tucking a dark wave behind her ear.

“Hey, we need another chair. We can probably borrow one—”

My arm shot out, capturing her around the waist, and I pulled her into my chest, covering her mouth with mine. She froze, her hands on my chest. I cupped the back of her head, tangling my fingers in her waves, and coaxed her lips with mine. They softened enough for me to press firmly and nibble on the bottom one before I pulled away.

Her throat and cheeks were red. Her fiery eyes narrowed. “Why’d you do that?”

“He was touching you.”

She glanced behind her, where everyone was pointedly not looking at us. Everyone but Charlie. He was bouncing in his seat like he was about to piss his pants. When our eyes clashed, he scoffed and shook his head.

June turned back to me. “Please let go of me. I’d like to enjoy the night with my friends. If you can be civil, you’re welcome to join us.” She tapped one finger in the center of my chest. “We’re going to talk about this later.”

“Oh, we have a lot to talk about, baby girl.”

The shiver that raced through her wasn’t from desire. The snarl on her lip told me that in no uncertain terms. “Don’t do that right now.”

My palm made a long stroke down her back, resting at the top of her ass. “Okay, June. Let’s have a nice time with your friends.”

When she tried to take her seat beside Charlie again, I moved it a couple

feet over and put my own between them. He was still smirking as he leaned forward to pick up his beer.

v “Staking a claim, huh, bossman?” he muttered.

o “Something like that.” I draped my arm over the back of June’s chair. She shot me a dirty look that was cute on her sweet face, so I grinned back at her.

“Don’t think she likes you very much.” Charlie snickered into his bottle.

I let him snicker. In my younger days, I would have snatched the bottle out of his hand and broken it over his head. Limits and reasoning had been foreign concepts to me back then. I’d learned a lot since those days and had my priorities straight. I hadn’t come here for this idiot. The only person who mattered to me was on my other side. I turned my back on Charlie, blocking my view of his smug face and *his* view of June.

o “Hi, Diego.” Adelaide waved from the other side of June. “I didn’t expect to see you here tonight.”

“Didn’t know this was happening.” I tapped on June’s thigh. “Fortunately, I was informed. I would have been disappointed if I’d missed it.”

s Adelaide picked up her cocktail, tipping it toward June. “She’s incredible, isn’t she?”

t “Absolutely incredible,” I agreed.

d Another act took the stage, the music drowning out the conversation. It was good. Nowhere near as good as June, but I enjoyed it. Slowly, June relaxed, shifting in her chair to face the stage. I wrapped my arm around her middle, tilting her back to lean against me. At first, she was stiff, but as the musician played on and I ran my fingers along the skin between her flowy tank and the waistband of her jeans, she let herself settle.

During a slower song, I brushed her hair aside and dipped down, putting my mouth beside her ear.

1 “I wish you’d have been the one to invite me, but I gotta tell you, I haven’
had a night this good in a long time.”

She tipped her head back and pressed a soft kiss to my jaw. “That make
me happy, Diego. If I had known you’d want to be here, I would have asked
you. I liked playing for you.”

“Christ, baby, did I like watching you.” I gave her belly a squeeze, and she
kissed my jaw again before turning back to the stage.

1

1

2 We rode home with the windows down, June’s guitar in my back seat, her
3 bare feet kicked up on the dash—it was a really fucking good night.

3 I felt her studying my profile in the dark. “You’re not going to ask why
t don’t try to make that my career?”

“No, don’t need to. You could make it. I think you know you’ve got the
chops and the connections. But that’s not you. You’re a singer, not a
performer. You’ve got other plans for your music.”

I glanced over in time for a streetlight to illuminate her gentle smile. “I do
like my stage small.”

“And you look gorgeous on it. Fuckin’ phenomenal.”

t “You’re right, though. I always have fun up there, tonight being no
e exception, but I have no desire to make that my career. As long as I can play
r and sing, I’ll be happy.”

2 “I believe that.” I reached across and took her hand, entwining our fingers.

y “My mother used to sing. Before she met my dad, she was a folk singer
She did the whole touring the country with her band in a beat-up minivan just
like Iris.”

3 “Like mother, like daughter.”

t “Yeah.” Her fingers wiggled between mine. “My dad made her give it up
He gets annoyed when she sings in the shower, that’s how much he hates it
sBut she made sure Iris and I had music lessons. She’d convinced my dad i
made us proper ladies, but in truth, it was her own little rebellion against
him.”

e “I’m sorry, baby. That fucking sucks he has that kind of control over her.”

“I don’t know why she gives in. I’ll never understand it. But I won’t stop
even if there’s no one to listen, I’ll keep playing.”

“I guarantee you’ll always have two Garza men to play for.”

r Her laugh was mist on a hot, hot night. “Promises, promises.”

I

When we walked into the house, Eli and Alicia were on my couch, cuddled
up, watching a movie. Eli made sure I saw him looking at me holding June’s
hand, and I looked right back at him without a need to explain myself. We
thanked them, they both hugged June, then they were off.

o I still hadn’t let go of June.

She pressed her other hand to my chest. “Dieg—”

“Tell me what you like, June.”

o Her fingers flexed. “What?”

y “Are you going to let me take you to bed again?”

She hesitated for a beat then nodded. “I think so. Yes.”

“Then I need to know what you like.” I scooped her hair off her shoulder
and touched my lips there. “What your limits are with me.”

t She chewed on her lip. The last thing I wanted was for her to be
uncomfortable around me. I walked to the couch and sat down, bending over
to remove her sandals. Once they were off, I patted my thigh.

l. “Come here and talk to me.”

: She sat down on my leg, and I dragged her back, tucking her up against me.

t Turning to her side, she grazed her fingertips over my jaw. So gentle and slow, I closed my eyes and leaned into her. If she was delaying this conversation, I didn’t mind her method. I didn’t get much gentle, not ever. Until June, I hadn’t realized I’d been craving it.

“I like when you take care of me like that,” she murmured. “I like when you take off my shoes and let me lean against you like you did at the bar.”

“That’s a good thing. I can’t seem to stop doing it.” I caught her hand kissing it. “I get the impression we have more in common than that. I’d like you to tell me what you like and what you don’t.”

d “Can I put my head on your shoulder first?”

s A knot I hadn’t known was lodged in my gut unraveled at her request.

e “Of course you can, baby girl.”

She wiggled into position and laid her head down, her face fitting in the crook of my neck.

“Last night was perfect,” she said.

“I agree. The only thing that would have made it better is if you’d stayed. I understand why you didn’t, but I was nowhere near finished with you.”

“I would have liked to stay too.” Her fingers toyed with the collar of my shirt. “I don’t like to be hurt. No whips or canes, but spanking with your hands can be fun. No blindfolding or gags, but I don’t mind being told to stay quiet. Restraints are a major yes, but please don’t leave me alone when I’m restrained. I absolutely hate being degraded, but I love the things you’ve been saying to me.”

My throat went dry. Why did this woman keep knocking me down at my

knees? I should have known by now to expect the unexpected. If I stopped to think *how* June had learned what her limits were and who she'd done that experimenting with, I'd rip the world apart. For my sanity's sake, I set that out of my mind.

s “You sound like you really know yourself.”

: “I do.” Her hand flattened at the base of my throat. “I like how you held me by the throat last night, but I don't like breath play. All parts of my body are open as long as there's proper prep. Toys are fun at home, but I won't play with them in public. That's just not my thing. I don't want to be watched, or shared. And I don't...” She stopped herself and nuzzled into me.

e “What? Tell me everything.”

“I don't share my partner.”

My chest rumbled. “That's not an issue for me.”

She lifted her head. “And the rest of it?”

“Told you we have a lot in common, baby girl.” I tapped the end of her nose. “I wasn't happy to find out about tonight from Charlie. I don't want him near you.”

The corners of her mouth curved, and I got a hint of the gap between her front teeth.

“That won't be a problem. I haven't spoken to Charlie since the first time we went to that bar. He knew I'd signed up to sing tonight because he was there when I did it. I don't want Charlie. I never have.”

: My brow lowered. “Who do you want?”

1 “I think you know.” She caressed the side of my neck and leaned forward to kiss my chin. “You know, don't you?”

Then she slid off my lap onto the floor, kneeling between my legs, both her hands on the center of my thighs. Blinking up at me, she quickly licked her

olips.

t “I want you, Diego.”

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lips.

“I want you, Diego.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JUNE

DIEGO MOVED FAST, GATHERING my hair into his fist and using it to tip my head back.

“Open your mouth for me. Show me your pretty lips and little wet tongue.”

The way he told me what to do, soft but commanding, melted me on the inside. My mouth fell open for him without a moment’s hesitation. He made me *want* to do as he told me.

His other hand cupped my jaw, and he stroked my bottom lip with his thumb.

“So pretty, baby girl. These lips are for me now. They only touch me.” His thumb dipped into my mouth and traced a line along the center of my tongue. “Perfect little tongue, wet and ready for my cock. Wrap your lips around my thumb and show me how you’re going to take care of me.”

With our gazes connected, I closed my lips around him and swirled the tip of his thumb. He pressed on my crown, pushing his thumb deeper in my mouth. It was nothing close to the size of his cock so I took him easily.

His eyes darkened, and the bulge in his lap swelled. I hoped he would let me suck him. God, I wanted to so badly right then.

His thumb popped out of my mouth, and he dragged my saliva along my lips.

“You are the sweetest thing I’ve ever had.” His eyes darkened as he released me to unzip his pants. Saliva pooled on my tongue in anticipation. “Give me that beautiful mouth, June. Let me feel that tongue on my cock. I want all that sweetness on me.”

He nodded to his lap. “Take it out.”

I reached forward, slipping my fingers into the waistband of his underwear and pulling them down his hips. Then I took his thick length in both hands and wrapped my fingers around it, giving it long, slow pumps.

“Mouth,” he said.

He held on to my hair as I rose on my knees and dipped my head to take him between my lips, using it to guide my movements. He wanted me to go slow, sliding down to the base of him, taking my time to work my way back to the tip.

While I worked him, he kept a constant stream of praise coming. Telling me what a good girl I was, how perfect my mouth was, that he’d never felt anything better. My core thrummed. I was achy for him, but I didn’t want to stop. I loved making him feel this way, and in the back of my mind, I still couldn’t quite believe he’d chosen me when he could have anyone he wanted.

I was his good girl.

It was me who had the perfect mouth.

I knew how to make him lose his mind.

“Come here, June.” With my hair wrapped around his fist, he pulled me off him. Panting, I looked up at him. He patted his leg. “Take your jeans off and

tstraddle me.”

He finally let go of my hair to help me stand and though he'd ordered me to take off my jeans, it was his fingers unbuttoning them and lowering them down my hips. His lips pressed to my belly as he tugged my underwear off then he dragged me down to straddle him. Once I settled, he got rid of my tank and bra.

I “Jesus Christ, baby, you're so sexy.”

I shuddered in his arms, then he was on me, cupping my breasts to his mouth to suck my nipples, one after the other. His cock was tapping against my core, so close to sliding inside me it drove me wild. It was nearly impossible to stay still, not to lift up and drive myself down on it. But he hadn't told me to, so I wouldn't. I knew without a doubt it would be worth the wait.

He reached between us to touch me. Rough fingertips circled my clit then breached my entrance, plunging deep into me.

“Ride my hand, June.”

I rocked my hips with his rhythm while he sucked on my neck and then went back to my breasts. Diego Garza was a tit man, it turned out. He was all over them, worshiping them, groaning with my nipples in his mouth. He told me I was sexy, but he made me believe it too, with how he responded to my body, to me.

“I'm going to come,” I rasped. “Can I?”

He lifted his head from my chest and slowly shook it. “Not yet.” His finger dragged out of me, teasing live-wire nerve endings as he retreated. I panted at the loss of him, forcing myself not to chase him.

His mouth landed on mine, sucking down my panting breaths and lapping at my tongue. While he kissed me, he circled my clit again, now with the

head of his cock. Back and forth, he rubbed. Sweat beaded on my forehead and it was all I could do to concentrate on his lips devouring mine.

1 And that was what he was doing. Consuming me. Truly feasting upon me. Every one of my senses was engaged while Diego wrecked my mouth and tortured my pussy. I could have come multiple times, but I so wanted to please him, each time my belly tightened and the telltale heaviness started between my legs, I pushed it away.

s I ached. Oh, how I ached. For him to take me, for me to find relief. Most of all, to hear him tell me how good I was for waiting.

y Diego didn't let me down.

e He tore his lips from mine and held my face in his hands, staring at me with something like accusation. His brown eyes had gone impossibly dark, the pupils blown. He was struggling and aching just as badly as I was.

1 "You're trembling," he said.

I nodded. "I want you."

He shook his head in disbelief. "But you waited, didn't you?" I nodded again. "You're such a good girl, you fought off your orgasm and waited for me to give it to you, didn't you? I'm so lucky to have a good girl like you in my lap. I don't think there's any man luckier than me. Now, I need you to take my cock in your hand and put it inside you. You're gonna go nice and slow so this doesn't end as soon as it starts. How does that sound?"

"Perfect," I rasped.

r The burning stretch as I lowered myself onto him was exactly what I needed. As soon as I was filled to the brim with Diego, I stopped fighting myself and fell into him. He wrapped his arms around me and held my ass in his hands, lifting me up and letting me fall back down.

e "Give me your mouth, baby," he uttered next to my ear.

l, I raised my head from his throat to offer him my lips, which he took with fervor. I'd never been kissed this way, like I was the moon and he was the tide, necessary to his continued existence. It made me swell, both inside my chest and between my legs.

o He must have felt it because he pulled back until his lips were only ghosting over mine.

“I want you to come on me now. Let me feel your pussy squeezing me.”

f All it took was his permission and grinding my clit against the base of him and I untangled the last of my restraints, letting myself fly. My head fell back, and the moan I released came from deep within. All my pent-up desire for this beautiful man were let loose.

; Fingers dug into my ass, and he sucked at my throat. He pushed me down on him as he lifted his hips to meet mine. While my orgasm seemed to go on and on, Diego grunted and fucked me from underneath. His control was slipping, and it turned me on even more.

l “Please,” I whimpered.

r “Please what?”

1 “Please come inside me.”

o He smacked my butt, drawing another whimper from me. “You didn’t have to ask. I’m going to fill you up so I’m still dripping out of you tomorrow. You’re going to be thinking about me all day, just waiting until you can have me inside you again.”

I “Yes,” I cooed. “Please, *please* give it to me.”

g Holy hell, did he give it to me. His fingers dug into me with bruising strength, slamming me down onto him until his head fell back and he released a soul-deep groan. My walls fluttered around him, milking every last drop from his body.

1 When we were both finished, panting to catch our breaths, I shoved my
e face in the crook of his neck, and he hugged me to him, making long
y soothing strokes down my spine. My eyes were in danger of closing and no
o opening for a long time, but we couldn't stay here, as disappointing as it was.

y "We should get up," I whispered.

"Not yet. Let's stay like this."

"I'm finding it difficult to argue."

, "Then don't. Just give me a few more minutes."

l "Okay."

s



1 The next thing I knew, Diego was holding me against his chest. Well, I gues
1 he had been before, but this time, I was being carried.

1 "Did I fall asleep?"

s He chuckled. "We both did. It's three a.m."

"Oops."

"Yeah, oops. You need to get to bed."

He pushed open my bedroom door and strode to the bathroom with me stil
e in his arms.

. "Do you want to take a shower?" he asked.

e "No, I'm sleepy. I'll shower in the morning."

He set me on top of a towel on the counter then braced his hands on eithe
e side of my thighs, peering straight into me.

g "We didn't use a condom. I have to ask if you're on birth control."

e I reached for his face to wipe off the worried pinch around his mouth. "
t am. I have an implant, so I'm covered. And I've been tested since my las
t partner. You?"

y Relief swept over him. “Yes. I haven’t slept with anyone in a long, long
;time. I’m sorry for taking a chance with you, though. No matter how swep
tup I was in what we were doing, I should have put on a condom. I had one in
. my damn pocket.”

I caressed his tight jaw. “Everything’s fine. If you don’t want to use a
condom with me, I give you permission, so long as I’m your only partner.”

He shook his head hard. “Already told you we’re on the same page with
that. There’s no one else.”

“Then stop worrying.” I circled my legs around his waist and pulled him
toward me. “Hug me, please?”

He swept me into a tight embrace, burying his face in my hair. Ever so
S slowly, the tension seeped out of him, and he relaxed in my arms.

“I want you in my bed.”

My heart stuttered. It went against my nature to deny him, but I had to
“Not while I’m working for you.”

“I know. Still want it.”

“I want it too.”

l He pulled back and pressed a hard kiss on my lips. “I’m gonna leave now
before I can’t.”

He kissed me one more time and walked away.

When I was alone, I had to pinch my arm to make sure I wasn’t dreaming
r How could this possibly be real life? My thighs pressed together, and the
ache between them reminded me it very much was.

I
t

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

JUNE

MY MOTHER CALLED ME for the first time in over a month. Hearing her voice in my ear after complete silence was almost painful.

I'd been in the middle of dinner with Camilo and Diego when her name appeared on my screen. Though it might have been wise to let it go to voice mail, I'd excused myself from the table to take the call.

"Mom?"

"Hi, June. How are you?"

I sank down on my bed, withering internally at the sound of her shaky voice. "I'm doing really well. How are you?"

Her breath hitched. "Oh? Have you found another job?"

It wasn't a surprise that she'd ignored my question. After years with my father, I was pretty certain she'd accepted how she was didn't really matter. *He* was the sun. We were just lucky he occasionally shone his light on us.

"Yes, Mom. I'm nannying for the summer. A friend from grad school put out feelers for practices hiring therapists. Hopefully something will come of that. My fingers are crossed."

“You’re nannying? June, all your education is being wasted. You could have stayed—”

“You know I couldn’t have. I don’t agree with Dad’s way of practicing. Besides, I wasn’t using my education working for him anyway. I was doing what he told me, *despite* my education. Why would you wish that on me?”

She sighed, and all her years of exhaustion were within it. “We don’t have to talk about that. I’d like to see you. I miss seeing you every day. Can we meet for coffee?”

She wouldn’t ask me over for dinner. I probably wasn’t welcome in their house anymore, not that I’d step foot in it.

“No, we can’t. I’m not in New York. I’m in Maryland now.”

^r Her soft gasp struck me straight in the heart. “You moved to a different state without telling us?”

^e “I’m sorry if that hurts your feelings, but I don’t think you should be ^e surprised. You’ve stayed with Dad even though he alienated you from your first daughter. Did you think it wouldn’t happen with me too? It took me a little longer to find the courage to say no more, but I’ve said it, Mom. So long as you’re with him, I can’t see us having a relationship.”

^y I never, ever thought I’d say anything like that to her. She’d always been a loving mother, interested in us girls, always singing to us, teaching us the guitar. But years of oppression had flattened her. Her smiles were few. Her ^y will barely existed. She’d stopped protecting Iris and me years ago. My father could get away with saying the most degrading, horrid things about Iris, and sometimes me, and my mother would just sit there and take it.

^t “June,” she rasped. “You can’t mean that. My sweet June. Please don’t.”

^f She tore me to shreds. It wasn’t her sadness that got to me, though. It was her complete surprise I would walk away from her. I’d been begging her to

choose her daughters and herself for so long, but it had only fallen on deaf ears. And if she couldn't choose me, I had to choose myself.

"I love you, Mom. I love you so much. I just can't be around him anymore and I know he won't let you see me without him. We can pretend you and I could meet for coffee and have a girls' day, but you know he wouldn't allow it."

Her sobs were weak, barely audible. I wondered how she'd snuck away to make this phone call. There wasn't really anything left for us to say to one another besides goodbye, so I did.

I sat on the side of my bed, clutching my phone for a minute or two. I was sad, but I'd resigned myself to this outcome months ago. I'd already mourned my mother and the father I'd never have. Still, grief clung to the corners of my heart like cobwebs. It didn't hurt too much anymore, but it was there.

I wasn't without a family. I wasn't alone. I had my sister and Ronan, who had become a brother to me. And one day, when it was my turn to be a mom, I knew exactly what I wasn't going to do with my kids. I could at least thank my parents for that.

My bedroom door pushed open, and a small voice called out to me through the slowly widening crack. "June? Want to come eat ice cream with me?"

I smiled at the little face peeking at me from the doorway. "Thank you for asking me, Camilo. I really, really do."

We held hands and walked into the kitchen, where a concerned Diego was waiting. I could tell he wanted to ask me about the call, but I shook my head and mouthed, "Later." He brushed his hand over my back and squeezed my nape. My eyes flicked to his. They were dark and heavy on mine. Concern etched lines in his brow.

"I heard there's ice cream," I said.

f He squeezed my nape again. “The rumors are true. I think you deserve the biggest scoop of all for being the best girl in the house.”

, Camilo cackled. “She’s the only girl!”

I Diego’s smile at his son was warm. “But she’s still the best, isn’t she?”

v Camilo nodded and bounced his forehead off my hip. “Yep. June’s the best girl ever, *ever*.”

o “You two know how to make me feel so special.” I cupped the back of Milo’s head. “I think you’re the best boys ever, *ever*, so it’s a good thing we’re all together. It seems like we’re an even match.”

s Diego turned that warm smile on me. “A match for sure.”

d The three of us piled ice cream into our bowls, then I spread a blanket out over the living room rug and we sat together, eating and watching a movie Milo chose.

o It was hard not to lean into Diego. I saw him eyeing me and knew he wanted me to. It had been a little over a week since open mic night, and we’d been slowly figuring out how to be together at night while keeping that separate from everything else.

1 We weren’t doing a great job at it. Today had been one of my days off, and instead of going off and doing my own thing, I’d spent it with the two of them. Diego’s sneaky touches and Milo’s hilarious observations were a lot more fun than spending time on my own.

s “There’s a blanket on the floor because I make a lot of messes.” Camilo said this after dropping a spoonful of ice cream on the floor.

y I tapped my temple. “I’m always thinking, bud. This isn’t my first rodeo.”

1 He snickered. “This isn’t a rodeo.”

Diego was cleaning up his son’s mess when he looked up. “Do you know what a rodeo is?”

e “Yep.” He nodded with confidence. “Ez-wa telled me. There’s cowboy and clowns and horses. Can I go to a rodeo?”

Diego and I exchanged glances. I shrugged. Milo and Ez were major FaceTime friends. They painted along with Bob Ross together. And talked about the rodeo...I guessed.

“I’m sure we can make that happen,” Diego said. “We’d have to go to Texas.”

g Milo whipped around to me. “You can come too. Don’t worry, you don’t have to ride a horse. They only make you watch them.”

I smiled at him even as my stomach twisted. Most likely, by then, I wouldn’t be his nanny anymore. I had no idea if I’d see him when this job was finished. That wasn’t unusual for me. I always worked short-term jobs.

But Milo was different, and not just because I was attached to his father. I cared about him as more than just my charge.

l “We’ll see. Your papá will have to let me know when you go.”

t Diego gave me a look, one that brooked no arguments. “You’ll go with us.”

l “See?” Milo beamed at me. “You’re gonna go with us, June!”

f Changing the subject was easy enough since Milo’s mind went a mile a minute, but I really hoped this little boy wasn’t going to be disappointed in me if what his father promised him didn’t happen.

)



Diego had asked me to wait in his room for him while he put his son to bed. When he walked through the door, his eyes immediately sought me out. I curled up in the oversized armchair in the corner, my skin buzzed.

v

s He came straight for me, scooping me up and sitting down with me in his lap. I circled his neck with my arms, and he held me tight against his chest. I tucked my face in his throat. He buried his nose in my hair. This was how we always ended up, no matter what. Diego gave me the most reassuring, all-encompassing hugs. He chased the bad moments away and made me feel so incredibly safe.

“You wanna tell me why you think you wouldn’t be right by my side when I’m taking my kid to the fuckin’ rodeo?” His rough words were as gentle as a big, gruff man like him could make them.

I A small laugh burst out of me. “I don’t want to assume anything.”

o “Like what?”

. “Like we’ll be together a month or two from now.” I swallowed down my doubts enough to voice my concerns. “I know you’re probably still getting over the loss of Sofia so—”

“The loss of her? Yeah. It was a fucked-up situation that screwed with my head. My love and affection for her? If that’s what you’re thinking, that’s been gone for years, since well before I kicked her out of my house—which by the way, was not *this* house. Sofia doesn’t haunt these walls or my heart. Whatever happens between me and you has nothing to do with her.”

1 “Oh.” I blinked at him. “I thought—after we kissed the first time, you said you were thinking of her.”

“I was. I was thinking of what she’d done to my son, not wishing it was her in my arms. You’re who I want, June. I haven’t been with a woman in years, but I can’t resist you.”

’ “I—I can’t resist you either.”

His mouth twitched. “That, I know. I haven’t forgotten you spying on me in the shower.” When my face flushed, he touched his lips to my hot cheek:

sand pressed me down to his shoulder again. “Now that we’ve settled that, will you tell me about that phone call?”

e It took me a breath or two to switch topics. Mostly because I wanted to take the knowledge that I was the first woman Diego had been with in years and wrap it in a bow as a present for myself. This was real. Whether it would last was another question, but what we had right now mattered.

1 “My mom. That was the first time I’d heard from her since I left my job. She was upset I didn’t tell her I moved.” I slapped a hand on his brick-wall chest. “She is so lost, and I can’t give up any more of myself to try to find her. I delayed my plans to stay with her and work for my dad, and I refuse to do that anymore.”

y He hummed and picked up a lock of my hair, rubbing it between his fingers.

“If I have any say in it, I won’t *let* you do that.”

y That made me smile. “Oh yeah? And how would you enforce that?”

s He tugged on my hair, tipping my head back, a serious intent behind his stare. “Spank your little ass until you agree to start living for yourself. Then I’ll block anyone from your life who tries to hold you back. Don’t care if it’s your mom or a lifelong friend, they don’t get to you if they don’t support you.”

“That’s—”

s “Too much?”

1 I shook my head, clamping my lips together to keep them from wobbling.

He took my chin between his fingers, prying my lips open. “Don’t hide from me, June. That’s not what we’re doing here.”

e I sucked in a breath. “I was going to say you’re intense, but I believe you. And that makes me feel like I have backup because sometimes I need that

It's easy for me to fall back into the pattern of allowing someone else to dictate my life. I don't like to make waves, and I really struggle with disappointing other people. But I've been disappointing myself in the process...

His chest rumbled. He really didn't like that I'd been doing that.

"Everything you want, you're gonna have. I'll be the bad guy for you if that's what it takes. Fuck everyone else."

He had no idea how big of an offer he was making me. It was too big for how new we were. But I wasn't about to argue with him. It was the thought of his desire to be here for me, to push me out of my old, harmful habits, that really struck me to the core.

"I'd like to see the bad guy in you." I bit back another smile. "Out of curiosity."

It took him a beat to catch on that I was teasing him. And asking for him to do more than tease me back.

"Would you now?" he asked lowly, with a dangerous edge.

I nodded. "Please."

He held my face and made sure I was looking at him before he spoke again. "This is not an escape, June. It can't be that."

My lips parted. My heart stuttered. "I'm here with you, Diego. This is you and me. Always, *always*."

A look of satisfaction swept over his serious, ruggedly handsome features before he snapped back into his role. Gone was my understanding lover who guarded my emotions like an attack dog. In his place was my bad boy who was going to show me what he did when his girl stepped out of line.

Diego patted the stuffed arm of the chair. "Bend over right here, baby girl. I think you're being naughty. Maybe you don't believe I mean what I say

oI'm going to show you I always follow through."

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I'm going to show you I always follow through."

CHAPTER THIRTY

JUNE

A THRILL SHOT UP my spine, and I slowly crawled out of Diego's lap. There was no question in my mind or a moment of hesitation in my body to do what Diego had said. He had secured my trust and my submission by proving again and again he deserved it.

I draped myself over the arm of the chair, my upper body resting along the back. Diego rose and ran his hand down my spine to my ass. He grabbed a handful of my flesh, kneading it hard, bordering on pain but never crossing the line. When he touched me like this, with propriety and adoration, my doubts faded so far into the background they didn't matter anymore.

He moved behind me, stealing my breath when he yanked my leggings and panties down to my knees in one rough swoop. I still hadn't regained proper lung function when his palm connected with my ass.

"You think I won't be bad for you, baby girl?" he uttered.

I shook my head. "I don't know."

He spanked me again.

“You sure you don’t know? I think you’re taunting me and it’s adorable. You’re after something from me, aren’t you? A punishment?”

My fingers curled into the cushion. Oh, I wanted this. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Another crack.

I jolted, whimpering from the sting.

“Is my baby girl being a brat? I didn’t think my sweet June was capable.” He slapped my upper thigh then rubbed the burn away before I could really feel it. “But you wanted me to do this to you, didn’t you? Naughty little June.”

Since we were playing this game, I gave in to my vixen side, arching my back and swaying my hips, enticing him to keep going. He growled under his breath and braced a wide hand at the base of my spine.

I was in for it. I did nothing to stop the smile pulling at the corners of my mouth.

Diego spanked me again and again, leaving me gasping and panting and dripping wet between my legs. He found out for himself just how wet I was when he cupped me there and idly fingered my clit. I shuddered, working hard to keep still for him.

“Look at my girl. All pink and slick for me. I don’t know if you’ve seen enough of my bad side.”

“Please,” I begged.

He bent over me, his mouth nipping at my ear. “Please what?”

I twisted my head to see him. “Please, show me more.”

“So sweet,” he breathed. “But so fuckin’ naughty. Don’t move an inch.”

Then he was off me, striding across the room to his nightstand, where he kept my toys, which had become ours. I rose on my toes in anticipation. *A*

.tremor ran through me, and it was almost impossible not to move. I rocked my hips against the chair, hitting my clit once, then again, and moaned from the friction.

He turned around, narrowing his eyes at my shaking body. Whatever he'd chosen from the drawer was tucked in his pockets. I wouldn't know until he was ready to show me.

” “Did you move?” He prowled toward me, and there was a perilous air about him that made my clit throb. His huge, rugged hands twitched at his sides, like he was desperate to get them on me. Internally, I was keening with the same desperation. I wanted him so bad I could taste it.

y “No.” I pushed up on my toes again. The movement was involuntary, but that was no excuse.

“Oh, beautiful, beautiful June.” He dragged his knuckles along the back of my thighs and bottom. “Not only did you move, but you lied to my face. You really are feeling naughty tonight. It's cute as hell. Makes my dick hard. But this behavior is not going to get you what you want, is it?”

s We both knew it was...eventually.

g I shook my head. “Please, please, please.”

He tugged my pants and underwear the rest of the way off and kicked my legs open wide. I felt him drop down behind me, gripping my cheeks to open me up. The flat of his tongue licked me from top to bottom, making my knees weak. The sturdy chair was the only thing keeping me from falling.

Diego buried his face between my thighs. There was no buildup. He didn't tease or play around. He went at me hard, unrelenting, until I was so close to coming, tears pricked my eyes. There was no way he was going to let me have this. Not this soon.

^ He pulled away.

d “Not yet, baby girl. I’ll get you there, but not yet.”

1 Warmth poured down the valley of my ass. My stomach was a whirling dervish. I tried so hard not to tense. I wanted him to be proud of how well I could take whatever he was going to give me.

e Something firm pressed at my back hole. Not a finger. He slid the plug in at a torturously slow pace. It wasn’t a small one, and the stretch pulled a belly-deep moan from me. Soon, he was circling my clit with his fingers to distract me, allowing him to push the plug all the way in.

1 When it was in place, he turned on the vibration, and it was all I could do not to rear back and demand...something. My mind swimming deep in arousal, I wasn’t quite sure what I needed.

Diego knew. His mouth was on me again, sucking my clit between his lips while he played with the plug in my ass. I was overloaded, clawing at the cushions, tears rolling down my cheeks in earnest.

t He smacked the side of my butt cheek. “Come now. Give it to me.” He returned to me, thrusting his tongue inside me. I splintered. The orgasm was violent, ripping into me with such intensity stars blinked in and out of existence behind my eyelids.

y “Good fucking girl,” he murmured against my soaked flesh. “So soft and drenched for me. Can’t get enough of this pussy.”

s He made me feel so wanted and desired I trembled all over. My inside shifted like the aftermath of a massive earthquake. I’d never be the same after Diego Garza. He’d changed me irrevocably. There was no going back to a life of not knowing how good I could have it. I was ruined for anyone else.

e I came until I was sweaty. Over and over again, I cried out Diego’s name. My throat was hoarse from it. My pussy was a swollen, tender mess. But he wasn’t done.

Picking me up, he stripped me of my top and tossed me on the bed. I lay there, boneless, watching my beautiful man remove his clothes. Moments before, I'd believed I couldn't possibly come again, but when he stood over me, massive, naked, powerful, utterly consumed with looking at me beneath him, my head got light, and my pussy pulsed.

a He opened my legs and pulled me to the edge of the mattress. Lining himself up at my entrance, he plunged into me, filling me completely. With the plug in my ass, I felt heavy and incredibly sensitive.

o "That's my good girl." His jaw was tight. His eyes were as dark as I'd ever seen them. "You're so damn tight like this. Your pussy is the best place on earth. I don't need to travel far and wide to know that. I've found it here."

s He lifted my legs up, cuffing my ankles together on one of his shoulders. It seemed impossible, but he went even deeper. So deep my eyes threatened to roll back, but I kept them on him. He didn't have to ask me to; I just knew what he liked me to do.

s Diego tugged on the plug while he continued his deep, long strokes. His eyes were on me. The way he looked at me, like he couldn't believe I was here with him, shot straight to my heart. I touched his face, and he kissed my palm.

"You feel incredible." His teeth dug into the meaty part of my hand.
s "You're doing so well, baby girl."

r My breath caught when he stopped moving to pull the plug all the way out of me and drop it on the floor. I didn't stay empty for long. He pushed his lubed-up fingers into me, pressing against the wall his cock was sliding along.

e I bucked and mewled, grasping for purchase on the sheets. He was so perfect at this, playing my body like he knew it better than I did. Like he'd

ystudied it for years and years to become an expert. My pleasure was
sparamount to him. He showed me that each time we were together.

r Slowly, his cock retreated from my pussy and his fingers left my ass
1Seconds passed. I was achingly, torturously empty. Diego never stopped
touching me, though, reassuring me I was doing so well, rubbing more lub
gon himself and on me. His cock nudged at my back hole. He'd gotten me so
1ready for him he worked his way in without a struggle.

I gasped when he was all the way in. There was nothing like this feeling
rFull, yet so incredibly carnal. My heart thrashed, and I squeezed out a raspy
1cry.

“Look at you, baby girl.” He leaned forward, scooping up the back of my
thead so I could see him sliding into me. The sight of his hips flexing and
obody disappearing into mine was utterly erotic. “Do you know what you do
vto me? You make me thankful to be alive. You make me want to kiss every
fuckin’ inch of you for giving me this bliss, baby. God, I love your body.”

s He let my head drop and cupped my tit, rubbing his thumb over my nipple
sThen he swung us around so he was sitting on the bed with me in his lap, hi
ycock lodged so deep inside me I felt him in my belly.

His mouth took mine. We kissed sweetly while he fucked me slow and
.dirty. It was perfect. My clit rubbed his pelvis, and he told me I could come
as many times as I wanted.

t So I did.

s Diego never stopped kissing me. Even when he was grunting, fucking into
gme, becoming more and more frenzied, his mouth never left mine. His finger
dug into my cheeks, pushing me down on him roughly, but his lips were
oreverent, careful. I was fluttering, in my heart, my pussy, everywhere.

1 Diego let loose inside me. He roared into my mouth while his cocl

emptied into my ass. We were locked around each other. My legs and arms circled him. He held me to him, suckling my lips as he throbbed inside me.

After long minutes of catching our breath, he carried me to the shower and cleaned me. His fingers delved into my hair, massaging shampoo into my scalp. He kept my conditioner in his shower now, and he knew to pull it through to the ends because I never had to wash my own hair when Diego was around.

When he was finished with me, I washed him from his head to his feet. I knelt in front of him, kissing his powerful thighs, and ran a washcloth over each of his toes. Then I took care of his cock. It hadn't gotten soft, but now it was thick and jutting proudly from his body. I couldn't resist closing my mouth over the tip of him.

With a groan, he held my head while I gently sucked him. But he didn't let me go for long. Hands under my arms lifted me, and he pressed me to the shower wall, thrusting into me.

“Love your ass, but I missed coming in your pussy.” His brow furrowed as she plunged in deep. “Gonna make up for that now.”

He fucked me so good against the tiles, drawing out another orgasm. I'd lost count of how many he'd given me. I was limp from all of them yet still yearned for this man.

We were grappling hands and frenzied kisses. Skin slapped skin. Our moans echoed off the walls. We weren't playing roles or following rules. This was us, June and Diego, two people who simply could not get enough of each other.

When he came, he held me tight and dropped his head to my shoulder. His breaths were hotter than the water. Minutes passed before he lifted his head and turned the shower off.

s Diego wrapped me up in a big bath sheet before drying himself. Then he
stood me in front of the vanity and combed all the tangles from my hair.
Once he was satisfied, he spun me around and slid his palms along my jaw.

γ “I want you to stay with me tonight. There’s no way I can send you back to
your bed.”

ο My heart leapt, but I was far too cautious to give in. “You know I can’t
We have to be deliberate with what we’re doing.”

Ι “I don’t like that answer.”

ρ I waited as he scowled at me, knowing his instinct to protect his son would
kick in soon.

γ He released a heavy sigh. “Fuck, June. I know you’re right. Just a few
more weeks until you’re not his nanny.”

τ “Right. Then we’ll figure this out.” I slipped my hand into his. “Walk me
to my room and kiss me good night?”

He chuffed but squeezed my hand. “I’m gonna do it, but I’m not pleased
about it.”

I didn’t say it, but his displeasure at letting me go, even for one night
pleased *me* to absolutely no end.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

DIEGO

BAD DAYS WEREN'T SO bad when I got to come home to the sounds of my boy laughing and my nanny doing a goofy-ass dance for him while dinner was cooking in the oven.

The minute they caught sight of me, Milo attacked me with a fierce hug and June offered a smile that held promises for later. We'd been together for over a month now. Her time here was dwindling. Not that I was going to let her leave if I could help it. We'd have to figure out what her staying would look like, and we would.

When it was dinnertime, she didn't disappear into her bedroom like she used to. We had three place mats on our table permanently. Adding June to our mealtimes had been as easy as breathing. Everything with her was.

I'd never had anything like this. Still wasn't sure if I deserved it. But I couldn't see myself willingly giving June up. If she wanted to go, she'd have to be the one to cut the ties. It wasn't going to be me.

After I put Milo to bed, I joined my girl in the living room. She was cuddled up in the corner of the couch, sipping tea. I sat beside her, claiming

her bare thigh with my hand.

She rubbed the space between my eyebrows with her fingertip. “You had a bad day.”

I tipped my head back, breathing out my frustrations at the ceiling. “I got sent the wrong part for the ’Cuda. It’s the second time now. I’m going to have to drive down to Virginia tomorrow and pick up the correct one myself. It’s hours out of my day off I could be spending doing shit that needs to be done around here. Or spending time with Milo and you.”

“I’m sorry.” I heard the clank of her mug being set on the coffee table then her warm lips touched my throat. “Do you want me to watch him while you’re gone tomorrow?”

“No.” I tugged her onto my lap and circled my arms around her waist. “He’s gonna hang out with Eli and Alicia. You want to go with me?”

“Yes. I’d love to.”

She smiled into my neck, and my heart went *thunk*. It was such a hard unexpected knock on my chest I had to pause and take a few breaths. She could be the death of me with how easy she was. And it wasn’t like she didn’t have a backbone. She did. It was stronger than she even acknowledged. But surrounding that steel was this kind of softness I’d never known.

“Hell yeah.” I raised her hand and shook it in celebration. “We’re going on a road trip.”

She laughed and pressed her hand to my cheek. “One condition: I have to be in charge of the playlist.”

I dropped her hand, my lip curled. “Never mind then. I’ll go on my own.”

She slapped at my chest. “Rude.”

I couldn’t even pretend to be mad at her. Dipping my head to bury my face in her silky hair, I mumbled, “Sorry, baby. You can play all the Florence you

want.”

a “That’s better.” She stroked my cheek some more, and my bad day completely slipped away while we sat there, quiet and comfortable.

t “I heard from my friend Cora today.”

o “Yeah?”

. “She put me in contact with two therapy practices that are very interested in me.”

My stomach curdled. “In New York?”

1 “One is in New York.” Dread struck me so hard I stopped breathing. “One is in Maryland. Actually, about twenty minutes from here. They both want to meet me.”

. I lifted my head. Her expression was wary. She was waiting for me to react. I had to school the panic waging war inside me. I would not be another motherfucker trying to dictate her life. She was only going to receive support from me.

1 “Of course they do, baby. I’m not surprised you’ve got two practices after you. What shocks me is they’ve taken this long.”

t She chewed on her bottom lip, her eyes darting around my face. I tampered down the urge to tell her to fuck New York. If that was the best opportunity for her, I wasn’t going to hold her back. I’d promised that, and as much as it clawed at me, I had to keep that promise.

o “Thank you.” Her eyes skated over my face one more time before she sighed and laid her head on my shoulder.



e We got on the road early. Our destination was two and a half hours each way
1 June packed snacks and coffee for me, tea for herself. That came as no

surprise, but it affected me, like everything else she did.

y She'd swept her dark waves into a ponytail and wore casual jean shorts and a tank. Her sandals were kicked off, pretty feet resting on my dash. I wondered, not for the first time, how I'd been able to look past her the time we'd met before. Now, I couldn't look away from her. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, and that wasn't an exaggeration. Her face, her body, the way she moved, her expressions, the sound of her voice and gentle demeanor, all of it stupefied me.

e I couldn't stop myself from thinking she was making a mistake with me. She thought I was something other than what I was. If she uncovered the truth, she'd be gone before I could blink.

o But she might be gone before that even happened if she took the New York job.

t My hands tightened on the steering wheel.

We'd driven into the heart of Virginia, past the areas close to Washington DC, into the parts that were a little more rural, less affluent, where strip malls were all off-brand grocery stores and Dollar Generals.

d I picked up the part I needed with no trouble, but I wasn't in a hurry to get back, so I drove around the smaller back roads.

t "I lived around here for a while when my mom was alive."

She turned toward me. "You did? I didn't know that."

e There was an urge in me to show her who I was. Maybe it was a test, I didn't know. But I pulled off onto a crumbling, broke-down road that narrowed to barely two lanes.

"It was down here. I haven't been back since I was in my early twenties. I came to see this place when we signed our first record deal. She wasn't here

o

She'd been dead for over a decade by then. But I still wanted to show this place I'd made it out."

I June reached out to squeeze my taut forearm. "How did that make you feel?"

t "Nothing. I felt empty. I got out of my car and pissed on the sign for our old trailer park. Then I drove to the nearest bar and got so shitfaced I had to sleep it off in my back seat."

June didn't flinch. She didn't stop holding on to me. She wasn't fazed, at least not visibly.

e Then again, my girl was trained to listen to screwed-up stories and keep herself neutral. This was her profession. My ugly might not have scared her but that didn't mean she'd want to be around it once she saw the raw, gritty truth of it.

When the sign for the last trailer park I'd lived in with my mother came into view, I pulled over in the gravel on the side of the road. My chest was tight. My breathing had become shallow.

"This is it?" June asked.

t "Yeah. Piece of shit, huh?"

"It looks like a sad place to have to live." She put her hand on her door.

"Should we go look around?"

I stared at her, taking a minute to process what she'd asked. "You want to look around?"

t "You wanted to show me this, didn't you?"

I had. But I really hadn't thought through what that would mean. The idea of June setting foot here...

. She was already out the door before I could tell her no. With her hand tucked in her pockets, she walked over to the sign marking *Pot O' Gold*

s *Campground and Trailer Park*. Whoever had been in charge of naming this place had had a sick sense of humor.

1 June leaned forward, reading the sign, then turned back to me, waving me over to her.

r I climbed out, boots crunching on the gravel, and strode to her, taking her around the waist.

“You don’t belong here.”

t She pressed a hand to my chest. “Neither do you. You never did.”

I scoffed. “You don’t know all the shit I’ve pulled, baby. I most certainly belonged here.”

; “Then tell me. Show me where you lived. I want to know you.”

y She asked, I gave. That was how I was with her. This was what I wanted her to see, even though revealing this side of me was a sharp jab to the solar plexus.

s The trailers in *Pot O’ Gold* had to be fifty years old. They were all metal and rust, more broken windows than whole. A few men were outside one sitting around in lawn chairs just as rusty as the homes. I steered June away from them. If they spoke to her, even looked at her, I couldn’t guarantee I could keep my cool.

I pointed to the spot where our trailer had been. Now, it was nothing but weeds and cinder blocks.

“That’s where our trailer was. It looked just like the others so you get the idea.” I turned to the thick bamboo lining this side of the park. “I used to hide in there. Sometimes for a couple days. I didn’t like being inside. Got used to not eating for long stretches. Nobody bothered me when I was out there.”

s “What else did you do?”

l I frowned at her. “Why aren’t you shocked?”

s “You told me you were feral when you came to Eli and Alicia. I had an idea of what that meant, Diego. I’m not shocked, but I’m...” She pulled her lips between her teeth. “I’m devastated for you that sitting in a bamboo jungle was a better choice than going home.”

r “My mother was an addict. She did anything she could for a hit. She brought men home. Didn’t give a shit if I was there to witness it or not. Sometimes I think she forgot she had a kid. I had to stop going to school in third grade because my shoes had basically disintegrated. Took a month for my mom to finally buy me new ones. I’d missed so much that year I had to repeat the grade.”

She wove her fingers between mine and leaned into me. No trite words, no talk about how I’d risen above. She was simply there. Showing me in no uncertain terms she was by my side.

It made me want to shake her. Didn’t she see?

l “I saw all that growing up, and do you think I hesitated when I took my first bump? You think I thought of my mom when I swallowed a handful of pills so I could float? Nah. I wanted it, so I did it. There was a time I fucking loved it. I could have lost everything, and I still would have loved it. I never understood my mother better than in those days. Nothing mattered more than my next high.”

She pressed her face to my arm. “Did you still understand her once Camille was born?”

e One question. That was all it took to undo me. The anger I’d been raveling around and around in my gut came loose. My head fell forward, and I exhaled all of it, leaving me feeling husked out. A gust of wind could have blown me away. Fitting, since trailer parks weren’t known to hold up well under

nextreme weather. This one would probably withstand a nuclear blast. It'd be cockroaches and the *Pot O' Gold* left at the end of the world.

o June hugged me around my middle. "I know you don't. How could anyone choose themselves over their child? You would never. I know what that's like. My parents *never* chose me. That's not who you are, Diego. You will never be that."

1 Her confidence in me was fierce. So fierce I wanted to believe her. But she didn't know how sick I'd been. She hadn't witnessed the way I'd let my addiction rule me.

I curled my arms around her. "You didn't see me back then, baby."

o "But I see you now. Don't you see yourself?"

o Something strangled came out of me. A sound I'd never made before. Like something dying. Or trying to live. One or the other. Or maybe it was the same thing.

y "Sometimes I don't," I admitted.

f "This place isn't you. It's a memory, but it's not who you are. Look around 'if you want because you're not coming back here. I won't be happy with you 'rif I find out you do."

1 I cupped her cheeks to examine her face. Her puffy pink lips were drawn down, brows winged up in twin slashes. She was pissed off and beautiful.

o "Let's get outta here, baby girl. I don't want you here another second."

June took my hand and pulled me toward the entrance. When we got to the sign, she paused, turned, and kicked it.

l "Fuck you, *Pot O' Gold*," she spat harshly, giving it another kick.

e A part of me that had been tied up and contained slipped free at the sight of my delicate girlfriend letting her righteous outrage loose. June was telling me I was allowed to show how much I hated this place. I'd been a kid, living in

hell, and I hadn't deserved it. It'd happened, though. I couldn't scream at my mother for letting it, but I could beat the shit out of this sign.

"Fuck you, *Pot O' Gold*," I echoed. Then I drew my foot back and slammed my boot into the center of the sign. It rattled, and I went at it again and again until the thick chunk of rotted wood cracked down the middle.
"Fuck you!"

June charged forward, kicked it one more time in the same spot I had, and it broke clean in half, both sides hanging from the posts they were attached to.

Her eyes went wide. Mine did too. I hadn't expected her to do that.

"Uh...should we run?" she asked weakly.

Laughter poured out of me. I scooped her into my arms, carting her around the truck to the passenger side. "You're a criminal, baby."

She tipped her head back, laughing with me. "They had it comin'!" she cried.

My chest swelled. It was almost suffocating. All I could do to relieve it was crash my mouth against hers. She moaned, and her fingers tangled in the back of my hair. We went hard at each other, nipping, sucking. My tongue slid into her mouth, claiming her sweetness, licking her all over.

Her legs were wrapped around my waist, her back pinned to the truck. No one was driving by. I could have taken her right there. But I'd never do that. Not here. Not in this place. Not my June.

I was out of breath when I tore myself away. June's eyes were glazed. Her lips were swollen. It was all I could do not to dip down and take another taste.

"We better go before they lock us up," I rasped.

"I can't believe I did that," she whispered.

y I touched my lips to hers and grinned. “I can’t either, but I fuckin’ love tha
you did.”

d

1

We stopped for something to eat on the drive back. It wasn’t a mealtime, so
the place was pretty deserted, which was good. I wasn’t in the mood to be
civil to anyone besides my girl and *maybe* a waitress if she wasn’t too chatty.

d

d

I ended up ordering a burger while June had apple pie and ice cream. She
was kind of a health nut, so that said a lot about her mood.

“You’re upset.”

Her eyes flicked to mine. “I knew. But seeing it is something different.
I want to go back in time to carry you out of the bamboo and tell you
everything will be all right. It makes me feel utterly helpless that I can’t.”

d

e

“Nah. No helping that kid anymore. But you’re gonna be helping a lot o
other kids. You’re gonna do a lot. I’m pretty proud to know you.”

t

e

She reached across the linoleum table, her fingers hooking around mine. “
feel the same way. Look how far you’ve come.”

e

e

I started to protest, to tell her I was still a dirtbag beneath the money and
nice house, but she held up her hand, stopping me before I could get a word
out. She probably had an idea of what I’d been about to say.

y

..

“Don’t try it with me. I’m on edge and feeling a little violent. If you try to
say something negative about yourself, I can’t promise you won’t get ice
cream flung at you.”

r

r

My chest went so tight I rubbed it. No idea what that was about. Probably
my body telling me to chill the hell out.

“All right, baby. I’ll be quiet. I don’t want ice cream on my head. You
could put some in my mouth, though. I’d like that.”

t Her eyes brightened, and she let go of my head to scoop a pile of ice cream onto her spoon. She leaned across the table, and I bent forward, opening my mouth. The spoon hit my tongue and I closed my lips as she slid it back out.

I hummed, and she raised a brow. “Good?”

o “Mm.” I patted the bench beside me. “Come over here. Don’t know why
e you’re all the way across from me anyway.”

June pushed her plate to my side of the table then slipped out of her seat to
e join me. I tugged her close, my hand going to her thigh. We shared her pie and I taught her the joy of dunking french fries in ice cream.

We lingered there, bumping shoulders, eating all the scraps on our plates
I After the trailer park, it seemed almost impossible to feel light, but I did. O
l as close to it as I got.

June sighed and rested her chin against my bicep. “Should we go home?”

f I turned my head and looked at her. So damn pretty, and for now, she wa
all mine. She’d stuck through some of my ugly. Maybe she’d stick through
I more of it.

“Yeah, baby. Let’s go home.”

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I turned my head and looked at her. So damn pretty, and for now, she was all mine. She’d stuck through some of my ugly. Maybe she’d stick through more of it.

“Yeah, baby. Let’s go home.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

JUNE

IT WAS A STRANGE feeling to be where I wanted, but not know where I stood.

I'd just had the best interview of my life. The practice outside Baltimore was exactly what I'd been dreaming of. Their philosophy matched mine, and the therapists I'd spoken to were thrilled about being able to offer music therapy if I joined them.

They would be sending their offer to me this evening, and I would have a week to give them an answer. I almost couldn't believe this was real.

But I had an interview scheduled in New York next week. As much as I loved the practice here—and god, I *loved* it—I wasn't certain I would stay.

Because I wasn't certain Diego wanted me to.

Before he and I became a couple, I'd been considering relocating here after my nanny position ended. Now...I didn't think I could live here and not have him.

Since our drive to Virginia a week ago, we'd been close. Each night, it became more and more impossible to pull myself away and sleep in my own

bed. But I had one more week as Camilo's nanny then...

We'd figure it out.

Hopefully.

Diego hadn't once asked me to stay. When I told him about the two practices interested in me, he hadn't voiced an opinion either way. And when I left for my interview today, he'd kissed my forehead and wished me luck. That was it, which was strange since Diego had very precise opinions about everything else—especially when it came to me.



Alicia was at her mailbox when I pulled into the driveway next door. She saw me and waved me over.

“Hey, June Bug,” she greeted, pulling me into a hug. “The servers are down at my office so I treated myself to a half day.”

d “Lucky you.”

c “That's right. And Eli's fishing with Milo. I get the house all to myself.”

She looked me over.

a “Well, you look really professional.” I wasn't in anything fancy, but supposed trousers were a big step up from my usual yoga pants and T-shirts. I “Come inside. Have a drink with me and tell me about it.”

I followed her into the house, happy to kick off my heels beside Alicia's and take a seat at her massive kitchen island. She poured us glasses of iced tea and set out a bowl of kettle corn before sitting beside me. Twisting her head, she propped her arm on the island.

“Where did you come from, all dressed up like this?” she asked.

t “A job interview.”

1 “Oh?” She raised a brow. “Well, let's hear it. Tell me all about it.”

I guessed I'd been eager to rehash the details because everything poured out of me. Alicia listened like she was truly interested, nodding and making little noises. By the time I finished speaking, I'd told her the names of the therapists, the paint colors of the walls, and even the route my GPS had taken me.

Alicia leaned forward and took my cheeks in her hands, grinning at me. "Oh my god, that sounds amazing, honey. And it's here, which means you're staying."

My heart stuttered. "I haven't accepted the job yet. And I don't know if I'll stay. I'd have to find a place to live and—"

Her head tilted. "You wouldn't live with Diego? I'd assumed..."

"Well, no. We're together, but it's too soon to live together as a couple, I think. Not that I've discussed it with him..."

Alicia let go of my face to clap her hands together. "Okay. I've got the perfect solution. *When*"—she raised a brow, challenging me to argue with her—"you accept the job, you can live in our pool house. It's perfect. There's even a mini kitchen, so it's essentially an apartment. And you'll be right next door to your man. You can sneak across the lawn to give him a good-night kiss."

She winked at that. When I didn't say anything, she took my hand and pulled me to my feet. Before I knew it, I was outside, skirting around the pool, heading to the small house tucked on the other side.

Alicia pushed open the door and shepherded me inside.

"See?" She bumped my shoulder with hers. "Isn't it so cute? We'd need to add a bed, but all the furniture is pretty much new. What do you think honey? Could you live here?"

My eyes were misty, and I couldn't seem to look at Alicia. Or answer her

with the knot in my throat. This place was so cute. I could absolutely see myself living here. I'd be lucky to live in this sunny, pristine little house, a stone's throw from people I cared about.

1 "I love it," I finally squeezed out.

"Good. I knew you would." She fanned her face. "And if you don't stop with the emotions, I'm going to start crying myself. You've never seen an ugly crier until you've seen me. Let's save us both the embarrassment okay?"

1 Laughing, I let her lead me around the space, pointing out closets and outlets. It really was the perfect little place for me.

Alicia spun around, her hands clasped under her chin. "It just dawned on me, this means you'll be here for my birthday in September. I always have a big 'do, starting with an all-day tamale-making session—women only at the *tamalada*. So you'll be there, naturally."

r My laugh was a nervous one. "I have no idea how to make a tamale."

s "Don't worry yourself about that. You'll know by the time you roll your fiftieth one of the day."

t



1 Alicia sent me home with a freezer bag filled with tamales from the last time
2 she made a batch. My head was whirling with possibilities when I let myself
3 inside. I wouldn't let myself get excited about the pool house. Because there
4 was absolutely no way I could live next door if Diego didn't want me around
5 long term.

6 I was placing the tamales in the freezer when the patio door opened.
7 I turned around, locking eyes with Diego. He didn't smile, which made me
8 nervous. My back pressed against the fridge.

r

e “Hey.”

a I brought my hands together in front of me. I hadn’t been nervous around him in a long time, but suddenly, I was.

“Hi.”

o “I thought you’d be back sooner.” He came into the kitchen, stopping at the sink to wash his hands. “I was coming in to text you.”

; “Alicia waylaid me when I pulled into the driveway.”

He shut off the water and turned around, his butt propped on the counter as he dried his hands.

“She’ll do that.” He took a long, slow perusal of me, landing on my face. We were across the kitchen from each other, neither of us breaching the gap.

a “I heard Milo’s fishing.”

e He huffed. “Yeah. Eli got an itch to take him. I couldn’t say no to that.” His gaze lowered, landing somewhere around my middle.

I looked down, finding the hem of my shirt wound around my hand—my old nervous habit.

Before I knew it, Diego was in front of me, unwinding the fabric from my fingers and smoothing it down on my stomach. Inhaling a gasp, my eye flicked to his.

e “Why are you acting like a stranger?” he grumbled.

f “You are too.”

e “I’m feeding off you.” His brow furrowed. “Why aren’t you telling me about your interview?”

“You didn’t ask. I wasn’t sure you’d want to know.”

I He stepped away from me and threw out his arms. “You weren’t sure? What gave you the impression I don’t want to know every single detail of your life?”

My chin wobbled, but I stiffened my spine. “You haven’t asked me anything, that’s what. I told you about the interview, and you barely gave me a ‘good luck.’ That’s why I didn’t think you’d want to know. My time is winding down here so I thought—”

He slammed his hand down on the counter. “Don’t you dare say you thought I was letting you go.”

I rocked back, hitting the fridge. “I don’t know, Diego. You haven’t said a single thing about what’s going to happen when this job ends.” I licked my lips and took a deep breath, reminding myself to stay calm. “You’ve only said we’ll figure it out. Well, Camilo’s starting preschool next week, which means I’m not going to be his nanny anymore. When will we be figuring this out?”

His jaw twitched as he stared at me, hands braced on the counter like he was preparing himself to move.

And move fast.

“I’m trying to be fair to you, June.”

I jerked at that. “What does that mean?”

“You’re finally free to decide your future. I’m not going to stand in the way of what you choose to do. You’re in control.”

I swiped at a stray strand of hair on my forehead. “I know I’m in control and I know what I *want* to do. But I really need to hear from you. I have to know what *you* want.”

His chin lowered. “So, you’ve decided?”

“Almost.”

When he didn’t speak right away, I rushed to fill the silence. “If you want me to go, I will. But you have to tell me that.”

He pulled up tight, inhaling sharply through his nose. “Didn’t I tell you no

to say anything about me letting you go? I'm *not* letting you go. I've been standing back. If you really want me to be honest, I'll be real fuckin' blunt. You go to New York, you stay here, you're mine. If I have to travel two hundred miles every week to see you, I'm going to be grumpy as hell about it, but I'm going to do it. We're not ending on the last day of your job here. As far as I'm concerned, we're only getting started. If I had my way, your little ass would be in my bed every night. That won't be possible if you're living in another state, but we'll make do because you deserve to pursue your dream, wherever that may be."

It was a good thing the fridge was at my back because my knees had liquefied. Diego had taken a lot of my "nevers" and flipped them into "never agains." I'd never been put first this way, and I'd never again question whether he wanted me here.

I approached him slowly. He watched me from under a heavy brow wariness pulling at his features. He was just as lost as I'd been, but he'd see me straight. Now it was my turn.

I placed my hand on his arm, sliding it up to the crook of his elbow until I could pick it up to slip inside the cage he'd made with his grip on the counter.

"The interview went so well, I almost can't believe it. They're sending me an official offer this evening and I have a week to respond." I cupped the sides of his neck, brushing my thumbs over his tense jaw. "I would want it even if you and Camilo weren't here, but you are, so that makes me want it tenfold. And Alicia offered me the pool house so I could be close and—"

Diego's chest rumbled. "You're giving me you then taking you away in the next breath?"

I rose up on my tiptoes to kiss his chin. "I'm still giving you me, but it's too soon for us to live together."

1 “We live together now.”

2 “Not the same.”

3 He exhaled a harsh breath. His forehead lowered to mine. “You’re
tstaying?”

4 I nodded. “I was thinking of canceling the New York interview.”

5 “Then you should. Cancel the fuck out of it.” His fingers dug into my hair
6 tipping my head back. “I’m still angry you’ve been keeping this from me
7 June. If you were feeling unsure, you should have told me. I would have
8 made it better. You asked me to care for you, but I can’t do that right unless
9 you tell me. Got it?”

10 “I’ll try to, but it’s not easy to get over a lifetime of pushing my feelings
11 aside. It’s my instinct to try to read other people’s feelings first before
12 express my own.”

13 “I know, but you don’t have to do that with me. You’re safe with me.
14 I need you to talk to me.”

15 I rose up on my tiptoes, bringing my mouth to his. “Can you kiss me now?
16 That’s what I need.”

17 “I will.” His lips grazed mine. “But not yet.”

18 He backed away from the counter, watching me with hooded eyes as he
19 kept distance between us. “Follow me,” he said lowly.

20 I trailed behind him into the living room. He stopped and turned around.
21 I stood still, my hands clasped in front of me.

22 He nodded to the rug covering the hardwood floor. “Crawl to me.”

23 I dropped to my knees, lowered my head in supplication, and crawled. He
24 backed away from me, all the way to the other side of the wide rug. When
25 I finally got to him, I knelt at his feet. Fingertips trailed along my jaw. A wide

palm smoothed down the back of my head. Diego circled around to my back crouching behind me, his mouth to my ear.

e “It’s my job to take care of your needs, isn’t it?” he murmured.

“Yes.”

“You needed me to reassure you I wanted you here with me.” He tugged on the hem of my shirt, dragging his knuckles along my newly exposed skin.

, I nodded. “Yes.”

e “Did you mess up by not telling me what you needed?”

s “I did.” He tapped my shoulder, and I lifted my arms up so he could pull my shirt over my head.

s “Will you do that again?” My bra came unhooked, straps sliding to the crook of my elbows.

“No.”

I He reached around me and cupped my breast, his thumb playing with the hardened peak. “I don’t know if I believe that, June. I’m going to show you how important it is for you to use your words with me. Go upstairs, take off the rest of your clothes, and lie down on my bed.”

I scrambled to my feet, my pussy throbbing with each step I took. I loved when Diego got just a little bit angry at me. He took it out on me in the exact way that drove me to ecstasy.

I I stripped down and lay on his bed, shaking with anticipation as I waited. Even though I was already going wild with need, I didn’t dare rub my thighs together to find relief.

e Diego filled the doorway after several interminable minutes. He strode to the side of the bed, drawing out the cuffs he’d installed for me, which he kept well hidden when not in use. Without saying a word, he strapped both my wrists and ankles to his bed.

; I was at his mercy.

I whimpered when he didn't touch me. He didn't say a single word. He sat on the edge of the bed, watching me, his chest rising and falling in a slow calm cadence.

d "Diego," I whispered.

"Baby girl."

"Please."

"Please what?"

l "Touch me."

He lifted his hand and drew a line down the underside of my arm. "Like that?"

"More please."

He made a circle with his finger on my elbow. "That?"

e "More."

1 His head cocked. "I need you to use your words, baby."

f I bit down on my lip. I wasn't used to this with him. He gave me what he thought I needed, and he was always right because I always wanted whatever he gave me.

t This was a game. A lesson. I had to tell him what I needed this time.

"I need my pussy filled. I want your mouth on me. Please, please, please."

l. His mouth twitched. "Was that so difficult? Good girls get what they ask for."

He rose from the bed, dragging his shirt over his head and kicking off his pants. Saliva pooled in my mouth as I raked my eyes over his sinewy tattooed back, the curve of his muscular ass encased in tight cotton, his strong thighs. He opened the drawer of his bedside table, palming something so

couldn't see, then climbed between my legs, sliding his other hand up the inside and running his thumb along my slit.

5, “Pretty little wet pussy needs filling, does it?” My eyes were stuck on his. I didn't notice what he'd been hiding until it slid into me. My mouth fell open when the vibrations started, first inside me, then on my clit. “You like that?”

I nodded. This wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind, but I couldn't think straight enough to express that. I arched my back, hoping to draw him down to me, then I remembered I was supposed to be speaking.

“Please, will you kiss me?”

6 e He smiled at me like I was the most perfect creature to ever walk the earth.

“I would love to, my precious girl.” He stretched over me, his elbow braced beside my head, the other arm snaking between us to thrust the vibrator in and out of me. “So pretty, my June.”

Diego kissed me gently, his tongue mapping the inside of my mouth. He took his time, licking me and twining his tongue with mine. I couldn't stand it. I was close to coming, but my hands were strapped and his mouth covered mine in searing kisses, removing my ability to ask for permission. Giving in, I kissed him and kissed him until it was too late. My insides clenched, my belly flooded with heat, and I came hard and fast, moaning against Diego's lips.

7 k He pulled back, watching me writhe beneath him.

“Diego,” I cried, wishing I could reach for him. I kept spiraling in a whirlpool of pleasure, and there was no stopping it.

8, “That's a girl,” he gruffed at me. “Look at you.”

9 g One orgasm rolled into another, and I bit down on my bottom lip to stop myself from screaming. The vibrations were so intense. I was losing my mind. My hips rose and plummeted, but there was no escaping it.

e “Diego, please.”

“Anything, baby.”

I I couldn’t get the words out. I wasn’t certain what I could ask for from him. I had to think, but thinking was impossible when he was over me relentlessly fucking me with my vibrator, sucking on my skin, watching my every movement. He filled my senses and my head. My world narrowed to this man and the places he was touching me. All at once, it was too much and not nearly enough.

He kissed me again, and I lost the voice I didn’t know how to use. I had never been so helpless with Diego. I arched my body and squirmed beneath him, my eyes squeezing tight as another wave of pleasure pulled me under. I was drowning in it. Tears flowed down my cheeks. Whether they were from desire or frustration, I couldn’t say. All of it was wrapped up in one.

e The vibrator clicked off and slid out of me. Diego hovered over me kissing my wet cheeks until they were dry.

l “Say it, baby girl,” he husked.

, I sniffled, turning my head away from him, raw and exposed, but I needed this, and so did he. “Tell me you want to keep me, please.”

s “I want to keep you, June. If you left, I would follow you, throw you over my shoulder, and bring you right back.”

“I don’t want to leave.”

a “I know that now.” His lips touched mine. “What do you want?”

“You.”

His fingers trailed over my swollen pussy, dipping inside. “Here?”

o “Yes. Everywhere.”

y He removed his fingers, trailing his hand up the curve of my waist, along my ribs, to my breast, kneading it with firm pressure. The tip of his cock

nudged at my entrance, and I moved so we were perfectly aligned. His entry was unhurried. A slow slide over achingly alive nerves. Halfway in, he released a guttural groan and lost control, fully seating himself inside me in a long, smooth thrust.

“Jesus, your body is made to take mine. I swear to god, baby girl, we were designed for each other. You think I’d ever walk away from this?”

He stared down at me, helpless, bound to his bed like he was still trying to convince me not to leave. His hooded eyes were filled with possession. I felt like I was his.

“Mine.” He dipped his head and sucked on the crook of my neck hard enough to leave marks.

I should have cared, but I didn’t. He needed it after the distance between us over the last week. After all Diego had freely given me, it was my pleasure to fulfill his needs. Tilting my head to the side, I gave him the room to claim me exactly as he wanted.

I’d already claimed him in my heart when he told me he wanted me to stay.

Later, after Diego had taken his time cleaning me up and putting me in one of his T-shirts, we lay in his bed together. We didn’t have much time. Milk would be home soon. But we grabbed on to what we had with greedy hands.

His fingers stroked through my hair while I rested my head on his chest.

“Like that you included my boy as a reason to live down here,” he murmured.

“Of course I did. I love him.”

His fingers stilled in my hair. “Yeah?”

“Mmhmm. He’s impossible not to love.”

y “What about his dad?”

e I stopped breathing. Why was he putting me on the spot like this? Was i
a part of my punishment?

Diego gave me a little shake then pulled me up from his chest so we were
nose to nose. His thumb pressed on my bottom lip, eyes darting between
mine.

o “I’m in love with you, June.”

t My mouth slipped into a wide grin. My heart went wild, dancing and
flipping until I was dizzy from it.

l “I’m in love with you too, Diego.”

His nostrils flared. “Good. And I’m not going to ask how long you’ve
known you felt that way and kept it from me. We don’t have the time for me
to redden your little secretive ass right now, so I’m just gonna kiss you until
my boy gets home.”

“I’m on board with that.”

o

e

o

e

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“I’m on board with that.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

DIEGO

JUNE HAD BEEN IN New York for two days without me, settling up her life so she could officially move. She'd waited for Camilo's first day of preschool to leave, wanting to see him off with me.

Sometimes her care for him was a dagger to my chest. His own mother couldn't get her shit together for him. If Sofia were alive, I wouldn't have been able to count on her showing for Milo's first day of school. She might have promised it, but her promises had always meant jack.

In the end, there was really no comparison between Sofia and June, so I didn't bother wasting my time trying.

The door to Iris and Ronan's apartment swung open before I could bring my fist up to knock. There she was. My beautiful girl standing right in front of me.

"Why aren't you in my arms?" I gruffed.

She threw herself at me, and I caught her, lifting her up to bury my face in her dark waves. Her legs and arms were wrapped around me as I walked up inside, kicking the door closed behind me.

I patted her butt. “Missed you, baby girl.”

“Missed you too.” Her lips touched my neck. “I’m happy you’re here.”

“God, am I happy to be here.”

A throat cleared from down the entry hall. I pulled my face from June’s hair to find her smirking sister watching us. I raised a brow at her challenging her to try to take my girl from me. She just shook her head and walked off, giving us the time we needed.

Eventually, I put June on her feet, and we ventured into the living room where Iris and Ronan were hanging. Once I shook Ronan’s hand and greeted Iris, June made me sit down while she grabbed me something to drink.

Iris crossed her arms over her chest. “I really don’t want to like you for taking my sister away from me.”

I chuckled. “You’re always welcome, you know. It’s not that far.”

Ronan cupped the back of her neck. “I’ll take you at least once a month.”

She ignored him and glared at me. “If she wasn’t starting her dream job next week, I’d kidnap her.”

Ronan leaned into her. “What did I tell you about kidnapping? We don’t do that.”

Her brows popped. “I seem to remember you not being opposed to carrying me over your shoulder and locking me up to get your way.”

He tapped her nose. “That was for your own safety, *meala*, which you know. June is safe with Diego. Haven’t you noticed how happy she is?”

Her nose twitched. “Is she safe with you?”

I touched my chest. “Of course she is. Always.”

June returned from the kitchen in time to see her sister giving me a threatening look. She dropped my drink in my hands, went over to Iris

popped down on her lap, and hugged her tight. It took only a second for Iris to wrap her arms around June.

Ronan met my eye and grinned. “Be prepared. This is what it’s like to love an Adler sister. They come as a package.”

Seeing the smile on my girl’s face as she hugged her sister, I was all right with that. Family was everything to both of us. I understood that bond better than anyone.

“I’m ready,” I answered, no doubt in my mind.

d



After spending the night with Ronan and Iris, we were visiting my brother and sister-in-law for brunch, then we had to pack up the rest of June’s things and hit the road for home.

Maeve opened the door to the condo, my nephew on her hip. Levi was two and ornery as hell. He took one look at me and screamed his head off. Maeve waved us in, giving me a kiss on the cheek as I passed.

“Don’t mind him. He wants me to carry him everywhere and has figured out he’ll get his way if he pretends to be afraid.”

Her Georgia accent was still as thick as it had been when I’d met her over a decade ago. I’d thought myself half in love with her back then, the accent had been a big part of the attraction. Boobs too. I’d been barely more than twenty. Boobs and a cute accent, and I was sprung.

Looking at her now, she was my sister. Couldn’t imagine her with anyone other than my brother.

June grinned at Maeve. “I don’t blame him. Who wouldn’t want to be carried around like a little prince?”

,

s Maeve rolled her eyes as she laughed and pulled June in for a hug with her free arm. “Hey, girl. It’s been too long since I’ve seen your sweet face. I never could’ve predicted we’d be meetin’ again like this.”

June’s cheeks flushed. “Believe me, neither could I.”

t Maeve led us into her home. For a condo in the city, she and my brother had taken pains to make it warm and inviting.

Speaking of Santi, he came strolling out of the hallway that led to the bedrooms, a little princess in his arms. He set her down on the ground, and she immediately came at me, her hands in the air.

“Hug,” she requested sweetly.

r I bent down and swooped my niece up. “Hey, you.” I poked her belly, earning me a soft smile. Viola was the opposite of her twin brother. Taciturn and quiet, she was more like Santi than anyone. “Do you have any new toys to show Uncle Diego?”

e She bobbed her head and peered over my shoulder at June. “Girl,” she whispered.

d I turned around to introduce them. “This is June. She’s a friend of Mama Daddy, and Uncle Diego. June, this is Viola. She’s two.”

a Viola wasn’t shy, only quiet. She waved at June, and my girl looked about ready to melt into a puddle.

· “Hi, Viola. It’s so nice to meet you. Can I see your toys too?” June asked in her singsong nanny voice.

e That was all it took for Viola. After that moment, she and June were besties. And once Viola chose June, Levi didn’t want to be left behind. He hopped out of Maeve’s arms and started to tumble and dance for her to entertain her.

I sat down with Santi at their kitchen table while Maeve hung in the living

room with June and the kids.

I When I'd gone to live with Eli, my brother had essentially been an adult following in our dad's footsteps, getting into fights, getting arrested, doing nefarious shit. Eventually, he'd turned himself around and had become like a second dad to me. I'd bucked against it—I hadn't been used to having one dad, let alone two in my face all the time.

2 Santiago was a good guy. The best man I knew. He was a stellar fucking husband as far as I could see and took the whole father-to-twins thing in stride. To top it off, he and Maeve still rocked hard on stage with Unrequited her behind the drum kit, Santi on bass. Needless to say, I looked up to my big brother.

1 He jerked his chin toward my arm. "How's that doing?"

s I lifted it up, rolling it once. "Not bad. As long as I'm mindful of it, it's not bothering me."

e "No drums?"

I grimaced slightly. "Not hours at a time."

, His head jerked. "Sucks."

"Yeah."

t He turned his head toward the living room. "June's a nice girl. I never would have placed the two of you together." He scratched the scruff on his jaw. "You remember her from years ago?"

"Took me a while. She had to jog my memory. Not happily. Once she did yeah, I remembered her. Kills me I didn't notice her then."

2 He cocked his head. "You weren't ready. You would have trampled her and never looked back."

I cupped the back of my neck and thought it over. There really was no arguing his point. "Yeah. Twenty-three-year-old me was a piece of shit."

“Who wasn’t at twenty-three?”

This time, we both turned toward the living room and chuckled. I’d known June had always been an angel. I’d known Maeve when she was twenty-three, and there was no doubt she’d been all class, even in her youth.

“I took her to the *Pot O’ Gold* and she kicked the sign until it broke in half.” With my help, but I didn’t need to take away from her badassery.

He chuckled. “Now that I wish I’d seen. I’m surprised you took her there. You haven’t taken me or Eli.”

I shrugged. “It was spur of the moment. We were down in Virginia and I guess I wanted her to see that side of me.”

He clamped a hand on my good shoulder. “That’s not a side of you. That’s something someone did to you as a kid. Get that straight.” He glared at me from under his thick black brows, and I felt it like a tangible thing. “I know why you took her there. Don’t try to sell me it was spur of the moment.”

“What was it then? Educate me, man.”

His fist balled on the table. “You were showing her something about you you thought would scare her off. You were giving her an easy exit. I know what that looks like. I tried it with Maeve once. She got so pissed at me. Told me she didn’t need to know my stories to already have an idea of where I’d come from.”

I blew out a long, slow breath. “June said pretty much the same thing. Then she destroyed the sign and I bought her a piece of pie and ice cream at a diner.”

That cleared some of the anger from his expression. “Good move. Ice cream and pie can repair a lot.”

We sat there for a while, shooting the shit about Eli, Alicia, and life in general, then we joined the party in the living room. June had both babies in

her lap, singing them a song with hand motions that went along with it. They were utterly enthralled.

Maeve raised her eyebrows at me and mouthed, “Oh my god!”

I shared the sentiment. How the hell I’d landed this kind of woman, I’d never be able to answer. For now, I was going to enjoy my day with my family and stop questioning my fortune.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

JUNE

SOMETIMES, I FELT LIKE the Pied Piper when children were around. They followed me everywhere. It was lucky I loved them, Levi and Viola Garza being no exceptions.

We were having brunch with the family, and I was sitting between the twins. Diego was disgruntled by this arrangement, but he'd have me to himself soon enough.

"I can't believe you're leaving the city," Maeve said as she scooped up fruit with her spoon.

"That's because you haven't lived here your whole life." I crunched on a piece of bacon.

Diego put down his fork. "I love you like a sister, Maeve, but if you're thinking of talking June into staying, I'll shun you faster than you can blink."

He leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed, grumpily staring at his sister-in-law, who was laughing at him. The babies thought their mom laughing was funny, and they started too. Levi threw his head back and really cackled. Viola's laugh was reserved but filled with joy. God, she was sweet.

Santi growled. If I hadn't met him plenty of times and known him to be a good guy, I would have been intimidated. Where Diego was incredibly handsome and huge, Santiago was ruggedly attractive and massive. His arms were tree trunks covered in tattoos. His hands reminded me of Eli's, scarred and tatted. Diego could scowl and give harsh looks without trying, but he had nothing on his older brother. Santiago had invented the scowl. He had resting scowl face. But when he looked at his children or Maeve, it all melted away. It was clear he was a softy for them.

Santi stared down his brother. "Don't threaten my wife, kid."

Maeve laughed even harder, setting the babies off again.

"Oh my lord, you two." Maeve shook her head. "Too much testosterone. Diego, you're not shunnin' me—you couldn't imagine your life without me. And I'm not tryin' to talk June into stayin'. Relax. I'm just sayin', I love it here, but if this is all you've ever known, I can see why June would want a quieter life."

"I don't know if it's going to be quiet." I handed Levi the spoon he'd tossed at me and wiped his yogurt off my hand. He proceeded to turn his spoon into a drumstick, banging on his place mat. *Mommy's boy.*

Diego chuckled. "Not around our place. Between Pops and Alicia stopping by whenever and Camilo's constant stream of consciousness, quiet doesn't happen. And Alicia is beside herself that June's taking the pool house. She has *plans*. Pretty sure she's already adopted June in her mind."

"I like plans," I said. "And I don't think I'd do well with a completely quiet life."

Leaving New York wasn't going to be easy, though. Over the two days I'd spent here without Diego, I'd seen all my friends one last time. All the members of TSC had come to Iris's for dinner that first night. I got to rub

aRoddy's wife, Hope's pregnant belly. She was round with a baby boy. Addi
yand Wren were going to come visit me, and I'd be back to see them too. I
swasn't so much closure as it was turning the page.

l I was going to miss the people I cared about, but I wasn't afraid to strik
lout on my own because I wouldn't be alone.

g



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After we finished brunch, the babies needed to go down for naps. Since Viola
was firmly attached to me, I told Maeve to hang out with Diego while Santi
and I put them down.

.
Viola's room was in soft greens, with pictures of musical instruments on
the walls. She was still in a crib, so I laid her down and sat on the floor beside
.
her to read her a book. She stuck her chubby little hand between the slats and
t
wrapped her fingers around two of mine. By the time I'd finished one book
a
her long lashes were kissing her round, rosy cheeks. My girl was out like
light. I stayed for another minute or two, staring at her sweet little face, then
l
tiptoed out, pausing in front of Levi's room.
s

Santiago was in there with him, and from the sound of it, they were
battling. Well, Levi was battling. Santi was exuding the patience of a saint. I
g
made me smile. The Garza men were incredible dads.
t

e
As I approached the living room, I bent down to pick up a few scattered
toys. Maeve and Diego's voices drifted as they chatted on the couch.

y
"—great with kids. You landed a good one, honey." That was Maeve. My
ears perked up.

l
"Yeah. No doubt about that. Don't know how I did it," Diego replied.

e
"Just cross your fingers you don't have twins next time around. I love
j
them, but they wear me out. One kid at a time is where it's at."

e Diego chuckled, and my face heated. I stood, clutching the toys to my chest.

“Yeah, that’s not me. I’m happy with what I’ve got. Not gonna tempt fate again. That ship has sailed.”

“Oh no, don’t tell me that. You’re going to break my heart.”

A door closed behind me. I rushed forward, carrying the toys to a basket in the twins’ play area. Maeve popped up from her seat.

^a “Oh my goodness, girl, you do *not* have to clean up my kids’ mess!”

ⁱ I gave her a smile I hoped wasn’t wobbly. “You let me cuddle Viola. It’s the least I can do.”

¹ She sighed, clutching her hands to her chest. Everything about her went soft until she wasn’t a gorgeous rock star, simply a lovesick mom.

^d “Isn’t she a love? Santi doesn’t believe me when I tell him she has his personality. You should see them when we’re out, both watching everything a million thoughts on their minds. Daddy’s girl, through and through.”

^I My chest suddenly felt too tight. All I could do was nod.

Diego slipped his arm around my shoulders and kissed the top of my head

^e “Think it’s time to head out, huh, baby?”

^t I couldn’t bring myself to look at him. Not yet.

“I think you’re right.”

^d



^yThe drive back to Maryland was interminably long. Every second that passed tightened a vise around my lungs. I had to ask what he’d meant by “that ship has sailed.” It was important. But I was putting it off. I didn’t want to face what would come after.



⁷“What’s going on with you?”

Diego stood in front of me, that angry line etched between his brows

²Though...I didn’t think he was actually angry at me. This was concern.

“Nothing.” I swiped at the light mist of sweat on my forehead. The end of summer was here, but it was still hotter than hell outside. “I guess I’m tired ¹from the last few days.”

Diego and I had been moving my boxes into the pool house from his truck. Well, he’d been moving them, I’d been carrying things he’d deemed light ^Senough for my *dainty* arms. I wasn’t really tired from physical exertion, it was the constant whirl of thoughts racing around my mind.

^t “You sure?” His gaze bore into me like he was trying to read my mind
“That’s it?”

^S *I wish that was it.*

³ “Yes.” I reached out and took his hand. “Thank you for helping me move.”

He pulled me into his body and wrapped his arms around me. “Don’t thank me, baby. I want you here. The only thing that could make it better is if I was ⁴moving you into my house. We’ll get there.” His lips touched the top of my head. “I love you.”

I clawed at the back of his shirt and closed my eyes. “I love you too.”

His arms tightened. “Something’s going on with you.”

“Just tired and a little emotional.”

¹ He pulled back from our embrace, keeping his hands on my shoulders
² “We’ve got one more kid-free night. Let’s go home and relax.”

^e I averted my eyes. “I thought I’d stay here and get unpacked. You should go relax. Enjoy your night off.”

“What the fuck, June?” In a heartbeat, he picked me up and sat down with me in his lap. My face was in his hands, and I couldn’t look away. “Milo is with his grandparents. Why would I want to spend the night alone when I could be with the woman I’m in love with?”

I wrapped my fingers around his wrists. “I don’t know. I told you I’m tired and the reality of how big all this is is hitting me. This is a huge change for me. I’m processing everything.”

“That’s understandable. So process it with me. I’m not spending the night without you. If you need me to be silent and leave you with your thoughts, I can do that. But we’re going to be together.”

Why did he have to say the right things? I couldn’t deny him or myself this. Just a little bit more.

Then I’d ask.



Once we unpacked most of my things, we went next door to Diego’s house and had dinner with a movie playing, so the silence wasn’t as thick as it could have been. I held on to Diego like he’d disappear if I let go. He’d gazed at me throughout the night, his stare heavy with apprehension.

When the movie was over, Diego carried me upstairs. I thought if it were up to him, he’d never let my feet touch the ground and nearly sobbed. I truly loved this man and felt his love for me in his every gesture, both minute and massive.

We showered together, barely taking our hands off each other, then he dried me, laid me on his bed, and kissed warm, wet paths up my thighs before settling between them. As he licked me, he told me I was his good girl and whispered to my sensitive, loved-on skin this was his homeland now and he’d

claimed it. No one else would ever touch it again. He brought me over in
gentle waves and told me he'd never known beauty until me.

I The tragic thing was, I believed him.

Lips closed around my clit, bringing me over again. I wove my fingers
through his hair, keeping us both locked together. Once he finally raised his
head, I asked him to kiss me.

When his mouth and body covered mine, I wrapped myself around him
We kissed and made love slowly. He didn't give me orders or teasingly
smack me. We were gentle, fervid hands and languid kisses that went on and
on. Longing tinged our movements. Diego might not have known why, but
there was no way he couldn't sense it. The world was about to end, and we
clung to one another, riding out our last, final breaths in each other's arms.

When Diego was close, thrusting into me, he bracketed my face with his
hands and stared down at me. He wouldn't look away. I reached for his face
cupping his jaw, and looked back at him.

"I love you," I sighed.

"I love you, June." He said it fiercely, with determination, like he was
pouring the meaning of the words into me, and I felt them settle over my skin
like velvet.

He chased the end while I wished it would never come. But it did. I
always did.



Later, he held me on his chest. This wasn't the first time I'd slept in his bed
but it was one of only a handful. We'd been just getting started.

“You have to talk to me, baby.”

d

1 I nodded. “In the morning. We’ll talk in the morning. I’m too tired to talk right now.”

“I don’t like what you’re doing.”

s “I’m not doing anything. I’m only processing like I said. Give me tonight.”

s *Please, please, please let me have tonight with you.*

After a long, heavy sigh, his arms tightened around me. “Okay, baby. Let’s go to sleep.”

y Diego fell asleep surprisingly quickly. Then again, his dreams hadn’t fallen apart with one sentence.

t *That ship has sailed.*

e I must have drifted off at some point. When I opened my eyes, the first soft rays of the sunrise were shining through a thin crack in the curtains. Diego was on his back, his arm flung over his head, still sleeping.

, Slipping from bed, I padded to the bathroom. I brushed my teeth and washed my face then dragged a brush through my hair. It made me feel more prepared to have a conversation.

s When I came back out, Diego was awake, sitting up against the headboard. I climbed into the bed and sat beside his leg, facing him.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

t I sucked in a breath. “Do you want more children?”

He jolted, sitting even more upright. “What?”

“I overheard you tell Maeve you don’t want to tempt fate again, and that ship has sailed for you. Do you want more children?”

’ Diego scrubbed at his face hard with the heel of his hand before dropping his head heavily in his lap. “No, I don’t. Children were never supposed to be in the cards for me. I have Camilo, and I’m thankful as hell to have him, but no, I don’t want more.”

k My heart sank. But I'd known this would be his answer.

“Okay. Well, the thing is, I do want children. Not right now, but in the near future, I want them.”

' “June.” My name sounded like a death knell tolling.

“I love you, Diego. If this was something I could give up to keep you, I would in a heartbeat. I would give up a lot. But I've always wanted children and I know I would be a great mom. I can't. I can't push aside this particular dream.”

His mouth fell open, but nothing more than harsh breaths came out. It was too much.

t “I guess that's it.”

o How I'd managed to stay calm, hold back my tears, and walk out of the room, I would never know. It had taken all my strength, of that I was certain. Once I was across the lawn and inside my pool house, I fell to my knees and let everything come tumbling out.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

JUNE

I WENT BACK TO New York.

As soon as I'd called Iris to tell her what had happened, she'd sent a car for me, and I'd stayed there for three nights. She'd coddled me, made sure I ate and bathed, but otherwise, she'd let me wallow.

It was what I needed. The whole time I was there, I knew I couldn't stay. My job was starting in a couple days, and while some of my dreams had turned to dust, that one hadn't.

So, I'd let myself feel all I needed to while I had the luxury of time. An overwhelming wave of sadness and anger had left me flattened on Iris and Ronan's lovely couch, but eventually, I got up.

When I arrived back in Maryland, nothing was the same. There were clouds over everything. The sun wasn't as bright as it had been. And the pool house I'd been so excited to move into was haunted by that feeling.

I wasn't a woman who could sit and do nothing, though, even when my bones felt brittle and my insides were dried out from crying rivers. I spent a few hours putting my things away then wondered why I was bothering. There

was no way I could stay in this pool house now that Diego and I weren't together.

But I wasn't quite ready to face looking for a new place. I'd stay here until I couldn't, and for now, at least, everything would be in order so I could be as comfortable as possible in a situation that was anything but.

Alicia knocked on the door after I'd been home for a few hours. From her crumpled expression, she knew.

"Oh, honey."

Her arms went out, but I held my hand up.

"Please, I can't. If we do that, I'll cry, and I just can't cry anymore."

She huffed a laugh and dropped her arms. "Fine. I won't hug you. Now, let me in."

^r We stood at the kitchen island together. I had nothing to offer her besides ^e water since I hadn't gone food shopping yet, so we drank our sad glasses of water without any fruit while Alicia tried not to look at me like she pitied me.

"I understand if you'd like me to move out of the pool house. I don't want ^d my staying here to make things awkward."

She held up a finger and pointed it at me. "Stop that right now. You and ^l I are friends, right?"

^d I lowered my chin. "Yes...?"

"Don't you dare put a question mark on that. You know we're friends, and ^e our friendship has nothing to do with your relationship with Diego. I offered ^l you a place to live because *I* care about you and like having you around. Now, if you want to leave, that's a different story."

^y "I—I didn't want any of this." I turned my head. "I want to stay. I'm just ^a not sure how long I'll be able to."

^e Her hand closed around my forearm. "And I won't hold a grudge if you

need to move. But the offer to live here was not conditional on being with Diego. I want you here.”

l “Okay.” I sucked in a breath and faced her again. “Thank you.”

s “We were worried when you disappeared, you know.”

“I texted you.”

r “Right. A day later. And you texted me, not *him*. He was banging down the door that first day. Eli had to drag him away.”

I shoved my fingers through my hair. “I don’t know why he would do that. Anything we have to say to each other would just be prolonging the end.”

Alicia set down her glass. “So, it’s really over? Did you have a fight?”

t Startled she didn’t seem to know, my mouth gaped. “He didn’t tell you?”

“No. He said it was his fault.”

s I sighed. “It’s not his fault. It’s just—” My chin started to quiver, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek. Saying it out loud was nearly impossible. “It’s just...it came to light Diego doesn’t want any more children while I very much do. That’s not something either of us can compromise on.”

She brought her fist to her mouth and stared at me for a long beat, her eyes shining. “I had no idea. He’s never expressed that to me before.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry. Can we talk about something else? I feel like I’ve thought of nothing but this topic for days. I’m really done.”

d Alicia stayed for a while after a trip across the yard to her house to pick up some things she deemed essential. Somehow, my empty fridge became fully stocked and my pantry was overflowing. Granted, they were both smaller than average, but I wondered if she had anything left in her own kitchen. Then she cooked for me and put on a movie to watch while we ate together. It was nice, but I couldn’t help being sad that we’d never be family.

1 At least she’d distracted me enough to get through the day.

1



The next morning, I was coming out of my bedroom to make some breakfast. I probably wouldn't eat when my door rattled from being pounded on. My feet stopped moving, and my heart slid into my throat.

2 "June!" Diego bellowed my name. "Open up or I'm gonna use the key I stole from Eli. Either way, I'm coming in."

His threat was meaningless. Before I could decide which was the lesser of the two evils, the lock was turning and he was standing inside my house.

"I was going to open the door." My mouth moved on its own. I was certain my mind wasn't in control. My focus was on the ravaged man coming toward me.

1 "June." A growl in the form of my name. I shuddered and clutched at the hem of my shirt, winding it tight around my fingers.

S "Where's Camilo?" Again, my mouth was out of my control.

y He stopped, his head rearing back like I'd jolted him out of his trajectory and he was searching for a new track.

S "Preschool." He roughed a hand over his hair. "I came back here as soon as I dropped him off."

2 "Oh, okay."

3 He found his track, closing the distance until he was a foot from me. It was impossible to forget how big he was, but he'd somehow grown larger over the days since I last saw him.

r "You left. You disappeared after you ran out on me. Every fucking hour that passed, I thought you were dead. I didn't know where you were. t thought you must've died." He clutched the sides of his head, gritting out :

sound that was so visceral it slammed me in the chest. “You can’t leave like that, June.”

^t “I’m sorry.” My brow pinched. “I texted, but I—why would you think ^ywas dead?”

Silence.

^I He stared at me in silence.

^f Of course. Sofia. It had only been a year since he’d lost her. Naturally she’d still color the way he thought.

¹ “Lost a lot of people, June. When they disappear, my mind is trained to ^dexpect the worst. I kept imagining having to tell my son you died. It’s not rational, but I’m not feeling really damn rational right now.”

^e “I’m sorry,” I whispered. And I was. If I’d stopped for one second to think what my disappearing would have done to Diego, I wouldn’t have done it. “² was in self-preservation mode. I never meant to worry you.”

“You did.”

^y “I’m here now. You don’t have to worry anymore. I’m okay.”

He huffed. “Yeah, well, I’m not. You left before we could really talk.”

¹ “There’s nothing else to say, Diego.”

^S “I disagree.” He shook his head. “You want children, I have a child. You love him, don’t you? We stay together, keep loving each other, we’ll be a family.”

^r I hadn’t known it was possible for my shattered heart to break any more. I was. Oh, how it was. I let my shirt unfurl so I could press both hands to my ^rchest. It felt like I’d been impaled.

^I “That would have been amazing, Diego. I love you both so much. But ^awant to be pregnant. I want a brood of children. I want a big, crazy, loud family that overflows my house.” It was hard to say these things to him

knowing my dreams misaligned with his on a fundamental level, but I had to make it clear why we couldn't work so he would understand and we wouldn't keep breaking each other's hearts.

"We're not enough for you." There was so much anger behind the accusation, it killed me. But he was being cruel to me for wanting more, and that wasn't fair.

"You told me you'd make sure I had everything I wanted. You said you'd be the bad guy to make sure that happened. Is that not true anymore? Because what I want is taking me away from you?"

He grunted like I'd punched him, and his fists balled at his sides. He wanted a fight, but I'd already laid down my gloves. He had no opponent.

"This isn't the same thing."

"I'm standing here in front of you, telling you what I want with my life and you're telling me I should compromise. This isn't what you promised me."

Eyes like anvils, he glared at me until it was so heavy I turned my head for some relief. A heavy gust exploded from his lungs in a sigh of defeat, and I had to brace myself so I wasn't blown away.

"If it was something I could give to you, I would." He sounded so steady now. He finally understood. "I've been down that road already, and I got something amazing from it, but my family is complete. I'm content with my boy."

I squeezed my eyes shut, clutching my hands under my chin. I wanted him to go. I wanted this to be a nightmare. As had been proven time and time again, I did not always get what I wanted.

"June—" His hand touched my face, turning it toward him. His beautiful, brown eyes were wet. Anger stirred in my belly that he was making me see

him this way. What good could come of it?

I whispered the thought that had been circling my head for days.

“You gave another woman the best of you, and now there’s nothing left for me.”

It wasn’t a fair thing to say, but my hurt had given rise to something that felt a lot like jealousy. Sofia might not have been in Diego’s heart anymore—land he’d never once given me a reason to doubt that or feel like second best to her—but the fact was, she’d shared something with him he wasn’t willing to share with me, and that made this sting worse. Much worse.

The fingers on my cheek flexed before he let his hand fall. “If that’s how you see it, then yeah, I guess I did.” He backed away from me with heavy plodding steps. “I did promise you, June. I said I’d be the bad guy, I’d shut out anyone who got in the way of your desires. I’ll aim it at me. I’m shutting myself out now. You’re going to get everything you want. Someone’s out there who hasn’t given the best of himself away, and he’ll love the shit out of you, June, ’cause that’s easy to do.”

With that devastating blow, Diego walked toward the door. It was a miracle I could even form cognizant thoughts, let alone push the words out of my mouth.

“Diego?”

He glanced back. “Yeah?”

“Would it be okay if I saw Camilo sometimes? Maybe when he’s visiting Eli and Alicia?”

His shoulders rolled forward, and his head dropped. I thought he wasn’t going to answer, and maybe I shouldn’t have even asked, but I really did love that little boy so much and I hadn’t gotten the chance to say goodbye.

Right as his hand gripped the doorknob, he gave his answer. “Of course

He'd love that."

When he closed the door behind him, my breath left me. I bent in half resting my elbows on the small kitchen island. I wished he hadn't come. I'd already started grieving us. Then he'd shown up, ripped me wide open again and it felt like I was even further from where I started.

- I was intimately familiar with starting from scratch to forge the life I wanted, and I had no doubt I could do it again. This time, though, there would be no shine to my new experiences. Not without the two loves of my life at my side.

v ***After a day spent setting up my little house, I finally sat down to try to choke down dinner. My cell phone rang from where I'd left it charging on the counter. I went over and checked the caller. If I ignored Iris, she'd come for me. She'd threatened it when I left New York, and I wasn't putting it past her to really do it.

f But it wasn't her. The caller was unknown. My gut told me I knew exactly who this was. Ashley Flowers hadn't published her article on my father yet and she hadn't given up speaking to me.

f As my phone continued to ring, I wondered who I was protecting by not speaking to her. Myself, sure, but was that really the reason I ran all the way to Maryland to avoid her?

My fight had left with Diego.

g The ringing stopped then immediately started again. At the end of my rope I snatched it up and glared at the screen. Her timing was impeccable. I was at my lowest low and spilling all my father's secrets was more than tempting.

e I picked up her call.

"June Adler, you're a hard woman to get a hold of."

. "Well, here I am."

“I’d apologize for my persistence, but I’m not sorry.”

“I wouldn’t have believed you if you’d pretended to be.”

She chuckled, and it actually sounded real. “Then I won’t bullshit you now. When I approached you at the beginning of the summer, I didn’t have what I claimed to have. I had rumors and hearsay, nothing solid. There was no way my editor would have run with any story I could have written. Since then, I’ve interviewed former patients. If you want to hear more, I’ll give you their names. In fact, I’ll divulge the content of the story so far. I could run it as is, but to be frank, it would be a lot stronger with your input.”

“Okay.”

She paused. Papers shuffled. “Okay?”

“Yes. I’m willing to talk.”

“That’s unexpected.” Another pause. “I’m coming to you.”

“I’m in Maryland.”

This time, there was no pause. “That’s fine. I’ll be there in the morning.”

My stomach fluttered with nerves, but I was determined. I’d stayed quiet too long.

“I’ll be here.”

y

,

t

“I’d apologize for my persistence, but I’m not sorry.”

“I wouldn’t have believed you if you’d pretended to be.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

DIEGO

MY OLD MAN AND brother darkened my doorstep. Those two literally blocked out the sun with their presence.

“What're you doing here?” I gruffed.

Eli jerked his chin. “Move aside. Let us in.”

Santi held up a paper bag. “Brought bagels from the city. Pops has coffee.”

“I don't want to talk.”

Eli huffed. “Did anyone say anything about talking? No one wants to talk to your grumpy ass. Now, step aside before I move you myself.”

Begrudgingly, I backed up, barely giving the two of them room to get through the door. Santi clapped me hard on the shoulder as he passed. No doubt he wasn't happy to be down here seeing after me when he could be in New York with his wife and kids.

“Milo at preschool?” Santi asked.

“Yep. It's my day off. I was looking forward to spending it alone.”

Any other time that would've been true. I liked peace and quiet. But this past week, since June and I'd come back from New York, I'd barely been

getting by. Being alone was dangerous for me. Having someone else to focus on took me out of the dark, shitty places my head kept going to. Milo was my preferred company because I could distract him from the topic of June with a cartoon or piggyback ride. My old man and brother weren't so easily deterred.

Santi and Eli went into my kitchen and made breakfast for themselves like that was the real reason they were here. I wasn't stupid. This was some twisted version of an intervention—the one they never got to have when I was deep in my addiction because I hid it like a pro until I checked myself into rehab.

Eli held up a bagel, waving it at me. “Everything?”

^y “Nah. I ate. I'll take some coffee, though.”

My kitchen was large, but with the three of us in it, we were bumping elbows. I shoved Santi aside so I could get a mug down. It said a lot that he didn't retaliate. He felt sorry for me.

“You guys don't have to do this.” I opened the fridge, pulling out milk and creamer.

^k “Do what?” Eli asked.

I placed the jug and carton on the counter after I poured a hefty dose into ^t my mug. “I'm not gonna fly off the deep end. Don't need you here to watch ^j over me. I'm dealing with it, not covering it up or looking for an out. My plan ⁿ is to hit a meeting today. I went to two last week. Like I said, I'm dealing.”

Eli squeezed my shoulder. “I'm proud of you for that, boy. That's not why we're here, though.”

I raised a brow. “Oh, really? I find that really hard to believe.”

^s Santi chuffed. “Neither of us thinks you're going to start using, but I'm ^l glad you're being proactive.”

s “Then why are you here acting all chipper? This isn’t a social call.”

y Eli picked up his plate and cocked his head toward the table. Santiago and
aI followed. My old man took his time before he spoke, settling in and biting
yinto his bagel. I leaned back, swigging on my coffee.

Finally, he wiped his mouth and turned his shrewd gaze on me. “It’s time
eboy. We’re going to talk about why you’re letting a good woman wall
eaway.”

I My eyes slid to my brother. “That’s why you’re here too?”

f He lowered his bearded chin. “You were in my home, happiest I think I’ve
ever seen you—and that’s including your Unrequited days. You couldn’t take
your eyes off her. Maeve and I were talking about how well the two of you
fit. It was a surprise to us, but a good one. Then, next thing we know, we’re
ghearing it’s over.”

e I set my mug down and flattened my hand on the table. “All that’s true
But she wants kids. I don’t want any more. She’s not willing to give up on
lthat dream, and me and Camilo aren’t enough for her. There’s no way
forward. Not much I can do.”

“Why don’t you want more kids?” Eli’s fist rested beside his plate
o““You’ve never told me that. Alicia either.”

1 I shrugged. “I don’t want more than I have.”

1 “Except June. You wanted June,” Santi said.

“Yeah, and I still want her. But it’s not gonna work.”

y Santi rubbed his jaw. “You said you and Camilo aren’t enough for her. Did
you say that shit to her?”

I nodded once. “I did. I asked her why she couldn’t be happy with us. She
1said she’s always wanted a big family.”

“That wasn’t right,” Eli stated. “It’s not fair to put that on her like that

guilt-tripping her for knowing what kind of family she wants. There's no reason she shouldn't have it, and I don't see why you're so unwilling to give it to her."

"Because I'm done, Pops. It's a road I've traveled, and I'm not going back. Life is good now. Camilo's incredible. Why take a chance on something going wrong? I'm not doing it. I'm done with all that." I folded my arms over my chest, pissed I had to explain myself. It was none of their business. Boundaries weren't much of a thing in our family.

"What could go wrong?" Santi asked with a lot more care than the blunt hammer Eli had used to get his point across.

I flung my hand up. "All the chaos that comes with bringing a new kid into the world. Mental health, late nights, yelling, crying, things falling apart. It's chaos, and I need stability. That's what I've got now. I'm not rocking my boat."

My old man's fist flexed. "You're sayin' you think June's like Sofia?"

"No." I shook my head. "Absolutely not."

"If you think June's so close to chaos, she shouldn't be living in the pool house. I'll ask her to move out." Eli rubbed the center of his craggy forehead. "Course when I do that, Alicia will go with her, and I can't be in that big house all by myself. I'll have to move in with you and Milo. It'll be like a fuckin' sitcom. What do you say?"

"Pops..." Santi groaned.

Eli held his hand up. "No. It sounds like June's real close to snapping. Is she gonna go off on a bender? Trash the pool house? I need to know what kind of chaos to expect from her. They say it's always the quiet ones."

"Shut up," I gritted out. "Stop talking about her."

Eli's shoulders went taut. "What did you say to me, boy?"

o My old man might've been pushing sixty-five, but he didn't play around when it came to disrespect. I'd learned that day one with him and regretted telling him to shut up almost instantly. But I couldn't keep listening to the bullshit spewing from his mouth.

g My head hung between my hands. "I'm sorry, but I need you to stop."

r "I'll give you a pass on that because I know you're nursing a broken heart right now. A heart you broke yourself, but that's not important. What is important is getting you to dig your head out of your ass and stop allowing Sofia's ghost to ruin the best thing that's ever happened to you outside of your son."

o I looked up at my old man's frown and Santi's ever-present stoicism.

s "That's not what I'm doing," I argued.

y Santi's brow dipped. "You get having kids isn't always like what you experienced, right? You came around when I had newborns. Two. Maeve and I were so fucking exhausted, but we were deliriously happy. Still are. We're thinking of adding more to the pack sooner than later."

l "Good for you." I meant it, so why did my chest feel like a herd of elephants was stampeding over it? "I'm not you, though, man. My life doesn't look like yours. It's not going to."

a "It could," Santi argued. "You're not even willing to try."

I sighed, tired of this. "No, I'm not."

"June's not chaos," he replied. "Anyone can see that. She's the opposite of chaos."

t He wasn't wrong about that. I'd never been more at peace than when I was holding her, stroking her hair, having quiet conversations while Camilo slept down the hall. But I couldn't have that. She'd taken it away.

"I know my limits. I'm not willing to test them."

l “You’re being a stubborn jackass,” Eli grouched. “And stupid to boot.”

l A dry chuckle rolled out of me. “Real supportive, old man.”

e “I always tell it to you straight. You’re letting Sofia ruin your life. The only good thing that girl did was give birth to Camilo. Actually,” Eli rubbed his temples roughly, “she did two things right. Giving birth to our boy and leaving this world before she destroyed anything else.”

s I sat upright, my hands slamming down on the table. “What the hell? How could you say that? She’s *dead*, Eli. Dead from the same addiction I have.”

f He waved me off like I wasn’t seething in front of him. “Nah. You can’t compare yourself to her. She was a selfish woman—that had nothing to do with her addiction. Even when she was stone-cold sober, she was a bitch, a lazy mother, and a bad partner. The only thing she had going for her was her looks, and that’s how she got her hooks in you. I’m relieved she’s gone. You and Camilo are much better off without her. And I refuse to stand by and allow what she did to you to keep dragging you down.”

“Why do you think it’s her?” I exploded out of my seat so fast it clattered to the ground behind me. “Why do you think Sofia’s the reason I won’t have more children? You ever consider it’s me? I’m the one who’s a mess. I don’t want to spread my damaged genes around and hope and pray the next kid doesn’t come out as screwed up as I am. I mean, look at you. You had a good one with Santi, then you rolled the dice again and ended up with me. You should’ve stopped at the first kid.”

Eli slammed his fist down on the table, shaking it to its foundation, and jabbed his finger at me. “Don’t you ever say shit like that to me again. My world wasn’t complete until you came into it. I never regretted your existence, not for one second, no matter how much trouble you put me through. You were a beautiful, troubled kid who was so fuckin’ easy to love

and you're a good, solid man who is kicking ass at fatherhood. I love the hell out of you, boy. So no, I shouldn't have stopped. Don't you ever even *think* that again or you're going to be in serious trouble."

I A stone sat in my throat. I stared at my old man, who didn't usually speak more than a sentence or two at a time. Expressions of affection were saved for birthdays and tragedies. He'd just poured his heart out to me, and I had no idea how to take it in.

"If you hadn't been around, I'd probably be in prison," Santiago added. "You are supposed to exist, damaged DNA or not. You belong in this world and in our family. None of us are perfect. We're far from it. But we're fighters. We Garzas don't back down, even when it's difficult. But I see you backing down, and it's alarming to me. This isn't you, Diego. You don't give up."

I I raked my fingers through my hair, wishing like hell I could crack my skull open and show them my brain so they'd understand.

I "It's not giving up. It's facing reality. I can't give June what she wants. I can't do it."

t "You can," Eli said.

I I shoved my hands in my pockets and turned to him. "I won't."

I He shook his head and looked at me like I was the biggest idiot alive. "She's gonna be living next door for the foreseeable future. Eventually, she's going to meet a man who's willing to give her everything she wants in life. You gonna be okay standing by and watching that go down?"

y "No." It made me sick and violent to even contemplate it. "But I'm gonna have to."

e "Fuck," Santi gritted out. "You really are bullheaded. Keep me apprised of June's dating life. I want to be here when she goes out on a date. I need to see

lthis motherfucker calmly watch it go down.”

k “I’m not going to watch. I know it’s going to happen, though, and I’ll have no say over it.”

κ If they weren’t here, I’d be punching a wall. I was on the verge of doing it regardless.

ο Eli seethed at me, his face mottled red. “You’re really messing up. It’s hard for me to stand by and accept this.”

ι. “You’re letting fear rule you,” Santi added.

ι “Why is it impossible to believe I like how my life is?” I bent down righting my chair. Eli gave it a pointed look, so I sat my ass down. I’d tested him enough today. It was time for all of us to calm down.

ε “I would’ve believed it if I hadn’t seen you with her,” Santi said.

I turned my hands over on the table. “I can’t have her, so it really doesn’t matter what you saw. There’s no future there.”

“Bullshit,” Eli gritted out.

Ι “Yeah.” I looked at him through slitted eyes. “I got your opinion.”

“Let me ask you one more thing.” Santi was so unbelievably calm. My unshakable brother. “One day, when Camilo’s all grown up and finds a woman he loves more than anything, will you tell him not to have kids? He is the product of two addicts, after all. Bad genes, isn’t that what you said?”

ς He watched his words land but didn’t seem to take any delight in the resulting atom blast. Eli was not so discreet. He patted Santi’s shoulder like he’d won a prize. I didn’t know about that, but he had me thinking about my stance, and that was something.



f

e

My old man and brother stayed until I had to pick up Camilo from preschool and helping me rip out part of the garden border in my yard that had rotted and replacing it with new wood. While we'd worked, they'd thrown more jabs to make sure I knew how displeased they were with me.

Camilo wasn't any happier. "I'm going to June's house."

d "No, bud. We're going to our house."

"Why doesn't June live in my house?"

"She's not your nanny anymore."

l, "She's my best friend."

d I exhaled, tapping my thumbs on the steering wheel to find my patience. He wanted her back. Maybe not as bad as I did, but based on how often he talked about her, his desire to be with her was a constant, aching thing. God, I knew the feeling.

And fate was a bitch. As soon as I pulled into my driveway, my head turned toward Eli and Alicia's house, and there she was, climbing out of her car.

y "June!" Camilo screamed through his open window.

a She whipped around in our direction, her frown instantly flipping into something bright and happy. She waved at him with enthusiasm and swayed in his direction, but she didn't take a step.

e As soon as I got out of the car and unbuckled my son from his booster, he took off running, colliding with her knees at full speed. Luckily, her car was at her back so she didn't go down on impact. I opened my mouth to scold him, but she laughed, and I clamped it shut. Keeping my approach slow and cautious, I started across the grass.

"What did I do to deserve a hug this big?" she asked him, stroking his upper back, his arms wrapped around her knees.

, “I miss you at my house.” He rubbed his face back and forth against her thigh.

o “I miss you too, bud. Lucky for both of us, I’m right next door.” She wiggled loose of his hold to crouch down in front of him. “Did you have a good day at school?”

“Yeah. I telled everybody about fruit water on Friday. And do you know what? Michael had oranges in his water, and Stella had lemons. Miss Rhonda had oranges *and* lemons. I think tomorrow everybody’s gonna have fruit water.”

. She gasped and cupped his cheeks. “Oh my goodness, that makes me so happy. Good job for spreading the word. You’re a leader, you know that?”

I He nodded and reached out to cup her cheeks too. “Yeah. I’m a leader. You teached me that.”

d Her eyes flicked up to mine. It only lasted a moment but nearly brought me to my knees. There was so much love in her gaze I felt like the biggest fool in the world for keeping these two apart.

Camilo spun around when he heard me behind him. “Can I go to June’s house? Just for a little bit. *Please?*”

d Behind him, June stood up and nodded to me. How could I say no? I had no reason to, even though every second of this was killing me and I knew she’d come home with her name on his lips.

s “Sure, for a little bit,” I answered.

d June mouthed, “Thank you.” She was thanking me for letting her have time with my son. This beautiful woman who had no obligation to my little boy was *thanking* me, and all I could do was watch them walk off together hand in hand.

My chest was so tight I couldn’t breathe. My insides kept swelling and

rswelling. I fucking knew this feeling. I'd never once hated it. Not until now
But there was no denying what it was.

e *This is where waves break.*

a “Did you know today was my first day at my new job?” she asked him
softly.

v “No! Did you do a good job?”

a She giggled. “I was nervous at first, but I do think I did a good job.”

t Their voices disappeared as they made their way around the house. I stood
there, in the place they'd been, equally angry and despondent. Angry at
myself for not being someone different, someone better. The despondence..
well, that was obvious.

: I was at the bottom of a black pit, unable to do anything but watch the
woman I loved like a breaking wave walking away with the boy who was my
whole heart, knowing they'd eventually fade out of each other's lives because
of me.

I turned around and headed back to my house.

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I was at the bottom of a black pit, unable to do anything but watch the woman I loved like a breaking wave walking away with the boy who was my whole heart, knowing they'd eventually fade out of each other's lives because of me.

I turned around and headed back to my house.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

JUNE

AFTER THE LAST WEEK, there was nothing I wanted more than to sleep in until an obscene hour and laze around my house in my pajamas for the rest of the day.

That wasn't going to happen.

Today was Alicia's birthday party slash *tamalada*. I was expected early and apparently, it was an all-day, into-the-night event. Since the party was going to be taking place right outside my pool house, I wouldn't even have a chance to make an escape.

I dragged my tired bones out of bed to get dressed.

My new job was incredible. I'd slowly started seeing patients while also shadowing the other therapists to learn the ropes of their practice. I loved going to work every day, I only wished my new beginning hadn't coincided with my devastating ending. The dichotomy of my daily emotions was like being caught in a rip tide, whipped around and battered on sharp rocks.

Added to that, after meeting with Ashley Flowers last week, I'd spoken to her on the phone nearly every evening. Her article had been published in

New York's most-read newspaper yesterday. It hadn't been front-page news but it had made a big enough splash her editor had asked her to write a follow-up, which would be going to press tomorrow.

Both my mother and father had called multiple times over the last twenty four hours, and I'd finally blocked them both. I'd thought it would hurt, but it was nothing but freeing.

Especially after everything Ashley Flowers had uncovered in her investigation. One of my father's former nurses revealed my father prescribed an anesthetic drug for several of his wealthy clients on a regular basis, similar to the one that killed a famous pop star a few years ago. It was only luck none of my father's patients had died from this.

¹ There were other stories, much like Diego's, of hopes being decimated by his callous disregard. Former patients forgotten after their surgeries. A doctor he went through residency with who'd witnessed my father's negligence when caring for a patient with a noted latex allergy, who then nearly died from anaphylaxis. Then, there were the opioid prescriptions and drug seekers Ashley had dug deep and found so much malfeasance it made me sick.

^a Iris called just as I was putting my shoes on.

"Hey," I answered. "Did you read it?"

"Skimmed it. I only read the parts with your name. I don't really want to know the depths of our father's amorality."

^d "Have they called you?"

^d "Mom has. Ronan answered her once. He used his bodyguard voice to tell her neither you nor I would be discussing the article with them. He said she was weeping and he could hear Dad yelling in the background."

^j My stomach plummeted with guilt. "I blocked them both. Now I feel like ¹___"

3, “No, June. We’ve tried everything to get Mom out of there. She still has access to me if she ever decides she wants help. But I have Ronan to back me up. You’re down there on your own and your heart is far too soft to deal with their drama. You have every right to protect yourself. Don’t you dare feel guilty, honey bunny.”

“Okay,” I whispered. “I’ll try.”

4 She exhaled, and I could picture her rubbing her temple. Our parents had always given her splitting headaches.

5 “I’m really proud of you. It took a lot of courage for you to stand up to Dad.”

“It would have been more courageous if I’d made a stand to his face.”

6 She clucked her tongue. “Don’t try to discount how big this is. You’ve always preferred your waters calm. You’d let yourself drown before making the smallest wave. But you made a wave with this article, and I promise it’s not going to crash on you. This is all going to come down on Dad. Everyone will know who he really is. Even if he keeps his license. Even if hospitals don’t cancel his contracts. Everyone will know, and that will absolutely kill him because his ego is the only thing that truly matters to him. You did so good, kid. So good.”

7



8 Alicia Garza made me into an expert tamale maker. A group of women, some of her friends from work, some relatives, gathered in her kitchen to form an assembly line. Over the hours, we talked, listened to music, and assembled hundreds of tamales.

9 I couldn’t remember ever having more fun. I’d been accepted into the group the second I’d walked through the door and Alicia had introduced me

sto everyone as her best girl. It had made me want to cry from how good tha
e felt.

1 Alicia sidled up beside me as I packed tamales in gallon-size storage bag
l to go into the deep freeze.

“I read the article, honey,” she murmured. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay. I had a long talk with Iris this morning. She talked me out o
d my guilt.”

She breathed a laugh. “I like your sister already.” Her shoulder bumpe
o mine. “I wanted to let you know I sent it to *him*. I don’t know if he’ll read it
or if he’ll say anything, but in case...”

“That’s fine.” It wasn’t really, but what could I do? It wasn’t as if I coul
e stop thinking about Diego when I was standing in his mother’s kitchen. Ho
g was everywhere I looked, everywhere I breathed.

s The time I’d spent with his son had been as beautiful as it had been
e heartbreaking. I couldn’t keep doing this to myself. It had been two week
s since Diego and I had broken up, and I’d come to the conclusion I couldn’
l live here, no matter how much I loved my little pool house. Like Iris ha
o said, I had to protect myself, and that meant putting physical distanc
between me and the family that would never be mine.

The front door burst open, and a moment later, Milo slid into the kitchen.

“I’m here! Happy birthday, Grandma!”

^e Alicia tossed the bag she’d been sealing aside and swooped her grandson
¹ up in her arms, kissing him all over his little cheeks. I got caught up in
¹ watching them, my cheeks lifting in an easy smile.

A shadow fell over me, and I turned my head. Diego was standing a foo
^e from me, his arms crossed as he swept me with his gaze.

^e “Hey.”

t “Hi.”

“He couldn’t wait to tell her happy birthday.” He jerked his chin toward his son, who was being carried around the kitchen to greet all the women.

“I don’t blame him. I don’t think Alicia’s too upset about his presence.”

“Not his. Mine, she could take or leave right now.” His dark eyes drilled into me. “How are you?”

“I’m fine. A little tired from a busy week and making a hundred tamales today, but I’m good. You?”

“As good as expected.” His brow furrowed. “Your new job good?”

I sucked in a breath, looking down at the bag in my hands. “I’m not really ready to do this with you.”

“Do what?” he asked in a tight, low voice.

“Talk to each other like we’re acquaintances. This hurts. Can we stop now?”

I felt him stiffen beside me but refused to lift my head.

“If that’s what you want.”

It wasn’t what I wanted. None of this was. I wanted Diego and Camilo and this family.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Right before he turned away, I swore I felt the ghost of his hand slide along my hair. I was too afraid to look up and check.

1



1

The party was everything I expected of Alicia. What looked like a hundred people milled around their backyard. Children wreaked havoc in the best kind of way, running and screaming and shooting each other with water guns.

I'd broken off from a small group of women I'd met earlier to wander over to the grill Eli was manning. As I got close, I looked up and found Diego scowling at me. There must have been fifty people between us, but there was no mistaking I was the object of his unhappiness.

I slid beside Eli, ignoring his son. "Do you want to take a break?" I asked him.

He chuckled. "Call me old-fashioned, but grilling is a man's job."

I laughed. He was completely serious, but I was charmed by him anyway.

"You're old-fashioned, Eli."

Someone sidled up on my other side. "Did I hear something about needing a man?"

That made me laugh a little harder. "Charlie! I didn't know you were here."

"Just arrived." He nodded at Eli. "You ready for a break, man?"

Eli held up his tongs. "That'd be great. I can go spend some time with my woman."

I stomped my foot. "Are you kidding me?"

Eli chuckled and passed the tongs to Charlie. "Told you I was old-fashioned."

Charlie slid a smirk my way. "He wouldn't let you be in charge of the grill?"

I lowered my voice to imitate Eli. "It's a man's job."

He threw his head back and cackled. I would have giggled along with him but the hairs on the back of my neck rose to attention. I swiveled around finding Diego again, except now he wasn't scowling. This was more than a scowl. He looked homicidal.

I turned away from him. This was exactly why I had to move. This wasn't

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

DIEGO

TOO BAD SANTI WASN'T around. He was missing out on all the good times. I could picture how smug he'd look, seeing that asshole Charlie flirting with June and her actually legitimately responding to the idiot.

I'd been on edge since she'd asked me not to speak to her. Hell, I'd been on edge since we'd broken up two weeks ago. Today was pushing me over that edge. Where I'd fall when that happened was the question. Right now, I was looking a lot like the side of violence. Charlie's cocky, pretty-boy face was a good starting point.

Neither of them noticed me behind them, catching them midconversation.

"...need to look for a new place ASAP," June said.

"Oh yeah?" Charlie grinned down at her. "I could help you look. Actually now that I'm thinking of it, my next-door neighbor is moving out at the end of the month. I live in a pretty sweet apartment complex, and I'd be there to look out for you."

"Really? Hmmm. I don't know if living next to you is a check in the minus or plus column."

He chuckled because, of course, he did. My June was being charming to a man who wasn't me.

He leaned into her, *touching* her. "What can I do to make it a plus?"

That was it. I wasn't standing here watching this. There was only so much I could take before I lost it, and I was there.

"June." My fingers wrapped around her bicep. "I need to talk to you."

She tried to tug her arm free, but I was already walking her away from the grill with no intention of letting her go until she was out of Charlie's sight. Hell, if I could have booted him to the moon, it wouldn't have been far enough away from her. I'd have to settle for getting her inside my house.

She slapped at my hand. "What are you doing? Where's Camilo?"

¹ That slowed me down, but only enough to frown at her. Damn her for ³having my kid at the front of her thoughts. "He's with his grandparents. You and I need to talk."

¹ "I told you, I don't want to talk to you."

^r "You said you don't want to talk like acquaintances. That's not my plan."

^t She hit my hand again. "Let me go, Diego."

^e "Not a chance," I growled. "I let you go for two weeks and find you flirting with fuckin' Charlie."

I shoved us both through my patio door and backed her into the nearest wall. "What was that about, June?"

[,] "Nothing." She pressed on my chest. "Don't make me hate you."

^d I cocked my head. "Don't you hate me already?"

^o "Not yet. If you continue being a possessive maniac when we *are no* together, I will."

^s It was true, but I didn't like her saying it. I didn't like her looking at me like she couldn't stand me. I didn't like any of this.

a My mouth crashed into hers, drawing a gasp from her lips. Fingers digging into her hair, the other hand palming her ass, I yanked her into me and slid my tongue between her parted lips. It took a beat, then two, and she was kissing me back. It was a battle, nipping, sucking, rough and needy. Her nail sank into the sides of my neck as I picked her up and pinned her to the wall. She may have hated me, but her legs were wrapped tightly around my waist right where they belonged.

∴ Breaking from her lips, I buried my face in her neck. She tipped her head to the side, panting as I lapped at her smooth skin. Her fingers raked through my hair, hips tilting toward mine.

“Diego,” she sighed.

r “June.” I kissed a line along her collarbone, clamping my teeth down to claim what was mine. She whimpered my name, and her fingers tightened in my hair, on the cusp of pain. What she didn’t know was she could’ve torn it out in chunks and it wouldn’t have deterred me. I was on a mission to remind her who she belonged to no matter what had happened.

“Diego.” She pulled even harder. “No. We can’t.”

1 “We can.”

“Stop. Please stop.”

t It wasn’t force that got me to listen to her. It was her small, broken plea. Slowly, definitely against my will, I set her on her feet, but I didn’t back up. I needed her to stay. I wasn’t ready to let her go completely.

“June—”

t Her features crumpled, and she took little wheezing pants. “I’ve been working so hard to get over you and you just—you just yanked me all the way back to the beginning.”

“Good. I don’t want you over me.”

g She made an awful keening sound I'd never forget as long as I lived and her knees buckled. I caught her and picked her up, carrying her into the skitchen, where I set her on the counter. Taking her face between my hands, stipped it back until she had no choice but to look at me.

. "I'm sorry, baby. I don't know how to love you like I do and let go of you ;I don't want to know."

A sob ripped out of her as she clutched at my hands. "I'm going to move lWe can't live next door to each other and get past this. It's not good for eithe n of us."

"And Camilo? You're going to leave him too?"

Her lashes fluttered to her cheeks. "I'm not going to be his family, Diego oIf he wants to see me as his friend, I would love that. I just can't see you n anymore."

t "You have all the answers, don't you, June? How is that when I'n lstanding here more confused than I've ever been in my life?"

"I don't know." She refused to open her eyes, even when I stroked he delicate cheeks with the backs of my knuckles. "All I'm certain of is we'r going to keep causing each other pain if I stay."

..keeping me holding on is the glimpses I get of you."

I Her eyes lifted to mine. "But I can't be that for you. You know that."

"I don't know anything. Before you came into my life, I had a clear picture of my path with Camilo. Now, it's all muddied."

1 "Did you have a sudden change of heart and decide you want children?"

e I would have done anything to yell, "Hell yes!" but I wasn't there. My answer wasn't "hell no" anymore, which was a massive shift in my mindset That shift had only come after two weeks of thinking of nothing but what

llife with June could be like. But I couldn't honestly say yes, and I wouldn't lie to her.

I “If you came back, maybe down the line, I'd change my mind—”

She shook her head hard enough to dislodge it from my hold. “No. Please .I'm begging you to let me go. Give me the time and space to get over you.”

Anger swung back at me like a wrecking ball. It was all or nothing with her, but I couldn't change the things I'd been so sure of at the drop of a hat—not when I'd never even considered another possibility. *I* needed time and space. But who was I to ask for that? An ex-junkie from the *Pot O' Gold*. No good enough for this girl. Not the kind of man she should end up with.

It was better this way.

Better she walked before she realized having a kid with me would be the biggest mistake of her life.

I backed up, holding my hands out in front of me. “Fine. You win. I'm no gonna fight if you won't.”

She hopped down from the counter on her own and wrapped her arm around her middle.

“I think I'm going to go for a drive so you can enjoy the party without me there. Tell Alicia happy birthday for me again.”

She started for the front door, but I called out her name.

“Wait.” I picked up the kettle that'd been haunting my counter for weeks “Take this. You're the only one who uses it.”

It's torture seeing it on my counter every day with you not here.

She tucked the kettle under her arm, and when she looked back up at me, a tear trickled down her cheek. My hands fisted at my sides, battling back the instinct to wipe her tears away and care for her until her sadness abated, and I watched her walk out of my front door for the last time.

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I'd planned to go back to the party, but I leaned against the counter, trying to catch my breath. This wasn't right. Letting her go wasn't right. The anger that had kept me silent minutes before had faded. Now, all I had was panic.

I'd done the wrong thing. I hadn't said what I should have.

This couldn't happen. She couldn't leave. Not without hearing me.

I strode to my front door, steeling myself to fight for my girl.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

JUNE

IF MY EYES HADN'T been blurry with tears, I would have seen him. But I was too preoccupied with the aching sadness burying me to pay attention to my surroundings. It wasn't until my father grasped my wrist that I looked up.

“Dad.”

My father was a handsome man. Distinguished. Kept his salt-and-pepper hair neatly trimmed and combed with a surgeon's precision. His suits were always tailored to his measurements. The only time I saw him semi-casual was when he went golfing.

The Phillip Adler in front of me was a different man. His face was mottled red, hair in disarray. He wore a stained Harvard T-shirt with black dress pants and brown loafers.

“What did you do, June?”

He held me so tight the bones in my wrist felt like they were grinding together.

“Let go of me. If you want to talk to me, we can, but not until you take your hands off me.”

I was lying. I'd run if I had the chance. There was no rationalizing with him on a good day, and from the looks of him, this wasn't a good day. My father must've been feeling the repercussions of Ashley's article and decided in his warped mind, it was my fault.

"Not happening. You're going to come back to New York with me and set the record straight. Tell them you lied because you're a vindictive little bitch." He started dragging me along toward his car, parked haphazardly in front of Diego's driveway.

I shook my arm and yanked with all my might, but his hold was like iron. I feared he would break my bones, and even then, he wouldn't release me.

"I'm not going anywhere with you. Nothing I said is untrue and you know I it."

He spun on me, getting in my face. Alcohol on his breath hit me like a wave. "This isn't up for discussion, young lady. Your sister is already an embarrassment to our family. I won't let you bring us more shame by talking about things meant to remain private. Now, get in the fucking car," he bellowed.

"I won't do it. I'm not going anywhere with you. Help!" I screamed, but the music next door was too loud. No one would hear me. "Help!" I tried again, yanking at my hand. If he broke my bones, so be it. I wasn't letting him put me in his car.

"What are you doing? Help? I'm not going to *hurt* you. I just want you to come to New York with me. Is that too much to ask? Your mother hasn't stopped crying for days. How does that make you feel?"

Suddenly, I remembered the kettle under my arm. I tried to wiggle it down to my hand, but my dad kept jerking me along, and I was stumbling over my own feet.

1 “Stop.” I tripped, and his hold on me stayed firm while my arm twisted and something snapped. I screamed at the sudden sharp, horrifying pain in my wrist. “You’re hurting me! Please stop,” I cried and begged, my pleas falling on deaf ears.

t Just as the kettle was about to be in my grasp, he gave a rough tug, and it fell to the ground. We were almost to his car, and he wasn’t slowing.

1 Now that my arm was free, I clawed at his hand, trying to get him to let go. He was so fired up he didn’t even flinch.

I “June!”

Diego. His voice cracked like thunder over the music and my father’s angry, drunken ranting.

“Help me!” I yelled. “Please help me!”

a I turned back even as I was dragged. Diego charged toward us. My father must have realized this because he stopped moving and his grip finally loosened enough for me to pull away.

e I bent down, grabbed the kettle, and threw it with all my strength.

It connected with my father’s face at the same time Diego reached me gathering me in his arms. Dad went down, blood instantly pouring from his nose. Diego held me with one strong arm. In the other hand, he had his phone, dialing the police.

My father was a coward, but that was no surprise. As soon as Diego was with me, he began pleading for leniency. If I had told Diego how badly my wrist was throbbing, he probably wouldn’t have granted it. But he just held me close, telling me I was safe, and kept me away from my father.

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Miraculously, through police cars and an ambulance, no one at Alicia's party noticed anything was amiss. My father's bloody nose had been treated by EMTs then he was arrested and taken away. I gave a statement while Diego grew more and more tense by my side with the details I revealed.

When I finally admitted I was almost certain my wrist was broken, Diego had to walk away. He was at the opposite end of the driveway, close to the house, his phone at his ear, while an EMT checked me out. My wrist was swollen and black and blue. I'd need an X-ray for sure.

Diego stormed back to me, gathering me to his chest. "We going to the hospital?"

"I can drive myself."

"You're kidding, right?"

"I wasn't kidding, but I knew you wouldn't let me."

"Don't be cute right now, June. I'm hanging on by a thread here."

I leaned into him, giving him all my weight, trembling with relief from his support. As much as I'd mourned the loss of my love, I'd missed our dynamic like crazy too. This man had looked after my needs so well I'd spent the last two weeks trying to remember how to do it myself.

"I'm tired," I sighed.

"I know, baby. Keep leaning on me. I've got you now."

Maybe it was wrong, but I gave myself over to him, handing him my reins and I didn't think twice about it.

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CHAPTER FORTY

DIEGO

HER OWN FATHER HAD held her wrist so hard he'd snapped it. The irony was not lost on me that an orthopedic surgeon broke his daughter's bone. But there was nothing funny about my beautiful girl whimpering from the pain. She'd tried to be brave and hide it, and she had, until she couldn't. Then she leaned on me, and I felt better than I had in weeks.

My job was to take care of her in every way. I'd been at loose ends when she'd taken that from me—when I'd allowed her to take herself away.

We'd been at the hospital for hours. June had been silent most of the time when she was awake then her nurse gave her something for the pain that knocked her out while we waited for her to be casted.

It gave me a lot of time to think but not the inclination. The image of June being dragged away from me, of her screams of agony, her pleas for my help were seared in my brain so completely there wasn't room for anything else.

Alicia and Eli had Camilo for the night. I hadn't gone into details with them, only told them June had broken her wrist. They'd be all over her if they knew, and I needed this time with her on my own.

When she was ready to go, freshly adorned with a purple cast, I helped her into my car and pulled the belt across her lap. She tipped her face to me, and froze, my nose inches from hers. Her eyes were swirling blue and so vulnerable, a fist squeezed around my heart.

“Let’s take you home.”

“Okay.”

I cupped the back of her head and touched my lips to her crown. She let out a sigh that drifted under my skin and into my veins. It took a lot more than willpower to pull back and close her door, but I managed.

June didn’t speak again until we were driving into our neighborhood. “Is the party over?”

“Yeah. Some people are probably helping clean up, but most have gone home.”

“That’s good. I can sneak back to the pool house without making a scene.”

I grunted. “You’re coming home with me. You need someone to watch out for you tonight and I’m not ready to have you out of my sight.”

“Diego…”

I slammed my hand down on the steering wheel. She flinched, and I felt bad about it, but the thread I’d been clinging to was quickly unraveling.

“Just let me take you home.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

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I got her settled in the living room but couldn’t force myself to sit. I was full of energy with nowhere to release it. It wasn’t anger, but I wasn’t anywhere near happy either.

“Do you want some tea?” I asked.

r She started to nod then her forehead crinkled. “I think I broke the kettle on my father’s face.”

o We stared at each other for a long beat before her lips started to twitch and mine did too. Her shoulder shook, and a sound rattled out of me that closely resembled a laugh but was more of a gurgle, throwing June into a fit of giggles. Her laughing like that made me feel like I had Pop Rocks on my skin. I fell down beside her, tossing my head back on the cushion, letting myself feel this moment.

“You really smashed his fuckin’ nose, baby.” My head lolled as I laughed softly with her.

She turned her head toward me, still giggling. “I’ll never forget how surprised he looked before the blood started gushing.”

“Best purchase I ever made.”

“Yeah,” she breathed, wiping her teary eyes. “I wish it wasn’t broken though. That was a really nice kettle.”

“I’ll get you one in every color.”

Her bottom lip trembled. “I really loved that one.” Then her tears of laughter turned into just tears. I pulled her into my lap, and she curled against my chest, just like always, her body shaking as she cried.

I held her and rocked her, tucking her face into the crook of my neck. As I trailed my hand up and down her back in long, slow strokes, she settled melting into me. It took a while, but her tears petered out until there was nothing but a random sniffle here and there.

^l “I read the article this morning. It took a lot of guts to speak out about you ^e father. I don’t know how to properly convey how damn proud of you I am. No matter what happened tonight, you did the right thing.”

Her nod against my throat was slight. “I had to. When the reporter let me

listen to some of the interviews she'd gotten before I'd agreed to go on record...god, it was worse than I'd even known. He's ruined people's lives.' She pulled back to meet my worried gaze. "He's a monster, and now everyone knows."

I picked up her casted wrist, kissing her exposed fingertips. "If he was here now, after what I saw him do to you, I don't know if I could stop myself from killing him."

"He's out of my life for good. If I have to see him in court, I will, but that's it. He's not my family anymore. As far as I'm concerned, it's me, Iris, and Ronan. It doesn't sound like a lot, but it's more than enough for me."

Her chin wobbled, and her eyes fell to her hand in mine.

"You're handling this a lot better than I am, baby. I feel like I'm going to explode. I can't stop thinking—" I shook my head. "I don't need to tell you what I saw. You lived it."

"Do you want me to go? I can go if—"

"No. I never want you to go. Having you in my arms is what's keeping me from falling apart."

She settled back down, resting her head on my shoulder. "This isn't good you know. We're never going to get over each other if we keep getting pulled back together."

"I'm never going to get over you, no matter what."

She gave my chest a light slap. "Don't say that. One day, you'll find the right partner and it'll be so great. I hope I'm far, far away when that happens but I do wish that for you."

Fed up, I dumped her onto her back and laid my body on top of hers, my arms bracketing her head.

"You don't get it, June. If it's not you, it's not going to be anyone. I know

you're it for me. I have *never* loved anyone the way I love you. The only person in this world I love as big as you is my son."

“Diego...” She reached for my face with her good hand, stroking my cheek with her fingertips.

“When Milo was born, I got this pain in my chest when I looked at him. The only thing I can compare it to is a wave, swollen to the pinnacle. That split second before it crashes. The love I have for him, and now for you, is where waves break. There's nothing bigger.”

She turned her head to the side, her eyes squeezed close as tears rushed down her cheeks in jagged lines. “You can't say that to me. You're being cruel.”

“June—”

“No! This is too much. I can't take anything else tonight. Please, please stop.”

I had more to say, but she was shaking, clutching her fist under her chin and I couldn't keep going. Not with all she'd been through. Climbing off her bed, I lifted her into my arms and she clung to my neck as I carried her upstairs. When I took her into my bathroom, she allowed me to wash her face and brush her teeth, drawing her line at my helping her with the toilet. When she was finished, I undressed her and slid one of my old T-shirts over her head.

She lay down in the center of my bed, and I curled around her, making sure I was touching every part of her with every part of me.

“I'm in love with you, June.”

Her soft, warm lips touched my throat, and her arms wound around my middle.

“I'm in love with you too, Diego.”

My chest clenched, and I closed my eyes, holding my girl closer.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

JUNE

I WOKE TO AN empty bed, and from the sounds of things downstairs Diego was cooking breakfast. He probably intended to bring it to me, but once I was freshened up, I padded downstairs to see what he was up to.

I couldn't remember ever having as good a night's sleep as I had last night. Even with the achy wrist, I'd slept so hard I hadn't woken once. Being well rested gave me a much brighter outlook.

Diego was standing at the stove, his back to me. Every time I saw his geometric tattoo, I smiled at the memory of doing mazes with Camilo.

I walked up behind him, and though I shouldn't have, I wrapped my arm around his middle and pressed my cheek to his back. He didn't flinch. In anything, the tightness in his muscles ebbed as I hugged him.

"Good morning," I murmured.

He rubbed my hand and gave it a squeeze. "Morning. I was going to bring breakfast up to you."

"I was awake and wanted to see what you were up to."

"Omelets."

“Extra cheese?”

“You know it.”

I let go of him so he could finish cooking, and it was harder than I wanted it to be. Once my arms were at my sides, I had to leave the room. It made me unaccountably sad. What was I doing, staying here, hugging him? Breaking my own heart all over again, that was what.

Minutes later, Diego slid two plates onto the table and took the chair beside mine. I’d been hungry, but now there was a knot lodged in my throat. I could barely swallow my own spit. Food was out of the question.

“Thank you,” I rasped.

His attention jerked to me at the weak sound of my voice. “What’s wrong?”
“Do you feel okay?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m fine. I just—thank you for taking care of me last night, but I should go.” I pushed my chair back, but Diego caught my hand before I could get up.

“No. Eat first.”

“I really want to go.”

“June.” He sighed. “Please eat. We didn’t finish talking last night. I’d like to do that before I go get Camilo. My family’s not going to leave you alone when they see your cast.”

I swallowed hard. “I can’t think of anything else we have to say.” But I stayed because he was right about his family. If Eli or Alicia found out I was hurt *and* unfed, they’d never stop babying me.

Another wave of sadness hit me. In the months I’d lived here, I’d fallen in love with all the Garzas. Giving them up was going to be worse than losing my own parents. So much worse.

Diego cut up my omelet for me, though I was almost certain I could have

managed it—even with the cast. If I hadn't stolen my fork away, he would have fed me too.

l “It’s not a no anymore,” he uttered as I put a big bite in my mouth.

e I kept chewing, unwilling to even attempt to decipher and process what he was saying. When I forced that bite down, I laid down my fork and slipped out of my chair.

r “I’m going to get dressed, then I’m going home.”

I I walked upstairs with my chin up. If I could just get out of this house without hearing another word from him, I’d be okay. Diego wasn’t going to let that happen, though. He followed me up the stairs, shutting his bedroom door behind him. Since we were alone in the house, I didn’t know why. Probably to block my only route for escape.

e “June, please give me a chance to speak. You asked me a question yesterday, and I didn’t get my answer out.”

“You said no.”

“It was a no but...” He scrubbed at his face with rough hands. “I was coming for you, after you left. I wasn’t letting you walk away.”

e “Oh.” I sat down on the side of the bed.

e “Yeah.” He stayed in front of the door, far, far away from me. I cursed every particle of air separating us, even knowing physical distance was probably better. “The thing is, I never wanted kids. In my head, it was because I didn’t want to spread my screwed-up genes to my offspring. Then I had Camilo. He’s the best accident that ever happened, but at the same time my life turned to shit for years after he was born, and that really firmed up my stance. No kids. It’s not something I’ve thought about since Milo was a baby. I haven’t had to. Until you asked.”

e I waved my hand like a white flag. “You don’t have to explain anymore

“Really. I’ve accepted it’s not what you want.”

He went on like I hadn’t said a word. “When you walked away from me, I spent half the time hating every minute you weren’t there. The other half... I’ve reconsidered what life would look like if you were with me forever. I have to tell you, baby, having you forever is a lot more appealing than never having you again.”

“Diego...” My fingertips dug into my knees. I couldn’t bear this much longer. “Please stop.”

“No. Not until I finish telling you what I know.” He took a step toward me. “I will never lie to you, June. The idea of having one more kid, let alone the whole brood you want, doesn’t fill me with excitement. But the idea of *you*, my love, pregnant with my baby, running around with my toddler, teaching my little guy to read, taking my girls to dance lessons, that’s not so bad. Not so fuckin’ bad at all.”

I sucked in a breath. He took another step.

“You don’t want this. You’ll resent me,” I argued.

He took another step. Then another. Until he was right in front of me. There, he dropped to his knees, and I stopped breathing.

“I’m so in love with you, June. It’s going to take me some time to reset the future I had envisioned for myself and Milo, but there’s no way forward without you by my side. I want to marry the shit out of you, baby. I want you in my house, as my wife.”

A sob burst out of me. “Is this—?”

He shook his head. “Soon. Let me make it beautiful for you when I slip a ring on your finger, okay?”

I nodded. God, what was happening?

“I’m asking you to give me time to get there about kids, but I’m promising

you, I will. No matter what, baby, I love you, and I will adore our children. I know I've got a lot of baggage. So much, I shouldn't even ask you to take me on, but I am. I want to take care of you and every single one of your needs. You know how good that makes me feel, right?"

g His hands were shaky as they closed around my knees. I tapped his knuckle like he had a habit of doing to me.

1 "I don't know how to say yes to this without feeling like I've manipulated you into it. I'm so worried I'm imposing my wants onto you. How do I know that's not what's happening?" I whispered my fears, and Diego's hands tightened on me.

y "If that was true, I would have agreed right away, given in immediately so I could keep you. I wouldn't have let us live through two weeks of hell. This took a lot of soul-searching and long conversations with my brother and old man. As long as I have the space to grow into the idea and the time with you as my wife first, I'll get there and we'll have the family we both want."

My heart thrashed wildly, but my mind refused to accept this was it. "Why is this so hard to believe?"

"Because it's good. You and I have gotten too used to bad, but that's not us. There's nothing bad between you and me, is there?"

d I shook my head. "Nothing."

1 He pushed my knees apart so he could fit himself between them. With me sitting and him kneeling, we were almost face-to-face. He cupped the back of my head and drew my face close to his.

a "Will you be mine again?"

I nodded. "I always was."

"Yeah," he breathed. "You know I never let you go. I can't do it."

g "I know."

I He kissed me then, slow and sweet and nothing like the crash and burn against the wall yesterday. We weren't those frantic, sad people anymore. He was his, and he was mine. When he said we'd figure things out, I believed him because he really meant it. My needs were his to take care of, and I trusted he would.

When we pulled apart, I traced my thumb over his bottom lip. "I like you on your knees for me."

v "As much as I like you on your knees for *me*?"

s I smiled. "I don't know about that. I do like my view when I'm looking up at you."

o He held my face in his two big hands, warm and secure. "You can get down on your knees for me as much as you want, baby girl, and if you want our roles to be reversed, I'll be glad to serve you."

u "I'm so in love with you, Diego."

"I'm so in love with you, June."

y I dropped to my knees in front of him and wrapped my arms around his neck. Our eyes met and I knew we were thinking the exact same thing.

t *This is where waves break.*

e

f

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This is where waves break.

EPILOGUE

DIEGO

EPILOGUE

DIEGO

Five Years Later

CAMILO CAME RUNNING AT me, his buddy Ezra shadowing him.

“Papá, Papá, listen to Ez.” My son was making a valiant attempt to hold in his laughter, but his face was bright red and little snorts kept escaping as Ez sucked on the open end of a mylar balloon.

Then Ez did an impression of a chipmunk, which sent Camilo into fuckin hysterics.

Ez waved his finger around. “There are no mistakes, only happy accidents.”

My boy hung off his best friend’s shoulder, snickering until he cried. Ez was puffing out his nine-year-old chest, proud to be the source of Milo’s laughter.

“Ah, the joys of helium.” I shook my head at Callum, who chuckled softly at his son. “I’m surprised it’s taken them this long to discover it.”

“Too busy playin’ video games and FaceTimin’ each other.” Callum had the dad sway down, rocking and patting his sleeping two-month-old son Eben, against his chest.

It was almost unbelievable to me the way Ez and Milo had stayed close after meeting in Spain all those years ago. Even living states apart, they’d managed to be a constant presence in each other’s lives. That meant a lot of visits between them, and in turn, we hung out with Callum and Wren just as often. It took a while, but Callum had grown on me. He was chill and a real family man like me. And June was always happy to hang with Wren.

“All right, boys. Let’s leave the balloons alone for now. June’s not going to be happy if you deflate them all before the party’s half over.”

Ez and Milo scattered, heading back outside with everyone else, and snagged June's diaper bag—what I'd originally come inside for before Callum and I got to talking about TSC's newest album and the boys waylaid us.

Callum shook his head as we stepped out onto the patio. "Never though I'd like bein' around something like this."

I huffed a laugh. "You and me both, man. I still wonder how I ended up here."

My eye caught on my wife across the lawn, smiling at something her sister was saying, and I remembered. I loved a girl enough to change my mind. Never once regretted it either.

Callum wandered off to find Wren, who was playing beanbag toss with their three-year-old, Elodie.

"Papá, Papá!"

I looked down at the boy tugging on the hem of my shorts. "What's shakin', bud?"

Mateo held up his hands, which were covered in mud. "Grandpa showed me how to make mud pies."

I crossed my arms, attempting to look stern, but my son had June's face, so it was pretty much impossible. "I hope he did that in his yard and you guys weren't digging up my new grass."

He nodded. "I'm gonna go make some more."

I grabbed the collar of his shirt before he could get away. "Don't make too much of a mess, all right? Cake's gonna be soon, and you kinda can't be covered in mud if you want to eat it."

His eyes went round with alarm. To a three-year-old who was doted on by everyone who met him, missing cake was the worst punishment.

I “I’m just gonna get a little bit messy. Okay, Papá?”

e I ruffled the top of his black hair. “A little bit messy’s the best kind of messy, bud.”

He made a run for Eli, who was waiting for him at the gate he’d installed between our yards. The kids ran back and forth between our house and their grandparents’ whenever they wanted. Alicia and Eli hadn’t stopped stealing my kids now that I had three of them. It had gotten even worse once Alicia retired. Neither June nor I had grown up with this kind of family. We didn’t take how lucky we were for granted and never complained about kid-free time.

Eli and Alicia had more than made up for June’s parents’ nonexistence in our lives. After her dad’s arrest, she never spoke another word to him. We’d heard things, like his contracts not being renewed at the hospitals where he’d performed surgery, lawsuits from former patients, most of his staff quitting and eventually, him “retiring.” Last we’d heard, he and June’s mom had moved to Florida. They weren’t a part of our lives, and as far as I was concerned, that was a very good thing.

My wife started walking toward me, our daughter on her hip. This was her party, but our shy girl had been clinging to Mama all afternoon, overwhelmed by all the people.

She’d get used to it soon enough. Garzas didn’t do small or quiet.

“Hey, baby.” I cupped the back of June’s head and planted a kiss on her mouth. “Want me to take her?”

e She nuzzled Viviana’s dark, wispy curls then looked up at me. “Could you? My arms are going numb.”

y She passed my girl to me, and she came easily into my arms. Vivi was wary of strangers and loud noises, but she was an easy baby and a delicate

little beauty like my June. When we'd found out we were having a girl, I'd been worried since all I'd known up to that point was boys, but the second I met Vivi a year ago, I said, "Oh, okay, I've got it now." And that had been it. She'd had me wrapped around her dainty little finger ever since.

Holding Vivi in one arm, I rested my other hand on June's hip. She sighed and leaned into me like she always did. We stood there for a minute watching the kids run around, parents attempting to carry on conversation while keeping an eye out.

Maeve and Santi were by the playground I'd built a few years back. My brother was pushing their youngest, Savannah, in the baby swing. Next to him, Adam was pushing his daughter Talia while Maeve and Adelaide chatted with Hope. Roddy was at the end of the slide, catching his two boys, Fox and Dash.

My niece and nephew, Levi and Viola, were chasing Ez and Milo with blow-up swords. We'd probably be confiscating those sooner than later, hopefully before someone got hurt or pissed.

Closer by, Iris had a Hula-Hoop swinging around her hips while her son, Cillian, who was six weeks younger than Vivi, sat in the grass beside Ronan, throwing his head back, laughing at his mom.

Over the years, I'd learned what it was like to love an Adler girl. They were as close as two sisters could be. When June had told her she was pregnant with Vivi, Iris had sighed and replied she'd guessed it was time for her too. A month later, she was pregnant with Cillian. I'd grown so used to the way the two of them worked I hadn't even been the least bit surprised.

Iris wasn't the same kind of mom June was, but I enjoyed watching my sister-in-law soften around her boy. She and Ronan were having fun being

parents, but I got the sense they were one and done. Which was fine since we were currently on a mission to overpopulate the earth.

∴ I snaked my arm around June and rubbed the side of her rounded belly.

“Feeling good aside from the dead arms?”

1 “Yeah, I’m doing great. Don’t count on me staying up past eight tonight, though.” She pressed up on her toes to kiss my jaw. “I’ll make it up to you tomorrow.”

“You have nothing to make up for, baby girl. You’re growing my kid and you’re doing a spectacular job of it. That, along with being a kickass mom to my other three kids, is tiring work.”

e She kissed my jaw again, and I turned my head to catch her mouth. Her hand smoothed down the front of me to my abdomen.

“I’m definitely going to make it up to you,” she said against my lips.

1 I rolled my forehead over hers. “I’ll never deny my girl anything she wants.”

She tipped her head back and shot me a mischievous smile. “Oh really? Well, Vivi needs her diaper changed.”

, I jiggled my littlest girl. “You were buttering me up just now? I see how it is.” I let go of June to hold Vivi under both arms, making a face at her. “Are you my stinky girl?”

s She giggled, and I was sprung for my little sweetheart for the thousandth time. There was nothing like having a daughter. Nothing.

o “I’ll be right back,” I told my wife. Before I could take a step, I turned back, and she was waiting. I kissed her lips hard and fast. “Mateo’s covered in mud. Tag, you’re it, baby.”

g I left her laughing and took Vivi into the living room, laying her down on the rug. All I had to do was sing her a little song or have a chat with her and

she'd lay there mesmerized while I got her freshened up. I didn't know if it was a girl thing, but changing her brothers' diapers at this age had been like wrestling alligators. My sweet little Vivi was too interested in what was coming out of my mouth to try to escape.

I picked up my girl from the floor, and we walked around the house pointing at the pictures on the wall. She pressed a chubby hand to my cheek as I talked to her, and I got that tightness in my chest that was as familiar as the back of my hand these days.

This is where waves break.

Five years ago, I hadn't wanted any of this. I'd almost given up the love of my life to avoid this reality.

Once I'd had June back, it had taken me a month to propose, another month for her to move in, and three months after that, we'd gotten married.

Neither of us had been ready for a baby then, but we'd kept the door open to conversation. Except...the first year of our marriage, she didn't bring it up even once. Six months after that, still nothing. Finally, I had broken the silence and asked her why. She'd told me she was giving me the time and space I'd asked for.

I knocked her up two weeks later.

I'd done a lot of things wrong in my life. I'd always be an addict—even though I only felt the need to attend meetings once in a blue moon these days—I'd always come from the *Pot O' Gold*, and I couldn't erase the hell that was the first eleven years of my life.

But marrying June and growing a family with her had given me a peace I'd never known was possible.

That was all down to her. Her calm, thoughtful presence created an atmosphere in our home that bred happiness and gave room for all our little

people's emotions to be expressed. My emotions too, for that matter.

I couldn't deny I'd been afraid before Mateo was born. Freaked the fuck out was more like it. June had been there with me, both reassuring me and giving me that space to sit in my freak-out so I could feel it and move past it. I'd never once felt like I'd had to hide my fears from her.

And then Mateo had shown up and fit right in. Camilo had taken charge of him immediately. He'd held Mateo in the hospital and explained the world to him.

"I'm your brother. You can call me Milo, 'cause that's probably easier for you to say than Camilo. We both call him Papá." His little finger pointed at me from beneath his sleeping brother, then he pointed to June. "This part's a little confusing. Your mama is my mama, but I call her June and you call her Mama. One day, when you're bigger, I'll explain it all to you. I'll tell you about everything."

Milo had never seemed to want to call June Mama, and she had never minded. Like Alicia with me, June considered Milo her boy, and he'd considered her his mom, and that was all that really mattered to any of us.

As I headed toward the patio door, Camilo stuck his head inside.

"Papá! June said it's cake time." He wiggled his fingers at Vivi. "Are you ready for cake, baby?"

She gave a happy squeal and kicked her legs. Camilo laughed, his eyes flicking to mine.

"Does that mean yes?" he asked.

"I think it does. Let's go sing "Happy Birthday" to your sister."



Viviana Alicia Garza smashed the hell out of her cake. My dainty lady smeared frosting all over herself, her hair, and her pretty pink dress, delighted by it all, squealing and pounding on the tray of her high chair.

Alicia and Eli hovered over her, Alicia taking pictures, Eli making sure she didn't choke.

Wren and Callum were sitting off to the side of the patio, Callum keeping watch over Wren while she nursed Eben under a cover.

Viola had her hands on her hips as she stood in front of her brother defending him against Ezra and Milo, who were exchanging glances as the little spitfire reamed them out.

Iris was blowing raspberries on Cillian's belly. Ronan looked at his wife like she hung the moon.

Maeve and Savannah were dancing with Adelaide and Talia to a song from June's party playlist. Elodie ran over with Mateo and Fox to join them.

Santi and Adam were in a deep discussion about the best preschools in Manhattan.

Roddy made airplane noises while he zoomed a piece of cake into Dash's mouth. Hope threw her head back and laughed when two-year-old Dash rolled his eyes at his dad.

June slipped under my arm. "She's a mess."

Vivi clapped her frosting-covered hands, and Alicia reacted like it was the most amazing thing she'd ever seen.

"She's happy."

"Yeah." She scanned our friends and family. "This has to be the wildest one-year-old's party ever."

I chuckled, seeing what she was seeing. "I bet you're right."

She shook her head, a soft laugh slipping out of her. "Chaos," she

ywhispered.

l It was.

Absolute, utter chaos.

e And dear god, was it beautiful.

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STAY IN TOUCH

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PLAYLIST

“DADDY ISSUES” THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

“Mary on a Cross” Ghost

“Into It” Chase Atlantic

“Scary Love” The Neighbourhood

“Feel Something” Jaymes Young

“Atlantis” Seafret

“Sex on Fire” Jennel Garcia

“Lost In Between” yaeow

“Perfume” mehro

“Wildfire” Cautious Clay

“Be My Queen” Seafret

“Waves” Dean Lewis

“Exile” Loveless

“The same” mehro

“This Is Why I Need You” Jesse Ruben

“Nothing Breaks Like a Heart” Miley Cyrus

“What Other People Say” Demi Lovato

“No Son Of Mine” Foo Fighters

“Where’s My Love” SYML

“Adore” Dean Lewis

“Mind Over Matter” Young The Giant

[https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4oXRYy6f3SD8jviWQrqaU?
si=7cc485b23e934d6d](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4oXRYy6f3SD8jviWQrqaU?si=7cc485b23e934d6d)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THIS BOOK WAS A long time coming. From the moment *Unrequited* released in March 2020, readers have asked for Diego's story. Well, we all know what else happened in March 2020. The simple truth is I wasn't ready to revisit the whole *Unrequited* world until now.

Boy, was writing the Garzas like sinking into a warm, cozy hug. Never have I wished my characters were real more than this family. If I don't get to attend Alicia's birthday tamalada, I'll throw a fit.

That being said, I want to thank all the readers who never stopped asking for Diego and June's story. You're the reason this happened, and I couldn't be happier that it did.

I have to thank my cover designer, Kate Farlow, for knocking it out of the ballpark with this series. You brought *The Seasons* to life.

And of course Wander Aguiar for taking the gorgeous photos on all the covers.

My words always need a lot of prettying up and I couldn't put out the books I do without my editing team. Monica and Rosa are my stars. Comma:

would be dotting my books at random intervals without them.

Thank you to Amber for keeping my reader group running. And Jen for keeping my everything else running.

Alley Ciz, Laura Lee, and CoraLee June, without our chat, I'd be going even more bananas.

I can't believe this season is over, but I can't thank you enough for standing by me through it all.

And when the seasons change

Will you stand by me?

'Cause I'm a young man built to fall

(Young the Giant)

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[Fix Her Up](#)

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ABOUT JULIA

Julia Wolf is a bestselling contemporary romance author. She writes bad boys with big hearts and strong, independent heroines. Julia enjoys reading romance just as much as she loves writing it. Whether reading or writing, she likes the emotions to run high and the heat to be scorching.

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