

Chapter 1

He emerges from the warm, windy desert darkness, his eyes a pure, knee-buckling shade of ocean blue, his golden-blond hair its own source of sunlight. With neat gray shorts and a long-sleeved T-shirt hugging his sculpted shoulders and arms, he pulls the attention of everyone standing in the fluorescent-lit trailer office of Vegas Outdoor Company.

And when those devastating, delicious eyes find me and travel down to my boots and back, I know he'll fit right in amongst my all-time best impulses of enrolling in culinary school and being the first in my family to leave Texas since the mestizos crossed the border.

Even if he holds a limp piece of pipe in his hand.

“Excuse me.”

A curt voice rings out from behind my soon-to-be Sin City souvenir, forcing him further into the tiny office, closer to the bitter-smelling carafes of brewing coffee and stacks of tourist brochures.

Muttering something about a broken trans-axle-thingamabob, a short, leathery-skinned man rubbing a silver goatee heads behind the counter and smacks the keyboard in front of the computer.

My souvenir glides through the sleepy couples nibbling on the free donuts and lays the piece of blackened pipe on the countertop.

“Look, we're awfully sorry.” The man unzips his jacket, revealing a golden Vegas Outdoor name badge with *Steve* in black lettering. “We've never had a Jeep break before.”

My souvenir leans down and glances at the trinkets for sale—hats, sweatshirts, coffee mugs—inside the glass case. “No worries, man, I understand.”

The warm, easy rumble of his voice adds to the arousal already pulsing in my tan hiking shorts.

Standing next to the register, I watch my souvenir chew on his lip for a moment and then glance over at me. I inhale sharply as a smile spreads to the corners of his mouth, demanding and receiving every bit of my focus. “Don’t suppose you know anything about fixing Jeeps?”

Dimples as deep as the Red Rock Canyon form on either side of his face.

My mouth turns into the Sahara, while thin beads of sweat break out on the back of my neck. Despite my body acting like it’s on meltdown, I manage a Cheshire grin. “Cars aren’t my thing.”

When he runs his hand through his silky thatch of hair, I sigh on the inside. I’d love to fist it and use it for guidance.

He lets out a defeated sigh. “Thought I’d ask.” Still laser focused on me, he pauses then extends his hand. “I’m Jake, by the way.”

I take it and enjoy his strong fingers against my skin. Hesitating for a moment, I’m unsure of how to respond. Should I offer my real name? I don’t normally. After all, I prefer to keep my dating life casual and often transactional.

Something about those eyes, though, makes breaking my rules seem worthwhile.

They’re trusting.

Sincere.

As my nipples harden underneath my thick, red tank top and goosebumps erupt on my arms, I open my mouth, ready to do the unthinkable—but I catch myself.

“Ana.”

Not a complete lie and still a little mysterious. My chest trembles as I tuck some of my long, chocolate-brown hair behind my ear and smile wider.

“I’d offer you another Jeep, but they’re all taken.” Steve taps a walkie-talkie against his bottom lip, his jaw working back and forth in frustration. “I can rebook you for another day, perhaps? We’re pretty open on Monday.”

“Crap,” Jake sighs, glancing at Steve. “I fly home tomorrow.”

Bingo. There's my golden invitation.

"Unless you want to rent ten big-wheel mountain bikes, then it's a refund, I guess."

The muscles in Jake's shoulder flex and harden as he pushes himself up from the counter. "And there's no other way to get to the overlook in..." he consults the black health watch on his wrist, "...less than an hour?"

"It's twenty-eight miles." Steve lets out a thick, rattling chuckle. "I've seen your games. You're fast and all, but a Jeep's the only way."

Jake taps his fingers against the counter and looks back at me. "Okay, a refund then."

Crushed by the defeat in his voice, I take a deep breath and open his invite. With my sweaty palm tight on my keys, I lift my chest higher and clear my throat. "I'll take him."

They stare at me for a second before Steve lets out a noise of professional hesitation. "That's kind of you to offer, but—"

"I'd love to. Unless the company, or Ana here, has a problem with it."

"Well, it's really only meant for couples or singles. We don't want any... awkwardness. But I guess it's not against the rules. So I'll leave up to you, miss. It's your Jeep."

"I promise not to make it awkward." Jake places a hand over his heart. "You're doing me an enormous favor. It's the highlight of my trip."

My eyes rake down his body and a devilish flare lights up my insides. "Really? I had the same thought."

* * *

As the darkness above us peels back, deep purples ceding to watery blues, Jake's voice carries over the wind whipping through the Jeep. "So what brings you to Vegas?"

I nudge my foot down on the gas, exhilarated at my hair flying behind me and the warm air racing over my skin. "Saying goodbye to one thing," I say, unable to wipe the smile off my face. "Starting something new."

Which isn't a lie.

Just not an explanation.

What I don't tell him is that my new life awaits in San Diego. New apartment. New possibilities. New life.

To get there, though, I had to break years of tradition and multiple generations of hearts.

Loaded with nothing more than a few suitcases, my trusty old Volvo P1800, and my best friend, Riley, I headed west.

And spent every mile considering going back.

Then Vegas called out like a sinful siren, promising us a palette-cleansing girls' weekend.

But even Vegas couldn't break through the storm of anxiety in my head.

So this morning, frustrated by the stack of room service trays, I packed early, determined to keep my one reservation and get out of my head. I certainly didn't expect such a delectable breakfast treat as Just-For-Fun Jake to be available though.

"What about you?" I ask, watching his eyes sparkle as the desert slowly awakens around us. "What are you flying away from tomorrow?"

Fortunately, Jake doesn't question my elusiveness. "A buddy is getting married next week. Wanted his bachelor party in Vegas."

"I didn't see anyone that looked like a bachelor party. Are they behind us?"

Even over the wind, Jake's laugh rings out, warm and infectious. "They don't know I'm here. They're all passed out."

"And...you're not?"

"I said I'd go to Vegas. I didn't say I'd be drunk since the plane."

"No?"

Jake looks over at me and smiles. "Stone-cold sober. I like it that way."

I bite my lip and stare out over the headlights for a moment, focused on the red-lit ass of the Jeep a hundred feet in front of us. Did I misinterpret the look he gave me in the office earlier? Should Just-For-Fun Jake really be Good-Boy Jake?

“It’s not that I don’t like booze. It’s just...my job requires I be at my physical best, and I take it seriously.”

What job could that be? I have an idea, but it doesn’t matter. Not for what I hope happens, anyway.

From behind a cliff, the glittering ribbon of lights from the Strip appears. Jake turns, takes in the scenery, and ends that topic.

Was it wrong that I want him to be a total lush, so that my horny, casual thoughts weren’t the only ones in the car?

Based on the stretch of fabric around his arms and the carved muscles of his legs, it looks like he meant what he said—he definitely *is* at his physical best. But if he’s such a goody-two-shoes about booze, what about casual sex? Would he turn me down? What job requires that level of dedication?

I admit, the mystery intrigues me.

So much so, I offer a nugget of truth against my better judgment. “I’m here for a girls’ weekend.”

Jake looks around, an impish grin spreading across his face. “And where are your girls?”

“Just one...and she’s probably passed out as well.” I look over at him and laugh. “She got mad last night when I went to bed at nine. She was like, ‘oh my God, nine is when the night starts!’”

Jake chuckles. “You have me beat, then. I was in bed at 8:45.”

“Shut up!”

“They say the most beautiful thing in Vegas is the sunrise over Red Rocks. I didn’t want to miss it.”

“Same.”

Jake smirks and turns his attention back to the scenery. The vibrating roar of the engine lulls us into a moment of muted, crackling energy. I steal quick glances, wondering what about him makes me so comfortable. So willing to share. Fifteen minutes in this Jeep and he knows more than most men ever have.

“They’re mistaken though.”

His voice makes me jump. “Who’s mistaken? About what?”

“The sunrise. It’s not the most beautiful thing in Vegas.”

“No? What is it then?”

He turns and says with all seriousness, “You.”

His single word steals the breath from my chest and the muscles in my body freeze. A devilish, molten smile forms on his lips, but disappears when I say nothing.

“Ah, man.” He claps his hand on the back of his neck. “I made it weird, didn’t I?” I open my mouth to correct him, but he barrels on. “I did. Damn it! I saw you in the office and...I thought there was a moment.”

I reach over and squeeze his solid thigh to make him stop. “You’re not wrong.”

Jake’s bright eyes darken in the growing light, a look that sends warmth pooling between my legs.

“You’re not married, are you?” I ask, hating how the words cool the surrounding air, but all I can hear in my head is my abuela calling me a puta.

“Sin. Gle.” He announces each syllable in a husky voice. “You?”

To answer him, I run my hand further up his leg, grazing the soft hair with my fingertips, and reach under the edge of his shorts. Heart hammering, I keep one eye on the road and one eye on Jake, who watches my fingers creep ever closer to...

“Shit!”

I slam on the brakes as the train of Jeeps comes to a sudden halt. My stomach lurches into my throat as our headlights come within a dusty millimeter of the bumper of the vehicle ahead of us. I gasp for air and hold up a shaky hand in apology to the driver, who’s staring daggers in their rearview mirror. Thank god we’re at the end of the caravan and there’s no one behind us.

“You okay?”

Jake’s voice cuts through the whooshing blood in my ears. I look down and realize he’s arm-barred me for protection, his cable-like forearm resting just above my breasts. Jake looks at where I’m looking, but doesn’t move.

“I’m okay.”

When he’s satisfied with my safety, he removes his arm, taking the warmth from my skin.

I wish he wouldn’t.

Jake exhales. “Man, that was close.”

“Yeah,” I say, hating how quick the heat of the moment disappears.

When the pack of deer finish scampering across the road, the rest of the Jeeps pull away. Unsure of what to do, I put the car in gear, ready to catch up. Before the car even starts rolling, though, Jake grabs my leg.

Part of me is ashamed of the needy arousal that washes through me when he does.

Part of me celebrates having his hands on me again.

“What are you doing?” I ask, knowing the damn answer already.

“Listen, about what was happening just before we nearly ended up in a ten-Jeep pileup?”

As my gaze falls to his lips, there’s a quick click and sweep of seat belt fabric. Before I can breathe, Jake lunges across the center console, slides his hand around the back of my neck, and crushes his mouth against mine.

I jump at the startling movement and then groan as his lips soften and he sweeps his tongue across my own. As he deepens the kiss and pulls the oxygen from the air, I go light-headed, creating a delirious tingling that surges through my body, dialing up all systems to full-bore carnal thirst.

After I don’t know how long, Jake breaks our kiss, his breath ragged, and whispers against my lips, “Was that what was supposed to happen?”

I nod and run my hands through his hair, threading my fingers together, keeping him right where he’s at, savoring the heat between us. “I didn’t know it’d be that good.”

Jake tucks a small chunk of hair behind my ear. His fingertips brush the soft skin and I whimper at the heat it creates. I'm about to order his hands elsewhere when he leans in and covers my mouth with his, stealing my order and convincing me to just go with it. I untangle my hands and stroke the rough stubble on his face as he groans and shifts around in his seat.

"Come here," he whispers. He slides his hands down my sides and seats them on my hips, digging his fingers into my soft flesh and pulling me toward him.

I fumble around to put the Jeep in park, yank the hand brake, and scramble over the console. Straddling him, I lean down for another delicious kiss.

"Just so you know," Jake gasps, "I don't normally—well, ever—hook up with strangers."

I look at him for a split second, carefully choosing my words. Now that I have him where I want him, the familiar masks fall into place. What does he want to hear?

I grind my hips against his. "Yeah, well, that makes two of us."

"So then you're...okay with this?"

I nod my head and smirk. "Relax, I won't fall in love with you."

It's my gold standard. It helps ease their minds, and nine times out of ten, seals the deal. And every time I say it, I mean it, which helps the truthfulness in the situation. I'm only interested in the physical and my emotional defenses are solid.

But when I look in his eyes, icy-blue fire in the gray morning, the words feel untruthful for the first time. I realize just how far I can lose myself in them. His eyes make me forget the constant loop of mi madre crying and cursing at me from the steps of our house.

Jake reaches up and touches my lips with his fingers. "You're shivering," he says.

"I...I can't wait." I hesitate, not wanting to talk. Instead, I take his fingers into my mouth and suck.

"Kiss me, Ana." He removes his fingers so I can follow his command.

While my lips are busy with his, I reach and tug at the hem of his T-shirt. Jake helps me remove the well-worn fabric and tosses it in the back of the Jeep.

Even in the pale light, I can see how chiseled he is, each quick breath revealing those little crooked roads of happiness that lead to the waistband of his shorts. I skim my fingers across the fabric and pull them down.

“Wait,” Jake says, grabbing my wrist. “I don’t have a condom.”

My chest hitches. For a second, I consider calling it off, but then I remember I’m always prepared. “In my backpack. I have one. Plus, I’m on the pill.”

Which is two familial strikes against me.

With a breath, the concern disappears from his face. He pulls me in and kisses me while he slips his hands under my tank top, strong fingertips grazing the sensitive skin up my sides until they reach the bottom of my tight sports bra.

He bunches up the fabric and I lean back to help him remove the constricting material. He pauses for a moment, taking me in with a look of awe. Then he sits up and takes the tip of my brown nipple into his mouth. I close my eyes and groan in appreciation, delighting in the slippery sensation of his tongue swirling my peak.

He pulls back and whispers, “Now the tricky part.”

His hands find my waistband and tug at the button of my shorts. Feeling the hard plastic edges of the Jeep against my legs, I understand what he means.

“Let’s be careful,” I say, lifting my hips. “Don’t want to damage anything.”

Jake grins, sliding my shorts as far as he can until it’s my turn to wiggle and twist my way out, pushing them to the floorboards.

As I open the protection, I watch Jake free his manhood and let it rest against his stomach, hard as stone.

I grin as I wrap my fingers around the hot flesh and rub the glistening pool of pre-cum over his crown before rolling on the condom. Desperate to ease the pulsating thrum in my pussy, I position myself and his cock where I need it.

“Don’t you dare close your eyes,” I whisper. “Keep your eyes on me, understand?”

Before he can even nod, I take him in and I wish to God I had said nothing. Something happens as I slide down, not stopping until his soft thatch of hair brushes my

exposed folds. Our bodies, our souls, fuse as I settle, adjusting to his fullness, before lifting and sinking down again.

In between rapid breaths, Jake opens his mouth, his words coming out in a soft murmur. “Holy shit. Holy shit.”

Each pump strokes the needy place inside me, sending electricity through my legs, building a pressure in my core, a pressure delicious to delay, but not for long.

Jake grabs my hips and drives himself deeper. I press my fingertips into his chest and cry out, pushing myself down against him, grinding my sensitive button against his skin, squeezing the muscles in my legs.

I whimper as his fingers tighten around me, keeping us as close as possible. I take one hand from his chest, reach down, and lace my fingers with his. As I do, an overwhelming surge of passion races through me.

What is *happening*?

Even though it increases the pressure, setting me up for a destructive release, I know I shouldn't and yet...I squeeze his fingers tighter, slowing down my pace, keeping the vibrating pressure at bay for a moment more, one last tortuous moment until Jake thrusts up and pushes my orgasm over the edge.

As the first rays of sunlight break over the horizon and the warm sun fills the Jeep with light and heats my bare skin, wave after heavy wave rushes down to the very tips of my toes, ripping the strength from my body.

My cries mix and disappear into the wind as Jake hardens underneath me. A moment later, he yells his release into the desert, his hot breath against my breasts. When he's done, he collapses against the seat. “Jesus. Fuck.” Fractured words leak out between heavy gasps. “Jesus Christ.”

I turn my head and brush soft kisses over his neck. I smile as his pulse pounds against his skin and my lips. Jake wraps an arm around my waist, keeping me right where I'm at.

And for the first time, I'm not interested in leaving as soon as it's over.

“Thanks for getting in my Jeep.” My smile stretches to the corners of my face.
“Hope it’s still the highlight of your trip.”

Jake nuzzles my ear. “Absolutely unforgettable.”

“We should hurry and catch up though, so they don’t come back for us.”

“Just another minute.” He leans down and takes my nipple in between his teeth. Like a switch flipping, I’m ready to go again. “My plane doesn’t leave until tonight.” He pulls the flesh into a tight, hard peak. “Why don’t we get some breakfast? Maybe…go back to your hotel? One roomie is easier to navigate than five.”

I let out a primitive groan as his hand moves from my back and cups my other breast, making me melt. It’d be so easy to say yes. But whatever is happening between us is already trying to work through my defenses—sound as they are—which is scary as fuck.

There’s hasn’t been a second time with anyone in a long time, and I’m not going to break the pattern with him.

I cradle his face in my hands and lean away from him, my heart feeling betrayed. “Sorry, Just-For-Fun Jake, but the magic ends here.” Just to torture myself, I memorize those eyes and steal one more kiss. “Thanks for the souvenir.”

Chapter 2

Two years later

“Liliana Rojas Cruz Jimenez Esparza! If you stuff one more empanada in my mouth, I’m going to kill you and then die of a heart attack!”

I chase Riley around our tiny kitchen, the flaky pastry in one hand, steaming ground beef and raisins spilling onto the floor. “Come on, one more bite.”

Backed into a laminate-covered corner, Riley grabs a spatula and holds it out in defense, spitting at wild strands of red hair waving in her face. “I’m serious.” Her chest shakes with laughter and a smile twitches on her lips. “I can’t eat anymore. You’ve made me enough food to last through the summer!” She pointedly glances at the teetering mountain of dirty pots and pans in the sink.

“Please. It’s just some empanadas.”

“What about the chilaquiles for breakfast? Or the nogada pepper for lunch?”

I stare at her for a moment, then drop my pastry weapon. My chest deflates and my eyes fall to the floor. “I’m sorry.”

After a moment, she crosses our entire kitchen in two steps, slips her arms around my shoulders, and hugs me. “It’s been what, a month now?”

“Eighteen days, twelve hours, and...” I glance at the kitschy red clock above the sink, “twelve minutes.”

Riley sighs. “And the restaurant reopens in...ten months?”

“Yes.” My voice catches, sounding strangled and muffled against her silky-smooth skin. “If there are no delays.” I sniff and feel the familiar well of tears.

The moment I passed Tita’s—the small restaurant on the corner of Sunrise and Main—two years ago and saw the *Chef Wanted* sign in the window, I knew I was home.

The meticulous kitchen; the deep brown leather booths; the cool, salty air that blew in from the Pacific Ocean just down the street; the fiery scent of the anejo tequila behind the bar. It all became a safe place. A distraction.

A purpose.

All the worry and anxiety of applying for jobs with only a degree and no experience disappeared as soon as the owner, Alejandro, closed his eyes and said my nogada pepper reminded him of his childhood home in Puebla.

Every night after that, Alejandro pulled me from the kitchen and paraded me through the packed tables. His adopted nieta, he always said, shaking hands with the lines of people waiting outside for my food and making them laugh.

I loved our little Dorada Beach community, and I adored feeding them.

Then, two months ago, an aneurysm toppled Alejandro in the parking lot and stole the smile from his face.

He left the building to his son, Dante, who, asking no one, tore it to the studs in order to put four floors of condos above Tita's. While Dante was nice enough and paid staff to stay until we reopened, he took something far more important than money.

Ever since, I've chewed on my fingers or destroyed our kitchen to keep busy.

Riley leans back and puts her hands on my shoulders. "Come on. You need to get out."

"And do what?"

"Anything. Get some sun. You're nearly as white as me."

"Excuse me?! I'm just as brown as I was when I left Texas!"

"It's a joke, for crying out loud." Riley smacks me on the arm and looks around the kitchen. When she spots the enormous pile of empanadas next to the oven, she snaps her fingers. "Idea."

"What?" I grumble, examining the brown skin on my arm, wondering if my gorgeous, fair-skinned friend is correct.

"We get cute and then..." She grabs an empanada. "We hand these babies out on the street and record it all for my YouTube channel!"

While I spent eighty or ninety hours a week at Tita's and loved every minute, Riley found success in San Diego as a food personality and part-time personal chef. Her popular blog and YouTube channel mean that she'll start looking for houses soon.

"What? No."

"Fine," Riley sighs, before perking back up. "Oh! Dinner at the boardwalk and watch the cute surfer boys?" She wiggles her eyebrows and lowers her voice, even though no one else is in the apartment. "Get a little dick therapy, maybe? That'll help you not think about the restaurant."

"Yeah, no thanks. I'll just stay here. Clammy ocean man flesh does *not* appeal to me right now." I leave the kitchen, intent on taking the recycling by the front door to the bins. "You go for it, though."

"Oh, come on," Riley calls. "A nice steely rod will straighten things out for a bit!"

I ignore her and grab the handles of the paper bags.

"You said it yourself the other day," she continues. "You're overdue for standard maintenance." There's a brief pause and then Riley shouts, "schedule that dicking today!"

One hand on the door, the other loaded with paper bags, I hesitate and let out a huge sigh. Riley's not wrong. I've had minimal flesh à la male—ocean or otherwise—since... Vegas. A stiff soldier should be fun, but my head isn't there.

It toils to free my heart from behind the construction fence.

Riley appears from the kitchen, phone in her hands, and a look of concern on her face. "In all seriousness, Lili, you haven't left the apartment in a week. Come on, just a for a couple of hours."

Clenching my jaw, I close my eyes, breathe deep and catch a whiff of myself. Grimacing, I say slowly, "Okay. Double D's only though. Dinner and drinks. No dick therapy."

"Yay," Riley exclaims. "I'll make a reservation!"

I open the front door and shove the bags into the hallway. "And I will take a shower."

* * *

An hour and a half later, Riley and I tumble out onto the sidewalk and into the warm San Diego sun, looking and feeling like a pair of badass women.

A shot of tequila helped matters, but having my hair done, falling over my shoulders in perfect chocolate waves, and my makeup perfect, puts a smile on my face.

So does the picnic basket full of food around my arm.

Riley dominates the conversation, which is fine by me. We walk past the long row of apartments, their bright blue and green doors popping against the white stucco exteriors, as Riley talks all about me and my food. I smile and hand out an empanada to anyone who wants one, stopping and chatting with those who eat it right away, recording their reactions.

A couple blocks from the boardwalk, Riley makes it a point to flirt with a group of Navy boys whose knees buckle at my food and whose eyes study my red-and-gold-print floral dress more than their flight plans.

I brush them off as easily as a fly on my shoulder, though, focusing instead on the people milling in and out of the small, early 1900s buildings, their brick-and-wood exteriors kept in immaculate condition.

“Lili!”

I look for the voice behind me. Carol, the owner of the clothing boutique kitty-corner from Tita’s, runs up and gives me a hug so strong, her bangles make music on her wrists.

“Oh my God, it’s so good to see you!” She lets go of me and gives me a knowing look. “Are you doing okay?” She puts a hand to her chest, covered in loose-flowing fabric. “I know he promised everything will blend right in and be better than before, but I can’t help but feel like he’s violating our little district, you know?”

I nod and try to keep the tears at bay behind my sunglasses. “Empanada?”

Carol peers down at the wrapped package, her eyes growing. She snatches it away from me, tears through the paper, stuffs half of it in her mouth, and groans. “Oh, God,” she mutters, her voice thick. “So good.”

A group of people walk by. Before they pass, Carol grabs one of their arms and holds them in place. “Have you ever eaten at Tita’s?” She gestures at me to supply them all with a free empanada while Riley records their reactions in silence. I do everything I can to keep the powerful grin on my face in check as the satisfied people walk off towards the Ferris wheel spinning above the roofs of the buildings, or the shrieks and thuds of the old metal bumper cars.

“You got any more business cards?” Carol asks, smacking my arm. “I’m out at the store.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“You think I could have five or six more? I’m headed to a girls’ group and I’m sure they’ll be hungry as well.”

“The more the merrier,” I say, supplying Carol with a handful.

“Thanks!” She turns, then stops. “Don’t be a stranger, Lili, seriously. Maybe we create a little patio set up. In my parking lot? My boyfriend is on the city council, you know.”

“Thank you, Carol, you’re the best.”

She gives me a California air smooch. “Love you!”

With a whoosh of perfumed air, she sashays in the other direction. Riley smirks as the smile on my face grows, smelling the almost invisible wisps of barbecue smoke and fish, making my stomach rumble and my mouth water for an icy-cold lavender vodka lemonade from Lake’s Fish House.

There’s still half a basket of food left, however. So I look up the street, spot the next couple walking by, arm in arm, and ask, “Empanada?”

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Belly full, body feeling like cotton from the booze, I lean back in my chair and watch the orange-and-yellow sunset melt into the sparkling blue-gray ocean.

Riley, meanwhile, stalks a group of six surfer boys stripping off their wet suits in the parking lot like a predatory cat.

“Should I go hang out with Carol so you can catch your ocean dick?”

Riley scrunches up her face. “What? No! It’s girls’ night.”

“You already got the Navy boy’s number.”

“Which I will save for later,” Riley says with a defiant flip of her hair before loading up a warm tortilla chip with fresh guacamole. “Right now, it’s all about you.”

I squirm in my seat, uncomfortable being the center of attention. After a minute, I say sheepishly, “thank you for suggesting this. I needed it more than I thought.”

“You’re welcome. I know how much cooking for these people means to you.”

My chest flutters with happiness as I work the straw up and down the plastic cup, making childish but satisfying squeaking sounds. “Maybe this can be a thing? Make something every day, hand it out. A way to pass—”

“Whoa, whoa,” Riley interrupts. “I love you, but there is a disaster zone waiting for us at home. We can’t balance my channel and you feeding all of Dorada Beach in twenty square feet.”

I lean back and sigh. She’s right. The only way we coexist is the fact that the kitchen at home is hers, decorated to fit her business, while Tita’s was my playground. Since I’m used to cooking in volume, I can empty our cabinets without a second thought. If I did that every day? Riley says she’s a pacifist, but...

“What am I going to do then?”

“Work at Burger Shack?” Riley offers, licking the salt off her margarita glass.

I glare at her. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

Riley squeals, cheeks full of margarita. She swallows with a brain-freezing grimace and then looks at me. “How about this?” She shoves her phone across the table and shows me a screen from a website called Personal Chefs Network.

Immediate Opening

Full-time personal chef needed in La Jolla. Discreet client looking for a culinary expert to shop and prepare all meals and snacks. Looking for passion, creativity, and dedication despite a very strict diet plan. Insurance and benefits provided. Minimum salary is \$400K, open for additional discussion based on experience.

“Holy shit!”

My shouts draw looks from the entire patio.

Glancing around, I lower my voice, but still shriek, “Four hundred *thousand*?”

“Probably more, knowing your talent.”

“Wait, why aren’t you applying?”

Riley tilts her head and shrugs her shoulders. “It’s a drop in pay, to be honest.”

My eyebrows lift in surprise.

“What? I’m doing well. Besides, I couldn’t imagine leaving my current client. I get the freedom to do my channel and be creative. This sounds like it would cramp my style.”

“And it wouldn’t cramp mine? I have a full-time job.”

“Not for ten months, you don’t.” Riley takes a drink. “If everything goes well.”

Having no answer, I read the ad again. “I don’t know.”

Riley takes her phone back, presses some buttons, and taps the screen. A second later, my phone dings and I know she’s sent me a screenshot of the contact information.

“Look, personal chefs come and go all the time. Why can’t you take this job and when the restaurant reopens, just quit?”

“I don’t want to quit on anyone. I’d be taking the job under false pretenses.”

“You need something to do. It’s your own kitchen and you’ll make...” Riley looks up into the sky, doing the same math I’ve already done in my head, “six times your annual salary. That’s enough savings to—”

“Actually have a savings account,” I finish for her.

“Fix the P1800?”

Our eyes meet and grow big.

“We can go on our South American food tour!”

Riley points a finger at me and winks. “Now you’re thinking.”

I grab a tortilla chip and break it into little pieces, the golden crumbs falling onto my plate. “If I did this, I’d make sure they knew it was only temporary.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“Besides, we’re assuming I get the job. For that salary, I’m sure there’s a mile-long line to apply.”

Riley sets down her glass and gives me an annoyed look. “You saw those Navy boys. They practically came in their khakis when they ate your food.” Riley glares at a horrified-looking family sitting next to us. “You’re a shoo-in.”

I grab the ends of my hair and ponder the problem. As Riley places some cash on top of the receipt, I dig my phone out of the picnic basket. I find the phone number and dial it, hoping someone already took the position.

Instead, a bright female voice answers. “Hello?”

“Uh, hi. My name’s Liliana. I’m calling about the personal chef job.”

“Oh, yeah! I’m Skylar. Are you interested in applying?”

“I am,” I say, watching Riley watch me.

“Can you come tomorrow for an interview? 12:30?”

“I can do that.”

“Awesome! I’ll text you the address! Oh! Just so there’s no confusion, your interview is making us lunch. I figured that would be obvious with the ad, but apparently not.”

“No problem. I’d expect nothing less.”

“Okay, Layla! We’ll see you tomorrow!” Before I can correct her, Skylar hangs up.

I stare at my phone for a moment, a strange numbness spreading across my chest. After a deep breath, I look up at Riley.

“Alright, then. Guess I better go sharpen my knives.”