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Up In Flames

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HAILEY ALCARAZ

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Up In Flames

Hailey Alcaraz

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Hailey Alcaraz began her writing career in the sixth grade as a kid reporter for *Time for Kids* magazine and has been addicted to storytelling ever since. Born in California and raised in Arizona, she's a Southwest girl through and through who loves stories about fellow multicultural girls finding their way in the world. She currently lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, with her husband, two daughters, and precocious German shepherd. *Up in Flames* is her first novel. Connect with her online at HaileyAlcaraz.com and @AlcarazBooks on both Twitter and Instagram.

Gorgeous, wealthy, and entitled,
Ruby has just one single worry in her life—scheming to get the boy next door to finally realize they're meant to be together. But when the California wildfires cause her privileged world to go up in flames, Ruby must struggle to find the grit and compassion to help her family and those less fortunate to rise from the ashes.

At eighteen, Ruby Ortega is an unapologetic flirt who balances her natural aptitude for economics with her skill in partying hard. But she couldn't care less about those messy college boys—it's her intense, brooding neighbor Ashton who she wants, and even followed to school. Even the fact that he has a girlfriend doesn't deter her . . . whatever Ruby wants, she eventually gets.

Her ruthless determination is tested when wildfires devastate her California hometown, destroying her parents' business and causing an unspeakable tragedy that shatters her to her core. Suddenly, Ruby is the head of the family and responsible for its survival, with no income or experience to rely on. Rebuilding seems hopeless, but with the help of unexpected allies—including a beguiling, dark-eyed boy who seems to understand her better than anyone—Ruby has to try. When she discovers that the fires also displaced many undocumented people in her town, it becomes even more imperative to help. And if she has to make hard choices along the way, can anyone blame her?

In her powerful debut novel, Mexican American author Hailey Alcarez chronicles a riveting portrait of transformation, resilience, and love with an unlikely heroine who, when faced with unforeseen disaster, surprises everyone, especially herself.

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Part One

"In the eyes of love,
we are all sparks
waiting for the flame."

—Giovannie de Sadeleer

1

Ruby Ortega always got what she wanted.

However, Ruby Ortega also frequently wanted what she couldn't have—which was precisely how she found herself in her current predicament: engulfed by a flock of rowdy boys lavishing her with the attention and adoration she craved on this tedious evening but still feeling just a little bit bored.

Among this crowd were, of course, the Trujillo brothers; they never passed up a chance to brag and boast in front of an audience. Ruby had once found the name of Alex Trujillo, the youngest of that tall brood, doodled in her sister's notebook with hearts and swirls, and suspected an unreciprocated crush. Then there were a handful of other boys she'd grown up with—Mike Thomas, Ian Percy, and Daniel de la Cruz—whose parents either worked with her father, attended spin class with her mother, or operated in some capacity in the high-society circle to which the Ortegas belonged. There were a few others who were less familiar, like Sam Gomez, whose parents

sent him off to boarding school last year after a drunken, late-night joy ride in their Beemer that had resulted in several thousand dollars of property damage near Balboa Park. All in all, the boys surrounding Ruby were all fine. No one particularly special, but at least they were better than the girls her age.

As they took turns blustering about achievements they seemed to find impressive—high scores on *Madden* or beer pong tournaments—Ruby feigned interest with a thin smile and a tiger-like scan of the rest of the partygoers clustered around the patio of her family's bed-and-breakfast.

At least two hundred guests had come to Elena's quinceañera. Ruby's father claimed most of them were related to their family, but who could really know with him? He referred to everyone as primo so-and-so or tía what's-her-name. Ruby'd had her own quince three years ago, and he'd introduced her to about twenty people who were "cousins" she'd never met.

Elena had been babbling incessantly about this party for months, and for the past week, no one in her family had been able to talk about anything else. Her sister had gone to everyone but Ruby as she deliberated over the color of her dress (mint green, which no one had the courage to tell her brought out the sickliest undertones in her skin), the party favor (key chains with her face on them—who the hell would want that?), or even the centerpiece flowers (it didn't matter that they were some exotic daisy that her mother had called three different florists to track down—they were still *daisies*). Daddy got to offer his opinions. Mom was integral to every decision. Even Carla, who was eleven, got to make suggestions. But anytime Ruby was proximal to any party planning, Elena would snap, "Oh,

Ruby. I'm sure you're busy getting ready for college. You don't need to worry about my birthday."

It was unrelenting, and Ruby'd had all she could bear.

She let out a bored sigh and locked eyes with Alex across the circle of boys as he shoved a sopaipilla into his face. He glanced around uncertainly before he realized that he was the one who Ruby had zeroed in on. She ran a hand over the shimmery fabric of her dress, acutely aware of the effect that would have on him. The wolfish way he stared at her as he finished off the fried pastry, scattering powdered sugar all over his shirt, was somehow both revolting and satisfying.

Ruby had a slim figure, but it was not offset by the gentle curves most of the other girls had upon exiting puberty. Her skin was fair, but not quite porcelain; it was just light enough for people to comment frequently that she didn't "look Latina"—whatever that meant. She had thick, dark hair that, on her best days, fell in glamorous waves down her back, but on her worst days drew Medusa-like comparisons. While some girls may have listed these qualities as flaws, Ruby in fact knew them to be traits she could use to her advantage with the right amount of confidence and a good deal of batting her eyelashes. There was absolutely no challenge that Ruby wasn't prepared to bend to her will.

Alex barreled toward her, earning more than a few irritated scowls as he did so.

"You look amazing" was all he could muster, a nervous grin playing on his sugarcoated lips.

She smiled back, instantly filled with the familiar satisfaction of having all eyes on her.

He seized her brief silence as his opportunity to interject what he probably thought was his most remarkable trait. "I don't know if you saw the new truck out there." Ruby maintained a blank expression, but he was undeterred. "It's mine. I just bought it. It's got three hundred horsepower. Which is a lot. Most people don't know the difference between horsepower and torque."

How did we go from complimenting me to this *so quickly?* she wondered.

Somehow he had transitioned to towing capacity, which apparently was also different from horsepower, and Ruby resisted the overwhelming urge to point out that all those things were similar in that she did not give two shits about any of them.

She eyed Ian Percy, who stood to the right of Alex's colossal shoulder with a disappointed scowl on his face. She'd always found him kind of skeevy, ever since she heard he had multiple iPhones to text different girlfriends, but perhaps he'd be a more interesting target? "I'm sorry," she cooed to Alex apologetically. "My champagne seems to have disappeared." She held up her empty hands and gave him a helpless shrug.

She flicked her eyes up at him and waited five full seconds for him to realize she was waiting for him to make himself useful.

At last, his eyes brightened with understanding. "I'll go get you one. Bartenders never ask for my ID." He put his own cup to his lips and drained its contents with one cartoonishly loud slurp. "Because I'm so tall," he added unnecessarily.

Ruby rewarded him with an affectionate pat on his arm. "Oh, would you? I'll see you back here in a minute, then." Before the relief of finally shaking the bumbling buffoon (really, *what* did Elena

see in that guy?) could sink in, Ruby felt a gentle but firm hand pull her by the arm, away from her gaggle of admirers.

"Ruby. Catherine. Ortega." Instantly, she was spun so her back was to the boys, and she was instead face-to-face with the reproachful glare of her mother—the only person in the world whose whisper could still be heard over the thumping of a DJ. "Are you trying to give your father a heart attack?"

Her father subsisted on a diet that was primarily made of tequila and red meat, so while a heart attack wasn't completely out of the question, Ruby didn't really see how it could be blamed on her.

Before she could answer, her mother snapped, "You know he didn't want you wearing that dress, and I still don't know how you made it out of the house without me seeing it." Her mother's eyes darted furiously over the pale green bodycon dress that clung to her torso, exposing more than a tasteful amount of cleavage. Of course, the dress's fit was only part of her parents' disapproval of her choice. The other part had been Elena's whining that the color was too close to the mint-green gown she'd selected for herself, which Ruby found ludicrous. Everyone knew green was *her* color.

Though it had required borderline espionage to escape her mother's authoritarian watch this afternoon, Ruby personally thought the greater accomplishment had been getting into the dress on her own. She'd had to jump up and down and nearly dislocate her shoulder to get it zipped.

"It wouldn't even have been an issue if Elena had included me in the damas." She dramatically folded her arms across her chest. However, she realized the effect this action had on her breasts—

heaving them upward from her plunging neckline—and uncrossed them, quickly pinning her arms to her side in faux innocence. Her sister had selected four of her friends to wear matching evening gowns as part of the ceremony and had been very insistent that Ruby was not among them. Ruby preferred her own dress, obviously—but she hated being excluded. She was not one to take being told no in stride.

It was, of course, beside the point that Ruby hadn't chosen Elena to be one of her damas for her quinceañera either.

"It is Elena's birthday, and it was her choice, just like your quinceañera was all your choice." Her mother grabbed the neckline of Ruby's dress roughly and jerked it upward, smashing her exposed cleavage underneath the shimmery fabric. "And that's what this is, Ruby. A quinceañera. A birthday party. Not a nightclub. Now take this sweater and cover yourself up before your grandmother—or worse, your *father*—sees you. *Go.*" She'd snatched some hideous gray cardigan off the nearest chair and thrust it into Ruby's arms before marching off.

Ruby briefly thought of mentioning that her grandmother *had* seen her dress before they left the house and had rewarded her with a devilish wink, chuckling that girls her age deserved wild adventures, but she didn't want to get Mama Ortega in trouble, too.

Distracted by her mother's tirade and the faint mildewy smell of her new accessory, she hadn't noticed the towering Trujillo troll returning, sloshing the two beers he held with every step.

She'd listened to him drone on *and on*, and he couldn't even be bothered to remember that she'd asked for champagne? Typical.

"Hey, do you want to go talk out front for a bit?" he offered with a hopeful smile.

She could not think of anything she wanted to do less than retreat to isolation with this boy—even with the mortifying new addition to her ensemble. But before she could say anything, he added, "My brother said Ashton Willis is back from his semester abroad, and he just got here. He's out front with a few friends."

Her words caught in her throat for an instant, in a stunned, ecstatic silence.

This was what she had been waiting for all evening. Maybe even all her life.

She tossed the cardigan back onto the chair where her mother had found it and eagerly latched onto Alex's arm so his gigantic figure would hide her from the judgmental eyes of her family. "That sounds wonderful!"

Ruby had to consciously force herself to breathe, her entire body tingling with excitement and exhilaration. She was anxious for so much these days—to leave for college, to have a life outside her insular community, where she knew everyone and everyone knew her—but there really was nothing like a summer night in Southern California, and she was certain this moment was going to be life changing.

Her pulse quickened as they crossed the crowded patio, bedecked with the twinkling string lights they pulled out for weddings and other special events, and weaved their way between bistro tables and waiters toting gleaming silver trays. The music began to fade, and briefly, they ducked into darkness as they traipsed along the side of the B&B. At last, they reemerged into brightness, mak-

ing their way to the front of the building, where glowing farmhouse sconces illuminated a small seating area.

Unlike the event space in the back, the front patio was much more intimate, adorned with a few blossoming rosebushes and two shabby-chic benches her mother had found at an antique store and had shipped to Vermont to be restored and refinished. The bed-and-breakfast itself was originally a barn and still maintained some of the rustic charm on the outside, with a peaked archway over the converted doors and distressed whitewashed wood panels. It was a pretty place, almost as much a part of Ruby's family as any person was, and it stirred something in Ruby's heart to have Ashton back here.

He had been studying abroad in Spain since Christmas, and while he had planned to be back in time for Elena's party, a series of flight delays had made his highly anticipated arrival a little hard to predict and utterly excruciating for Ruby. But here he was. He was back.

And he was finally going to be hers.

She was still several yards away from him as she stepped onto the cobblestone walkway, his back to her, but the second her eyes fell on his lanky frame, her insides turned molten. Her heart raced with a dizzying mixture of nostalgia and yearning.

The Willises had lived next door to the Ortegas for as long as Ruby could remember. Ashton was two and a half years older, but they'd grown up side by side, their childhoods intertwined. Hell, there was even a picture of Ashton and Ruby as toddlers in the bathtub together—a relic that used to mortify her, but now one that made her blush excitedly.

Ashton had always been sweet and kind to her, a reliable force

of chivalry in a teenage social world that was often dramatic and tumultuous. He'd given her rides in high school so she wouldn't have to debase herself by waiting for the bus. He'd even listen to her complain about her most recent breakups without ever making the snarky comments the girls in her class were prone to about how maybe the problem wasn't them, but her. Sure, there were times she had found him a little dorky, like when he'd go on a tangent about comic books or insist on dipping everything he ate in ranch dressing, but she knew those things weren't a big deal. Ruby saw now that they were meant for each other, that all the time they'd spent growing up alongside each other, they'd also been falling in love without even realizing it. She'd rolled her eyes through way too many romantic comedies for her not to know that the girl next door always got the guy.

It had become clear to her on his first visit home from college almost two years ago. He was tanned from a recent trip to Lake Havasu, which gave his freckled cheeks the most adorable glow, and they'd stayed up all night talking in his backyard, sprawled out on his trampoline underneath the stars like they'd used to when they were younger. He told her all about college—his dorm, his classes, his fraternity—and she lay beside him in rapture, wondering if his eyelashes had always been so long, if he had always smelled so amazing.

After that, each of his visits was more tantalizing than the last.

He hadn't quite worked up the nerve to kiss her yet, but Ruby felt it in her bones. This would be the night. In her shimmering green dress and peep-toe heels, with her professionally curled hair and just enough alcohol—hopefully—to give her the final dose of con-

fidence she needed to unveil her true feelings. This would be the night.

She inhaled sharply, readjusted her neckline from her mother's tampering so her cleavage resembled the gently heaving bosom of a romance-novel heroine, and released her escort's arm. She couldn't risk sending any mixed signals now that Ashton was here. She quickly tousled her hair, just in time for him to turn and face them. He grinned, and Ruby melted.

Buzzing with a sense of anticipation he could surely feel vibrating off her, she watched Alex and Ashton shake hands before she pulled him into a hug, pressing every inch of her body against his.

"Hi, Ashton," she breathed into his shirt as she nuzzled her face against him.

"Whoa, I had no idea you missed me that much!" He laughed, disentangling himself from her embrace, his cheeks a bright pink even in the half darkness. "I should leave the country more often!"

She batted her eyelashes and smiled in a way that she thought was demure, though in actuality, she had never been demure in her entire life. "Well, maybe next time you run off to Europe for six months, you'll think about taking some of us with you!"

He chuckled, a sweet sparkle in his eyes as his gaze lingered on Ruby. "Believe me, it crossed my mind."

RUBY SPENT THE NEXT HOUR MAKING UNSUCCESSFUL attempts to capture Ashton's attention and lure him away, before

resorting to sultry, sidelong gazes and any opportunity to stroke his arm or bump shoulders with him. Finally, the crowd started to thin. Each person made their way back to the party to dance, to get a drink, to find a missing relative—or, in Alex's case, to check for the third time if they were serving dessert yet. The night was nearly halfway over, but at long last, it was just Ruby and Ashton nestled on the bench, awash in the gentle patio lighting as if they were in a world all their own. He was talking in a meandering manner about his semester abroad, describing ancient buildings and unfamiliar foods in a dazzling way Ruby had a hard time following. She felt a warm thrill throughout her entire body as he described the meaty prawns in heaping bowls of paella, which he always set aside because their tails freaked him out, or the mind-boggling, colorful architecture of Barcelona. He had decided to enroll in the arts track rather than Spanish-language immersion, he told her, which Ruby found both impractical and charming. After all, they lived in Southern California, where Spanish was spoken almost as much as English. Though Ashton scarcely knew ten words of Spanish, his love for pretty, intellectual things like museums and classical art trumped the practicality of being bilingual. It was that kind of uncompromising idealism that was so endearing to Ruby. Her brilliant, head-in-the-clouds Ashton.

She felt completely scatterbrained as he spoke, partially because she had never left the country and had nothing to compare this sense of wonderment to, but mostly because of how enchanting and exalting she found him in this moment.

She had folded her legs so her feet were tucked beneath her, with her hands resting in her lap, close enough that he could eas-

ily hold them if he wanted to. The strap of her dress kept slipping down, and she waited longer and longer each time to return it to where it belonged. But now, she let the sparkly strap linger, revealing her bare shoulder.

A beat of silence passed between them as Ashton appeared to notice for the first time that it was just the two of them. She watched his gaze catch on the exposed skin of her shoulder before settling on her face, and Ruby almost admired his ability to restrain himself from taking in the full effect of her body in the shimmering dress.

"Ruby Ortega." He sighed, his voice warm with adoration. "You look . . . *great*." Ruby could've lived forever inside the contemplative pause that followed his words—if she weren't so eager for him to kiss her already, of course. "Are you excited for college? Can you believe school starts next month?"

She nodded slowly, maintaining eye contact with him. "I can't wait to get out of here." She suppressed thoughts of her irritating sister and her demanding mother. She didn't want to think of them in this moment.

He glanced upward at the stars, strands of his blond hair falling into his eyes that he didn't bother to sweep away. "It is amazing to see what else is out there, but you'll be surprised. You'll miss this place."

Buena Valley was where she and Ashton had found each other, and she would always love her hometown for that. But lately, she'd been feeling like she'd outgrown it. She knew that for her and Ashton to explore their romance, they needed somewhere new, somewhere that wasn't so familiar. That was, of course, a

large part of why she'd applied to college in Arizona in the first place, though she hadn't actually shared that rationale with anyone. Sure, Arizona State had a robust business program and was far enough from home for her own adventure but close enough to visit often—but it also had *Ashton*. Her Ashton.

"You promise we'll see each other? I mean, I know you have your own life over there. I just want to know that I'll get to see you. I've missed you, Ashton. You'll show me around? Help me out?" Her tone grew softer as she slowly inched her way closer to him, willing him to look at her again. She couldn't take her eyes off him. He had the faintest golden stubble growing along his chin, and she longed to run her neatly manicured fingertips along it.

"Ruby, you won't need my help. You never have," he teased. "But of course I'll show you around. There's actually someone I'm really excited for you to meet." His gaze finally turned away from the sky and fell back on Ruby, glittering eyes and overflowing neckline and all. A brief look of apprehension crossed his face before he added, "My girlfriend, Millie."

Ruby leaned into the word *girlfriend*, tilting her head so it would be easier for his lips to find hers. She personally thought it was too soon to call herself his girlfriend, but she wouldn't protest. Whatever he wanted. She parted her lips just as the word *Millie* hit her like an ice pick to the nerves. She stiffened.

Who the *fuck* was Millie?

She sat upright. *"What did you say?"*

He took a nervous breath, quick and sharp. "Yeah, I've uh . . . met someone. Millie. Millie Hamilton. We met a couple of weeks before I left for Spain, but we've been kind of seeing each other long-

distance, and she actually visited me in Barcelona for a few days, and it was great." He was rambling. "She's coming out here this weekend. To meet my family. She gets in tomorrow. She lives in Arizona, but she's coming out here to drive to campus with me, too."

If she hadn't been sitting down, Ruby was sure she would've fallen right over.

Girlfriend? For as long as she had known him, Ashton had never had a girlfriend. She had always thought of him as patiently waiting for her to come around, and now that the stars had finally aligned, he had a girlfriend? *They* were supposed to be together. She was finally eighteen, so if it had been her age that was holding him back all this time, that didn't matter anymore. She was heading off to college at the same school he attended, so they'd have space away from their families while they figured things out. They could be together! They were *supposed* to be together.

Deflated, she slumped against the arm of the bench, and angrily snapped her shoulder strap back into place.

"Girlfriend. Millie. *Wow*," she scoffed.

"It was unexpected, of course," he continued. "These kinds of things always are. But it's really great. I think you'll like her."

These kinds of things? What the hell did Ashton Willis know about "these kinds of things"? The only girl Ruby had ever heard him mention outside of his family and Ruby's family was Wonder Woman, but now he was such a romantic expert he was able to make philosophical generalizations about "these kinds of things"? *Please.*

She remained unmoving, her breath slow and furious. "You think I'll *like* her? Why?"

"Because she's a beautiful person, inside and out. She's not like anyone I've ever met. When we're together—"

"She sounds sensational," Ruby interrupted flatly. She'd heard enough.

"She is. I know you're going to like her." He paused, staring at her in his cozy, soulful way. "You know, you're one of my closest friends. I hope you'll like her."

Ruby knew she was going to hate her. She opened her mouth to tell him precisely that, but suddenly the front doors were thrown open and Carla burst through, shouting, "Cake! Hurry. It's time for cake!"

Ashton smiled a half-hearted, thin smile and patted her hand. She couldn't tell if he was oblivious to the fact that he'd just broken her heart or if he pitied her; either way, it pissed her off. "I guess we'd better get back over there."

Ruby nodded. "Yeah. Wouldn't want to miss cake," she said testily.

"The Ruby I know and love would never want to miss cake," he joked over his shoulder as he stood and made his way to the door.

He didn't even notice that she wasn't following him.

She waited until the door shut behind him, until she was sure she was completely alone, to seize the nearest drink—a half-drunk, warm Corona Lite—and guzzle it in one enraged swig. She winced at the bitter taste before launching the bottle across the patio. It shattered against the ceramic pot of a bougainvillea.

"*Girlfriend?*" she muttered to herself. "Closest friends? Is he deranged?"

"Well, *I* definitely think so."

She sprang to her feet and whirled around to seek out the source

of the disembodied voice, teetering precariously in her stilettos. Just as mysteriously as the words had materialized in the dim courtyard, the owner of the voice appeared beside her, a warm hand on her arm to steady her, saving her from topping off her romantic failure with an epic wipeout on the cobblestones.

"Who the hell are you? Where the hell did you come from? And what the hell are you thinking, hiding out in the goddamn shadows like that?" She jerked her arm out of the stranger's grasp and stumbled backward. She braced herself against the bench, trying desperately to catch her breath as she glowered at the olive-skinned stranger who surveyed her with clear bemusement.

He laughed, holding his hands up innocently. "Whoa, whoa. I wasn't hiding. I came out here for some peace and quiet, and before I knew it, you and the white boy were having a moment." She detected the slightest Spanish accent as he spoke, something she might've missed in the chaos if it didn't remind her of the way her grandmother stretched out her vowels and curled her *r*'s when she was distracted. "I didn't want to ruin the mood you were trying to set—I thought he was going to be into what you were putting out there. I don't know what he's thinking." He grinned, his eyes shamelessly flicking up and down her dress.

"Who. Are. You."

"Remy Bustillos. I work with your dad." The smiling stranger held out his hand.

Ruby ignored it. "You work for my dad? How old are you?"

He raised his brows and returned his hand to his side good-naturedly, as if refusing to shake someone's hand were a normal greeting.

Her irritation and embarrassment subsided enough for her to

feel a twinge of curiosity about this person who had just brazenly inserted himself in what was supposed to be the most romantic moment of her life. He did not seem old enough to be a co-worker of her father's. He didn't look any older than Ruby, after all. He was tall, with dark hair meticulously styled into place. Even in the dim lighting of the courtyard, she was particularly struck by his eyes. She had always found dark eyes to be beady and sharklike, but in his case, the eyes he had fixed on her felt bottomless, infinite. He was kind of . . . handsome—in an over-the-top, flashy, irritating sort of way.

He smirked. "Isn't that kind of a rude question to ask someone you barely know?"

"Isn't it kind of rude to eavesdrop on two people having a private conversation?"

"Oh, it looked like you were hoping it was going to be much more than a conversation."

"And that makes it okay?" She rolled her eyes. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

He shrugged his broad shoulders and tilted his head toward her so he could speak a little more softly. In spite of herself, Ruby found herself unable to resist leaning toward him as well. "Maybe not, but I think he's crazy. Personally, I'd love to have a better idea of what you were talking about." His voice was husky, gentle . . . *flirtatious*?

How *dare* he? Still hot from Ashton's abrupt rejection, Ruby couldn't even begin to imagine what would inspire this man to think now was the appropriate time to lay on the charm. She didn't care how good-looking he was.

She shuddered. “Absolutely not.” She had intended to shout it, but instead her words caught in her throat and escaped as an enraged whisper. She stormed through the front door, marching straight through the empty lobby toward the back patio, eager to pretend she had never met this bizarre witness to her heartbreak.

2

Before rejoining the party, Ruby paused for a minute at the glass-paned double doors that led to the courtyard, the muted sounds of her family singing "Feliz Cumpleaños" audible inside the empty bed-and-breakfast. Elena sat perched on a chair in the center of the dance floor, next to a custom ice sculpture of a swan. Engulfed by the bulging, glittering fabric of her gown, she looked like a scoop of pistachio ice cream. Two waiters presented her with a three-tier cake, a sugary monstrosity decked in matching mint frosting and shimmering 1 and 5 candles. The crowd cheered as Elena daintily extinguished both flames, beaming with rosy-cheeked joy.

If Ashton thought she was just going to go lick her wounds and back down, he had another thing coming, she thought as she stepped outside. That was just *not* how Ortegas did things.

"Mija, where have you been?" her father asked, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Ruby's stomach tightened as she remembered her mother's dic-

tum about her dress. She couldn't bear being scolded *again* after everything that had just happened.

But thankfully, he seemed to sense her disappointment and didn't mention her dress. He had a magical way of doing that, of knowing when to drill down and when to let something go—especially when it came to Ruby, who had never let anything go in her whole life.

"You've missed your sister's entire party," he continued.

"Oh, no I didn't. I was just . . . out front for a little bit." She forced a feeble smile. "It's a great party, Daddy."

He nodded, examining the cheerful crowd with pursed lips. "You saw that Ashton is back, I assume?"

Ruby was silent. She had never mentioned her feelings for Ashton to anyone in her family before, but again, she didn't know why she was surprised her father understood.

"His parents told me that he has a special guest visiting him tomorrow. He told you this, yes?" Her father accepted two plates of chocolate cake from a passing waiter and held the bigger one out to Ruby.

She took it and nodded glumly. "Yes, his girlfriend."

"And you're unhappy about this girlfriend?"

She glowered. Could this evening get any worse? Not only had she been publicly spurned by her soulmate, but now she had to rehash it with her father? *God.* She cut off a bite of cake with her fork and shoved it in her mouth. At least the cake was good.

Her father softly clicked his tongue and nodded again, as if she'd responded. "Listen, I know this news might make you feel sad, but you can't force these kinds of things."

She opened her half-full mouth to interject, but he silenced her with a pointed look. Why was everyone suddenly so eager to lecture her on "these kinds of things"? Was she such an emotional dunce that every male in her life felt the need to give her step-by-step instructions on matters of the heart?

"No, not even *you* can force these things. I'm only guessing that's what all *this* is about?" He used his fork to gesture at Ruby's outfit, but his eyes did not leave her face, as if he refused to acknowledge her clothing with anything but his utensil. "It's about Ashton, yes?"

Ruby shrugged. She couldn't *lie* to him, but she also couldn't bring herself to confess her plans of seduction.

"Didn't Mom tell you to stop eating sweets after your last cardiologist appointment?" she countered.

Once more, he nodded, seeming unsurprised. He set his cake down on the nearest table. "Ruby, you are smart and strong and *beautiful*. You do not need to do all of *this* to make someone see that. If they cannot see it on their own, that's their fault. That's their loss."

She felt her eyes tearing up at these words, at the solemn way her father regarded her. She inhaled deeply to keep her composure.

"And you certainly don't need to run around family functions with your chichis hanging out."

She flushed as he issued her one more knowing glance before retrieving his cake and disappearing to talk with someone else—presumably a person who didn't exasperate him with their exposed chichis.

RUBY AWOKE THE NEXT MORNING TO A SHARP CHAMPAGNE headache, as well as a fourteen-point to-do list neatly penned on the monogrammed stationary of Eleanor Robinson Ortega. Her mother was the kind of disciplined woman who successfully balanced an unrelenting schedule of charity functions, exercise classes, therapy, social engagements, and household errands, so it didn't surprise Ruby at all that she had scurried off to her six a.m. spin class the morning after Elena's party. It also shouldn't have surprised her that she expected her daughter to be just as productive.

Sure, Ruby *was* going off to college in two weeks, and sure, she hadn't packed a damn thing. But she didn't see why that had to be resolved just after sunrise—especially after a night like last night.

Despite the daunting length of her mother's list, Ruby's number one priority that morning was to keep her eye on Ashton. She could see the Willises' driveway from her bedroom window, where she had been sequestered with a stack of cardboard boxes and a roll of packing tape. Maybe she should've been a little more focused on the tasks her mother had outlined, but she told herself that it was good for her *emotionally* to keep track of Ashton's comings and goings—maybe to move on or maybe to figure out how the hell to knock some sense into that clueless boy she loved.

Around noon, she watched him return from the airport with . . . *her*. She couldn't see much of her at this distance, even after she climbed on top of her dresser and smashed her face against the window. Millie appeared to be blond and a good deal shorter than Ashton. She held his hand as they made their way from his Prius up the walkway that led to the Willises' house. They paused in front of the wrought-iron double doors and shared a prolonged kiss before

heading inside. Ruby gaped in horror-struck envy long after they'd disappeared from view.

Of course, the youngest Ortega sister chose this precise moment to appear in Ruby's doorway. "Ruby, can I borrow—*what* are you *doing*?" Carla inquired, cocking her head like a curious puppy.

If it had been anyone else, Ruby would've tried to lie. Unlike Elena, Carla wouldn't rat her out to their parents and, unlike their parents, she was too young to pass much judgment on Ruby. Her age and naturally sweet disposition rendered her neutral territory among the Ortega women.

"Ashton's back with that *girl*," Ruby muttered, dismounting from her dresser and painfully smacking her knee on its beveled edge. She grimaced as she slid to her feet.

"Are you okay?"

"No, I am not okay. He's dating some girl from school after leading me on for months," she grumbled.

"Oh." Carla sat down on the edge of Ruby's bed and began sifting through a pile of bikinis. "I meant your knee. But I'm sorry to hear about that, too. I didn't know you *liked* Ashton. You said he was dorky."

Ruby rolled her eyes and aggressively threw some shoes in the nearest empty box, despite the fact that her mother had clearly labeled it BOOKS. "No. I mean, yes, I used to. But things are different now. Things have changed. He's changed. *I've* changed. I thought we changed together and it was finally time for us to be together, but now here's this girl ruining everything."

Carla's face looked eerily similar to their father's as she weighed Ruby's words. "He brought her here, though, didn't he? So she's not

here to ruin things. She's here because he wants her here, right?"

Ruby tossed a single tennis shoe without its mate into the box and glared at Carla. "What is it you came in here for?"

Carla cast her eyes down and timidly picked a bottle of Dior nail polish from a box on Ruby's nightstand. "I'm sorry Ashton hurt your feelings. You know how Mama Ortega says 'what's meant to be will always find a way'? Maybe it's like that." She gave her sister a sympathetic look, her dark eyes sparkling compassionately.

Ruby had spotted her grandmother forcing that irritating stranger Remy Bustillos to cumbia with her at the end of the night, cackling with delight as she criticized his footwork, so Mama Ortega's judgment was dubious at best. Nevertheless, she found her words comforting in this moment.

"Well, I'm sure you could stay home tonight, if you think it'll be too difficult," Carla suggested meekly, unscrewing the top of the nail polish and lightly testing it out on her pinkie nail.

Ruby shot her sister a questioning look. "Stay home? From what?"

Carla examined her finger, blowing it dry. "Dinner." When Ruby's face failed to show any recognition at all, she continued. "At the Willises'?" Ruby's frown only deepened. "They invited all of us over tonight to meet Ashton's new girlfriend. Mom told us this morning in the kitchen."

Ruby did recall being in the kitchen this morning. Granted, her mother had been simultaneously making a protein shake and disputing a credit card charge over the phone as she spoke to Ruby and her sisters—and Ruby had, of course, been preoccupied with selecting the perfect Instagram filter for last night's photos. But now that

Carla mentioned it, Ruby did sort of remember dinner being one of the many things their mother had talked about.

She mulled it over, rolling the idea around in her mind until it became much more than a neighborly outing—it was an opportunity. Exactly the one she needed.

"Dinner. At the Willises'. Right. Of course," Ruby mumbled, her thoughts racing. With any luck, Ashton would take one look at the two of them side by side and send that girl packing so they could put this whole messy affair behind them before the first day of school.

3

Over the years, Ruby had eaten dinner at the Willis household nearly as often as she had eaten at her own house. While her parents usually insisted on a certain amount of decorum at their dinner table, Mrs. Willis was much more laid-back. Ruby could think of several times when she had eaten dinner in just her swimsuit following an afternoon in their pool, and many more when they had eaten their food in the living room while watching cartoons—conduct that never would have been acceptable in her own home. Ashton said it was because his parents were white; that's just how they did dinner. But Ruby's mother was white, too, so she didn't see how that could be the only explanation. In fact, she'd spent much of her adolescence wondering if her family's peculiarities were typical, weird family things that everyone experienced, or the result of subtle cultural differences. It was impossible to know sometimes.

Despite the lax dress code, Ruby found herself intensely scrutinizing her outfit that evening. She had decided on a new pair of

jeans and a crop top. Her competitive edge told her to throw on a pair of Prada platform sandals that made her legs look incredible, but she knew her mother would suspect something if she showed up at a midweek barbecue in heels.

With one final glance, she slipped her favorite Tory Burch sandals on and grabbed her cell phone off her nightstand.

No text messages.

Her contact with Ashton had been intermittent while he was in Spain, but they'd caught up every couple of days. He'd tell her about his favorite tapas bars or weekends traveling in Seville or Lisbon; she'd find discreet ways to send him flattering faux-candid selfies. He'd been radio silent since the quinceañera and Millie's arrival, though. It wasn't hard to figure out why, but it still stung.

She did have another notification, though: a new follower on Instagram. She didn't know the username, but when she clicked on it, she immediately recognized the smirking face of Remy Bustillos. As if their initial encounter hadn't been disconcerting enough, now he'd found her on social media.

Ruby's lip curled, and as she toyed with the idea of blocking this peculiar and persistent person, her attention was diverted by her mother's figure in her doorway. Eleanor wore a sunny Lilly Pulitzer shift dress, her wheat-colored hair pulled back into a loose bun. A discerning furrow marred her immaculately sculpted eyebrows.

"Are you . . . *ready*?"

Ruby knew instantly she was asking much more than whether Ruby was dressed. A classic Eleanor Ortega veiled warning. "I don't know, *am* I?" she shot back, cringing at her petulance even as the words flew out of her mouth.

Her mother's lips pursed into the subtlest expression of displeasure, so discreet that Ruby was sure anyone else would've missed it. Eleanor Ortega was the essence of poise and patience, while Ruby tended toward what she thought of as passionate on her best days and pigheadedness on her worst days—traits she had inherited from her father. She knew she could probably work her whole life to be half as calm and restrained as her mother, and still never achieve it.

"I realize your feelings are hurt by Ashton's new relationship, and I'm sorry about that. I wish that wasn't the case, but it is, and you must deal with it—hopefully in a mature way. And if not in a mature way, then in a *private* way. Ashton has known you your whole life, and he cares for you, even if it's not in the way that you hoped. He's not trying to hurt you, and I don't want you to jeopardize a lifelong friendship simply because your ego has been bruised."

Ruby's pulse quickened, thumping in her forehead. *A bruised ego? Is that all she thought this was?* "Mom," she said through gritted teeth. "I'm not pouting because he bruised my ego. It's more than that. It's . . ."

Her mother held up her hand, the diamonds in her tennis bracelet gleaming in the afternoon sun. "Okay, perhaps I misunderstood. If this really is about more than that, if this is about deeper feelings, then my hope for you is still the same. You won't convince him of your affections by attempting to destroy his relationship."

Ruby nodded reluctantly. Though she didn't particularly like the comparison between her romantic pursuits and a force of destruction, she could at least understand the logic in her mother's argument.

Eleanor turned to leave before pausing and casting her daughter one last, thoughtful look. "So you do think you have real, serious feelings for him?"

"Yes, Mom."

"It's not just you wanting something you can't have?"

"Mom." It was a valid inquiry, but it rankled regardless. She wasn't just a boy-crazy kid anymore. She was capable of real emotions. She was capable of falling in love. Why did her parents have such a hard time believing that?

"Okay, I'm sorry. I just had to ask." Her mother sighed. "And you think you're right for each other? You think you could make each other happy?"

Ruby didn't hesitate for a second this time. "Yes."

"All right," she conceded. "Well, please think about why you feel this way. You don't have to tell me, but you should know for yourself. Understanding why you feel what you do is part of being an adult." She turned down the hallway and issued one last demand. "And behave yourself at dinner tonight."

With a frustrated sigh, Ruby tucked her phone in her pocket and followed, only to discover Elena lurking just outside her bedroom door, clearly eavesdropping.

"I'm surprised you're willing to show your face after what happened at my party," Elena hissed, a cruel bite to her words. "*Everyone* saw you throwing yourself at him all night."

Ruby flushed but refused to dignify the snide remarks with a response. She pushed past her sister to join her parents downstairs, telling herself there was no way everyone knew what had happened, and even if they did, she didn't care what her sister's little friends

thought of her. The only people who truly knew of the conversation were her, Ashton, and her newest Instagram follower, Remy.

Even so, her cheeks remained hot as she walked across the street with her family.

WHILE RUBY'S PARENTS TENDED TO OVERLOOK UNDERAGE drinking on special occasions, surrounded by the watchful eyes of loved ones, they certainly did not make a habit of condoning it. Watching Millie sip a second glass of wine just solidified the feeling of being robbed of the privileges she desired. Ruby could scarcely even stand to look at her as she accepted an iced tea from Mrs. Willis. Ashton found her gaze as he selected a Coors Light from the cooler and offered her a sympathetic smile before making his way toward her with Millie at his side.

A clamminess seized hold of Ruby as they approached. It wasn't embarrassment, though; she knew how she felt for Ashton, and she knew she had every right to feel this way. The prickling in her temples was the fury of being denied something—someone, rather—she was positive was already hers, even if she was the only one who recognized it right now.

"This is Ruby, the neighbor I've been telling you about," Ashton said blandly, a hand outstretched toward Ruby. "Ruby, this is Millie."

Ruby forced a stiff smile. Sure, he had referred to her as a *neighbor* when she thought there were about a dozen other titles he could have applied—though she conceded that referring to her as his soulmate might have been a little awkward. But, *neighbor*? As if

she were just a girl he waved at occasionally when he was unloading groceries from his car.

But he did say that he had told her about me, she reminded herself. *That means he's been talking about me, which means he's been thinking about me.*

"It's good to meet you, Millie," Ruby said tepidly.

Millie absolutely beamed. If Ruby had been willing to give her any credit at all, she might've said she had the kind of smile that lit up a room. But she wasn't, so she didn't. "All I've heard about for *weeks* is the famous Ruby Ortega, so I told Ash I absolutely had to meet you! I'm so happy we finally get a chance to connect!"

"Ash?" Ruby repeated the cutesy nickname with a raised eyebrow.

Ashton's cheeks turned pink, but he didn't say anything. He'd always hated that nickname ever since a group of third-grade bullies realized how similar it sounded to *ass*. *I guess he's okay with it now*, Ruby thought sourly.

Dinner itself was comparable to a national parade in the happy couple's honor. Her own mother spent nearly forty-five minutes gushing over Millie's bobbed haircut, treating the girl like she was a guest on a late-night talk show. What was she studying? Where was she from? How did she and Ashton meet? What did her parents do?

Blah, blah, blah.

The questions were bad enough on their own, but her mom's reactions to Millie's responses were what really pushed Ruby over the edge. She briefly contemplated feigning an illness just so she could stop listening to her mom rave enthusiastically about how smart it was of Millie to choose communications as her major, how proud

Millie must be that her father is a firefighter, how sweet it was that Millie met Ashton through mutual friends at the library.

Blah, blah, barf.

She shoved a french fry into her mouth and offered to help Mrs. Willis clear the table while Ashton and Millie regaled her family with anecdotes and cozy selfies from Millie's visit to Spain.

When she finally returned to the living room, she found Elena was now the focus of the conversation. Her sister scowled sullenly with her arms across her chest, pleading with her parents.

"It's not *fair*," Elena whined. "I'm *fifteen* now!"

"Sí, you are only fifteen," Daddy said firmly. "You still have a curfew, and there's no way you'll be back by then."

Elena rolled her eyes. "But I'm sure *Ruby* gets to go because Ruby gets whatever she wants!"

"If only," Ruby muttered to herself, despite the fact that she had absolutely no idea what had inspired her sister's meltdown.

Ashton turned to her from the love seat, where he and Millie were nestled. "I was just telling your family that Millie and I are going to a bonfire on the beach tonight to meet up with some friends. I invited you and your sister, but your parents said no. To Elena. You're still welcome to come." He glanced at Ruby's father with the anxious deference that he always showed her father, who not so secretly scared him a little. "Right?"

Her father shot her a warning glare. "Ruby is eighteen. She's an adult. She is, of course, *allowed* to go." The emphasis on the word *allowed* told Ruby her permission was conditional. She was allowed to go only if she did not use this as another opportunity to hurl herself at Ashton.

The room was silent except for Elena's loud, disappointed groan.

If Ruby didn't go—well, that would feel like cowardice, like giving up. But if she did go, she'd have to continue to watch Ashton dote on this girl.

It ultimately came down to the fact that she'd *missed* Ashton after so many months apart. All her life, he'd been there for her, ready to hang out or talk, and it had been hard adjusting to his absence. Even when he'd left for college, he texted and visited home often enough that the longing wasn't so bad. She'd give anything to be transported back in time to the days she'd flop down next to him on the couch in his family's rec room while he explained for the millionth time the difference between the DC and Marvel universes. She missed him. She missed him, and even now that he was back, she was *still* missing him. He was home, sure, but he was no longer hers. He was Millie's now.

So, despite her reservations, she heard herself saying yes.

4

As Ruby settled herself in the back seat of Ashton's Prius, it occurred to her how phony this whole excursion felt.

Their hometown, Buena Valley, was a small ranch community in the foothills of San Diego. For them, going to the beach was a full-day activity. In the best conditions, their houses were still a forty-five-minute drive from the nearest oceanfront; with any traffic at all, which was usually the case, it was over an hour. Spontaneously attending a bonfire was an inconvenience and not something they'd ever done before. It was clearly all for Millie's benefit, to glamorize the California lifestyle for her. If Millie was too dumb to notice that the horse properties and farmhouses in their area were a far cry from the surfer towns and sandy beaches of TV's California, all Ruby could do was hope that Ashton would realize that.

She did notice, with revulsion, that Ashton was driving with one hand on the wheel and the other resting intimately on Millie's upper thigh, his fingers absently drumming on the polka-dot fabric of her

sundress. Millie blathered on about the scenery, evidently so accustomed to Ashton's touch that she didn't even notice his hand—or the envy radiating from Ruby in the back seat.

Ruby distracted herself by pulling out her phone. Remy's Instagram page, the last thing she'd looked at this afternoon, was still open, and the bemused smirk on his profile picture made her feel like he'd been watching (and laughing at) her all evening.

She idly scrolled through his pictures: tropical beaches and luxurious resorts, fancy meals and decadent cocktails, and snapshots of Remy, usually in some sort of unusual outfit, sporting a beautiful girl on his arm. She tapped a recent one of him in a tuxedo with a tan blonde in a navy evening gown grinning by his side. The picture was tagged in a fancy New York City hotel, and the caption read, "Honored to have our app recognized at tonight's awards ceremony!"

An app, huh? She zoomed in on his face, assessing his smile and gleaming black eyes. He didn't look like the nerdy tech types that sometimes came down from Silicon Valley. But then again, he didn't look like any of the people who worked for her father either. It was more than his young age that stood out to her, though. She just couldn't put her finger on it.

Regardless, she didn't think Ortega Properties even had an app.

Who was this guy?

She scrolled through a few more pictures. Remy vacationing in Bali, Remy running a marathon, Remy enjoying a beer at a rooftop bar. The comments on these idyllic snapshots were almost more intriguing than the images themselves. On a picture of Remy sporting a pair of very tight swim trunks on a white sand beach, a user

named "ashleyyyyyyy" had commented with a series of heart emojis, pointing out that the beach was nothing compared to the ones they'd visited together on their Mediterranean yacht tour last spring. Other girls left notes alluding to innuendo-filled DMs, late-night skinny dipping, and a myriad of other provocative activities that made Ruby's eyes widen to see on a public platform like this.

Who *was* this guy?

She tapped his most recent picture, posted this morning, an artsy shot of a coffee mug on a beachfront balcony, with a backdrop of cloudless sky and sandy terrain. He'd captioned it, "Enjoying a wonderful business trip in beautiful California." The location he'd tagged was a ritzy resort where politicians and celebrities were known to vacation.

Ortega Properties was growing, sure, but right now it only consisted of the luxury bed-and-breakfast on their ranch. They'd recently begun construction on a reception hall to be built next door to the B&B, and there were talks of a vineyard or farm-to-table restaurant in the future, but it was all very local. What would they even need an app for?

She frowned and was about to google his name when she noticed Millie's face peering back at her from the front seat.

"So, do you?" Millie chirped, clearly continuing a conversation that she'd been having with Ruby, unbeknownst to Ruby.

"Um, I'm sorry. Do I what?" She clicked the screen of her phone off, hiding Remy's mischievous face yet again.

"Do you have a boyfriend? Are you seeing anyone?" Millie asked with a giggle.

Ashton's eyes darted up from the road to watch Ruby in the rear-

view mirror, lingering on her until she spoke. "No, not exactly," she said slowly, directing her response more to Ashton than to Millie.

Millie grinned encouragingly. "Not exactly? So there is someone?"

"You could say that. It's . . . complicated."

Ashton's brows furrowed in the rearview mirror. The rest of his face was hidden from her view, so she couldn't decide if he was worried or confused by her response.

"Well, I'm only asking because one of our friends from school—Ashton's roommate from last year—is in town with his family and he's meeting us at this bonfire tonight," Millie explained, almost reading Ruby's mind. "I don't know your type or anything, but he's really cute and so sweet, and I thought at the very least it might be nice for you to meet some people who will be on campus this year. But who knows? Maybe you'll hit it off, and you can move on from whatever complicated situation you're in. You don't want to start college off with a mess like that! And Charlie's so *nice*. But obviously, you don't have to date him if you—"

"What?" Ashton interjected suddenly, in a garbled noise that was half cough, half bark of laughter. "Charlie and Ruby? What? No." He laughed again, and the shrill, flabbergasted sound stunned Ruby for a moment.

She eyed the back of his head curiously, studying the tops of his ears and the freckled nape of his neck.

Was he . . . *jealous*?

His hazel eyes flicked up to the rearview mirror once more, a flash of unguarded distress in them that delighted Ruby beyond words.

Millie shook her head at Ashton in a good-natured but baffled way. “I don’t know. It’s worth a shot, isn’t it? He’s just a wonderful guy and a really good friend.”

Ruby grinned, keeping her eyes locked on the rearview mirror, but Ashton refused to meet her gaze again, so instead she fixated on the splays of tawny hair that fell across his forehead. He *was* jealous!

“Definitely worth seeing how it plays out, then,” Ruby responded coolly, a fiery sense of anticipation flickering in her chest.

RUBY KNEW THAT AS LONG AS ASHTON WILLIS WALKED THE earth, no other boy would measure up in her eyes. That being said, she still couldn’t imagine a more incompatible, inadequate romantic prospect than the soft-spoken, quivering Charlie Hampton.

She could endure the dopiest of dopes if it meant a chance to get Ashton’s attention, but *come on*. It was hard to believe *anyone* would feel even the slightest bit intimidated by Charlie of all people.

She had also been a little put off by Millie’s gall, the fact that she felt inclined to set Ruby up on what was basically a blind date even though they were practically strangers. But when Millie and Ashton deposited Ruby with Charlie just minutes after joining their friends? That was just plain ballsy. Maybe Ruby had underestimated her. Maybe she knew exactly what was going on here and this was all part of her evil plan. Maybe listening to Charlie sputter through his bland list of hobbies was the punishment Millie had been plotting for Ruby all along.

Ruby almost hoped that was the case. That was at least something she could understand.

"D-do you know what d-dorm you're living in?" Charlie inquired with a visible tremble.

"Yes," she said in a clipped tone that did not inspire a follow-up question.

"I remember feeling overwhelmed as a freshman. It's a lot to take in. But don't worry, you'll know your way around in n-no time." He flashed her a nervous smile, his lips twitching as if they couldn't decide what expression to make.

Actually, Ruby couldn't have been less worried about college. She knew it was silly, but many of her expectations were tied to her hopes for a romance with Ashton. Her daydreams about studying in her dorm room or attending football games or walking to class had always featured him in a prominent and essential role. Even after the incident at Elena's party, Ruby hadn't considered that those fantasies may not come to fruition—and she certainly hadn't given much thought as to what college might be like if she weren't with him. But even if she wasn't going to give up on him, she knew she should be working out all the other logistical things about school.

I still have time, she told herself. *I'll figure it all out soon.*

"So you're from San Diego?" Charlie ventured shakily. Though his nervous stammering had subsided, his soft tone was barely audible above the sound of waves crashing against the shore in the distance.

Normally she would've pointed out the distinction between rural Buena Valley and San Diego proper, but instead she just nodded and pulled out her phone for the dozenth time. She knew it was

rude, but she also didn't want to give this guy any illusions that this exchange was going well.

She spotted a new notification on her phone as Charlie squeaked, "What are you majoring in?"

"Business." She opened the new message.

REMY

You sure move quickly 😊

The back of her neck prickled. Was Remy *here*? Was he watching her? A strange, curious thrill tingled inside her as she quickly scanned the dark beachfront. Aside from the ten people clustered around their bonfire, there weren't many others nearby. A few dim shapes along the beach between their gathering and the next fire pit—but then she spotted him, leaning against the retaining wall that separated the beach from the sidewalk. She recognized his broad-shouldered silhouette as soon as she laid eyes on him.

"Will you excuse me for a minute? I think I see someone I know," Ruby interrupted, returning Remy's fierce gaze.

Charlie's eyes flitted nervously between the two of them. "That guy standing alone in the dark staring at us?"

She shrugged. Between Charlie and Remy, she'd rather take her chances with the lurking stranger at this point. "I'll be right back," she called over her shoulder.

She approached Remy, instinctively smoothing any stray hairs caught in the sea breeze. "What—you're stalking me now?" she shouted. His smile widened with every step she took in his direction, but she fought the urge to return it, forcing her lips into a

playful smirk instead. No amount of handsome could make up for how weird it was that he'd just shown up here, she told herself unconvincingly.

"Well, if I was stalking you, I'd have a pretty easy job." He uncrossed his arms and put his hands in his pockets. "You've posted your location three times since you've been here. Anyone could find you. Besides, my hotel's right down the street." He tilted his head toward the right, and Ruby recognized the palm-lined terrace of the resort he'd tagged this morning. "It's good to see you're moving forward with your life after what happened at the party, but I've got to say, I'm surprised by your choice." They both glanced toward the bonfire, where Ruby could still make out Charlie's scrawny figure standing on the periphery of the crowd, watching them.

She rolled her eyes and ignored his comment. "If you work for my father, why don't you live here?"

Remy clicked his tongue and chuckled. "I don't work *for* your dad. I work with him. I have my own company."

Ruby still had not seen him in full light, and again she found herself wondering how old he was. All his pictures showed a fit, brown-skinned guy with thick, glossy hair and a grin that easily could've belonged to the debonair hero—or perhaps, in Remy's case, the slick evil twin—of a telenovela. He couldn't have been more than a couple of years older than her, but there was still something about him—in his smile, in his clothing maybe, in the way he carried himself—that seemed older. More mature.

"An app, right?" she pressed further, still scrutinizing his appearance. Tonight he was wearing a pair of shorts and a gray T-shirt that was pulled tight across his muscled chest.

His eyes glittered as he nodded smugly. "Looked me up, did you?"

She pushed past the embarrassment she felt creeping up on her. "I didn't even realize my father knew what an app was," she said. She pictured her father puttering around on their ranch—pruning flowers, petting horses, and pausing to send a tweet? She couldn't think of anything less likely.

"Well," Remy acquiesced, "he doesn't, really. But he's learning. He's a smart guy, and he's just interested in what it's going to take for local establishments to get on the cutting edge of the hospitality industry. He's looking for creative ideas to keep up with the next big thing."

That did sound like her dad. He was not a fan of technology, that was for sure, but he was cutthroat when it came to the business he'd built from scratch, and she knew he'd do just about anything to keep it successful—even taking meetings with smarmy kids who would lecture him about hashtags and influencers and algorithms.

"And that's what you do?" There was something about this smooth-talking mystery man that both intrigued her and put her on edge.

He nodded again. "Yeah, for the last year or so. I travel around and help businesses—mostly hotels, but a couple event venues and tour companies—develop some more personalized features that focus on consumer experiences. This week San Diego, next week Miami."

Though she didn't really understand what he meant by *personalized features* or *consumer experiences*, she didn't let on. "Where do you live?" She perched herself on the wall that Remy leaned against so they no longer faced each other but looked out at the

beach together. He remained standing, but their bodies were now close enough that Ruby could feel the faint tickle of his arm hairs against her skin.

"Funny you should ask, not that far from where you'll be living," he laughed, playfully bumping his shoulder against her. Her skin immediately erupted in goose bumps as soon as his warm skin touched hers. She quickly rubbed her hand along her forearm to dissolve them before he could notice. "Relax," he teased. "Your dad told me you're going to Arizona State this fall. I have a condo in Scottsdale, though I'm not there too much these days."

Just then, Ruby noticed three figures making their way from the bonfire toward them: Millie and Ashton, with a clumsy Charlie bobbing along behind them. Apparently what it took to get Ashton's attention was Charlie tattling on her for disappearing into the night with a tall, dark stranger.

"Hey, man. Ashton Willis." Ashton thrust his hand out to Remy as he approached, his tone brusque and strangely assertive. "This is my girlfriend, Millie, and our friend Charlie. You were at Elena's party, right?"

Remy shook Ashton's hand, and Ruby wondered if Remy was flexing his forearm intentionally as some sort of display of dominance or if his muscles always had those distinct edges. "Yeah, I remember you." A brief, almost undetectable smirk flashed across his face, and Ruby prayed Ashton hadn't noticed. "Remy Bustillos."

Ashton's posture remained stiff, and he gave a quick nod. "Oh, right. How do you know the Ortegas?"

There was that delicious bite of wariness in Ashton's voice. Ruby fought to choke down a self-satisfied cackle as she watched them.

Remy's devious smirk reemerged. "I'm a colleague of Ruby's father. I just happened to be in town for a couple meetings, so he invited me. It was a good party." His gaze slid over to Ruby, and this time he dared to wink at her. "I had a great time."

Her body instantly filled with hot mortification. Ashton's eyes widened; his furrowed brows told her that he had not missed the exchange.

"Cool." Ashton's voice was flat as he attempted to feign disinterest. "Well, we just came over to grab Ruby. We're about ready to head home."

Ruby couldn't help but notice he wasn't asking if she was ready, but his blatant jealousy sent her over the moon regardless. She dismounted from the wall with a gleeful bounce in her step. "See you around, Remy!"

Remy surveyed them, his perpetually laughing eyes lingering on each of them, and she wondered what was going through his mind. Had he detected Ashton's jealousy, too?

Not that she cared. It didn't matter what Remy thought about them. She had no interest in what Remy thought about her or her life.

"Drive safe!" This time, Ruby was sure he waited for Ashton to look at him before he winked at her one more time. "Maybe I'll see you in Arizona."