



# This Means War

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Don't Ask. Don't Tell. Don't Fall In Love.

Luis and Rafael are spies with a rivalry as old as their bond. Both have spent years competing to climb the ranks through sheer determination and a relentless drive to one-up each other at every turn. Beneath their playful jabs is a simmering undeniable attraction neither can ignore.

When Monica, a brilliant and equally closeted UN negotiator, steps into their world, everything changes. She's everything they should want—ambitious, smart, and effortlessly captivating. As Luis and Rafael start working together to protect her, their rivalry begins to shift, uncovering deeper feelings that risk exposing their carefully guarded secrets.

Caught in a tangled web of desire and rivalry, Luis and Rafael must confront the lines between love, and loyalty. With every glance, every touch, the lines between them blur.

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# Page 1

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one

- LUIS -

I watch her from across the room. Miss Monica May. Professional, poised, and as always remarkably composed. She's seated at the head of the table, adjusting her blazer like she owns the place, which—let's be honest—she kind of does.

There's an air about her, something unspoken, that makes her stand out in any room. It's not just how she carries herself, or the sharp intelligence that's always evident in her every move. It's the fact that she can do all that while never letting anyone see beneath the surface. Yet, she doesn't come off as fake as fuck. I've been around enough diplomats and politicians to know that's a rare skill. And I'd be lying if I said it didn't intrigue me.

But today... today something else is in the air. The kind of tension that I'm sure Monica doesn't notice. I've seen her navigate tense rooms before, but there's a subtle shift when she takes her seat—when her eyes meet mine for the briefest moments. An honest look that makes me want to get to know her.

Something that says she's aware of me, of my added attention. That she knows I'm not just watching her for her diplomatic skills.

The other guys around the table are oblivious. Boastful military types. Everyone's so focused on their power plays and strategies. But I know better. I know how to read people. And I know there's more to Monica than just the professionalism she projects.

Her voice pulls me out of my thoughts, smooth as ever, commanding the room's attention. She starts talking strategy, just like she's supposed to, laying out the facts like it's second nature. Everyone listens, and I can't help but admire how she holds the room.

I've been in meetings like these for years, and no one has ever commanded attention like her. Sure, she's brilliant, no question there. But there's something else. Something magnetic. Something that I'm sure has worked on many men before she secured some treaty. Peace is always the number-one thing she wants.

I shift in my seat, focusing on the whole room. But then I catch it. A flicker in the eyes, the slight shift in posture. It's subtle. But it's there as Monica looks back at me.

I don't let my smile show, but damn, if I'm not tempted. Monica's a puzzle. And I'm the kind of guy who loves a good puzzle.

There's only one problem... I'm gay.

No one knows. But it's not that Raf lets me forget. My bleeding heart, as he calls it, is always the punchline whenever he bests me. But damn, I can't shake the feeling that I've got the better angle with Monica.

When she starts outlining the next steps needed for a treaty, I lean forward, giving her my full attention. Not that she needs it. Monica's used to being the center of things. And maybe, just maybe, she knows exactly how much we're all watching her, how much we're all a little bit... taken with her.

I can't help but wonder—just for a second—what it would be like to break through that perfectly polished exterior. To see what's hidden beneath.

But for now, all I can do is watch. Smile when I'm supposed to, laugh at the right

moments, and play the part of a mid-level State Department trade official. It's a role I know backward and forward, but every second I'm here, I'm reminded that talk is cheap. It's only the truth that has the power to unravel everything.

The meeting ends with the usual polite applause, chairs scraping against the floor as everyone rises. Monica gathers her papers, sliding them neatly into a leather portfolio. The others are already filtering out, trading empty pleasantries or sidling up to whoever they think holds the most influence.

I stay back, lingering just enough to seem casual, though I know exactly what I'm doing.

She notices, of course. Monica may very well spot everything. If she wasn't dedicated to her work at the UN, the CIA may have recruited her. That sharp gaze cuts through the room and lands on me, just for a moment, before she steps to the side, avoiding the crowd.

"Trade official, huh?" she says as I approach, her voice low enough not to carry.

"Guilty," I reply, flashing the practiced grin that has disarmed many.

She raises an eyebrow, her expression unreadable. "And what exactly is your trade?"

"Cooperation," I say smoothly. "You'd be surprised how hard it is to export goodwill these days."

Her lips twitch, the closest I've seen to a genuine smile. "I'm sure."

Few crave the truth; they long for the allure of intrigue. And it seems I've provided that. Even as the hum of conversations swirls around us, the clink of glasses echoes from the reception starting next door—her gaze lingers, a subtle signal that I've

caught her continued fascination.

“You’ve got a talent for cutting through the noise,” I say, nodding toward the empty table where we sat moments ago. “Not many people can hold a room like that.”

Her expression softens, but only slightly. “And you? What’s your talent?”

“Listening,” I say, without missing a beat.

That earns a real smile, small but undeniable. “Good. You’ll need it if you’re serious about working with this crowd.”

It’s a dismissive tone, polite but firm, and I take the cue. As I step away, I catch Monica glancing at me again, her expression thoughtful. Attracted even.

What a puzzle. I’m hooked.

Monica moves toward the reception, and I hang back for a moment. Most people have already drifted in, eager to get to the socializing. I know better than to stand out here. The middle of the pack is where I thrive. No sense in being the star unless I can outshine Raf.

The conversations linger in the air like the last notes of a song, mixing with the clinking of glasses and the soft murmur of polished voices. Through the open doors there is a low hum of laughter, and a gasp that draws my attention.

“Alan Sheridan, that health CEO,” I manage to catch a woman saying, “He was shot dead today.”

The surprised reply of whoever she is talking to is cut off as I make my way in, Monica stands up from the crowd, shifting gears effortlessly as if the transition from

strategy to socializing is nothing. She adjusts her blazer, smooth and poised, that perfect air of control. But there's a flicker in her eyes—a subtle shift in her posture. For a moment, I think I catch her glancing toward the door like she's plotting her exit or maybe just sizing up the crowd.

The words rarely matter until the officials get tipsy, and I witness the usual scene: diplomats laughing at bad jokes, hands shaking, smiles nervously sharper than necessary. The dance of power and influence is thick in the air as time goes on.

Then something shifts. Monica catches my eye again, moving with the same deliberate grace. But I notice her head dart around, almost like spotting something—or someone.

I can't be imagining it. She's uncomfortable.

I try not to make it obvious, but my attention locks on her. I'm not sure what I'm expecting to happen, but then it happens: a man approaches her. Well-dressed, broad-shouldered, and confident like he thinks the world belongs to him. He slides into her space, close enough that she has to angle her body just a little to keep her distance.

She's polite, of course. Too polite. She always is. But there is a tightness in her shoulders, that little shift in her gaze, the way she barely meets his eyes that tells me she's not happy. Not even close.

Her gaze flicks over to me. It's barely a glance, but it's enough. It's like she's telling me without saying a word.

I don't wait for permission. I've seen this kind of thing before. Men who think their presence is a favor to the room, and to the woman they're speaking to. Men who think they can push into someone's space and think nothing of it.

I slide through the crowd, smooth but deliberate. I don't interrupt immediately, not wanting to make it worse by shouting from afar, but when I get close enough, I make sure my voice cuts through.

"Almost lost you there," I say, my voice low enough for her to hear, handing her my untouched glass with a lazy smile. "Your drink."

She glances over at me, confusion flooding her eyes at that moment before she's back in control, a mask of politeness sliding over her features. She's always so composed. But I've seen the cracks. "Sorry for making you fetch it."

I offer her a smile before turning to the man beside her. Adam Renner. I recognize him easily—his tailored suit too sharp and posture too assured. A business strategist from London, the type who claims to defend minorities with his privilege but somehow keeps collecting awards that only seem to line his own pockets.

Oblivious to the subtext, he doesn't hesitate and carries on to Monica, "You know, I've been thinking about what you said today, and I still don't see why we can't discuss it further over dinner."

"I—uh..." Monica falters, her composure slipping just for a second. "If you want to talk business, I can arrange a meeting. Myself and a few colleagues are meeting tomorrow morning over coffee to discuss this proposal. You're welcome to join us there."

She turns to me, her posture already shifting back to something more comfortable. "Luis here," she says quietly, and there's something extra in her voice—gratefulness. "Has also agreed to join me to work out the final details."

The first name was a choice, and Renner's lips tightened at the idea of a group setting, disappointment clear, but he forced a polite smile. "Another time, maybe," he

adds, before stepping away.

Monica takes a breath as if testing the waters. “I think I may owe you that coffee,” she says lightly, but there’s something in the words—uncertainty, maybe. The true invitation? Or a polite way to end this?

“I’ll compromise on my drink back,” I say with a grin, raising an eyebrow.

Monica blinks, clearly surprised she’s still holding it. She quickly hands it back, her fingers brushing mine just slightly.

I can’t help but laugh, a real laugh this time as it’s returned. “If you like coffee, you should try Brewtiful Mornings.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Are you asking me out?”

I shake my head, a smirk tugging at the corner of my mouth. “I’d never ask a woman out after someone bothered them,” I say, my tone playful but sincere. “It’s just a really good breakfast spot.”

She gives me the softest look before nodding, the smile playing on her lips making other grins in the room feel hollow. “Thanks. I should get back to mingling.”

I take a moment to collect myself, to blend back into the reception. But I can’t stop thinking about her, about that brief moment we shared. It probably means nothing, but I wonder—if we were different people, what could it have become?



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:25 am*

two

- RAFAEL -

A nother damn line. There's always a line now. Luis is telling far too many people about this café. That man has lips that are far too loose for a spy.

I sigh as I stand outside Brewtiful Mornings, hands stuffed in my jacket pockets. It wasn't that early, barely 8 a.m., and that morning rush came on with full force. Unfortunately, Luis wasn't wrong about this place—their coffee was strong, the pastries were addictive, and their breakfast wraps were a cure-all for whatever ailed you in the morning.

No, the problem wasn't the café. The problem was admitting Luis was right. Which is why I will never tell him I came here. Thankfully he didn't either as a night owl.

When I finally shuffled my way to the front, I rattled off my order—double espresso, egg and chorizo wrap—and stepped aside to wait. That's when I noticed her.

She was standing near the pickup counter, looking out of place in a way that caught my eye. She wasn't fidgeting with her phone or staring wide-eyed at the menu like most people. She just stood there, hands lightly folded, her expression calm, almost too calm for this chaos. She wore a tailored blazer over a soft blue blouse, her black trousers sharp and professional.

Her order was called—something fancier than I would have figured. A coffee with oat milk and an almond croissant—and she turned, giving me a polite but brief smile.

I wasn't one to strike up random conversations, but there was something about her... not her beauty, though she was definitely beautiful. No, it was the way she didn't quite fit in like she had a secret and was utterly comfortable in keeping it.

Before I knew it, I spoke. "First time here?"

She glanced back at me, surprised. "Is it that obvious?"

I shrugged, trying to look casual. "A little. You look like someone who usually drinks hotel coffee."

Her lips twitched, almost a smile. "That's a strangely specific observation."

"It's a shame," I said, gesturing to her croissant. "You didn't order the breakfast wrap. Rookie mistake."

She chuckled softly, a sound that felt like the first warm breeze after a winter storm. "Noted for next time."

"Let me guess," I said, leaning lightly against the counter. "You're new to the area. Someone recommended this place, but they forgot to warn you about the lines."

"Pretty close," she admitted. "I just moved here for work. It was mentioned this was the best breakfast spot, so I thought I'd see what all the fuss was about."

"And?" I asked, arching a brow.

Her croissant was still untouched in her hand, so she lifted it as if to toast and took a bite. She hummed, considering. "The food's good. Jury's still out on the rest."

"That's because you didn't get the wrap," I said, deadpan. "It's so good, you wouldn't

even care if they gave you a burnt coffee.”

“That so?” She said, shaking her head, “If that’s the case where’s—”

Before she could finish the employee called my name. I turned to take both the food and my drink.

“Ah, a man who practices what he teaches after all.” This time, she smiled—a real smile—and it was brighter than the morning sun outside. “I’ll keep that in mind for next time.”

Instead of heading for the door like usual, I lingered. She was still standing there too, looking like she wasn’t quite ready to leave. Given how busy it was, there was only one small uncleared table left, but I didn’t want to fight her over it. “Hey, have you found your favorite place to eat around here yet?”

She hesitated. Normally, I’d eat in the car or take it to the office, and her pause made me think she was the same. “Depends. Are we talking about somewhere scenic?”

“And quiet.”

Her brows lifted, amused. “Isn’t both a little too much to ask for?”

“Not with me. There’s a park a couple blocks from here,” I said. “Beats sitting in a crowd.”

She glanced at her watch, then back at the limited seating available. “Lead the way.”

We walked in comfortable silence at first, the early morning buzz of the city providing a soundtrack. She sipped her coffee, taking in the sights truly seeing everything for the first time. I felt like a lucky man who caught her before she locked

into a routine.

“So, what brought you to town?” I asked, breaking the quiet.

“Work,” she said simply. “And you?”

“Same.”

She glanced at me, waiting for more.

I gave her a wry smile. “It’s not that exciting. I work security for NoxTech.”

Her brows lifted slightly, and I swore that was what her disapproving face looked like. NoxTech’s CEO was so controversial he was practically a litmus test for people’s politics. Thankfully my job was to spy on , rather than for .

“Yeah. It’s mostly boring stuff—keeping facilities secure, checking personnel ID, that kind of thing.” I kept my tone casual, making it sound as mundane as possible.

She nodded, as if filing that information away. “Sounds important.”

“Someone’s got to do it,” I conceded. “What about you?”

“I work in negotiations,” she said vaguely.

“Negotiations,” I repeated. “That sounds... diplomatic.”

Her lips curved, but she didn’t elaborate.

We reached the park, a small but well-kept green space tucked between office buildings. It was quiet, with only a few people scattered across benches or jogging

along the paths. We found a spot near a fountain, where the sound of trickling water drowned out the distant hum of traffic.

She sat down first, carefully sipping on her coffee. I joined her, biting into my wrap and making a point of exaggerating how delicious it was.

“Is it really that good?” she asked, amused.

“Better than your croissant,” I said through a mouthful of food.

She shook her head, laughing softly. “You seem like a gym type that complains when food doesn’t have protein.”

My jaw dropped a bit in surprise, and I saw her head tilt as if to challenge me to disagree. “You must be truly good at your job to read people so well.”

“Thank you,” she said. Then, to my surprise, she tore off a piece of her croissant and handed it to me. “Cheat day?”

I smiled, taking it out of politeness more than conscious thought before I popped it into my mouth. All buttery and flaky. Yet, I still gave a dramatic shrug. “Not bad, but it’s no wrap.”

She laughed again, a sound that was starting to feel addictive. “You are an exceedingly good liar.”

After a chuckle, I leaned back on the bench looking out at the park. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“Monica,” she said. “And you?”

“Rafael,” I replied before finally glancing back at her. Damn, Brewtiful Mornings made me a sap.

“Nice to meet you, Rafael.”

“Likewise, Monica.”

We fell into an easy rhythm after that, talking about the city, the places for a ‘real meal’, and the worst places for traffic. She had a sharp wit and a way of deflecting personal questions that I recognized immediately. It was the kind of skill you only picked up in certain lines of work—where privacy was currency.

As we finished our food, she pulled out her phone. “I should probably head to the office soon. But... it was nice talking to you.”

“Same here,” I said. “I hope I’ll see you around.”

She hesitated, then held out her phone. “Here. Put your number in. In case I have any more breakfast-related questions.”

I smirked, taking her phone and typing in my number. “Feel free to reach out anytime. Breakfast emergencies are not my only specialty.”

She smiled, tucking her phone away. “Good to know. See you around, Rafael.”

“See you, Monica.”

As she walked away, I watched her go, a strange mix of curiosity and amusement swirling in my chest. I didn’t know much about her, but something told me this wasn’t the last time our paths would cross. And as much as I hated to admit it, I was looking forward to bragging to Luis about it all.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:25 am*

three

- LUIS -

Rafael's apartment always surprised me. It didn't matter how many times I came over. You'd think a guy like him—gym-obsessed, all charm and no chill—would live in a space that matched his personality. Something flashy, loud, maybe a little gaudy. Instead, it was the opposite: sparse furniture, neutral tones, not a single picture on the walls. His apartment looked like it was a model unit no one had ever fully moved into.

It made me feel weirdly self-conscious every time I walked in. For the first five or so minutes until Raf and I got talking.

"Don't you ever get tired of living in a museum?" I asked, plopping the takeout bags I brought over onto his pristine counter.

Rafael shot me a look from across the room, where he was folding a towel in the exacting way that only a man with too much discipline could. I was surprised he didn't iron it. "It's called minimalism. You wouldn't understand."

"Minimalism?" I gestured around, grabbing a beer from the six-pack in the fridge. One of the few things that are actually in his fridge with any sort of consistency. "This place looks like you're staging it for a realtor."

"Some of us value simplicity," he said, tossing the folded towel into a small hamper basket. "Not everyone needs neon beer signs and football posters to feel at home."

I grinned, twisting the cap off my bottle and taking a long swig. Raf always guessed what my place looked like, but he'd never seen it. We were best friends, obviously, but I still needed a place where I didn't need to pretend about anything. "You're not wrong about the beer signs. Speaking of which..." I grabbed another beer and walked over to offer it to him.

Rafael rightfully didn't believe me as he took the beer then nodded toward the food. "What's the occasion?"

"Do I need an occasion to check in on my buddy?" I asked, feigning offense.

He arched a brow. "You 'check in' with beer and takeout? What's really going on, Luis?"

I held up my hands, mock-innocent. "Nothing! Can't a guy bring his friend dinner without being interrogated?"

"Not you," he said, popping the cap off his beer and taking a sip.

I smirked, leaning against the counter. He wasn't wrong.

"Fine," I admitted. "I just thought—I don't even know, I had a good day at work. Seemed worth celebrating over a drink with a friend."

Rafael gave me a look but wasn't going to push it. Not yet, at least.

"So," I said, tearing open one of the takeout bags. The smell of chicken fried rice filled the room, and Rafael wrinkled his nose. "How about you? What's new with you? Meet anyone interesting lately?"

There was a beat of silence, just long enough to make it awkward. "Not really,"



Rafael said finally, his tone flat.

I hid my frown by digging into the food. “Funny. I would’ve sworn you only get that look when you’re hiding something.”

Rafael’s shoulders stiffened. Got him.

“It’s just some woman I ran into,” he said casually, but there was an edge to his voice now. “Why do you care?”

“Oh, I don’t,” I said, far too quickly to sound convincing. “Just interesting, is all. Not the type you usually go for.”

“And what’s her type?” Rafael asked, crossing his arms. “I’ve told you nothing about her.”

Damn it.

“She’s classy. Professional. Like she has her life together,” he said before taking a bite of chicken, nearly smirking as he chewed. “The sort that could straighten out a playboy like me.”

I twitched at the phrasing. Whatever enjoyment this stranger might bring, I knew it was nothing compared to the enjoyment he got from dissecting me. Some days I worried we were friends simply because we could disarm each other far too easily. It kept us sharp around everyone else.

“Oh, come on,” I said, waving a fork at him. “I’ve known you for years. You are never going to be the type to settle down.”

He didn’t respond, which was as good as a confession when it came to Raf. So I

decided to press my advantage. “I’ll give you credit, though. She sounds like a good choice. Someone like her would make you look...” I paused, savoring the moment. “Respectable.”

Rafael’s jaw tightened. I could practically see the gears turning in his head. “Yeah, whatever man. What international trade agreement am I even meant to be celebrating right now? What’s the angle?”

“The angle?” I laughed. “I just enjoy being friendly at work. Unlike you, I’m not trying to impress anyone.”

Rafael took another sip of his beer, his expression unreadable. “Right. Because you’re such a modest guy.”

“Exactly,” I said, flashing him a grin.

The tension in the room was palpable now, and I could feel the rivalry simmering just below the surface. This was the real reason I came over tonight—to get under his skin, to show him up, and maybe now to remind him that he wasn’t the only one with a claim to girls. Not that I really cared about any in that way, of course.

“Let me guess,” Rafael said suddenly, his tone sharp. “You’re here to talk strategy.”

“Strategy?” I asked, playing dumb.

“You met someone too, didn’t you?” he asked. “You want to know what my next move is so you can copy me.”

I laughed, setting my beer down. “You give me too little credit. I’d never copy you, Raf.”

“Right,” he muttered, leaning back into the couch and savoring the beer. “Well, I’m in a good mood so I’ll toss you some scraps on how to get a girl. Her name is Monica—”

Rafael’s words hung in the air, and in that moment, time seemed to stop. My hand tightened around the bottle as the name hit me like a punch to the chest.

“Monica?” I repeated, my voice tightly cautious. I set the bottle down on the coffee table with a little too much force, the sound sharp in the silence that followed.

Rafael, oblivious to the change in tone, continued with a shrug. “Yeah. Monica. I ran into her this morning at a coffee shop. Smart, elegant—real put-together type. Seemed like someone worth getting to know.”

I forced myself to breathe, but it was hard. My thoughts were a whirlwind and I didn’t know which was going to land first. My chest felt tight, and there was an odd fluttering in my stomach. Not only had Monica listened to my suggestion, but this also meant that so had Raf.

“She... she’s the one you’re after?” I managed, though the words felt foreign in my mouth. My stomach twisted in a way I couldn’t quite place. It had all been too casual, too simple when Rafael mentioned it like it was just another name.

Rafael shot me a puzzled glance. “Yeah. What’s the matter? You know her or something?”

I finished my beer in a single swig as my mind raced. This was not supposed to be how things went. This was supposed to be easy, a casual thing between us, just some harmless fun. But now, with the name hanging in the air...

I forced a casual chuckle, the sound hollow. “Nah, man. Just surprised you’d go for

someone like her, that's all."

"You are repeating yourself," Rafael said with a skeptical eyebrow raised.

I tried to wave it off and lean back into the couch to control the erratic acceleration of my heart. Anticipation coiled in me—the thrill of winning something from him.

He just shrugged, taking another swig of his beer. And I thought he didn't catch the undertones of what I was thinking.

Raf let out a bitter laugh. It was a clipped sound that was all too full of himself. "You're the one who told Monica about the breakfast place."

The rivalry over something new was quickly thickening between us. The thought of Raf going after Monica didn't sit right with me, and just like he was too stubborn to tell me he liked my breakfast picks I was too stubborn to tell him why.

He had always been known as the one who got the girl. Always. Since I liked using my words less of a show was expected of me. But I enjoyed the subtle bravo in her.

"You know," I said, picking up my trash and walking over to the kitchen. "This could be fun. A little friendly competition. May the best man win."

Raf eyed me like I was the only thing in his house worth focusing on. "And what happens when you lose?"

"Lose?" I repeated, feigning shock. "Come on, Rafael. You think your tongue can win a diplomat?"

He didn't answer, but the look he gave me was enough to let me know I'd hit a nerve.

“Relax,” I said, clapping him on the shoulder. “It’s not like I’m going to sabotage you or anything. This is just... a game.”

“A game,” he repeated, his voice dripping with machismo.

“We’ve both been single for far too long,” I said, grinning. “Maybe all we needed was some motivation.”

“All games need rules,” he said slowly, “so let’s settle it the old-fashioned way.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What, you want to arm wrestle or something?”

“Not exactly,” he said, gesturing toward another room where I knew a set of weights and a punching bag sat. “Let’s see if you even can keep up with me in the first place.”

The muscles in Rafael’s shoulders flexed as he tugged off his shirt, revealing his lean and defined torso. My fingers itched for the familiar cool of the beer bottle, and was unable to even force myself to look away. I wasn’t supposed to be this drawn to him. Not now. Not like this.

Instead, I merely scuffed, shaking my head. “You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious,” he said, his tone challenging. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

I hesitated for a moment, then rolled my eyes. I didn’t work out enough anyway. “Fine. But don’t cry when I beat you.”

We squared off in a gym that was outfitted enough to have been shared by the whole apartment building. The workout started simple enough—push-ups, pull-ups, basic strength exercises—but it quickly escalated.

“Is that all you’ve got?” Rafael taunted as I struggled to finish my last set of weights.

I had learned to dress more casually when coming over since this exact sort of thing had happened before. But that didn’t mean I was in proper gym clothes as even my casual clothes were more restrictive. “No one enjoys it when you get cocky,” I shot back, wiping the sweat from my brow.

The final round was sparring, and that’s when things got interesting. Rafael threw the first punch—a quick jab that I barely managed to dodge. “Even half naked you’re too slow,” I said, smirking as I countered with a hook that grazed his shoulder.

He didn’t respond, but the look in his eyes said everything. This wasn’t just about Monica anymore. Though it probably never was.

We went at it for a long while, each of us refusing to back down. By the time we finally called it quits, we were both drenched in sweat, and my breaths came in ragged gasps. I had the urge to strip out of my t-shirt to cool down faster, but refused to give him the satisfaction.

“Not bad,” Rafael admitted grudgingly as he wiped his face with a towel.

“You too,” I said, though the words tasted like defeat as a clean towel was tossed at me.

After the workout, we collapsed onto Rafael’s couch, the rivalry momentarily worked out.

“You’re a pain in the ass, you know that?” Raf said, cracking open another beer.

“Likewise,” I muttered, though there was a hint of a smile on my face.

We sat in silence, the news on for a while, the sound of the city humming faintly through the windows.

“I don’t get you, man,” Raf said finally, voice low. “Why Monica? What’s the real reason?”

I didn’t answer right away, and for a moment, I thought I might not reply at all. “She might really get me,” I said finally, truly unguarded. “When she was leading a meeting and I couldn’t keep my eyes off her.”

He nodded, taking another sip of beer.

This spoken truth hung between us, heavy, but acknowledged.

The thing was I couldn’t even claim that neither of us cared about Monica. Someone as smart as her wasn’t that safe or uncomplicated either. And yet still the perfect distraction from the parts of ourselves we couldn’t admit, even to each other.

“Just so you know,” Raf said, his voice breaking the silence, “I’m not letting you win.”

I grinned at the TV before shaking my head. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:25 am*

four

- RAFAEL -

A nother morning. Another line. Another game.

Luis would never admit it, but he loves stirring the pot. I'm reminded of this because he shows up at the café the next morning. Worse, I can't even really complain. It's his spot, to be fair.

Today, though, I'm ready. He can try to take over my morning, my focus, and maybe even Monica. But I know his moves.

"You're late," I say as I spot him scanning the café, probably looking for Monica. He's wearing that smug grin, the one that usually means he's just won some bet I didn't know I was a part of. I can't imagine what he might have done given how little time we've both had since last seeing each other.

"Late?" Luis asks, feigning surprise. "Didn't realize I was on your schedule, Raf."

There it is, the subtle jab. He knows exactly how to needle me without crossing the line. I just roll my eyes.

The café is bustling as usual, the scent of freshly brewed espresso blending with the chatter of suited professionals. Monica hasn't arrived yet, but that's fine. I have a plan.



Luis slides into the chair across from me, a lazy confidence in his movements. “So, what’s the play today? ‘I’m rich and dangerous, let me tell you about in route?’”

“Better than your ‘I’m just a humble guy who reads poetry on weekends’ act?” I counter, keeping my tone light. It’s always like this—friendly fire disguised as banter. But beneath it, there’s something heavier, something we never talk about.

Luis laughs, leaning back in his chair. “Please. You couldn’t handle danger if it hit you with a Bentley.”

I smirk. “Let’s test that theory.”

And as if on cue, Monica walks in. She’s immaculate. Today, it’s a tailored white blazer over a soft lavender blouse, her heels clicking confidently against the tiled floor. Heads turn as she moves through the room, but her eyes—when they glance over and meet mine—linger just a second too long.

Luis notices. Of course, he does.

“Looks like she’s still deciding between us,” he says under his breath, his voice laced with mischief.

“Did she even see you?” I reply smoothly.

Monica reaches the counter, and I watch as she places her order. I wonder if she is going to order a wrap. I wonder why I care so much about it.

Luis doesn’t wait. He’s up before I can stop him, striding toward the counter like he owns the place. I clench my jaw, debating whether to let him have his moment or step in and reclaim the lead. The fact that she doesn’t know we are friends keeps me put.

“Miss Monica May,” he says, his voice smooth, his smile practiced. “Fancy meeting you here.”

She turns, surprised but polite. “Luis, I should have known I could find you here.”

He nods, his confidence radiating. “Wonderful I get to see you outside of work.”

Her laugh is soft and polite. “This place is as great as you said. It’s like I’ve stumbled into a... community?”

Luis grins, but I see the flicker of wonder in his eyes. Monica’s phrasing alone throws him off balance. I take my chance and stand, closing the distance between us.

“He might sing this place’s praises,” I say as I approach, my tone light but firm. “Making it a shame that he is hardly a regular here.”

Luis raises an eyebrow, the challenge clear in his expression. Before he finds the words Monica tilts her head and asks him, “Why is that?”

“More of a night owl,” he answers honestly. It’s almost stunning to see him lead with the unfiltered truth. “If this place were open past 8 PM I’d be here nightly.”

I chuckle, stepping into the space between them, just close enough to make Luis shift slightly to the side. “Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

Luis claps me on the shoulder, his grip firm. “Spoken like a man who’s allergic to sitting still.”

Monica shakes her head as she laughs, a sound that’s both genuine and disarming. “You two seem to know each other well.”

“Maybe this cafe is a real community at times,” I say, meeting Luis’ gaze. The tension is palpable, but Monica doesn’t seem to notice. Or maybe she does, and she’s just too skilled at navigating situations like this.

She glances between us, her curiosity evident. “I’d stay and eat, but I’m running late. Snuck in another meeting before our’s on Tuesday.”

Luis steps aside with a charming smile. “Wouldn’t dream of keeping you.”

Monica nods, her gaze lingering on him for just a moment before she turns and heads for the door.

The silence between us is deafening once she’s gone.

“Well,” Luis says, breaking it with a smirk. “Looks like you’ve got some work to do.”

I exhale, shaking my head. “You’re insufferable.”

“And you love it,” he says, his voice low, almost teasing.

The words hang in the air longer than they should, and for a split second, the playful edge in his tone feels like something more. But I push the thought aside.

“You’re delusional in the mornings,” I say, grabbing my coffee and heading for the door.

Luis follows, his grin unwavering.

The rest of the day is a blur of standing around and nodding at people I recognize so well that I’d be able to sketch them with my eyes closed. So my mind keeps drifting

back to that moment in the café. To Monica's smile. I do think Luis likes her more than most people. He only shortens or extends past a full name when he is being friendly.

By the time evening rolls around, I need a distraction. Something to clear my head.

Luis texts me as I'm heading home.

Luis: Game night. Usual bar. Don't chicken out.

I almost don't respond. Almost. But then I think of the way he looked at Monica this morning, the spark of more than competition in his eyes. And I can't say no.

Me: Be there by 9

When I arrive, the bar is its usual mix of charm. It's a small place that only locals visit. There's a bottle of expensive whiskey on the counter and a stack of cards in front of Luis. He looks relaxed, even in his suit. The jacket hangs off the back of the chair as he sets up some sort of strategy game I don't recognize.

"Ready to lose?" he asks without looking up.

"You wish," I reply, dropping into the seat next to him.

We play for hours, the competitive banter flowing as easily as the whiskey. But beneath the surface, there's a tension neither of us addresses. Touches linger—a hand on a shoulder, a knee brushing against mine as we lean over the table. It's all so casual, so easy to dismiss.

Until it's not.

At some point, Luis leans back, his expression uncharacteristically serious. “You know this thing with Monica... it’s not just a game, right?”

I freeze, unsure of how to respond.

He continues, his gaze locked on mine. “I mean, sure, it’s fun to mess with you. But if she’s someone you’re serious about, I’d back off.”

The sincerity in his voice throws me off balance. I open my mouth to respond, but the words catch in my throat.

Because the truth is, it’s not Monica I’m thinking about.

Not really.

“I don’t know,” I say finally, my voice quieter than intended.

Luis tilts his head, studying me. “What don’t you know?”

I shake my head, standing and grabbing my jacket. Glad I don’t have to drive home given how much I’ve had. “Forget it. It’s late. I should go.”

He doesn’t have muscle on me, but he does have speed. And as fast as a dart his hand is over mine I reached for the bill. “Raf.”

I meet his gaze, and for a moment, the world feels like it’s holding its breath. I pulled my eyes away from the game we’re playing and managed to count the score.

I won.

“You can tell me,” he says, his voice barely above a whisper.

I swallow hard, my heart pounding in my chest. The air between us is charged, the distance too small, too intimate.

But instead of saying what I want to—what I'm afraid to—I force a laugh and step back. "Better luck next time, Luis."

He doesn't stop me, but I can feel his eyes on me as I leave.

And as I walk home, the night cool and quiet around me, I can't help but wonder if the game we're playing is one we're both destined to lose.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:25 am*

five

- LUIS -

The thing about Rafael is that he always leaves just before things get interesting. He's been that way for as long as I've known him. He pushes you, teases you, gets under your skin—and then, just when you think you've got him cornered, he slips away. It's maddening. Addictive, even. Tonight was no exception.

Maybe I shouldn't have let it go. But little does it matter now as I'm standing in my kitchen with a cup of coffee that's already gone cold. And I can't stop replaying the look in his eyes when he walked out. It wasn't anger or even irritation. It was... fear? No, that's not it...

Whatever it was, it's stuck with me, and I hate that it has. It's late now and both time and coffee have sobered me up.

My phone buzzes on the counter, breaking the silence. For a split second, I think it's him.

Monica: Meeting rescheduled. 10 AM tomorrow.

Straightforward, professional. No hint of warmth. I don't know why I expected anything else. She's not the type to waste words—or time—on needless pleasantries.

I sip my coffee, grimacing at the bitter taste. It doesn't matter. Tomorrow's another chance to prove I'm better than Raf. Smarter. Faster. Worth her attention.

That's the real reason I'm playing this game, isn't it?

At least, that's what I tell myself.

The embassy is buzzing when I arrive the next morning. U.N. Security guards patrol the entrance, their crisp uniforms spotless. The air smells faintly of polished wood and fresh coffee—a stark contrast to the chaos outside. Monica is already here, standing near a conference table with a group of officials. She's poised, commanding, the very picture of professionalism.

And then there's Rafael.

He's leaning against the far wall, arms crossed, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. He's wearing one of those suits that make him look like he stepped out of a magazine, and the worst part is, he's not even trying. I had my suit tailored to fit. He just naturally fills his out.

Our eyes meet across the room, and he nods in acknowledgment, his expression unreadable.

“Luis,” Monica says, drawing my attention back to her. “You're just in time.”

I flash her a smile, the one I know works on most people. “I'm happy to join you this morning, but confused about why we are all meeting.”

She doesn't smile back, but her eyes soften slightly. It's a small victory, but I'll take it. Then she holds out her phone to me. “You need to see this,” she says quietly.

The post on the screen is from Rafael's NoxTech boss. The words are sharp and crass if I was to use my work vocabulary. ‘DEI hires always come from TITS. Can't see her lasting long in New York or D.C.’



“That’s... messed up to say,” I mumble, more confused than before. Monica nods, her gaze unwavering. “I’m sorry but I don’t get it.”

Raf sighs. “TITS is the name of the public university NoxTech bought and renamed.”

“My alma mater,” Monica adds.

“That’s outrageous,” I continue, before searching Rafael’s face for more clarity.

Thankfully, he doesn’t take advantage of my confusion. “My boss offered me as her personal security to show it was just a joke.”

So he did get reassigned. Horrible for our game, but great for Monica.

“I absolutely don’t want to make this sound about me,” I say, running a hand through my hair, “but I don’t know why our meeting was rescheduled if we are the only ones here.”

“I was authorized to give your side better terms as an exclusive state supplier. The offer will probably only last until NoxTech stock bounces back. Thus the haste,” Monica explained, then frowned. “Sorry if I was too blunt in my text. My notifications were very nasty last night.”

Oh. Maybe I’d get a bonus at my cover job too. I could treat myself to something nice—something to soothe the sting of losing this round to Raf. After all, who could resist a beefy bodyguard?

Monica crossed her arms, her expression sharp as I realized she had a bigger plan. “I was going to turn down NoxTech’s offer,” she says evenly, “But then I realized this could be mutually beneficial for us all.”

“It won't be easy,” she continues without missing a beat. “I need someone who can outthink a billionaire with an ego the size of Texas. That's you. Or at least I think it is.”

Rafael snorts softly from the corner, but I ignore him. I expect a fight, but the words that follow are so unexpected it takes me a moment to process them. “No one better at words than Mr. Navarro.”

For the first time, my rivalry with him fades into the background. For all of my complaints, I don't hate my cover job. I just always wish that I could do more in my actual job. Make a real change at an international level beyond just witnessing something occasionally worth reporting on.

“I understand now,” I say, squaring my shoulders. “What's our first step?”

Monica glances at Rafael, who falls into his silent protector mode and moves towards the door. Her lips press into a thin line as if fully committing to this unusual plan before offering me a faint smile. “If we are lucky, maybe we can skip our next meeting completely.”

“Like a reverse date,” I tease.

Rafael raises an eyebrow, clearly surprised. I think Monica even blushes before she pulls over the paperwork to discuss. This day just keeps getting better.

The morning meeting was nothing like I first expected. There is still a mix of diplomacy and thinly veiled power plays. This is what friendly competition has gotten us. Monica is still in her element, cutting through the noise with the precision of a scalpel. Rafael chimes in occasionally, his insights sharp and annoyingly on point. That man knows his boss, and together we can turn a ‘joke’ into something profitable for us all.

By the time the meeting ends, my week is made. We are now looking at a trade agreement that benefits people back home too. Monica shakes my hand before heading off to get final approval from a few other officials.

“You looked sharp out there,” Rafael says, his tone casual. He couldn’t join her in this latest classified meeting because that would ruin the illusion that he doesn’t have state clearance. I pretend I’m thrilled about this for a fake reason.

“It’s not a game of football,” I counter before I can stop myself. “Don’t patronize me.”

“Touchy.” He raises an eyebrow, amused. “You always this sensitive after getting exactly what you want?”

As good as the day had been, it felt endless. I’d expected to sleep in—not work until six in the evening on my day off. It’s not that I dislike his words. Far from it. They’re sticky sweet, and that’s the problem.

I grab my bag, slinging it over my shoulder. “Maybe I’m just tired of you somehow inserting yourself in all my business.”

He steps closer. “Maybe you should stop making it so easy.”

I tilt my head up, words almost biting. “You volunteered to guard her, didn’t you?”

The air between us is thick with unspoken tension. I can feel the weight of his gaze, the heat of his presence. For a moment, I think he’s going to say something else, something important.

But then the smirk returns as he steps back. “See you around.”

I don't know why I do it. Maybe it's the adrenaline from all the praise from my call with my bosses when I recap what happened at the meeting. Or it could be the frustration of always being two steps behind him. I refuse to accept any other explanation besides those two.

Whatever the reason, I find myself at Raf's door that night, a six-pack of beer in one hand and a flimsy excuse in the other.

He answers after the second knock, his shirt untucked, his tie loose around his neck.

"Luis," he says, clearly surprised. "What are you doing here?"

I hold up the beer, forcing a grin. "I wanted to say sorry."

He hesitates for a moment before stepping aside to let me in.

The apartment is as spotless as ever, still all clean lines and neutral tones. He cleans when he's upset. It's the complete opposite of my place, which is cluttered with half-read books and mismatched blankets.

Rafael takes a beer, popping the top off one bottle and handing it to me in exchange for the remaining five. "So, what's the real reason you're here?"

I shrug, taking a long sip. "Can't a guy just check in on his friend?"

He smirks, settling onto the couch. "You used that excuse last time."

The words hit harder than they should, and I cover my reaction with a sip of beer. "I mean it this time."

We talk about nothing for a while, the conversation drifting from work to old

memories to whatever happens to be on TV. It's easy, familiar. And yet, there's a tension beneath it all, a current pulling us toward something neither of us is ready to face. The idea of actually working together is something we hadn't ever tried to do. There had been chances. But we always make sure to outpace each other. He must like Monica a lot to want to be bored around her instead.

At some point, Rafael turns to me, his expression unreadable. "Why do we do this?"

"Do what?"

"This," he says, gesturing between us. "The competition, the games. What's the point?"

I laugh, though it sounds hollow even to me. "Because it's fun?"

"Wait," he starts without a smile. "A 'reverse date'. Was that a joke?"

I don't know how to answer that. Because the truth is, he asked two questions and it's not all fun. It's exhausting, confusing, and... I can't stop. I'm honestly unsure what he is even talking about anymore. "I don't know," I admit either way.

Rafael shakes his head, his gaze dropping to the beer in his hands. For a moment, I think the conversation is over.

But then he looks up, and the intensity in his eyes steals the breath from my lungs.

"Luis," he says, his voice barely above a whisper. "What are we doing?"

The question hangs in the air, heavy and unanswerable.

And for the first time in years, I have no idea what to say.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:25 am*

six

- RAFAEL -

The first thing I notice when I wake up in a living room chair is the sunlight pouring through the windows, painting streaks of gold across the floor. The second thing I see is the steady rhythm of someone breathing nearby.

It's a Sunday morning.

Quiet.

Calm.

I sit up, running a hand through my hair and letting my eyes adjust to the light. The familiar nature of my living room greets me—the hard lines, the subtle gleam of the polished floor, and, on the couch, Luis.

He's sprawled out, one arm dangling off the edge, his head resting against the arm's cushion at an angle that can't possibly be comfortable. His shoes are off—kicked to the floor sometime after we'd stopped talking and he just... stayed .

I stand, stretching out the stiffness in my back. It takes a moment to piece together how we ended up here.

Last night. The beers. The silence that said more than the words we didn't say.

And now, this.

Luis, in my space, as if he belongs here.

I lean against the hallway wall, arms crossed, and take him in. His usually precise hair is mussed, and the shirt he fell asleep in is wrinkled. The sight is deeply domestic, and for a brief, absurd moment, I wonder what it would be like if this was normal. If I woke up every morning to the sound of his breathing, his presence filling the quiet.

He shifts, murmuring something unintelligible before settling deeper into the couch.

Dangerous thoughts, Rafael.

‘Don’t ask. Don’t tell.’ That isn’t the official rule anymore, but that doesn’t mean such things aren’t still considered blackmail material everywhere.

I head to the kitchen. The sound of my footsteps muted against the floor. Coffee. That’s what I need. Something strong enough to shake off the lingering haze of last night.

The machine hums to life, filling the air with the scent of freshly ground beans. By the time I pour a cup, Luis stirs.

“Morning, sunshine,” I call out, my tone light, teasing.

He groans, dragging a hand over his face. “Why is it so bright in here?”

“Because it’s daytime.”

He sits up slowly, squinting at me like I’m the one to blame for the existence of

sunlight. “Why don’t you have curtains?”

I shrug. “My living room doesn’t usually need them.”

Luis mutters something under his breath and leans back, his eyes falling shut again.

“Coffee?” I offer, holding up the extra mug I’ve poured.

He cracks one eye open, looking at me like I’ve just handed him the keys to the kingdom. “You’re being a saint this morning.”

I snort, handing him the mug. “Don’t push it.”

He takes a sip, sighing in a way that’s almost obscene. “You know, for someone who pretends to hate indulgence, you make a damn good cup of coffee.”

“It’s the type you said was good.”

“Really?” Luis says, sitting up straighter. “That stuff so expensive I don’t even buy it.”

“See the good that happens when you buy things you don’t need?”

“Rafael Leon Castillo,” he starts in a tone that should sound punishing but is rather decadent, “Curtains?”

“It’s called balance.”

Luis smirks and sets the mug down on the table beside him. “Is that what you are calling it?”



The playful edge in his voice is too familiar, too easy to fall into. It's a game we've played for years—one where every word is a challenge, every glance a move on a game board neither of us can walk away from.

But today, it feels different.

Maybe it's the quiet. Or the fact that he's still here, his presence lingering like the scent of coffee and sunlight.

"Why'd you stay?" I ask, breaking the silence.

Luis shrugs, his expression unreadable. "Fell asleep, I guess."

It's a simple answer. Too simple.

I lean against the counter, studying him. "You're not usually this careless."

He chuckles, the sound low and rough. "And you're not usually this hospitable. Guess we're both full of surprises."

The air shifts, heavy with something unspoken.

Luis looks up at me, his gaze sharp despite the lazy slouch of his posture. "You gonna stare at me all morning, or are we doing something?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Something?"

He grins. The kind that's all teeth and challenge. "I don't know. You're the one usually dragging me into the gym. Which I pray you excuse me from today. All the drinking and late nights recently have messed up my sleep schedule. So, what's the new plan, Raf?"

The familiar spark of rivalry pulls me in, even as I try to resist it. “Yeah, hardly seems like a fair fight considering.”

Luis scoffs, stretching his arms above his head. The motion pulls his shirt tight across his chest, and I force myself to look away, focusing on the calendar pinned to the wall instead.

Sunday. It’s just a normal Sunday.

“Come on,” I say, grabbing my keys. “We’re going out.”

Luis raises an eyebrow. “Out where?”

“You’ll see.”

The streets are quiet, the usual chaos of the city subdued in the soft glow of a Sunday morning. Luis follows me without question, his hands shoved into his pockets, his steps matching mine.

I take him to a park—not the one near the café, but another spot I know. It’s tucked away, hidden and green, with a view of the river that stretches out like a silver ribbon in the sunlight. I don’t know how Luis misses the morning so often since it’s the best time of day.

Luis whistles low when we arrive. “You’ve been holding out on me.”

“Not everything’s a competition,” I reply, though the words feel like a lie.

We sit on a bench near the water. The sound of the river filling the silence between us. For a while, neither of us spoke.

It's Luis who breaks the quiet.

"So, Monica," he says, his tone casual. "How long are you meant to be on guard duty?"

I glance at him, unsure if he's genuinely curious or just trying to bait me. "Probably a week unless those fanboys can't find anything else to be weird about."

He shakes his head, leaning back against the bench. "Do you want them to be?"

"For my sake, yeah."

Luis chuckles. "Don't tell me you're taking winning her heart this seriously."

I wasn't, but I bristle over his tone. "Shouldn't I be?"

The question hangs in the air, heavier than I intended.

Luis turns to look at me, his expression unreadable. "Guy stands up to his billionaire boss, wins a priceless girl, and they become the internet's next It couple."

The words hit like a punch to the chest. "Sorry to dash your fantasy of meeting a girl boss at work and becoming an international power couple squabbling over trade details."

"You always make it sound like you are criticizing a Star Wars prequel," he says. "It's just what I do."

"Is it?"

I meet his gaze, the intensity in his eyes cutting through the facade I've been clinging

to. “You really aren’t going to back off from this, are you?”

“Why should I?”

“Because—” The thought begins but then he pulls it back. “How often do I get to meet someone I like as much as her? I see you flirting with women all the time.”

“That’s different,” I say, my voice sharp. “Flirting is easy. This... this feels like a mistake waiting to happen.”

“A mistake?” he repeats, leaning in. “What are you on about?”

The posture is meant to be intimidating. But I don’t flinch, meeting his stare head-on. His words lose their elegance when he’s flustered. And ruffling his feathers, seeing him puff up, is far too enjoyable. “You’re cute when you’re trying so hard,” I say, letting a smirk tug at the corner of my lips. “I’ll give you that.”

“Fuck you,” Luis huffs, his jaw tightening as a faint flush creeps up his neck. He gets up off the bench, fingers flaring next to his sides. See this is exactly why we usually end up working out instead. All that pent-up energy needs to go somewhere. I watch him like a cat wanting to bat at his favorite mouse.

“You know what,” he says and I stand up too, the space between us narrowing. Then he blinks. Glances around at the park as if he forgot where north is. “I don’t need this. I got work tomorrow.”

“Luis, come on,” I laugh at the absurdity of it. “You going to let some girl get in between us?”

“You think you’re going to win her by default because you... can arm-wrestle better than me, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

And in with those words, I feel it—the weight of everything I ever said but barely meant.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:25 am*

seven

- LUIS -

The thing about Rafael is that he never gives up.

I thought maybe last night—him letting me crash on his couch, the angry way we ended the morning—meant we were taking a break from hanging out. Maybe, for once, we'd focus on something other than one-upping each other.

But no. Rafael doesn't know how to quit.

Case in point: the text I got from him at exactly 08:59 AM Monday. Literally a minute before my phone would drop into focus mode. I rolled my eyes, scrolling past a news update about that CEO killer still not being found, on the way to opening his message.

Rafael: You're invited, Friday night. Dress sharp. No excuses.

I blink at the text, trying to figure out what angle he's playing. It doesn't give much away, and Rafael is too calculated to just invite me somewhere without a plan. Especially if a dress code is involved. Some mysteries just don't get solved, I guess.

Still, I'm curious. And I hate that I am. I hope by Friday the feeling passes.

It does not. If anything I feel like I'm on a secret mission as I'm pulling up to a private gallery in the arts district. The building is all glass and steel, the kind of place

where everything reeks of money and exclusivity.

I spot Rafael the second I walk in. He's standing near a massive abstract painting, looking as polished as ever in another perfectly fitting suit. Blue this time. Monica is with him, her laugh light as she leans in slightly, clearly captivated by whatever nonsense he's spinning.

What a dick. To invite me a week ahead of time just to rub everything in my face.

He sees me before she does, his eyes brightening just enough that I smile back out of habit. The urge to leave is strong but it would be more embarrassing to go now, so I stride over to him.

"Luis," he says as I approach, his tone perfectly civil. "I wasn't sure you'd make it."

Monica turns, her expression lighting up when she sees me. "Luis! I didn't know you'd be here."

I shoot Rafael a look. "He didn't tell you?"

Rafael's jaw tightens, but his smile doesn't falter. I know that look. I've joked it's his cyanide pill tell. When he crushes a secret between his teeth.

"I wanted it to be a surprise," he answers at last, swaying as if to speak to us both.

Monica smiles, her eyes sparkling. "You two always seem to find new ways to keep things interesting."

I opt to ignore him and focus on Monica. "What's the occasion?"

"Tonight is a private showing," she explains, gesturing to the artwork around us. "A

new collection from a contemporary artist that's gone viral. Between us, I think NoxTech is doing some BS with crypto, but art is art. I wouldn't have gotten on the guest list if it wasn't for Rafael so will save my complaints about the host."

Of course, he got the invites. Rafael's always been good at this—choosing the perfect setting to show off.

"Care to join us?" Monica adds.

"Happy to," I confess and follow at her free side onto the next piece. "This is an interesting one," I say, stepping closer to the painting in front of us. It's a chaotic swirl of colors, bold and unapologetic, but with just enough structure to feel deliberate. It reminded me of that infamous banana taped to a wall—only here, it felt like the whole thing had exploded into a chaotic splash of yellow paint. "What do you think?"

She tilts her head, studying the piece. "I like it. There's something... raw about it. Honest."

Rafael squints at the painting, before ending up simply nodding along without comment. I do my best not to outright snort over the confused little expression he has.

We view the next pieces in a similar dance. A careful push and pull between Rafael and me as we vie for Monica's attention. Just because he doesn't get art doesn't mean he isn't still all charm.

When Monica excuses herself for the bathroom, I see my chance. "What game are you playing?"

"It wasn't fair that something as fleeting as a one-off post changed everything," Rafael said, his gaze fixed on the art as if still searching to see what we did. "When I



got invited to this PR event, I knew you and Monica would enjoy it more. I don't play dirty, and I don't cheat when it comes to matters of the heart. But I'm not giving up, either."

"How she was invited is very understandable," I say trying to figure out the new rules of his game, "What I don't understand is how I was on the guest list. Our companies are rivals."

"Specific job perk."

I get it without needing further explanation. It's the kind of thing you can't discuss openly, the kind of advantage understood by people in our field but never said aloud. Sometimes I swear things like this expand the agency's budget by a trillion or two. A tiny invite here, a private plane there, soon someone could be swaying some judge into agreeing with you since you paid off their parent's mortgage. You know, just political things.

Raf's good, I think, as he walks past me, the confidence in his stride practically daring me to waver. But it won't be good enough—not against me. Especially now that the gloves are off, and we're free to play this game without as much pretense.

I catch up to the two of them and just as Monica is leaning in to read the plaque beneath the sculpture.

"This one is nice," I say, nodding toward the work. It's a sleek, minimalist structure—black metal twisted into impossible shapes. I bet this is Raf's favorite.

She glances at me, her expression thoughtful. "What do you think it means?"

I pause, considering my answer. "I think it's about control. How we try to bend things to our will, only to end up tangled in the process."

She raises an eyebrow, impressed. “That’s... surprisingly insightful.”

I shrug, playing it cool. “Art’s open to interpretation, right? What do you see?”

Monica steps back, her gaze fixed on the sculpture. “It feels like a struggle. A push and pull between chaos and order.”

“Equally deep,” I say, my tone light.

She laughs, nudging me lightly. “Thanks.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Rafael not watching us, but studying the sculpture. His expression is unreadable before he says, “I like it.”

Monica smiles at him with affection, and I find myself mirroring her expression. But unlike her, I don’t take his arm. As they walk ahead, Raf holds my gaze and I catch his lips forming the words: head start, bitch.

He winks, and despite myself, I laugh. Damn it, it’s on now. The beauty of the game, the danger of what’s at stake—no matter what it costs to pull off, there’s no turning back now. This means war.

eight

- RAFAEL-

M ondays aren't made for this. They were supposed to be for aimless coffee runs and quiet afternoons where people settled into a groove—not sitting in a parked car with the air conditioning humming efficiently ready for any stakeout. But here we were, doing just that because I needed to know Monica would be safe after today.

She sat in the passenger seat, poised as always. Her attention flickered between the view outside and her tablet, where she was reviewing documents with a focus that made me feel like a distracted teenager in comparison.

“You don't have to do this,” she said for the third time in as many hours, not looking up from the screen.

“Yes, I do,” I replied, my tone leaving no room for argument.

She sighed, finally setting the tablet aside to face me. “Rafael, the NoxTech little fanboys haven't shown up in person once. If anything were going to happen, don't you think it would've happened by now?”

“Relaxing gets people killed,” I muttered, scanning the square through the binoculars perched on the dashboard.

Monica gasped softly. “So dramatic.”

I met her look, holding it for a moment that felt like an unspoken whisper. Monica's shoulders relaxed, her guarded expression softening, as if to say she knew she could trust me. After we shared a smile, I turned back to focus on the people.

There was a man loitering near the café's outdoor seating area. Tall and broad-shouldered, he leaned against a light post with the kind of smug posture that screamed self-importance. His sunglasses, unnecessary under the overcast sky, perched above a patchy beard that looked like it grew in defiance rather than care. A baseball cap with some half-faded slogan sat low on his forehead, and his arms were crossed over a graphic tee featuring a meme I vaguely recognized as the online emblem of a bad take. Suspicious enough to keep my attention.

"You're profiling tourists now?" Monica asked, her voice laced with amusement.

I glanced over. "He's been standing there for fifteen minutes and hasn't ordered anything. Tourists don't do that."

"Maybe," she offered, leaning back in her seat. I wondered if there was any more to the sentence but instead, she picked up her phone and I watched as she scrolled through a wall of notifications that only deepened her frown.

We silently watched as the man finally moved, blending into the flow of pedestrians with practiced ease.

"Was it this guy?" Monica turned her phone toward me, the screen lighting up with a social media profile that felt more put together than the man in person. But the profile picture of the same patchy beard paired with a username that proudly displayed: TruthCrusader

"Sure looks like," I said, leaning closer to read the bio: Patriot. Free thinker. Banned but not silenced.

“He’s got a lot of fans himself.” Her tone was light, but the furrow of her brow hadn’t eased. “Check the numbers.”

I followed the suggestion, noting the follower count that somehow teetered between impressive and deeply unsettling. It was not so big that it seemed fake, but enough to be a big fish in someone’s pond.

We fell into silence after that, the kind that was comfortable with each other and charged against the world all at once. Monica returned to her tablet, and I returned to scanning the street, but my thoughts drifted.

This was supposed to be my last assignment with her. The idea was simple: one last stakeout to confirm she was no longer a target, then back to my regular post. But sitting here with her now, I wasn’t so sure I wanted things to go back to normal.

I stole a glance, the way the soft light from the window caught her. She was beautiful, of course, but it was more than that. It was the way she carried herself—the quiet strength, the razor-sharp intellect, the ability to command a room without ever raising her voice.

Before I could express this, a sharp movement in the corner of my eye drew my attention. The same man from earlier had reappeared, now joined by another figure. They stood near the entrance of the café, their body language tense, their heads angled toward the square as if scanning for someone.

“Stay here,” I said, reaching for the door handle.

Monica frowned. “What are you doing?”

“Just checking something out,” I said, already stepping out of the car.

“Rafael, I know my feed wasn’t cleared of harassment,” she said, sigh clear in her voice, “But you don’t have to put yourself at risk.”

"Have to? No," I said with a wink, shutting the car door and crossing the street toward the café.

The two men didn’t notice me at first. They were too focused on their conversation, their voices low and urgent. But as I got closer, one of them looked up, his eyes narrowing as he saw me.

“Can I help you?” he asked, his tone clipped.

“You lost?” I said casually, slipping my hands into my pockets. “Or just killing time?”

The man’s jaw tightened. “None of your business.”

His friend shifted, reaching for something inside his jacket. I didn’t wait to find out what.

In one quick motion, I stepped forward, grabbing the man’s wrist and twisting it behind his back. His friend lunged at me, but I ducked, using the first man as a shield as I shoved him into the attacker’s path.

Chaos erupted.

The café’s patrons scattered, tables and chairs clattering to the ground as the men tried to regroup. I landed a solid punch to the first man’s stomach, sending him reeling, but the second managed to pull a knife from his jacket.

“Really?” I said, dodging the first swing. “In broad daylight?”

He didn't answer, his movements quick and calculated as he advanced. I grabbed a nearby chair, using it to block his next strike before kicking it into his legs. He stumbled, giving me just enough time to disarm him and send the knife skidding across the pavement.

"Rafael!" Monica's voice cut through the commotion, sharp and commanding.

I turned to see her standing by the car, her expression equal parts furious and concerned.

"Get back inside!" I shouted.

She didn't move, her eyes darting between me and the two men.

The man with the knife recovered quickly, charging at me with a growl. I sidestepped, grabbing his arm and flipping him onto the ground with a satisfying thud.

The first man, seeing his friend incapacitated, bolted. I debated chasing after him but decided against it. Keeping Monica safe was the priority.

By the time the commotion settled, the square was eerily quiet. The remaining man groaned on the ground, clutching his arm, while the knife lay forgotten a few feet away.

Monica approached cautiously, her heels clicking against the pavement. Her eyes lingered on the knife but didn't near as she pulled the phone up to her ear. "How did this all happen?"

I straightened, brushing dust off my jacket. "You're welcome."

“For turning a quiet stakeout into an action movie?”

I smirked. “I did, didn’t I?”

She shook her head, exasperated, “You’re unbelievable.” But as her shoulders dropped I realized she was relieved too.

Before I could respond, a familiar voice cut in. “Nice work.”

I turned to see Luis leaning casually against a wall, in front of him were two men in dark suits. His arms were crossed, and a grin played on his face, but the presence of his security detail made the air feel heavier.

At least, that’s how it seemed to me. Monica let out a deep sigh as the men skillfully handled the knife and managed the crowd so effectively that she ended up hanging up on whoever she had been trying to call.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him.

“Just passing by,” he said, though the glint in his eye told me otherwise. “Good thing too—you almost looked like you needed backup.”

“I had it handled,” I said, though the words lacked conviction.

Luis greeted Monica with a smile and a quick hug. The shuffle of hurried footsteps and murmured questions signaled the arrival of reporters, cameras already filming. Monica’s shoulders tensed as she glanced at the growing crowd, her jaw tightening. By lunch, I had no doubt headlines would scream about the attack on U.N. advisors. She exhaled sharply, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I need a vacation,” she muttered, half to herself.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:25 am*

nine

- LUIS -

Mornings after a fight always felt surreal, like the world shouldn't move forward so easily. I sat at my kitchen table, staring at my untouched coffee as the early sunlight crept across the floor. The events of yesterday kept replaying in my head—the fight, the media frenzy, Raf, and Miss Monica May.

I checked my phone, scrolling through the news coverage. Headlines ranged from factual to sensational:

- Attack on U.N. Staff Sparks Security Concerns
- U.N. Advisor Monica May's Heroic Calm After Harassment
- Love and Loyalty? Speculations Surround U.N. Official's Personal Life

The last one made me grit my teeth. They didn't know her. Monica wasn't the type to engage in that type of thing. Still, the world loved stories, and people twisted things they saw. The thought of her being reduced to tabloid fodder made my stomach churn. Then again our names being mentioned at all could blow our cover... or glue it permanently as things were.

There would be worse things than being stuck with Monica. But there was only one spot by her side.

By the time I arrived at the U.N. office, the tension in the air was palpable. Staffers moved with purpose, clutching files and laptops, their conversations hushed but intense. I walked through the halls, nodding at the occasional familiar face.

Near the elevators, two junior staffers were talking just loud enough for me to overhear.

“She didn’t even flinch yesterday,” one said, her voice tinged with admiration.

“Hardly a surprise,” the other replied with a knowing smile. “But did you see how both of those guys looked at her? No wonder the press is eating it up.”

I clenched my jaw, forcing myself to keep walking. People loved to gossip. Still, their words lingered. Was it really that obvious, the way Raf and I hovered around her? Well, Rafael’s behavior was. But mine too?

Monica’s office door was slightly ajar when I walked by. Inside, she was seated at the head of a desk, surrounded by her team.

“No distractions, no leaks,” she was saying. “Security footage has already been submitted, but we’re not giving the press anything else to speculate on. We are here to do work, not be involved in online drama. Understood?”

The group murmured their agreement, shuffling to gather their materials before filing out. A staffer caught the door just as it was about to click shut and turned to me. “We’re finished if you want to go speak with her.”

I was committed now. “Thanks,” I replied, offering a friendly smile. As I stepped inside, I added, “You’re running a tight ship.”

Her head snapped up, and for a moment, surprise flickered across her face. She

composed herself, before speaking. “Luis. Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I wanted to check in,” I said, moving further into the room to sit across from her. “So yesterday was... a lot.”

She shrugged, picking up a stack of papers. “It’s part of the job.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s easy,” I said. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine,” she replied, almost distractedly. “Here I was wishing people would focus and not speculate on that murder, and now this has everyone’s attention. I guess you should be careful what you wish for.”

“Maybe,” I said, suddenly concerned about that backstory, “but that doesn’t mean you have to shoulder any of it alone.”

Her hands paused mid-motion, hovering over the papers. “I’m fine,” she said, though her voice lacked conviction.

“Monica,” I said gently, “I saw the way you handled everything yesterday. You don’t just manage the chaos—you become the calm in it. That’s a heavy burden to carry by yourself.”

She let out a dry laugh, shaking her head. “If I stop to think about it, the whole thing falls apart.”

“That’s not true,” I countered.

“Oh?”

“Well one,” I started, smiling softly, “I know it’s not because I do the same thing.

And two, I think you are even better at it than me.”

Her gaze met mine then, and for a brief moment, I thought I saw something crack. As if she might be about to confess something. But just as quickly, the walls went back up.

“Thank you,” she said, her tone polite but distant. “I do have everything under control.”

Before I could respond, her phone buzzed on the table. She glanced at the screen, her expression tightening. “I need to take this,” she said, already reaching for it.

I nodded, standing. “You know where to find me.”

She didn’t reply, her attention already on the call. As I stepped out of her office, the bureaucratic buzzing halls swallowed me. The world kept moving, and so must we.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I dialed a familiar number. It rang twice before a voice answered.

“Luis? Didn’t expect to hear from you so soon.”

“It’s about yesterday,” I said. “I need a full debrief on what the agency has on this.” There was a pause on the other end, before an objection came I continued. “Let’s just say I have a vested interest.”

The voice sighed. “I’ll send you what I can.”

Hanging up, I looked out the windows, scanning the street. Something about yesterday didn’t sit right with me. The attackers were sloppy, almost amateurish, but they’d had enough nerve to act in broad daylight. That kind of recklessness usually

meant one of two things: desperation or a distraction.

It was a scary day when you were rooting for desperation.

By late afternoon, the building had settled, the morning's buzz gave way to the steady hum of life as usual. Online, though, the topic had exploded. Alerts I'd set up for my name—rarely triggered and never without warning—now flooded my inbox.

There was even fan cams on social media. Most of them had Raf spliced together with dramatic pop music, making him look both heroic and slightly unhinged. He looked hotter for it. Unfortunately.

By lunchtime, I didn't dare step outside, and opted instead to order delivery. When the food arrived, I grabbed the bags and headed back up to Monica's office. "Bought extra," I said, holding up the bag like a peace offering. "Figured we're safer eating in."

"Safer?" She asked with a brow raised.

"I meant attention wise."

"Ah," she said and gestured to the chair on front of her. "Good point."

"Let me guess." She closed her laptop, leaning back in her chair. "You're here to check on me again?"

"Can you blame me?" I said, gesturing vaguely to my phone. "The internet isn't letting it go."

"It never does." For a moment, she didn't say anything else, her gaze drifting to the street outside. The faint sounds of the city filtered in—honking cars, distant voices,

the hum of a passing bus. Her fingers tapped absently on the table as if searching for a rhythm to match her thoughts. When she finally spoke, her voice was quieter. “Do you ever feel like you’re playing a role, and if you stop, even for a second, the whole world will realize?”

I frowned. “Sometimes. But that doesn’t mean you can’t take off the mask every now and then.”

She looked at me, her expression unreadable. “Do you?”

I didn’t have an answer for that.

It was past ten when I finally leaned back in my office chair, eyes tired from hours spent poring over reports that seemed more like attempts to bury the truth than anything useful.

Monica had left hours ago, but the memory of her lingering at the edge of my mind wouldn’t leave. Her words over lunch had stayed with me—fragments of something real, something beyond the usual surface.

The sound of a knock broke my concentration.

I looked up, half-expecting it to be one of the staff with another update, but instead, it was her.

Monica’s presence filled the doorway, a welcome contrast to the dimly lit room. She was dressed down now, her blazer gone, sleeves rolled up as if a document’s details literally had to be hammered out.

“Still here?” she asked, leaning against the doorframe.

I rubbed my face, tired but amused. “Was about to ask you the same thing.”

She smirked, stepping into the office with a fluid confidence. “Came to drag you out.”

I blinked in surprised. “Drag me out?”

She nodded, glancing around the room briefly before her eyes locked onto mine. “Yeah. We’ve both been here long enough to drive anyone insane. Let’s go get a drink.”

It wasn’t like her to step out of her carefully controlled routine, but I was too curious to question it. So, I smiled and pushed back my chair. “I’m not going to turn down an offer like that.”

She gave a small laugh, almost to herself. “Good. I was starting to think you might be afraid of having fun.”

“I have fun,” I said, grabbing my jacket and slinging it over my shoulder. “Just never at work so let’s quickly make our escape.”

Monica didn’t say much at first, the easy silence between us comfortable rather than awkward. She was different tonight—less guarded, less like the polished figure she usually portrayed.

We arrived at the bar after a short walk, a low-key place that seemed to welcome both casual conversations and deep thoughts. There was something cozy about it. The soft clink of glass, the low hum of conversation. I followed her to a quiet corner, and we both sat down.

A waitress came by shortly after, and Monica ordered a gin and tonic before turning

to me. “You?”

I hesitated for a moment. “Whiskey. Neat.”

Monica raised an eyebrow. “Another classic.”

I smirked. “I’m just a man of simple tastes.”

She chuckled, then leaned back in her chair. “I thought you’d be more of a beer guy.”

“Beer is for casual evenings,” I replied, my eyes meeting hers across the table. “This feels like a night for something a bit stronger.”

Her smile faltered just a fraction, as if something in the way I spoke registered deeply. But she didn’t linger on it. Instead, she took a sip of her water, her eyes never leaving mine.

“So,” she began, her voice soft but steady, “what’s really going on with you lately?”

“Me?” I stared at her for a moment, unsure how to answer. Part of me wanted to joke it off, but there was a certain weight in her eyes that made me want to be honest, or at least try. “What do you mean?”

Monica nodded. “I spent enough time with Rafael that he mentioned you a few times.”

“Yeah?” I let out a quiet laugh. “What that ass say?”

She looked at me, her lips curling slightly. “You two have an odd friendship.”

I shrugged, my gaze shifting to my glass.



Monica was silent for a moment, and when she spoke again, her voice was almost softer than usual. “Friends don’t have to keep secrets from each other.”

The words hit me harder than I expected. I met her gaze again, and for the first time, I noticed almost a similarity she usually kept hidden beneath layers of professionalism. There was a quiet sincerity in her eyes, something real that made the air between us charged.

“That what we are?” I knew I sounded defensive, but the question seemed to have an echo. And I absolutely knew when someone was digging for information and it never felt all that friendly.

Monica studied me for a second, her lips pressing into a tight line before she spoke again. “I think in our jobs, it’s less about keeping secrets. More so about knowing when to share them.”

The tension in the air shifted. It was subtle, but undeniable. Something unspoken between us seemed to crackle in that instant, a shift in the dynamic, a new understanding settling between us.

“To... not doing everything alone,” I said, my voice low but sincere as I held up my drink.

Monica hesitated only a moment before clinking her glass against mine. “To not doing everything alone.”

We both took a sip, the world outside momentarily forgotten along side each other’s company and the feeling that we weren’t just colleagues, weren’t just two people caught up in the grind. There was something more now—something tangible that I couldn’t quite define, but that I knew was growing between us.

I looked at her, and for a fleeting second, I knew she felt it too.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:25 am*

ten

- RAFAEL -

Normalcy. That's what this was supposed to be.

Back at my desk at NoxTech, the hum of servers and the faint buzz of fluorescent lights filled the air. There was a collection of camera feeds all pulled up on the computer screen, but I hadn't been able to focus on a single one. I was supposed to be checking the visitor logs, logging incident reports, and acting like I wasn't itching to be anywhere but here.

Anywhere Monica was.

I tapped my pen against the desk, the rhythm irritating enough to keep me grounded. The office buzzed around me, with coworkers casually discussing updates about schedules and software rollouts, but their voices felt distant. This was my normal, the life I'd been carefully balancing for years. But now it felt hollow, like a show I didn't want to watch anymore.

I leaned back in my chair, pulling out my phone. My handlers wouldn't like this, but I didn't care. The line rang twice before a clipped voice answered. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Thinking about a change," I said, my voice steady despite the storm brewing in my chest. "I preferred my lunch schedule last week."

There was a pause, then a dry chuckle. “An out? That’s unlike you. Please explain.”

I glanced around the office, making sure no one was close enough to overhear. “It’s the UN assignment. I think I’m more useful staying there.”

“Useful?” the voice echoed, clearly weighing the implications.

“There’s nothing left to learn here,” I added, though we both knew that was a lie. “People who post their every thought have no secrets.”

Another pause, longer this time. “Interesting. We’ve been considering increasing our presence in that space anyway. If you’re requesting a transfer, I’ll get back to you if approved.”

“Of course.”

Another pause, then a soft sigh. “This about a girl?”

“Should it not be?”

“No,” the voice replied, far too quickly. “This could work. You’ll get official confirmation within the hour. Make sure you don’t lose focus. The job must come first.”

“Always.”

No other words were exchanged before the line went dead. I stared at my phone, the weight of the decision settling over me. This wasn’t about loyalty, love, or even duty. It was about proximity—keeping her close, no matter the cost.

I finished my shift and then packed up before driving over to the U.N. headquarters.

The drive there gave me too much time to think. My choice hung over me like a fog, and no matter how I tried to frame it—as a strategic move, a logical step—I couldn't ignore the truth.

By the time I reached the building, the buzz of activity inside felt more urgent. The chaos held me and reminded me of why I was here.

After a week of being Monica's security, entering the briefing felt natural. I've been here plenty because of Luis, but with Monica, the reason was truly allowed for the first time.

As I approached the briefing room, Monica's voice carried through the slightly ajar door, steady and confident. Inside, she stood at the head of the table, her usual composure softened by a faint smile. Luis sat near her, leaning back in his chair with relaxed ease, arms draped across the armrests. The way he grinned, it was clear she'd just said something that had landed well.

Luis' gaze shifted and he straightened in his seat as he spotted me. The grin shifted into something sharper, as though he'd just found the perfect opening for a jab.

He pushed his chair back with deliberate slowness, rising to his feet. After adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves with measured precision. He stepped outside the room, closing the door fully before he spoke to me. "Good of you to join us," he said, his tone smooth but edged, like a blade hidden in silk.

"Wouldn't miss it," I replied.

He didn't respond, though the faintest hint of a smile tugged at his lips. "Thought you were back at your desk job. Couldn't stay away?"

I shrugged, keeping my tone light. "Turns out, security isn't as thrilling as playing

model U.N.”

“This isn’t a game.”

“All the more fun.”

Luis raised a hand, cutting off the back-and-forth before it could escalate. “Why are you really here?”

“We have a lead on a tech broker working with a splinter group those two trolls were a part of. They’re scheduled to attend a high-profile event tonight, and I got approved to be the extra eyes on the ground.”

“Why would they assign you?”

The door opened, cutting through the conversation as people began to file out of the meeting. Monica’s gaze shifted toward me, her voice cool but with an edge of something I couldn’t quite place. “Nice of you to make it on such short notice.”

Luis frowned, the tension in his jaw clear. “What’s happening?”

“I was looking to get more security, but turns out Rafael already had the clearance,” she replied without hesitation.

I shot Luis a smirk, unable to resist. “Don’t worry. I’ll let you carry my gear if you want to join us.”

He gave me a look that was half annoyed, half amused despite himself as he shook his head. “Why are you risking her like this?”

Monica nudged my shoulder lightly with hers, her smile mischievous. “I’ll be plenty

safe next to you two,” she said, her tone teasing as she glanced at the both of us. “Come on, it will be like a double date.”

Her words lingered in the air as I exchanged a look with Luis, both of us caught by the surprise. She was far too smart to not know what she was doing there.

The hum of the city grew louder as we approached the venue, a sleek high-rise hiding its secrets below the ground. The tech exchange was a clandestine event, exclusive to those who knew how to find it.

Despite the joking, we all entered separately, blending into the stream of sharply dressed attendees. The air buzzed with hushed conversations and the occasional flash of holographic displays showcasing gadgets most people couldn’t even dream up.

“Earpiece check,” Monica’s voice came through, steady and clear.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff,” I replied, scanning the room and thankfully finding her mostly standing alone. We had discussed playing spy in the car but it was clear it was just a game to her.

“Sorry, excuse me,” she chuckled.

The venue was sleek, with all reflective surfaces and subtle lighting. It was the kind of place where the line between legitimate business and what people thought business was meant to look like.

I spotted Luis across the room, moving toward the same area with his usual quiet confidence. We locked eyes briefly, and I couldn’t help but smirk. Let the competition begin.

In the center of the room, there was a large display playing a visual swirl of

technology talk and ego. Luis sidled up next to me, his voice low. “What do you think the big reveal tonight is going to be?”

I kept my eyes forward on the teaser trailer I had already seen at my old job. “Something pompous.”

Luis snorted. “I’m still hoping for something more... creative than usual.”

Before I could respond, I caught the movement of one of the two men we had been briefed about on the drive over. The nervous weave he did through the crowd lacked practice, and it was clear he was looking to find someone.

“Did you come with a date?” Luis asked.

I swore my heart stopped beating for a moment. He was so good at actual spy craft that I forget he picked words specifically to keep the ruse going among strangers. Wordlessly, I fumbled a loose gesture towards Monica.

“Ah, well that makes sense,” he added, “You two have a good night.”

With that Luis parted, keeping his distance but placed in the crowd as if planning never to lose sight of our new troll. I walked over to Monica and leaned in to whisper into her ear. “Remember his name is Kane, has a bad foot after literally shooting himself in it.”

Monica laughed as if I told her a joke, her arm lingering on my arm even as I stood back up straight.

The moment Kane realized he was being followed, chaos erupted. He bolted toward a back hallway, and without hesitation, Luis broke into a run.



By the sounds of it, I could only imagine how a chase took us through narrow corridors and up a staircase as the footsteps echoed from the confined space and into our ears.

“Maybe we should take things slow,” Monica whispered into my earpiece, her voice carefully casual, as though speaking directly to me, but the words were meant for Luis.

“We know what we are doing,” I replied with a wink, pulling out my phone as if to show her a funny video. As I held it up, the screen flickered to life, displaying a live feed of a camera pointed at the rooftop above us.

Kane was cornered, his breath ragged as he turned around. Luis moved first, his movements quick and calculated. Kane fought back, but it was sloppy, his desperation showing. There was a reason I always made Luis workout so hard. Just so when he got stubborn like this he could handle it.

Kane backed up against the low wall at the edge of the rooftop. His eyes darted around, weighing his options, but there was nowhere left to run.

Luis was already moving again, fluid, and calculated, every step purposeful. Without a second thought, he lunged, grabbing the man by the wrist and twisting it behind his back.

Kane glared over his shoulder with a keyboard warrior’s courage. “This isn’t over,” he spat despite it all.

Luis smiled, “It is for you.”

eleven

- LUIS -

The mid-afternoon lull was always deceptive. People moved with purpose, their conversations short and efficient, but the undercurrent of tension was always there. I had been reviewing a list of updated protocols for the third time, trying to convince myself I hadn't already memorized it when my phone buzzed on the desk beside me.

Monica: Can you meet me in the parking garage? Level C

Short, professional, and vague. Monica didn't pick random locations or send cryptic messages so there has to be a reason. Level C wasn't just any spot; people always grumbled about how that's where their car's radio would cut out. All that concrete made for an accidental signal blocker, and was the safest place to talk without prying ears. Whatever this was, it mattered.

I grabbed my jacket and moved quickly through the maze of offices and security checkpoints. The hum of conversation faded as I descended the stairwell, the rhythm of my boots on the concrete keeping me sharp.

When I stepped onto Level C, the dimly lit expanse of the parking garage stretched before me, quiet except for the faint buzz of fluorescent lights overhead. Monica stood near a central column, arms crossed, her phone held loosely in one hand. Even in the low light, her poise was striking, though the tension in her shoulders betrayed her.

“Luis,” she said as I approached, her voice low but steady. “Wasn’t sure if I missed your reply.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, scanning the space briefly before focusing on her.

She looked around, ensuring we were alone. “I needed somewhere secure to talk,” she said, calm but deliberate. “Somewhere without any interruptions.” She hesitated, just for a moment, before continuing. “I’ve been thinking about some things...”

The words hit like a shiver, rippling through me and making my pulse race faster. “What kind of things?” I asked, keeping my tone even.

Her eyes didn’t waver. “You’ve been here how long now? A year?”

“Just over,” I replied cautiously.

“And yet, you seem to handle situations that most people in your role wouldn’t even be trained for.” She tilted her head slightly, her voice sharpening just enough to feel like a scalpel. “You don’t flinch. You anticipate. You adapt in ways that aren’t just analytical. That’s not typical.”

I shrugged, forcing a casual tone. “You think I don’t take my job seriously?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” she countered. “I think you’re good at your job. But I also think there’s more to you than you let on.”

For a moment, only the faint rustle of the wind broke the silence. I could feel the weight of her expression, cutting and unyielding.

“You’ve got an active imagination.”

Her lips curved into a faint smile, but her eyes stayed steady. “That so?”

She shifted, the soft click of her heel breaking the silence. “Here’s the thing, Luis. I don’t need to know the details. But I do need to know I can trust you.”

Her comment hit harder than expected, settling in my chest like a weight. Trust wasn’t something Monica handed out lightly, and neither did I.

“You can,” I said, meeting her gaze head-on. “And I want to trust you too.”

“Don’t you?”

“What are you trying to say?”

Monica studied me for a moment longer, her face unreadable. Then, with a small nod, she relaxed slightly, though the tension in the air didn’t entirely dissipate. “Most people don’t have two jobs when they work somewhere like this,” she said, her voice softening just enough to feel like a shift in the tide.

She knew.

To some degree at least. She glanced at her phone, and my eyes followed to see she was checking the time before we caught each other’s gaze again. Her lips curled into a faint smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “One more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Rafael.”

The name was like a spark, lighting up the silence between us. I stiffened, but Monica’s conviction didn’t falter.

“What about him?” I asked, keeping my tone neutral.

Her smile widened. “You’re not as subtle as you think.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but she held up a hand. “Relax. I’m not judging you.” Her head tilted, studying me as if piecing together a puzzle. “I understand more than you realize.”

“How?”

Her hand came to rest on my chest, the touch meant to be friendly, but it sent a jolt through me, making me inhale sharply. I wasn’t sure if it was the weight of her hand or the precision of her words, but suddenly it felt like the ground beneath me was unsteady.

“I heard it,” Monica said softly, her voice barely above a whisper, “in the way you asked if he was with anyone.”

Her words settled between us like a carefully placed card in a house of glass. I couldn’t look at her at first, couldn’t meet the quiet certainty in her eyes. Instead, I glanced down, my focus zeroing in on the curve of her fingers against my chest, steady and unshaken.

Wordlessly, I lifted her hand in mine, the motion slow, deliberate. Her palm was warm against my skin, her pulse reliable in a way that made me feel anything but. My fingers curled around hers, holding her hand like it was fragile even though she wasn’t.

“Monica,” I started, my voice strained, thick with words I wasn’t sure I could ever say out loud.

She didn't pull her hand away, didn't move except to tilt her head slightly, her gaze soft but unyielding. "You don't have to explain anything to me," she said, her tone still so kind.

The air between us felt too thin, the weight of her words pressing down on me. Her hand lingered in mine, neither of us moving, as though any motion would shatter the precarious balance.

"You should be with me instead," I managed, though my voice betrayed me, cracking slightly under the pressure.

Monica smiled faintly, a hint of sadness tugging at the corners of her mouth.

My chest tightened the space between us shrinking even as I wanted to pull myself back. Her hand in mine was steady, and grounding, and it felt like if I let go I'd be completely undressed.

"You're too good at this," she said softly.

"At what?" I asked, with the best teasing tone I could muster.

"Whatever you call this," she said, squeezing my hand so subtly I easily could have missed it.

Her words cut through the silence like a blade, leaving me speechless. I looked at her then, really looked at her, and for a moment, I wondered if she could hear the pounding of my heart.

Before I could respond, a faint scuff against the concrete broke the stillness from the far end of the garage. The sound was small, but it carried in within the quiet moment.

Monica's head snapped toward the source, her posture rigid, her breath hitching just enough for me to notice. Instinct took over, and I stepped in front of her without thinking, my body blocking hers as I scanned the shadows ahead. My arm stretched back slightly, a silent barrier between her and whatever—or whoever—was out there.

“Stay here,” I said, my voice low but firm.

“Luis—”

“I've got this,” I said firmly, glancing over my shoulder. “Don't move.”

She hesitated, her phone clutched tightly in her hand, but she nodded.

I moved quickly but carefully, weaving through the rows of parked cars. The shadows stretched long under the dim fluorescent lights, every movement amplified by the eerie stillness. My pulse quickened, but my focus sharpened.

Then I saw him—a figure darting between two columns, heading for the stairwell.

“Hey!” I called, breaking into a sprint.

The man didn't hesitate, bolting for the exit as I closed the distance. He darted toward the elevator hallway, his footsteps frantic as he glanced over his shoulder, realizing I was closing in. The faint buzz of the garage lights hummed in the background, but the noise of our chase—his running and my pursuit filled the air.

As he reached the door to the elevators, his fingers just barely brushing the buttons, I knew there was no way one would arrive fast enough.

To my horror, however, an elevator started to open all on its own with a happy little ding before he vanished inside.

The scuffling from the elevator was all wrong. It wasn't a fight. It wasn't even a struggle. Rather a near comedic a waving of limbs that tried to retreat before the doors closed followed by a loud clang, and a yelp that sounded near slapstick.

I glanced at Monica, shifting my weight, and preparing for whatever the hell this was. The stairs would be our best bet, but then the elevator doors pinged open once more.

I took a half-step back, ready to protect her. The first thing that came out wasn't a man—it was a mess.

The black jacket and sneakers of the figure tumbled out of the elevator, arms flailing, legs twisting mid-fall as if they had no idea where they were going. The gun—yes, a gun—clattered across the floor with a ridiculous clink before sliding to another elevator door like it was trying to make a cleaner escape.

Once the man was on the ground. He rolled over like a flipped turtle, reaching for the weapon that was no longer attached to him.

I didn't know whether to laugh or shove him into a broom closet and wait for someone with cuffs. But I didn't have time for either.

The noise from earlier made sense now—it wasn't a scuffle or a struggle. It was a whole ass scene as Rafael walked out of the elevator with an air of confidence that made me want to groan in frustration.

The dark tones of his military camo clinging to his frame like he built his body around them. The jagged angles of the pattern only emphasized the broadness of his shoulders, the taper of his waist, and the way his every movement contained a muscle group only he could name.

His boots thudded softly against the floor, the polished leather catching just enough



light to make it clear he knew exactly how to make an entrance. Damn it. Why did he have to look like he'd just walked off the set of some over-the-top recruitment ad?

The cocky tilt of his head and the faint smirk tugging at his lips didn't help either. And I hated how my stomach tightened at the sight—two parts jealousy and one part the weak urge to drop to my knees.

He strolled forward with his usual nonchalance, his expression calm but full of purpose. His eyes flicked over to the tangled mess of a man and me, his gaze not quite surprised, but amused in that infuriatingly easy way he had.

Rafael reached forward and yanked the stranger upright, his grip firm as he steadied him, one hand wrapping around his wrist while the other grabbed his jacket and pushed him back against the wall of the elevator hallway.

“Who sent you?” Raf growled, his patience thinning.

The man's face was twisted in panic, his breath coming in quick, sharp bursts. “You don't know what you're involved in,” he rasped, eyes darting around like he was searching for an escape route.

“Try me,” he shot back, twisting the man's wrist until he grunted in pain.

“The fuck did you find out?” I said voice tinged with something playfully confused. “I thought you said you had security all yourself.”

“Maybe I just wanted an audience,” he muttered back without looking my way.

The man, still flailing to get free like he was stuck in an action movie blooper reel, gathered some semblance of resolve as he turned to face Rafael. “Fuck you, man.”

Rafael's smile only deepened. "Not interested, but I think we need to have a little chat." He slowly leaned in, his tone now deadly serious. "And this time, I'm not going to let you dance around it first."

I heard the sharp click of Monica's heels against the concrete as she took a cautious step forward. Glancing back, I gave her a quick nod, signaling it was safe to come over.

She hesitated for a moment longer, her gaze darting from Raf and me before she crossed the distance. When she reached my side, she didn't say anything. Instead, her hand slipped into mine. It wasn't just a ruse; but as if anchoring herself with the quiet reassurance.

I glanced over at her, searching her face. Her expression was calm, but her grip tightened slightly once more, and I realized she wanted the connection as much as I did.

"Are you okay?" she asked Raf, her voice spiking a bit from the shock of everything.

"Yeah," Rafael nodded, "Sorry about the security breach."

"Security breach?" she laughed, raising an eyebrow. "It was a hell of a way to make an entrance."

He grinned over at her. "Seriously you two, go. I'll explain later tonight."

"Let's go," I murmured, giving her hand a subtle tug. And to my surprise, she nodded and soon her confidence pulled me along.

twelve

- MONICA -

The hum of the car's engine filled the silence as I guided it onto the highway, the weight of the last few hours pressing down on me like a thick fog. The headlights cut through the darkness, illuminating the empty road ahead. I'd been driving for a while now. My hands still gripped the steering wheel tightly, though I wasn't sure if I was holding the car steady or trying to steady myself.

All I knew was that this car had been cleared of any bugs or danger earlier today. Rafael had insisted. He did a sweep, going over a checklist of safety measures, as I nodded along thinking I understood at the time. There was something about the simplicity of driving that calmed me, even when the world outside felt like it was unraveling.

In the passenger seat, Luis was quiet, his profile illuminated by the faint glow of the dashboard. He watched the road, though I could feel his attention flickering toward me occasionally, as if he were trying to read my thoughts.

"Where should we be headed?" I asked.

Luis hesitated, his gaze lingering on the road before he answered. "There's a house outside the city. It's... unofficial. But it's safe."

I glanced at him, arching an eyebrow. "Unofficial?"

“It’s a place we use sometimes. Off the grid,” he explained, his tone careful. “No one knows about it except a handful of people.”

“And you’re one of them,” I said, more of a statement than a question.

He nodded.

I didn’t press further, since he had sat silently when I needed a moment to process the past week. Still, my mind started dissecting his words. The way he phrased it, the slight shift in his tone—it all felt calculated. But then again, so did most things Luis said or did. Not inherently a con, but nuanced.

The house came into view twenty minutes later, tucked behind a line of tall trees. It was modest, at least from the outside—a single-story structure with clean lines and large windows that reflected the moonlight. Wealth understated.

I parked the car in the driveway, cutting the engine. Luis was out before I could say anything, scanning the area like he was waiting for something to jump out of the shadows.

“Should I be worried?” I said, stepping out of the car.

He glanced at me, the faintest hint of a smile tugging at his lips. “No, our neighbor lets their cat roam outside. I try to feed it when I see her.”

It was such a casually soft answer that I followed him inside, the door creaking slightly as we entered. The interior was just as understated as the exterior—functional yet elegant. Minimalist furniture, soft lighting, and a few tasteful artworks showing the coast. It felt like a place designed to disappear into, not to stand out.

Luis immediately went to check the locks, his movements efficient, and precise. I

watched him for a moment, the way his shoulders stayed tense even when there was no visible threat. He moved like someone who couldn't trust the quiet.

"Everything's secure," he said, turning back to me. "No need to worry any more than you are."

"Good to know," I said, though my tone was more nervous than I intended.

The quiet settled over us again as we moved to the living room. Luis busied himself with the fireplace, stacking wood and kindling with practiced ease. I sat on the edge of the sofa, my eyes flicking to the shadows that played across the walls.

"Tea?" Luis asked suddenly, glancing over his shoulder.

"Sure," I said, though I wasn't sure I'd drink it.

He disappeared into the kitchen, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

It wasn't the first time I'd found myself in the middle of an unspoken tug-of-war between Luis and Rafael. They both had a way of commanding attention, of drawing people into their orbit, though in completely different ways. Luis was precise, methodical, and steady. Rafael was charm and chaos, a storm in a suit.

And then there was me—a queen at the center of their elaborate game full of allure, tension, and the unspoken intensity of every calculated move they made.

I could feel it, the way they circled each other under the guise of vying for my attention. It was almost amusing, watching two men who were so clearly playing a deeper game.

Because it wasn't about me.

Not really.

Luis returned with two mugs, setting one in front of me before taking a seat across the room. His movements were deliberate, as always, but there was a hint of something else tonight. He seemed... distracted.

“Thank you,” I said, wrapping my hands around the mug.

He nodded, his eyes meeting mine briefly before looking away. “This place is my parents’.”

We sat in silence, the crackle of the fire filling the space between us. “Oh,” I said as I took a sip of the tea, letting the warmth of both settle in my chest.

“Can I ask you something?” I said finally.

Luis looked up, his expression guarded but curious. “Sure.”

“Why do you and Rafael act like you’re on opposite sides when you’re clearly not?”

He froze, his hand tightening around the mug. For a moment, I thought he wasn’t going to answer.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said carefully.

I tilted my head, studying him. “You do. You two... It’s like you’re constantly trying to outdo each other, but when it matters, you’re on the same page. It’s not exactly normal.”

“It’s complicated,” Luis exhaled slowly, his shoulders relaxing just slightly. “Are men these days ever normal?”

“Not in my experience,” I replied, jokingly but with just enough edge to make my point.

He didn’t elaborate, nor did I push. Instead, I let the silence return, filling the room like a weighted blanket. It was nice. I could imagine the exchange being filled with anything I wanted.

As I watched the firelight, I thought about Luis and Rafael—the way they vied for my attention with quiet intensity, yet always moved in unison when it truly mattered. If you looked closely enough, the truth was as clear as the heat radiating from the flames.

They weren’t rivals.

They were magnets.

And me? I was just the thing between them—the excuse they used to stay close without having to admit why.

It wasn’t the first time I’d found myself in this position. Men saw what they wanted to see. They assumed, projected, and convinced themselves of things that weren’t true. It was easier to let them think I was part of their game than to explain the truth.

The truth was simpler.

I wasn’t interested in men.

But I was captivated by the way these two were drawn to each other. There was a gravity to it. And I was the star in between.

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway pulled me from my thoughts. I stood,

moving to the window just as the headlights cut through the trees.

Rafael stepped out, his movements unhurried, but there was something about his posture that set me on edge. He wasn't his usual self, all charm and bravado. Tonight, his confidence was more muted.

I opened the door before he could knock.

"Late night," I said, leaning against the frame.

He gave me a faint smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Thought I'd stop by. Luis here?"

"Living room."

Rafael stepped inside, his presence filling the quiet space. The warmth of the firelight flickered across his face as he glanced around. He looked like he belonged in a place like this, his sharp features softened by the golden glow, his tailored coat draped perfectly on his broad shoulders.

"I'm sure Luis will be right back," I added.

"I figured," Rafael replied, but he didn't move to find him. Instead, his gaze settled on me, his expression unusually serious. "I'm sorry about this all."

I tilted my head, studying him. "Whatever this all is."

From the hallway, I heard the faint creak of a floorboard. Luis appeared a moment later. "Hey, what did you find out?" he asked Rafael, utterly unsurprised he was here. He must be one of the few Luis shared this address with.



“It’s not what you’d expect,” Rafael started, “They’re using the CEO’s followers as patsies—stirring them up to harass women and anyone else whose policies they don’t like, all while keeping their own hands clean.”

“Man,” I scoffed, “he sure has a lot of friends.”

Rafael shook his head. “No, they aren’t his friends. That would be easier to track. Even calling them fans could oversell it depending. My former boss is offering a million-dollar reward for the best viral moment, and unfortunately, you were tweeted about at a very inopportune time.”

“It’s not just personal?” Luis asked.

“There’s a group in L.A. that got arrested for an assumed bomb threat when they projected a ‘404 brIDGE NOT FOUND — get ready to watch the internet implode’ across the Golden Gate.”

“Are you telling me they got arrested for literally trolling a bridge?” I said utterly flabbergasted, “As a viral stunt?”

Rafael’s smirk faltered. “Yeah, well, the line between a clever stunt and a crime has gotten blurry.”

The tension in the room thickened, the air charged with the kind of rivalry that was as much unspoken as it was open competition. I could see it in the way Luis held his ground, the way Rafael’s all-knowing smirk softened just slightly when their eyes met.

I cleared my throat, breaking the moment. “If you two are done staring each other down, I’d like to know how we’re going to handle this.”

Rafael looked over at me. “Simple,” he said, his voice as calm as ever, though something dangerous flickered in his eyes. “We just keep moving. Be the more entertaining chaos that makes things interesting.” He glanced over at Luis, who was still tense and shrugged. “It will throw enough noise into the system, expose anyone still lurking, and the internet will do what it does best and move on to another trend soon enough.”

Luis scowled, clearly uncomfortable with the lack of a more structured plan. “This isn’t a prank. We’re dealing with real people here. Who wants to be the next trend? Who needed to be noticed like that?”

Rafael leaned back against the kitchen counter, unfazed. “Being noticed isn’t exclusively a bad thing. The more they try to figure us out, the bigger we get. The people we’re dealing with—tech billionaires and their followers who think they can 3D chess the whole world. They want the spotlight, the drama. So we give it to them. But this time, we’re the ones on top, not in the middle of it. Surely the U.N. is the one with the power anyway?”

Luis’ jaw clenched, frustration bubbling to the surface. “Why do you think we’ll stay on top of this ‘drama’ rather than getting buried under it?”

“We’ll be ready,” Rafael replied, his smirk returning as she spoke to us both. “Don’t want more than just a paycheck? Let’s start breaking their game with some serious noise. When it all goes sideways, we’ll ride to the top together.”

“Together?” Luis echoed, though his tone carried its own weight.

I watched the two of them, caught in the middle of something larger than any of us. They were both too proud to admit what was obvious, too stubborn to acknowledge the undercurrent that tied them together.

And me? I was just the audience to their game. But I could have my own part to play.

I smiled faintly, extending my hand between them as if calling for a huddle. “Then I suggest we start planning. Because if we’re pawns, we’d better learn how to play like we’re three queens.”

thirteen

- RAFAEL -

A safe house was meant to be a place to regroup. A quiet haven to think, plan, and reset. Here and tonight though, it was something much more.

I remember walking into this house for the first time, the way it felt impossibly warm and lived-in. There was a quiet beauty in the mismatched furniture, the family photographs lining the walls, and the way the light hit the kitchen tiles in the late afternoon. It wasn't extravagant or polished like the places I'd grown up in—it was real.

And Luis belonged here, seamlessly woven into the warmth and quiet beauty of the house like he was part of its very foundation—a steady, grounding presence that continued to exist amid the world's nonsense.

He was so different back then, or maybe I just saw him differently. He wasn't the man who could command a room with a glance, or make me feel like I had to prove myself every time we spoke. He was just Luis—fierce and funny, maybe a little awkward in a way that made him all the more endearing. I'd followed him into this house like it was the most natural thing in the world, but the moment we'd stepped inside, I realized I'd been holding my breath the entire time.

I remembered how he'd moved through the space back then, so completely at ease, before the world taught him to always keep a defensive front. In high school, he'd drop onto the worn living room couch with his legs casually crossed and tucked

close, a picture of effortless comfort. I remembered the way he'd rummage through the kitchen for snacks, his shirt lifting just enough to reveal a glimpse of his stomach—and the strange, unshakable ache it caused in my chest. A secret I wasn't even ready to name. It wasn't just that I wanted his home life—I wanted to be near him always, or maybe I wanted to know what it felt like to have someone look at me the way I couldn't stop looking at him.

It was here, in this house, that I'd first realized that liking men wasn't some distant, abstract idea. It was the way my throat tightened when Luis smiled at me from across the room, how my skin burned when his shoulder brushed against mine as he leaned past me to grab the remote. It was how his laugh stayed with me long after I'd left, echoing in the corners of my mind like a song I couldn't stop replaying.

I didn't know what to do with those feelings back then. I hadn't been ready to admit what they meant, let alone what I wanted. So, I buried them, like I buried so many other parts of myself, and told myself that whatever I felt for Luis was just... unimportant.

The world wanted men to compete against each other. So we did. But standing here again, surrounded by the same walls, the same quiet warmth, I couldn't pretend those memories didn't exist. I couldn't pretend that this dangerous game we were playing hadn't brought all of it rushing back, sharper and more undeniable than ever. The air felt heavier, the silence more intimate, like the house itself remembered what I was too afraid to admit.

I leaned against the edge of the kitchen counter. Across the room, Luis sat rigid on the sofa, his arms crossed, his sharp gaze fixed somewhere out from the patio door. Monica stood near the fire, her posture as calm and composed as always, but even she couldn't hide the tension in her shoulders.

The three of us lingered like wolves in a too-small den, each watching, waiting, and

bracing for the next move.

“Are we going to sit here all night pretending there’s no plan?” I said, breaking the silence.

Luis’ jaw tightened, and he finally turned his eyes on me. “A plan would be a lot easier to come by if someone didn’t treat this like a game.”

I smirked, taking a slow sip from my mug. “Who says I’m not playing to win?”

Monica sighed, stepping between us like a referee who had grown tired of this fight. “Enough,” she said sharply. “We’re not getting anywhere with this.”

“Tell that to him,” Luis muttered.

“Tell that to yourself,” I shot back, the words sharper than I intended.

The problem wasn’t just that Luis and I couldn’t agree. It was that I still couldn’t stop watching him, couldn’t stop gauging his every move, every expression. He was the only person I’d ever met who could make me feel like I was playing catch-up, and I hated it.

Except I didn’t.

Because as much as I wanted to outmaneuver him, I also wanted to see if we could move in sync instead of always circling each other. Come together instead of just mirroring each other’s machismo.

It was maddening.

And Monica, of course, saw right through it.

“Are you two done staring each other down?” she asked, her tone laced with exasperation. “Or do I need to lock you in a room until you figure out whatever this is?”

Luis stiffened, his eyes flicking to her, then back to me. “Whatever this is,” he repeated, his tone icy.

I raised an eyebrow but didn’t respond. Instead, I crossed the room to the small table where my laptop sat. “Let me show you everything my team collected so far.”

We gathered around the table, and the tension between us was redirected. On the screen was a grainy video of security footage. The time stamp was recent, no more than a few hours old.

“That’s one of the CEO’s associates,” Monica said, pointing to a man in a sharp suit stepping out of a car. He was flanked by two others. They were obscure podcast hosts until the CEO shined a light onto them.

“Where was this?” Luis asked, leaning closer.

“An event space downtown,” I replied. “They’re hosting a private tech summit tomorrow. Invite-only. And rumor has it, they’re bringing in all the trolls to maximize the online reach.”

“In hopes of virality?” Luis asked, his voice low.

“More like continued harassment campaigns,” Monica grumbled.

I leaned back, crossing my arms. “So we crash the summit, make our own scene. Force their hand.”

“Force their hand?” Luis shook his head. “If we go in without a plan, we’ll... blow everything.”

“Since when do you play it safe?” I asked, my tone challenging.

“Since I realized the stakes are higher than your ego,” he shot back.

Monica’s voice cut through the brewing argument. “We can do this, but we gotta do this smart. Less improvising, less unnecessary risks.” She looked at both of us, her gaze sharp enough to cut glass. “Can we agree to be a trio?”

Luis nodded, though the tension in his jaw remained. I gave a mock salute, earning an eye roll and smile from Monica.

As the night wore on, the plan began to take shape. I would secure the logistics—credentials, entry points, and escape routes. Luis and Monica would be the boots on the ground, one blending into the crowd while gathering intel as the other makes sure no incel gets too close.

It was a solid plan. Practical, efficient.

And yet, I couldn’t shake the feeling that it wasn’t enough. Did it have enough pizzazz? If I could reach back in time and ask Luis from high school, he’d know exactly. Nowadays, I can only think about looking cool in a fight.

After an hour or two, Monica retired to one of the bedrooms and Luis was double-checking the locks for what had to be the third time, I found myself lingering by the fireplace. The flames cast flickering shadows across the room, their warmth doing little to chase away the uneasethat had settledin my chest.

I didn’t hear Luis approach, but I felt his presence before I saw him.



“You’ve been pretty talkative tonight,” he said, his tone almost curious.

“Don’t get used to it,” I replied, glancing over my shoulder.

He didn’t laugh, but the faintest hint of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. It was gone as quickly as it appeared, replaced by the stoic mask he always wore.

“Do you ever get tired of it?” I asked suddenly.

“Tired of what?”

“This,” I said, gesturing vaguely. “The games, the plans, the constant need to be three steps ahead.”

Luis hesitated, his gaze dropping to the fire. “This is what it means to be an adult,” he said quietly. “We have a country, and Monica to protect now.”

I nodded, his words settling in the space between us. “I know.”

For a moment, we stood there in silence, the crackle of the fire the only sound.

The quiet was broken by the faint buzz of my phone. I pulled it from my pocket, frowning as I read the message.

“What is it?” Luis asked, his tone sharp.

“It’s from Monica,” I said, holding up the screen so he could see. “She says no fighting.”

His gaze flicked toward the closed door of her room. “She knows us too well.”

“She probably wanted to give us a chance to stop glaring at each other like we’re in a schoolyard fight,” I said with a smirk.

“I don’t think that’s it.” Luis’ eyes narrowed, and I braced myself for a sharp retort, but instead, he surprised me. “But maybe she’s right. Maybe we do need to figure out... whatever this is. ”

He said it so quietly I almost missed it, his voice blending with the fire’s crackle. For a moment, it felt like the room stilled, like the weight of his words pressed against me, daring me to answer.

I tilted my head, studying him in the flickering light. The fire cast sharp shadows across his face, softening the edges of his usual stoicism, making him seem... younger. More vulnerable.

“You’re the one who keeps making it a fight,” I said, though my voice lacked its usual bite.

Luis crossed his arms again. “I don’t know how else to be with you,” he admitted, and the honesty in his words hit me like a punch.

I wanted to laugh it off, to say something snarky, but the look in his eyes stopped me. It was raw, unguarded, and it made my chest ache in a way I hadn’t felt often since the first time I’d been in this house all those years ago.

“Maybe we don’t have to fight,” I said, my voice quieter now. “Maybe we just... exist. Together. No games, no plans, no three steps ahead.”

His eyes searched my face like he was trying to figure out if I was serious. For a moment, I thought he might say something, but instead, he let out a long breath and shook his head.

“Not today,” he said, voice steady once more. “And let’s get through tomorrow.”

I nodded, though I wasn’t sure what I was even agreeing to anymore. If nothing else, I could make Monica happy by not fighting. So I turned back to the fire, my mind spinning with everything now half said. The flames flickered, casting light and shadow across the room, and I thought about how much easier it was to fight than to feel.

fourteen

- LUIS -

Coming home was meant to feel secure—a place to steady yourself. But as I stood in the quiet kitchen nursing a cup of black coffee, every muscle in my body tensed, waiting for a hit that hadn't come yet. The space felt hollow like it wasn't doing its job anymore. Maybe it wasn't the walls—it was me.

Either of us could have accessed a state-backed safe house—not my family home. But that would have ruined the ruse that I was risking my job for a girl. Jobs, really, for a chance at a 'fling' with a coworker.

The early morning light bled through the blinds, thin and gray, while the muffled sound of Rafael's voice filtered in from the next room. He and Monica were already going over the plan, their words too low for me to catch specifics. Rafael, as usual, had been up before any of us, securing logistics like it was the most natural thing in the world. Tickets, cover IDs, new earpiece comms—everything we'd need for the summit had been secured hours ago.

And he acted like it was no big deal.

I pressed my mug to my lips, letting the bitterness ground me.

“You going to sit there brooding all morning?”

Rafael's voice cut through the quiet like a blade. I turned to find him leaning in the

archway, that familiar smirk curving his mouth. He looked irritatingly put-together for someone who'd probably slept less than I had—crisp shirt, sharp lines—like he didn't even need sleep to be beautiful.

“Didn't realize I was on a schedule,” I muttered.

“You're not.” He shrugged, stepping into the kitchen with that easy, arrogant grace of his. “But you'll want your head on straight today.”

I didn't need the reminder. The summit wasn't some backroom deal or sloppy troll operation—it was a showcase of power. And behind all the glitter and luxury would be NoxTech's CEO and his orbit of loyal followers—Rafael's old boss.

A part of me had wondered if that bothered him, if he felt any weight at the idea of running headlong into the belly of the beast. As if we weren't already there. But if it did, he didn't show it. He never did.

“You don't have to babysit me,” I said.

Rafael tilted his head, his smirk softening slightly. “That's not what this is.”

And maybe it wasn't.

Before I could reply, Monica stepped into the kitchen, heels clicking softly against the floor. “Ready to move,” she said briskly, her eyes sharp as she looked at the two of us. “You good to go boys?”

“Always,” Rafael replied smoothly, though I caught the faint tension in his jaw.

“Good.” Monica turned to me, giving me a small nod. “Let's go.”

The drive to the summit was quiet, the weight of what we were walking into heavy between us. It was far, and we hit traffic so much of our day was spent simply getting there. Monica scrolled through files on her phone, double-checking what Rafael had sent before she checked her makeup. It must be extra hard to be policed like that as a woman.

I gripped the wheel, my eyes quickly returning to the empty road ahead.

“You’re quiet,” she called over from the passenger seat.

“Just focused.”

Her gaze flicked toward me, too knowing. “Rafael seems pretty confident.”

“Rafael’s always confident,” I muttered, maybe too sharply.

Monica hummed under her breath, unconvinced. She glanced back into the backseat where Rafael finally fell asleep while we drove.

I didn’t say anything and didn’t look. That was the problem, wasn’t it? Rafael always trusted me to do my job, and I trusted him to do this. It would’ve been easier if we didn’t.

The summit was housed in a sleek, gleaming venue—an expanse of marble floors, soaring glass windows, and the hum of wealth reverberating through every inch of space. The kind of place where everything was expensive, everyone was important, and the line between friend and predator was razor-thin.

Monica walked in like she owned the room, her head high, every movement deliberate. I stayed close, blending in without looking like I was trying. It had never been easier since following her.

Rafael's voice buzzed faintly in my ear through the comms.

"Status check?" he asked.

"Fancy place," I murmured under my breath, my gaze scanning the crowd.

The people here were everything I'd expected—tech moguls, political influencers, wannabe entrepreneurs who didn't pull strings, they wove entire webs of connections. But beneath the luxury and polish, there was something darker. No one was here out of the kindness of their social hearts. They were here to climb the ranks of attention. I could feel their gazes sweeping the room, lingering just a little too long on certain faces.

Just like hyenas, their gazes darted around the room, searching for the next meal to rip apart. Hungry for blood, chaos, and the thrill of watching someone else fall for their entertainment.

We moved deeper into the crowd, stopping near a table that displayed the latest innovations in surveillance technology—sleek drones, facial recognition tools, things that made my stomach twist.

"Luis," Rafael's voice came through my earpiece again, steady but sharper this time. "Two men, ten o'clock. They're watching Monica."

I turned slightly, spotting them near the far edge of the room—two men in tech bro casual, their focus zeroed in on her.

Monica didn't look up from the display. "Let them look. They're here to show off just as much as we are."

She wasn't wrong, but something felt off. The trolls weren't just watching—they

were waiting. For what, I didn't know. Maybe for us to stumble.

I kept close to Monica, close enough that anyone watching would think twice before approaching her. My hand hovered near the small of her back, protectively guiding her through crowds as we moved through the room.

This kind of quiet possessiveness wasn't entirely an act anymore. It was the way the light caught the edge of her sharp, focused expression, the way her confidence carved a path through the crowd that made me want to shield her from anyone who dared look too long. Not because she was simply beautiful, but because she cared deeply. How she had the courage to risk herself, and the cushy, important-sounding job, just so the truth could be flushed out.

Thankfully, or maybe horrifically, it didn't take long to find what we were looking for. Near the back of the hall, was a wall of screens with a single open laptop in the middle. Each display had a list of names scrolling too quickly for anyone to catch them all in a single go.

Monica and I stepped closer, pretending to admire the set of semi-holographic screens.

"Is this..." she started to ask under her breath, "their targeted harassment list?"

I caught it then—a photo of Monica, her name and job title highlighted in red before the screen flashed to someone else.

My stomach dropped. "Seems so," I murmured.

Monica's expression didn't falter, but I saw her shoulders tense. "Okay," she breathed out, "we knew I was on that already."



The endless scrolling text starts to remind me of when I would do a lazy Control F search through bloated government documents. Words flashing too quickly to grab, like someone trying to hide the truth in plain sight. Only here, the stakes were sharper, each name a potential target to dogpile on. No, this search had to be more than simply picking a target to play with...

“They’re setting people up for something bigger,” I said, my voice low.

Before she could respond, Rafael’s voice cut in sharply through the comms. “Luis, Monica—move. Now .”

“What is it?” Monica asked quietly.

“Too much chatter. You’ve been made.”

We moved fast, slipping through the crowd toward the west door. I could feel the tension in the air, the subtle shift as the crowd’s attention. I didn’t look back, but I knew someone was following.

“Left hallway,” Rafael said, guiding us through the earpiece. “There’s a service exit two floors down.”

Monica stayed close, her movements frantic but focused. I took the lead, every muscle in my body braced for the fight I knew was coming.

“Luis, stay sharp,” Rafael said, his voice quieter now. “I can’t see ahead of you currently.”

“I’m fine,” I replied, though my pulse pounded in my ears.

“You always are,” he said softly.

We hit the hallway just as two men turned the corner in front of us. For a split second, everything slowed—Monica jumped back, the men’s eyes widened, and I moved before they could.

I surged forward, slamming one of the men into the wall. The other reached for something—probably a weapon—but Monica was faster, grabbing a fire extinguisher and swinging it into his side.

“Nice!” I shouted, pulling her toward the stairwell. “Keep moving!”

We hit the stairs again running, Rafael’s voice guiding us step by step. By the time we reached the service exit, the pounding of feet echoed behind us, too close for comfort.

Monica shoved the door open, and the cold night air hit me like a slap. We sprinted into the empty lot outside, gravel crunching beneath our feet.

“Car’s to your left,” Rafael said. “Back seat. Hurry.”

We didn’t stop until we were in the back. Raf threw the car into drive as we sped away from the building. The silence in the car was heavy, both of us catching our breath.

“They’re not just randomly harassing people,” Monica said finally, her voice steady despite everything. “What are they orchestrating and why the continued focus on me?”

“They’re setting you up to take a fall. Remember that murder in the news? Piece by piece they are finding the perfect scapegoat.” he added, as I thought back to what we’d witnessed. “And the program mathematically picked it to be you.”

“Why me?” As she repeated those words her voice wavered, and for the first time that calm professional veneer fully cracked. “Because I just moved into town?”

Rafael ventured a glance into the backseat. “It’s not just about your job,” he said, his voice quick but more hushed than usual. “One of your exs got dragged into it first. The connection is weak. But she tweeted angrily at the murder victim before hand. The internet sleuths combed all of her accounts and found a photo of you two together on vacation.”

She ?

Monica gestured vaguely, her frustration rising to the point where she was at an utter loss of words. “That isn’t—,” she started to say but with Raf’s eyes back on the road she merely slumped back in her seat. “Fuck!”

A strange stillness washed over me, as if everything had frozen in that moment. Raf had said it so casually, but the realization that she had a girlfriend...

Everything made sense now. The way she hadn’t judged me, the understanding in her eyes. She knew. Of course, she knew.

We weren't so different after all. We held close the exact same secret.

And for the first time, I wasn’t sure if we’d ever catch up to the pieces that had been set into motion. But one thing was certain—whatever happened next, we weren’t getting out of this clean.

fifteen

- RAFAEL -

We'd been holed up in a nondescript storage facility—one of those cold, utilitarian spaces meant for holding what people didn't want seen, not suited for proper hiding. It belonged to some NGO Monica had ties to, the kind of connection that spoke to her quiet authority, her ability to slip seamlessly into any situation and make it work. She was too good for a place like this.

The concrete walls felt oppressive, the flickering overhead light casting long, restless shadows that danced with every movement. It wasn't glamorous or comfortable, but there was something about the rawness of the space, the unpolished edges, that made the tension all the more palpable. Every breath felt heavier, every glance more charged, as if the warehouse stripped back every thought until I was left with only one: I could see Luis here.

I could picture him moving through the halls like it was just some paperwork he had to sort through. His sharp edges and restless energy matched the roughness of the space. He'd lean back against the cold concrete, arms crossed, eyes daring me to step closer, to break the unspoken rule we'd both clung to for so long. There was something so dangerous in the thought—something that pressed against my chest, making the air feel thinner. If we gave in, especially in a place like this, it wouldn't be gentle. It would be like this place: raw, half-ignored, and locked away from the rest of your life. The kind of place that stripped everything down to its essentials and the truths you couldn't hide from.

Over our heads, the hum of flickering fluorescent lights and the smell of dust filled the air, and for the first time in days, I allowed myself to let the stillness settle around me. There was no luxury here. No polished marble floors or glitzy power brokers to hide behind. This was about survival.

And we needed to survive.

Monica was at the far end of the unit, making a phone call, while Luis paced near the exit, his eyes scanning the street outside. His restlessness had become my own. We were running out of time. But I didn't know if it was from the dangers outside or the ones within. Because there was something else now simmering unspoken but undeniable. We both felt it. The way we couldn't stop watching each other, the tension growing every time our eyes met.

This wasn't just the competition for a girl anymore. It was something more complicated. Something that was becoming harder to ignore.

I opted to watch Monica for a moment—her concentration unwavering as she read off her phone. She was calm, always calm, but I could see the faintest tension in her posture. She knew what we were up against. She knew the stakes were rising.

“Rafael,” she said, breaking my thoughts. “We need to talk.”

I walked over to where she was standing. “About what?” I asked, my gaze still flicking toward Luis.

“I’m officially expected to turn myself in as a... suspected murder suspect now. Told to turn myself in for questioning by the end of the week,” Monica said, tapping the screen to bring up a local news article about it. “My boss thinks an official recall from work might come soon.”

“He can’t think you actually did it, does he?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head as she secured her phone away. “That’s why a recall might be sent quickly.”

I nodded, already processing the information. “We’ll adjust. We always do.”

“We could leave the city,” Luis said, stepping toward us. “Call in, get to an actually safe location where we can think, reset. Stop playing their game since their way makes us sitting ducks.”

“At least we know their true game now,” Monica said with enough grace it defused a bomb I hadn’t even noticed we neared.

This wasn’t a bad idea. I wasn’t exactly in love with calling into our handlers again, but the bigger question was where we’d go next. We had options, but all of them involved leaving behind any pretense of normalcy.

Monica looked between us, her eyes calculating. “Where do we go? We can’t just disappear into thin air.”

Luis smiled. “We can pull it off.”

“We?”

Luis lifted his phone, the glow catching the lines of his face as if to remind me that the fragile quiet of just the three of us wasn’t meant to last—that the outside world could pull us all apart with a single call.

He stepped a few paces away, his voice low as he placed the call. While Monica and I stayed by the battered metal desk, surrounded by shelves crammed with mismatched

boxes labeled in bold black marker—"medical kits", "water filtration", "disaster relief". The irony wasn't lost on me. We were standing amid supplies meant to keep people safe, yet safety felt like a distant dream.

Luis' voice cut through the stillness, steady but clipped. "I need an update on the situation." He paused, listening, and I could see the faint twitch in his fingers where they rested on the edge of a shelf.

The reply was inaudible, but whatever they said made his posture straighten, and his shoulders stiffening as though bracing for impact. "I'm not done here," Luis said, his tone firm. "If that is what you think is best." Another pause, longer this time. The faint hum of distant traffic outside was the only sound filling the silence between his words.

Monica crossed her arms, her brow furrowing as she glanced at me, but I shook my head. I couldn't hear the other side of the conversation either.

Luis' next words came quieter, but there was a sharpening edge to them. "Who's handling the local case?" His question hung in the air like a weight, heavy and foreboding.

Another pause, and then I saw it—the slight widening of his eyes, the way his hand tightened around the phone like it might shatter. "Detective Rourke?" he repeated, the name rolling off his tongue with the kind of restrained fury that made my pulse quicken.

Luis' voice dropped lower, but the steel in it was impossible for me to miss. "Okay, thanks. We will come in," he said, each word covered with a silkiness I could never muster.

He tossed the phone on the shelf, his movements controlled but radiating frustration.

He returned to face us, his jaw tight. "Detective Rourke," he said, his voice flat. "I saw him at the summit. He just as easily could have been framed, but is choosing to aid this mess."

Monica's eyes widened, but she didn't say anything, waiting for him to continue.

"They want us to turn ourselves in too?" I asked.

His gaze flicked to mine, pointed and furious. "Just Monica and I."

The realization hit me like a punch to the gut. "No. You two are not submitting to the police," I said, my voice low but absolute.

Luis didn't reply, but the look in his eyes said he agreed. The air in the room felt heavier, the oppressive weight of the situation settling over all of us. "We can't stay here," he said finally.

Monica nodded. "Let's get moving."

I snatched the nearest duffel bag, my heart racing as I hurriedly stuffed whatever we might need, then added a few extra things to make it look like it was holding clothes for three.

Luis gave Monica a quick recap of how we could be tracked. Her face shifted between the things she already knew and the horrifying new truths she was just learning.

"Phone," I said, nodding as I tossed mine next to his and slung the bag over my shoulder.

Once Monica did the same, we moved quickly, pulling closed the storage unit's side door, and moving into the cold night air. The street outside was quiet, almost



unnervingly so.

“How do you feel about a sudden vacation?” I asked Monica.

“With two strapping young men like you?” She arched an eyebrow, her lips curving into a teasing smile. “Count me in.”

An hour later, we were on the road again, leaving behind the safe convenient ease of Monica’s car and our comfortable lifestyles for something more luxurious—a high-end hotel with two beds in a penthouse suite, hidden in plain sight. Soft gold accents glimmered under the recessed lighting, and the panoramic windows offered a sweeping view of the city skyline. A place that screamed the type of wealth that people envied but rarely ever targeted.

Luis stepped inside first, his sharp gaze sweeping the room like he was searching for hidden threats, even here. Monica followed, her heels clicking softly against the polished marble floors. I stayed near the door, taking a slow breath as I scanned the space.

The penthouse was immaculate—built for experience, not for living. It was a jewel designed to be looked at, envied, and enjoyed for a weekend. Perfect for what we needed.

Monica sat her purse down on the low glass coffee table. “We couldn’t have picked somewhere more conspicuous if we tried.”

“Definitely not our usual style,” Luis replied, his voice low. He moved toward the windows, his silhouette outlined against the city lights.

I dropped my bag near the sofa and glanced around. The suite held two queen beds separated by a sleek nightstand, and a kitchenette stocked with overpriced snacks that

we had no reason not to touch. Wasn't like this room was in our name or under our real cards. If you were a spy, you always had secrets. Even from your own government.

We didn't bring much. No phones, no laptops, nothing that could ping back to us. Largely just the bag from that NGO's disaster relief stockpile. The juxtaposition was almost comical. In a room where the bed linens probably cost more than my monthly rent. No sense in unpacking bandages and water purifiers like we were preparing for the apocalypse.

Monica strode to the mini fridge. She opened it with a quiet hum, pulling out a sleek glass bottle of sparkling water and a delicate tin of imported chocolates. "Now this," she said with a teasing smile, holding the sweets up like a trophy, "feels like the dessert we deserve after everything."

I leaned back against the armrest of the leather sofa, smirking. "Five-star snacks at their finest," I grinned, glancing past her at the rest of the neatly packed fridge shelves—artisanal cheeses, champagne, probably even jars of caviar, the works really.

"And I thought the fancy recyclable water bottles in the U.N. break room were bougie," Monica laughed as she tossed the chocolates to Luis, who caught them easily, his expression unreadable as he set them on the nightstand without comment.

Monica eventually retreated to the bathroom, leaving me alone with Luis.

"You going to stay this quiet?" I asked.

He glanced over his shoulder, expression still unreadable. "Just thinking."

"Dangerous habit."

Luis turned fully, crossing his arms as he leaned back against the window. “Not all of us can get anything they want with nothing more than a clever quip.”

I pushed off the armrest and stood, closing the space between us just enough to feel the tension ripple in the air. “Don’t even need that.”

A flicker of amusement crossed his face, but it didn’t last. Luis’ eyes lingered on mine, searching, like he was trying to address something he wasn’t ready to say out loud. It wasn’t a heated look—no, it was something quieter, more intimate. The kind of look that slipped beneath, like a tentative hand brushing the edge of a hem, testing the boundary between hesitation and getting exactly what you want.

Monica emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, her hair tied back and a look of exhaustion settling over her features. “Full shampoo bottles,” she announced, with a double thumbs up before heading straight for one of the beds without waiting for a reply. “I’m going to crash now though.”

Luis raised an eyebrow at me, his arms still crossed. “Guess it’s you and me, then.”

I shrugged, keeping my tone casual. “Just like old times.”

“Do you still snore?” he asked, his voice casual but with a dare I couldn’t quite place.

I smirked, tossing my jacket onto the back of a chair, eyeing that Monica was facing away before undressing down to my boxers and quickly sliding under the covers. The bed was absurdly comfortable, but I found it hard to relax.

Luis folded his clothes, and turned off the lights before settling down, his movements precise and deliberate, like he was trying not to disrupt the fragile peace. The distance between us both too small and too vast. I could feel the heat of his body, the faint shift of the mattress as he adjusted positions. It was maddeningly intimate, and yet

neither of us said a word.

I tried to focus on before.

The way Luis had stood at the window, so serene and dominant, like he could hold the weight of the world on his shoulders. Maybe I did get art. Maybe he was Atlas with muscles I helped strengthen with wordless gym sessions. He'd fallen asleep in my place before, but this, here, now lying next to him in the quiet, was somehow so much closer to home. Our professional reputations had likely been ruined for a girl, and yet, it brought us closer.

I thought about everything we'd been through—the missions, the close calls, the endless tug-of-war. Beneath it all, there was something I couldn't ignore. Something I didn't want to ignore anymore.

Luis shifted beside me, and for a brief moment, his leg brushed against mine. The touch was fleeting, barely there, and accident for sure, yet I still suddenly wanted to tangled our lives up even more.

I closed my eyes, forcing myself to breathe evenly. All it would take is to reach out and close the distance.

But I didn't.

The tension between Luis and me was thick enough to cut with a knife. But it wasn't just rivalry anymore. We were in this, not just for the mission, but for each other.

We were on the run together. From the cops, the government, and the viral attention. But maybe most of all, from the truth that had been staring us in the face all along.

sixteen

- LUIS -

Tucked by the elevators in the hotel's main hall was a business room, separated by sleek glass walls that gave it an illusion of privacy. Inside, polished wooden desks lined the space, each paired with a desktop computer and a small printer. The room felt like it belonged to a different world—a bubble of professional control amidst the chaos outside.

Using something meant for the public usually was a digital nightmare, but as long as we stayed off our accounts, it was an anonymous loophole—and a rare, unexpected gift.

I closed the door behind us and glanced at Rafael. He was already surveying the space, his gaze checking for every possible exit, hidden camera, or threat. It wasn't paranoia. It was survival.

Monica sank into one of the chairs, pulling her blazer tighter around her shoulders. It just took enough time for that jacket to start to wrinkle for me to realize I truly cared about her. Her fingers trembled as she reached for the keyboard. There was tightness in her jaw as she focused on the screen.

That is what Raf's focus meant too. It was love, even if it could never be romantic. I've never seen him act so selflessly before.

I sat down beside her at another computer and booted it up. The interface felt ancient

compared to the speed and access we had at work. But with our phones gone and our usual tools out of reach, it would have to do. We were working blind. And I was eager to see just what this collective gift of the World Wide Web had left for us.

Raf leaned in over my shoulder. “How long do you think we’ve got?”

I didn’t look up. “Not long enough.”

The room fell silent except for the clatter of keys and the hum of the machines. Monica was digging through news sites, forums, and social media, piecing together the threads of the narrative the trolls had built against her. Every so often, she’d pause, her lips pressing into a thin line before she kept going.

I focused on online forums, scrolling through page after page of anonymous vitriol. The language was vile, the accusations ludicrous, but that didn’t matter. Lies didn’t need to be believable to stick. They just needed to be loud.

“Got something,” Monica said, her voice steady but stressed. She turned the screen toward us, revealing a screenshot of a troll group chat. The messages were timestamped and damning, outlining a coordinated effort to tie her to the murder.

“In order to frame me, they’re rewriting the whole story.”

Raf stepped closer, his brow furrowing as he scanned the screen. “This is what happens when people have too much time on their hands.”

“They’re playing with fire,” I muttered, my jaw tightening. “And they’re about to burn us all.”

Monica’s fingers danced across the keyboard, her pace relentless. Meanwhile, Rafael and I hovered like mismatched magnets, circling but never meeting. We weren’t just

giving her space; we were caught in a quiet stalemate, both too aware of the standoff pulling at the edges of this truce.

Normally, Raf would've had us burning off steam in the gym by now, wringing ourselves dry until there was no room left for anything but sweat and muscle ache. But with the three of us here, splitting up into pairs meant someone would end up alone.

"You're quiet again," Rafael said.

I glanced at him, my hands tightening into fists. "I'm thinking."

"Doesn't look like it."

His tone was light, almost teasing, but it hit a nerve. "What is thinking meant to look like?"

Raf raised an eyebrow, his expression calm but his eyes amused. "I think you're blaming me for something that isn't my fault."

"What am I blaming you for?" I shot back, my voice rising. "You act like you've got it all under control, like nothing touches you. This is serious for us, our careers are being ripped apart."

"There it is." Rafael's smirk faded, replaced by something quieter. "And you think this doesn't touch me?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't.

I knew he'd given up his old assignment to stay close to Monica, but it was never a role he cared for. Maybe I did blame him. Annoyed in some deep, stubborn part of

me. He'd known that the ruse of being at her side was a lie layered over another lie—and he didn't tell me.

Raf stepped closer, his presence filling the space between us. "You want to know why I keep it together? Because I have to. Because if I don't, you won't."

I swallowed hard, my throat tight. "No, that's not it."

"And yet here we are," he said softly, his gaze locking onto mine.

"Take it outside," Monica called from her seat. With only one door in or out, we did have just enough room to step away from each other—a plan that might have worked if we hadn't both stepped into the hall at the same time, ending up on opposite sides of the door as if she were addressing us both directly.

The space between us shrank. I watched as he checked for cameras. When he finally settled back, his eyes lingered. Searching within mine before his drifted lower to settle on my lips.

I froze under his gaze, the charge between us more palpable than ever. It wasn't just the closeness; it was the way he looked at me like he saw the whole world, and deciding if this was the moment to cross a line we'd been skirting for too long. My pulse quickened, my breath catching in my throat, and I wondered if he could see it, if he could feel the yearning thumping through my heart.

I'd never known what Rafael was into. Maybe that was his best spy work—keeping everyone guessing what girl he had on his arm this time, letting them believe what they wanted. The effortless charm, the sidelong glances, the way he could step into any room and have someone eating out of the palm of his hand—it all pointed one way. Or maybe I just hated myself enough to believe it, to let the lie settle in because it was easier to accept than hoping for something else. Something real. Something



that might have included me.

His hand brushed against my arm as if testing the waters.

I didn't pull away.

When our lips met, it wasn't soft or tentative. It was fierce, almost defiant—a collision of everything we'd been holding back. My hand found its way to the back of his neck, pulling him closer as the kiss deepened.

For a moment, nothing else existed. There was no mission, no trolls, no danger—just us.

“If we sink this ship,” he whispered, his voice so close I could feel the brush of each softly spoken word, “then we're in this boat, drowning together.”

I could feel the meaning of his words settle in my chest, the knot of desire that had rested there for decades finally unraveling as my hand found his cheek, a touch that spoke of a truth we'd finally allowed ourselves to admit.

The scrape of a chair against the floor shattered the moment. We pulled apart, both of us breathing hard as Monica came over to the door.

“I hate to interrupt,” she said, her voice professionally cool, “but we've got a new problem.”

I glanced at the screen behind her, my heart sinking. A new video had appeared, this one claiming evidence of Monica doing the murder.

“They're doubling down,” Raf said, his voice steady but his jaw tight.

“Faking it until they make it.”

Monica nodded, her expression grim. “Then we need to hit back now. No more playing defense.”

We spent the next hour piecing together a counter-narrative, pulling screenshots, timestamps, and chat logs to prove Monica’s innocence. The murder had occurred an hour before work, and my hope of using myself as an alibi crumbled. The tension between Rafael and me lingered, but it felt different now—less like an obstacle and more like an unspoken promise of what might come next.

As they worked, I couldn’t shake the memory of the kiss—how his hand had lingered on my arm, how he’d looked at me like I was the thing holding him together. Turns out, the gym wasn’t the only place he could pull me out of my spiraling thoughts.

The printer whirled to life, spitting out the final document we needed. Monica grabbed it, her eyes sharp with determination. “Let’s go,” she said.

The three of us walked out of the hotel, ready to face whatever came next. Moreover, we’d do it our way, on our time, with our truth—and nothing was going to stand in our way.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:25 am*

We rented a sleek, high-end car—with leather seats soft as clouds, and a quiet engine humming with an air of understated wealth—and paid in cash, a subtle exchange that left no trace behind. Monica sat in the back, her posture regal, her face an unreadable mask. Luis leaned against the passenger window, his fingers tapping an uneven rhythm on his knee, each motion brimming with restless energy. I kept my eyes on the city streets as I drove, the skyline glittering like a promise just out of reach.

The silence between us was taut and alive, coiled like a spring ready to snap. But this could work. Monica and Luis had the kind of brilliance that thrived on tension—sharp minds and sharper words, honed in a world where language itself was a weapon.

The UN building loomed ahead, its polished steel and glass cutting through the skyline. Its grandeur felt both comforting and suffocating, a reminder of Monica's literal agency and the danger she was still navigating.

Once inside, Monica led us through the hushed, and honored halls of the UN building. The polished floors gleaming beneath the soft glow of recessed lighting. She walked with the poise of someone who belonged there—each step deliberate, her shoulders squared, her presence commanding. But there was a subtle falter in her silence, that betrayed the exhaustion she was too proud to show.

Luis and I lingered near the door while Monica crossed the room to her desk. She reached for the landline's receiver, her hand hesitating briefly before dialing. When she spoke to the officer on the other end, her voice was steady, unwavering in its calm authority. She had found a smoking gun, we just had to keep her safe until she could use it.

“This is Monica May, United Nations Advisor,” she began, her tone calm but firm. “I’d like to arrange a meeting to address the accusations against me. I’ll be at the UN building for the rest of the evening if you want to talk.”

Luis exchanged a glance with me, his brow furrowed. I nodded, letting him know that I thought we got this. Monica hung up the phone, her hand lingering on the receiver before she turned to face us.

“They’ll be here soon,” she said.

The room we set up in wasn’t reserved for dignitaries or diplomats. It was sterile and cold, its lighting washing the color from everything. We weren’t using this building built on international law and order for show. This room quietly spoke that we had work to do.

Luis pulled out a work phone he kept in his office, his thumb hovering over the screen before he started typing. The message was short, letting the seriousness of everything we’d uncovered speak for itself. If the public evidence and Detective Rourke’s connection weren’t enough our agency could easily pull the IP address to fully verify. He hit send, the text disappearing into the ether with a finality that carried all the choices we made. A single ping followed moments later, the reply as curt as it was clear: We will send someone.

Luis took a seat next to Monica, his posture protective. I stood near the corner, leaning against the wall, arms crossed. It wasn’t Luis’ handler that showed up. It was a tall, eagle-eyed woman with a stern demeanor and voice that I only heard once but would never be able to forget how it was able to clear a room. We had summoned our collective boss to this battle.

She didn’t speak, merely giving Luis a subtle nod before sitting at his side of the table, her hands resting on a leather pad-folio.

A few police officers arrived next, their uniforms crisp, their expressions neutral but curious. The detective wasn't among them, but I doubt he would stay hidden for long.

The conversation started predictably—polite questions, veiled accusations, as Monica countered each point with measured precise answers. But when the detective finally walked in, the niceties stopped.

Detective Rourke. His face was too familiar now. We'd seen him at the summit, hovering near several groups over the night, pretending not to listen but catching every word.

He wasted no time presenting his case, sliding printed photos and digital timestamps across the table. "Ms. May it is clear you have connections to individuals directly involved in the murder of Mr. Alan Sheridan," he said, his voice tinged with an eager satisfaction.

Monica didn't flinch. "None of that evidence links me directly to the crime," she replied smoothly. "In fact, your own actions speak louder than your flimsy accusations ever could."

Rourke's smirk faltered.

Our handler leaned back as she unzipped her pad-folio. The sound alone jarring enough that the officers remained silent. "Connections only matter if they're relevant. And those aren't. But these?" She tossed some papers on the table. "However, very much are."

"What are you going on about?" the detective barked and hastily grabbed the papers before any of the other officers could see. "This shows nothing!"

Luis' hand curled into a fist on the table, but he didn't speak. I could see the barely restrained urge to call out Rourke's hypocrisy. He was a fighter at his core, and by far

the most disciplined person I knew. That's why I respected—no, liked him so much.

"Let's review," our handler said, sliding a fresh stack of papers across the table to each party. "These logs trace the anonymous posts back to Detective Rourke's home address."

"Fine, but I didn't shoot anyone!" he objected, turning to his fellow officers for backup. "I was on duty at the time of the murder."

"Detective Rourke," she continued, her tone icy, "This is about your quite active online presence. These posts—hateful, slanderous, coordinated—and how they align perfectly with the campaign to frame Ms. May. Care to explain why you did this?"

Rourke's face turned red, his composure cracking. "This is absurd," he stammered. "I—those logs could be faked."

"If anyone knows about faking evidence, seems it would be you," I scuffed. "Do you want to explain to your boss why you failed at your job so spectacularly that you had to go home and make up evidence for extra credit?"

Monica sat back in her chair, her gaze steady. "This wasn't even about me, was it? It was about your obsession. Your hatred. You wanted a target, and you chose me because I don't fit your mold. I was nothing more than fresh meat to your followers and dreams of a raise, wasn't I?"

I hated to agree. Rourke wasn't just acting as another cog in the system; he had made it personal. His fixation on Monica stemmed from her identity, her dating history, and everything she represented. But it wasn't just about him. His actions fed a larger conspiracy orchestrated by NoxTech fanboys. Their pitiful boredom weaponized into something far more dangerous. And with his badge and position, he made the threat impossible to ignore.

Rourke opened his mouth to respond, but the volume of the evidence—and the room—was now crushing him into silence.

Our handler rose from her seat, her voice snapping like a whip. “Arrest that man,” she said, nodding toward the detective.

His face twisted in indignation. “You can’t be serious. I outrank every officer here. You have no jurisdiction!”

With a cool ease, our boss reached into her coat and flashed a badge—sleek, official, and unarguable. Those three letters caught the light as she let the badge linger just long enough to make an impact.

For the first time, I caught her smile. “You might outrank them, but not me.”

Rourke paled, his protests faltering as the officers exchanged glances. One stepped forward with handcuffs.

He didn’t put up a fight as his forged career fell into shambles. Maybe another lie later would get him out of trouble, but for now, and for us—it was over.

The police had no choice but to clear Monica’s name as a suspect, their apologies short and insincere. Rourke was escorted out in cuffs with his hatred laid bare for all of us to see.

Monica watched the officers go, her expression unreadable. When the door finally closed, she let out a slow, measured breath. “Well,” she said softly, “that’s one mess cleaned up.”

Luis reached out, his hand resting on hers briefly. “You handled that perfectly.”

She smiled faintly. “Thanks to your help.”

“What other mess?” I risked asking.

Monica’s face hit the jackpot of surprise before she softly laughed at me. She glanced over to our handler before she excused herself to make some more calls.

Our handler waited until Monica was out of earshot, then turned her strict gaze on us. “I suppose I should commend you for improvisation,” she said, her tone deceptively calm. “But going off book without authorization? That’s a gamble no agent is ever meant to take.”

My stomach dropped. I should have expected this, but hearing the words still felt like a blow. I glanced at Luis, who looked equally unsettled.

“We may have to reassign you both after this.”

“Where?” I asked, keeping my voice steady.

She tilted her head and glanced towards Monica. “That depends.”

“On what?” Luis asked with a wince.

“I was briefed on both of your recent actions,” she said sternly, her gaze landing back on us. For a moment, I saw a flicker of mercy in her eyes. “Since you’ve shown you can work well together, perhaps something together could be part of your new cover if you both agree.”

Luis blinked, his surprise quickly masked by a soft smile. “They do say a lie is best when it has a grain of truth.”

“You think we make a good team?” I dared ask.

The handler winked, a sight so impossible I thought I witnessed a miracle. “Let’s just



say you're effective."

Later that night, the three of us sat on the steps of the UN building, as the weight of the past couple weeks finally began to lift. Our personal phones, which were picked up by the agency, were returned by a recruiter who gave a friendly pitch to Monica if she ever wanted a change of career.

I watched with a smile as Luis leaned against me, thinking about how Monica's name had been cleared, her reputation intact—maybe even bolstered.

Still, everything would be different for us now. No more lying, no more hiding the truth. At least, not the truths that meant the most to us.

"Raf," Luis said finally, his voice soft at my side. "Would you want me to come with you?"

I turned to him, my chest tightening at the sincerity in his gaze. "Maybe I could be your bodyguard if you stayed," I teased. "Might need to get you back into danger first."

A genuine smile tugged at his lips as he fought back a laugh. "How about personal trainer?"

The city lights sparkled around us, the world moving on while we remained still in this perfect bubble of contentment. For the first time in what felt like forever, the future didn't feel like a mission—it felt like a choice.

And I chose him.

"Our cover story before was just being friends," I said, pretending to hum in consideration. "How about boyfriends?"

“Yeah,” Luis teased, unable to conceal the joy in his voice. “Boyfriends. I can bring you over to my apartment.”

His words lingered, charged with my excitement of seeing something so simple in the new and beautiful light of day. My pulse raced, but not from the urge to compete. It was something else—something I’d been avoiding for too long. I leaned in, my forehead resting against his. “No more pretending,” I said softly. “It’s you. It’s always been about you.”

When our lips met, it was nothing like the anxiety and urgency of before. This pride was slow and deliberate, a promise made between shared hearts. His hand cupped my jaw, tilting my face as I let myself fall into him, and this moment that felt like a long lasting peace.

Standing behind us, Monica cleared her throat, the sound fully amused. “If you two are done making the world jealous, we’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Luis pulled back just enough to grin, his eyes still locked on mine as he brightly blushed. “Going to have to get used to being seen,” he said, tone teasing but warm.

“Nah.” I grinned, my heart lighter than it has even been. “That’s what your apartment is for.”

I wrapped an arm around his shoulder as we stood and turned toward Monica. Whatever came next, this wasn’t just the end of one story—it was the start of something new, something that was ours.