

# In Too Deep



Rachael Sommers



# Chapter 1

“DO YOU REALLY THINK YOU can bully my client into accepting this deal?” Lucy straightened up in her seat, leveling the lawyer sitting opposite with her best piercing stare.

“Bully?” He looked outraged. “This is an excellent deal, Ms. Holloway, and I’d advise your client to—”

“An excellent deal?” Lucy shook her head and stabbed her index finger on the front page of the paperwork sitting on the table between them. “It’s an insult.” She pushed it toward him. “And we will not be signing it.”

“You won’t get a better deal than that.”

Lucy held his gaze, knowing he was bluffing, and shrugged. “Then we’ll go to court and have a judge decide, shall we? Though I think we both know that with the way your clients conducted themselves over the past few months, they will rule in my favor. And we’ve done you a favor by trying to settle this out of court, but if you and your client want to take a chance, I’m more than willing to hedge my bets.” Lucy shut the cover of her binder of notes with a snap and watched her opposition’s eyes widen in alarm. “If that is all,” Lucy said, straightening the collar of her jacket, “then I have another meeting to get to.”

“Wait!” He caved before Lucy had risen from her seat. “I’ll give them a call. See if we might be able to come to another arrangement.”

“Do not keep me waiting too long, Mr. Langdon.”

He and his colleague scurried away, and on Lucy's left, her own colleague chuckled.

"Watching you work really is something," Felix said with a wry shake of his head. "What do you think they'll come back with?"

Lucy pursed her lips, glancing once more at the agreement on the table. "I promised Cleo I wouldn't settle for less than a million." Compared to some of the deals Lucy had dealt with in the past, a million was small change. But to a small business owner—who was being bullied out of producing a useful product by a pharmaceutical conglomerate on a bullshit patent dispute—it meant everything.

Watching Langdon pace up and down through the glass walls of the conference room, his phone pressed to his ear, Lucy wished she could lip-read. But body language she could do, and as she saw his shoulder slump, Lucy smiled victoriously.

"We can double it," Langdon said when he stepped back into the room, a scowl across his face. "But that's the best you are going to get. I can have the paperwork sent over later today."

"I will speak to my client, and we'll sign if we're happy with it." Lucy gathered her things and strode past Langdon with a wide smile. "Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Langdon."

He muttered something under his breath as Lucy held the door open for Felix. She was sure it was far from complimentary, but Lucy didn't care. She loved bagging herself a win, and she couldn't wait to give Cleo the good news.

"Drinks tonight to celebrate?" Felix said as she stepped into the hall. He followed beside Lucy in his electric wheelchair, his notes from the deposition balanced carefully in his lap.

"I can't. I already have plans."

"Hot date?"

Lucy—known in the office to be notoriously private—didn't dignify him with a response. "I'll see you for the deposition later."

She left Felix at the door to his office and made the short trip to her own. Settling behind her desk, Lucy straightened out her keyboard as she glanced at her diary. She had an hour before she was due to meet

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Carla for lunch, and a non-stop afternoon of meetings to look forward to after that.

Knowing she wouldn't have time to do so later, Lucy reached for her phone and keyed in Cleo's number. As it rang, she spun around in her chair to glance out of her window, admiring the beautiful view of the New York skyline.

No answer. Typical. It seemed Cleo would have to wait to hear the good news.

"Hi, Cleo," Lucy said when prompted to leave a voicemail. "It's Lucy Holloway calling with the result of today's negotiations. I think you'll be happy with them."

Behind Lucy, the door opened. Expecting Felix or one of her other colleagues, she held up a hand and spun slowly back around. "Give me a call as soon as you—"

Lucy blinked in surprise when she laid eyes on her visitor. Darren looked different to the last time Lucy had seen him: drawn, haunted, bags under his bloodshot eyes.

"—can," Lucy said, hanging up the phone. "Darren? Can I help you?"

Darren scoffed, his face twisting into a look of such hatred Lucy felt as if her blood had frozen in her veins—because no one, in her forty years of life, had ever looked at her in such a way.

As if they wanted to destroy her.

And Lucy could only think of one reason why, dread settling in her stomach—hot and heavy, her throat feeling so tight it was hard to breathe, and her heart beating so loud she could hear it in her ears.

As Darren drew himself up to his full height and opened his mouth, the only thing Lucy could think was that she wished he'd shut the door behind him.

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Through the open balcony doors, the low hum of excited chatter reached Lucy's ears. If she concentrated, she could hear the crash of the

waves against the nearby beach, the screech of birds, and smell the salt in the air.

Taking temporary refuge from the relentless heat of the July sun in the air-conditioned sanctity of her hotel room, Lucy breathed a deep sigh. Rest and relaxation were the order of the day, and Lucy tried to recall some of the words from the yoga instructor she had left back in the U.S. as she reclined on her king-size bed.

Feet wide, eyes closed, and breathe in deeply for—

A phone rang, and Lucy's eyes flew open. Her cellphone—abandoned in the bottom of her handbag—had been switched off ever since she had arrived in Tenerife the day before. It took her a moment to realize it was the old-school phone in the hotel room, and Lucy frowned. She had stayed in a lot of hotels in her life and hadn't had an unexpected call in a single one.

It must be important. Lucy leaned over to pluck the receiver free and held it to her ear. "Hello?"

"You are a hard woman to track down."

The voice was a familiar one, and Lucy felt her lips curve into a smile. If there was anything Lucy was going to miss about her home, Carla would be at the top of that list. "Did you perhaps consider I did not want to be found?" Lucy shifted to lean her back against the headboard and wound the cord of the phone around her finger. "How did you find me, anyway?"

"I'm a woman of many talents."

Lucy waited, knowing Carla would elaborate.

"You should really consider changing your e-mail password. Your mother's maiden name and your birthday, Luce? Really?"

That explained it. Her hotel and flight booking information were on there—once she had figured out where Lucy was staying, all Carla would have had to do was persuade the front desk to patch her through to Lucy's room.

"You hacked into my email?"

Carla huffed. "I had to. I was worried about you."

"I could have you arrested."

“Please.” Carla’s voice turned dismissive. “We both know you wouldn’t dare. Now, do you want to tell me why you are hiding halfway across the world?”

Lucy glowered, though she knew Carla could not see her. “I am not hiding.”

“Oh yeah? What else would you call packing up in the middle of the night and leaving without saying a word?” Carla didn’t hide the hurt in her voice. Lucy knew she had made a mistake—too goddamn many of them to count—but she had needed to get away as quickly as possible.

“I didn’t want you to worry,” Lucy said. “I knew you had a big case.”

“Bullshit.”

One of the reasons Carla and Lucy’s friendship was so strong was because neither were afraid to say it how it was—or call the other one out when they had done something wrong. It was that spirit that had drawn Lucy to Carla when they were in law school—in comparison to the two-faced nature of most of their classmates—but sometimes Lucy hated it.

“You knew I wouldn’t let you go,” Carla said. “What about your clients, Luce?”

Lucy scoffed. “I was told to take a sabbatical, remember?” She couldn’t hide the note of bitterness in her voice. “They are in Felix’s capable hands.” Lucy was sure he was unhappy to have Lucy’s cases thrust upon him on short notice, but it would be good for him. If he wanted to make senior partner one day, the chance to step up and take charge was valuable experience. And she knew he would be able to handle it—she had trained him well. “Besides,” Lucy said, keeping her voice light. “I’m not the most popular person in the office right now.”

“What did you expect? There’s a reason it’s a bad idea to sleep with a colleague. Let alone a married one.”

Lucy knew Carla well enough to imagine the look of disapproval that would be on her face. “She told me they were separated.” Otherwise Lucy never would have let it happen. “I was naïve enough to believe her.”

“But not naïve enough to tell me until all was said and done.” Carla sounded as wounded now as she had looked when Lucy had finally come clean, and Lucy hoped that her actions hadn’t severed her closest friendship as well as everything else.

“Because I already knew what you would say.” And it was not what Lucy wanted to hear. “And she wanted to keep it quiet.”

“I wonder why?”

“Don’t.” It was sharper than she intended, the wounds still raw, and Carla sucked in a breath.

“Were you in love with her?”

Lucy didn’t answer, knowing her silence spoke for itself. Why else would she be there, holed up in a hotel across the Atlantic, desperately trying to forget the things she had left behind?

“Look,” Carla said with a sigh, “I disagree with what you’re doing, but if you’re not coming back any time soon at least turn on your goddamn phone. I don’t want to have to threaten the hotel staff every time I want to talk to you.”

“I suppose I can manage that.”

“I miss you.”

“I miss you, too. And I am sorry.” Leaving the city had not been a decision Lucy had made lightly. “I know I’ve handled this all wrong. If I could take it all back...” She would do everything differently, for a start. “I hope you can forgive me.”

“You know I can never stay mad at you for long. But you do owe me one hell of an apology when your ass is back here. Which will be when, exactly?”

“I don’t know.” The hotel manager had let her book the room out on a weekly basis—Lucy didn’t have a set checkout date planned. “I just need—” Some time to process. Some space to mend her shattered heart. “I just need a break.”

“Lawyers are not supposed to get those.”

“Well then it’s no wonder we burn out sometimes, is it?”

“Only if you aren’t cut out for this career. And speaking of my career, I’d better go. I’m in court later today and I need to prepare.”

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While they had studied together, their paths had deviated once they had begun working. Carla had chosen the criminal route, and Lucy business, and she did not envy Carla's time in the courtroom. "Good luck."

"Don't need it, but thank you." Carla had never lacked self-confidence. "I will speak to you soon, okay? Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"That's a short list." Law school had taught her that. Carla was wild as anything, and Lucy had often struggled to keep up. On paper, they could not be more different—Lucy was a white gay woman who couldn't hold a relationship down and had always been quiet, while Carla was a Black, straight, happily married woman who was the life and soul of the party—but their friendship had been solid from the start.

Carla's laughter was still ringing in Lucy's ears once she set the phone back on the hook. She looked to her bag again and the cell at the bottom of it, and she told herself to stop being such a big baby.

She was forty years old, for God's sake—she needed to get a grip and start facing her problems head on.

Lucy grabbed her phone and turned it on with the faintest of trembles in her fingers. Dozens of notifications awaited her. Most were emails from work, some were texts from concerned friends and colleagues—there were at least five from Carla alone—but it was the one from an unknown number that she lingered on.

Unknown to Lucy's phone, at least. She might have deleted it in a fit of rage when the truth had come spilling out, but Lucy recognized the digits well enough.

*I'm sorry.*

Biting her lip and blinking away the sudden rush of tears that stung her eyes, Lucy deleted the text. Replying would not do her any good—would only send her tumbling down the rabbit hole—but still, the message lingered, souring Lucy's mood.



She sighed and shook her head. The sun was shining, and there wasn't a single cloud in the dazzlingly blue sky; Lucy was not going to spend the day dwelling in her hotel room when there was an island paradise to enjoy.

\* \* \*

Elena breathed in the scent of suntan lotion and chlorine as she stepped into the lobby of the Sol Plaza. It looked the same as always. The marble floor sparkled in the sunlight filtering through the huge windows that offered a view of the lush hotel gardens, green despite the arid climate. Luxurious gray couches were dotted around the room, guests waiting for a coach to take them to the airport spread among them.

As always, it felt like coming home—and considering she'd spent half of her life in this place, it may as well be.

The consequence of her father being the hotel manager.

Who, as soon as he caught sight of Elena, barreled out from behind the huge check-in desk pressed against the rear wall of the lobby.

"Elena!" He swept her into a hug so fierce she struggled to breathe. "I didn't expect to see you here until tomorrow."

"I couldn't wait until tonight to see you," Elena said. As always whenever she returned to the island after almost a year away, Elena's Spanish was rusty, but it never took her long to get back into the swing of things.

Her father's smile lit up his whole face. "How are you? How was the flight? Have you been home long? How—"

"I know she's your favorite kid," a new voice said, and Elena turned to see David's grinning face, "but give her a chance to breathe, at least."

Their father tutted as he released Elena. "She's not my favorite."

"Please. I know where I stand." David looked unfazed by it as he dragged Elena into a hug of his own. "She is the smart one, after all."

"But you're the one following in his footsteps," Elena said, tugging at the tag pinned to David's Sol Plaza polo shirt, *Assistant Manager*

written under his name. She'd never had the brains for business like David did.

"Ah, but you're the one with the fancy college degree he brags about whenever he meets anyone new. My daughter's at George Washington University, you know, in the United States." He imitated their father's voice, and Elena laughed. "Meanwhile, my son graduated from a meager Spanish college—"

"Enough." Their father chastised David, but he was smiling. "Come on, Elena. I'll show you what's changed since you were last here."

"Nothing," David called after them as Elena was led away. "Nothing has changed because he's allergic to it!"

Their father muttered some choice curses, and Elena grinned. It was good to be back.

"He doesn't know what he's talking about. It's all change around here."

"How is the new owner?" The hotel had changed hands for the first time in fifty years, when the previous owner had passed away. At least it was being kept in the family—Mateo Ortega had taken over from his uncle, but he had big shoes to fill.

Her father shrugged. "Haven't seen much of him, to tell you the truth. I think everything's still too raw. It's only been a few months since Tony's funeral, after all. I suspect he'll take more of an interest soon, but I hope he doesn't have too many new ideas."

Elena knew her father wouldn't take kindly to too many changes. After working in the Sol Plaza for nearly forty years, he was rather attached to the place.

"We have a new chef in the restaurant. Very fancy. You'll have to try it and let me know what you think." He hooked an arm through Elena's.

Her father pulled Elena toward her favorite part of the hotel—the pool. Elena blinked in the sunlight as they stepped outside, enjoying the feeling of it on her skin. Though the summer she'd left behind in D.C. had been warm, the sun in Tenerife had always felt different. More intense, closer to the equator, and oh, she'd missed it.

“You don’t have to work for the summer, you know. We have other lifeguards.” Her father glanced toward the empty chair on the opposite side of the pool and frowned. “Though I don’t know where the one on duty now is.”

“Who is it supposed to be?”

“Nic.”

Elena made a face. Of the other three lifeguards that worked at the Sol Plaza, Nic was by far her least favorite. At nineteen, he was the youngest, and spent most of his shifts trying to chat up anyone who would listen instead of watching the pool.

Elena was partial to a bit of flirtation herself, but not at the expense of the safety of others.

“He’s not so bad,” her father said in response to Elena’s obvious disdain. “He only works a few hours.”

“Maybe if I’m here he can work even less,” Elena said, and her father shook his head. “And stop trying to talk me out of it. You know I like working here.” She had twelve weeks before she would begin the next phase of her training to become a physical therapist, and she was spending ten of them back home. Elena had never been very good at being idle—she needed something to fill her days with while the rest of her family were working.

“Besides, it’s not like it’s hard—I get to sunbathe by the pool for most of the day, and I can see you whenever I want.” Elena’s gaze scanned across the pool. A white woman in a black and white bikini caught Elena’s eye. She sat on the edge, feet dangling in the water, her brown hair shining in the sunlight. She was gorgeous, body sun-kissed and toned, and views like that didn’t exactly make Elena’s job a hardship, either. “What’s not to like?”

“Only if you’re sure.”

“I am.” Elena sidestepped a toddler being chased by another. “Don’t run by the pool!” she said in Spanish, repeating it in English when neither child took any notice of her. She sighed—hopefully they’d listen more when she was in her red bathing suit and had a whistle around her neck.

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“Your hours will be—”

A scream cut him off, and Elena whirled around to see the same toddler who’d just run past her run straight into the back of another child. The impact sent both of them careening into the pool, and they sank fast, blond heads of hair disappearing beneath the water as those nearby watched, too shocked to move.

Elena reacted without thinking, shrugging out of her jacket and sprinting toward the pool. She dived in, the water cold enough to force the air from her lungs. Grabbing hold of the closest child, she set her feet on the tiles of the pool floor and propelled them to the surface.

Holding tight as the child struggled in her arms, Elena swam to the edge of the pool. A frantic-looking woman appeared as they reached the side, reaching out to take the child from Elena. The mother, if Elena had to guess—they had the same white skin, blonde hair, and pale green eyes.

Elena was only too happy to hand the child back over. Before she could turn to go back to fetch the other toddler who had tumbled into the water, she heard a splash and watched as they emerged from the pool with the help of the woman Elena had noticed earlier, her hair slicked back against her head as she wiped water out of her eyes.

“Oh my God, Quentin, don’t ever do something like that again!” The mother said as she fussed over her child.

Elena refrained from pointing out that if Quentin’s mother had been watching him more closely, this would never have happened in the first place. She’d seen it so many times—parents thinking that just because they were on vacation, they no longer needed to keep an eye on their kids because someone else would do it for them.

“Thank you.” The mother wrapped a hand around Elena’s shoulder.

“It’s what anyone would have done.” Elena pushed herself out of the pool and glanced down—her jeans looked like they were painted to her legs and would be a nightmare to peel off. Not to mention her T-shirt. She’d chosen a bad day to wear white.

“Here.” A towel was handed toward her, and Elena looked down into dazzling blue eyes. The woman was even more gorgeous up close,

and Elena couldn't help but appreciate the way her bikini clung to her skin. The woman admired her in return, and Elena made sure their fingers brushed as she accepted the towel, skin tingling at the contact.

"Thanks." Elena could deal with the chill of the water—the day was warm, after all—but not with having so many eyes on her when her clothes were plastered to her skin. It felt more revealing than her bathing suit, and Elena wrapped the towel around her shoulders. "That was a quick reaction time. You could have me out of a job."

"What job?" Her accent was American, and the way her eyebrows creased into a puzzled frown made Elena smile.

"Lifeguard. I start tomorrow, so if you're around the pool often you'll get to see a lot more of me." Being brazen didn't always work—especially on women older than Elena, who sometimes mistook her confidence for arrogance—but based on the quirk of the woman's lips, Elena hadn't put her off.

Yet.

"Well, you'll have plenty of opportunities to get my towel back to me, won't you? Clean, I hope."

"Of course. But how will I know where to find you?"

"I'm sure you'll figure it out." With that, the woman walked away, leaving Elena staring after her.

"Elena." Her father hurried to her side. "Are you all right?" he said in Spanish.

"I'm fine. Though I'd be better if I was dry."

"There are some spare uniforms in the office," he said. "I'll go and get you one. Freshen up in the gym if you like. And you"—he turned toward Nic, who had quietly reappeared during the commotion—"I want to see you in my office when your shift finishes."

Nic looked unimpressed by the command, and Elena had to bite her tongue so she didn't chastise him herself as she brushed past him. Thankfully, the gym was empty—unsurprising, considering the mercury was in the low nineties—and Elena towed herself off as best as she could manage as she waited for her spare clothes.

“Is there a hero somewhere in here?” A familiar voice called, and Elena grinned as her best friend stepped into the gym. “I’m looking for a hero?”

“I think you might have the wrong room.”

“Not according to the people out there,” Marcos said, leaning in for a hug. “You’re the talk of the hotel. Made quite an impression. You couldn’t have waited five minutes so I could see you in action?”

“And let the kid drown?”

“I’m sure they’d have been fine.” Marcos grinned wide, and Elena shook her head as she sat on an exercise bike. Marcos settled onto one of the gym’s rowing machines, and Elena laughed when it moved, nearly sending them sprawling on their ass.

“So, the prodigal daughter returns,” Marcos said, once they’d recovered their composure. “Back to slumming it with those of us who didn’t get into a fancy American school.” The teasing was good-natured, though, a smile on their mouth, and Elena knew they’d missed her as much as she’d missed them. “How are you going to cope?”

“I don’t know.” Elena heaved a dramatic sigh. “But I’m sure I’ll manage.”

Marcos shook their head. “Before I forget—I made you something.” They reached into their pocket and produced a teardrop necklace. The chain was silver and delicate, and Elena recognized the shining purple stone as amethyst, her birthstone.

“Another *Made by Marcos* creation?” Elena said, taking the necklace with careful fingers. They’d come a long way from the crude pieces Elena had been gifted when they were starting out—Elena knew their Etsy shop was thriving—but she still loved each one the same, because they’d all been made for her. “You spoil me.”

Marcos shrugged. “Consider it a welcome home present. Speaking of: how long are you here to annoy me this time?”

“To brighten up your days, you mean?” Elena fastened the chain around her neck. “Two months. My DPT program starts in the middle of August.” After her first choice of career—professional swimmer—had been cut short by injury, it had taken Elena a long time to figure

out what she wanted to do. She was behind her peers, graduating at twenty-eight, but she felt good about where she was at, and about the next step she was taking. Physical therapists had tried everything to get her back to racing after she'd torn her left rotator cuff, and Elena wanted to be that person for someone else. To help people.

"After you graduate, do I get to call you Dr. Elena Garcia?"

Elena shrugged. "I guess that'll technically be my title." Doctor of physical therapy had a ring to it.

"I still can't believe it. You hated school more than I did."

"Because time spent in school was time I wished I was in the pool," Elena said. "And that was all I wanted to do." In hindsight, it was a good thing her parents hadn't allowed her to drop the ball on her education. Elena might have hated it, but with the help of a few private tutors she had done well and would never have been where she was now if they'd let her flunk out.

"And we all know how much you loved the pool." Her father appeared in the doorway holding a pile of clothes, a fond smile on his face. Elena knew it had been hard on her parents, too, when she'd retired from swimming competitively. They'd given up a lot—and spent thousands—so Elena could achieve her dreams, sacrificing some of their own, but they'd never put any pressure on her to succeed.

"Here you are." He handed Elena the clothes. "I have a meeting in a few minutes, so I'll see you back at home. Your mother should be back from work in an hour or so to keep you company."

He kissed Elena's cheek before leaving them to it. Elena waited until the door was closed behind him before wriggling out of her shirt, replacing it with the white polo that the majority of Sol Plaza employees wore. Years of changing in front of other people had made her immune to self-consciousness, and she knew Marcos didn't care anyway. They'd been best friends since they were four—it wasn't the first time they'd seen each other half-dressed.

"How is it that you still have the same physique you had when you were a pro?" Marcos said as Elena peeled off her pants.

She wished there was something she could do about her underwear, but she didn't feel like going commando for the rest of the day, so she pulled the black slacks on once she'd dried her legs.

"Years of regimented diet and exercise?" Elena didn't necessarily try to stay in the same shape as she had been during her pro years, but it was hard to let go of her routines.

"It's unfair."

"Thank you for the compliment." She stuck her tongue out at them and folded her clothes into a sad, soggy pile. "You look dashing as ever." When they were younger, Marcos had been scrawny—tall and lanky, skinny no matter how much crap they ate—but had filled out over the years. They no longer looked like they could be knocked over by a stiff breeze, and that wasn't a bad thing. "In fact, you look amazing."

Confidence really did work wonders. It had taken a long time for Marcos to figure out who they were. They'd come out as pansexual a couple of years after Elena had realized she was gay, and as nonbinary when they were twenty-two. The change had been immediate, like a weight lifted off their shoulders and they were finally able to live a full and healthy life. The way they carried and treated themselves was a stark contrast from their childhood and Elena was so happy for them.

"Glowing, in fact," Elena said. "Has that got anything to do with a man by the name of André?" From the faint blush on Marcos's cheeks, Elena surmised that the answer to that question was a resounding yes. "I'm happy for you."

"Thanks. I'd ask if you had someone waiting for you across the Atlantic, but I think we both know the answer is no."

"You know you'd be the first to know if I did." Even though they were an ocean and several time-zones apart, they still spoke often.

"True. I'd have to throw you a party: Infamous Elena Garcia finally settles down." Marcos grinned when Elena flipped them off.

"I wouldn't say infamous."

"I would. You've gotten yourself a reputation around these parts."

Elena shrugged it off. She liked to indulge in what the island had to offer when she was home for the holidays—what was wrong with that?



“So did you, before you decided to settle down,” she said. Marcos had used to be just as wild as she was. “But come on, I don’t want to talk about that anymore. Catch me up on everything I’ve missed since I was last here.”

## Chapter 2

LUCY TOOK A SIP OF her passionfruit martini mocktail and adjusted her AirPods as she leaned back on her sun lounger.

As she lost herself in her audiobook—her second of the week, the break from work giving her the chance to indulge in some old hobbies—Lucy’s gaze strayed to the opposite side of the pool.

The tall, tanned lifeguard who had captured Lucy’s attention when she’d leapt into the pool to save a drowning child was nowhere to be seen, the lifeguard chair occupied by the same teenager who’d been there the day before.

Lucy didn’t know why she was disappointed. Sure, it had been nice to talk to someone face-to-face. Even nicer to be flirted with—or at least, Lucy thought it had been flirting—considering she still felt raw and unwanted after everything that had happened with Olivia.

But one conversation didn’t mean anything.

Lucy lay her head back and closed her eyes, determined to stop looking toward the lifeguard chair like she was desperate. Her audiobook was reaching a critical point—the murderer was about to be discovered—when it cut off mid-sentence, replaced by the blare of her ringtone.

Grumbling, Lucy glanced at the screen. It was Carla, requesting a video call, and Lucy accepted, knowing if she didn’t, Carla would keep calling until she picked up.

“Hello?” Lucy squinted at the screen, barely able to see Carla’s face because it was so dark. She did some quick math in her head—it was around 9 a.m. at home, and Carla famously didn’t rise from bed until at least 10 a.m. on a Sunday, much as her husband might nag her. “What’s the point of a video call if you aren’t going to open the drapes?”

“The point is I get to see you living it up,” Carla said, voice raspy from sleep. “Show me what I’m missing out on.”

Lucy obliged, sitting up on her lounge and twisting her phone around. She showed Carla the pool, gleaming in the sunlight, the beach-hut cabin that served as a poolside bar, and the roiling waves of the ocean visible in the distance.

“I’m very jealous. Is that a cocktail, too?”

Lucy took a sip. “Mocktail.” Lucy wasn’t going to start day drinking, vacation or no.

“I hate you.”

“You could always come and join me,” Lucy said, leaning back and kicking her feet up. “I have a king-size bed. Plenty of room for the both of us.”

“If only I could.” Carla sighed. “But I’ve been handed four new clients because one of my colleagues is an idiot.”

Lucy hoped Felix hadn’t said something similar when he had been given Lucy’s ongoing cases. “Which one?”

“Brian. You know that big trial he lost a couple of weeks ago? Turns out he was paid to throw it.”

“Jesus.”

“I know. It has been a shitshow. And now all our cases are under the microscope, which is not what we need, especially with our workload increased. It’s been—”

Lucy blinked as the woman from the previous day strode out of the hotel lobby. She wore a practical one-piece swimsuit and knee-length boardshorts, a black lanyard around her neck with a whistle dangling from it, and Lucy’s towel tucked under her arm.

“Lucy?” Carla said. “Are you listening to me?”

“Sorry.” Sheepish, Lucy turned her gaze back to her phone—but then she noticed the lifeguard heading her way. “Give me a second.”

“Give you a second? What, because you’re so busy ordering mocktails?”

Lucy ignored Carla, taking out one of her AirPods and dropping her phone onto the sun lounger as a shadow fell over her. “Hi.”

“Hi.” The woman spoke with lightly accented English, brown eyes bright as she handed Lucy her towel. Between the accent and her Brown skin, Lucy assumed she was one of the islands native inhabitants. “As promised. Freshly washed and everything.”

“Thank you.” Lucy expected her to leave, but she lingered, towering over Lucy, although it wasn’t her height Lucy found intimidating. It was her smile, the curve of her lips both wicked and inviting, sending Lucy’s heart racing.

“Planning any more daring rescues?”

“Depends—are you planning on being as incompetent as your colleague?”

The woman laughed, a sound Lucy wouldn’t mind hearing again. “Oh, I can assure you I’m very competent,” she said, the accompanying wink leaving Lucy with no doubt she wasn’t just talking about her lifeguarding duties. “But I’d better get to it. It was nice to speak to you again...?”

“Lucy.”

“Elena.” Elena held out a hand, her grip firm and her fingers warm when Lucy offered hers for Elena to shake. “Until next time.”

Elena sauntered away, and Lucy couldn’t help but watch her go.

Rustling echoed into her ear, and Lucy swore—she’d forgotten all about Carla, too busy getting lost in gorgeous brown eyes.

“Sorry about that,” Lucy said, putting her other earphone back in. “So, Brian’s an idiot?”

“Not so fast.” Carla had turned on a lamp while Lucy had been distracted and stared at Lucy with narrowed eyes. “What the hell was that? Or should I say who the hell was that?”

“Nothing. And no one.”

“Then why are you blushing?”

“I am not.”

“You are.”

Lucy squinted at the thumbnail in the corner of her screen showing her face. Goddammit—she was. Stupid pale complexion.

“And it didn’t sound like nothing,” Carla said. “Sounded like flirting to me. Are you embracing that adage about the best way to get over someone?”

“No!” The exclamation was loud enough to draw the attention of a couple people nearby, and Lucy was sure her cheeks were turning redder by the second. She glanced across the pool. At least Elena wouldn’t notice Lucy’s growing embarrassment—she was engaged in conversation with a fellow employee. Part of the waitstaff, if Lucy remembered correctly—they’d caught her eye because of the pin badge on their uniform, they/them pronouns listed on top of the nonbinary flag. “I’m not interested in getting under anyone. Especially not one of the hotel lifeguards.”

“Why not? I had a highly unflattering angle of her and even I could tell she is gorgeous.”

Lucy shook her head, lying back on her lounge to avoid the temptation Elena presented. It wouldn’t do to be caught staring. “It’s not going to happen. I don’t...do that.”

Carla’s laughter rang loud in her ears. “Have a one-night stand? God, you sound like such a prude. It might be good for you.”

“How on earth would it be good for me?”

“How would it be bad for you?” Carla said in her best no-nonsense voice. “You are single, hot, and on vacation. And a distraction so you don’t keep dwelling on what happened with she-who-shall-not-be-named, would not be the worst thing in the world.”

Lucy tried not to think that Carla raised some good points. “There’s a difference between flirting with someone and inviting them into your bed.” Elena looked like she could be half Lucy’s age. “Perhaps she acts that way with all the hotel guests.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

Lucy shrugged. "It's none of my business, is it?"

"Just—don't be so closed-off, okay? What is the worst that could happen?"

Based on Lucy's recent track record? A lot.

She was saved having to answer by the arrival of Nate, appearing on Lucy's phone screen to hand his wife a steaming mug of coffee. "Hi, Nate. How are things?"

"Good, good." He perched beside Carla on their bed and leaned toward the camera. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"She could be enjoying herself more," Carla muttered, and Lucy groaned.

"Enough!" Lucy's annoyance made Nate blink, no doubt wondering what he'd missed. Not that he wasn't used to their bickering—he and Carla had been together for nearly ten years. "We're not talking about this anymore. Are you two doing anything nice today?"

"I'm trying to get Carla to come with me to the farmers' market," Nate said, voice tinged with desperation. "But that would involve her getting out of bed."

"Not before ten, darling. I still have another—" Carla glanced at the watch on her wrist— "five minutes."

Nate shook his head, but he was smiling. "I'm going to shower off my run before you hog the bathroom." He kissed Carla's cheek and raised a hand to wave at Lucy. "Hope we see you soon, Luce. It's not the same without you here—I have to be Carla's sounding board, and, as she keeps telling me, I pale in comparison to you."

Lucy grinned. Much as her getaway was nice, she did miss the two of them. If she were at home right then, she'd probably be spending her Sunday with the Andersons. "I'm sure she's overexaggerating."

"I am not," Carla said. "Lucy, what is the correct response to me telling you what an idiot Brian is?"

"Agree with everything you say," Lucy said without hesitation.

"Exactly." Carla leveled her husband with a disappointed stare. "See? Not 'don't be so hard on him, Carla.' Honestly."

Nate shot Lucy a pleading look as he stood up. "Please come home."

“Bye, Nate,” Lucy said, laughing. “Maybe you shouldn’t be so hard on Nate,” she said to Carla once Nate had disappeared from view.

“Please. You know he can handle himself. Now, what are you doing for the rest of your day?”

“Finishing the audiobook you interrupted when you called me.”

“How rude of me. I’ll let you get back to it, shall I?”

“Have fun at the farmers’ market.”

Carla’s sigh was good-natured. “Have fun checking out the hot lifeguard. Speak to you soon!”

Carla hung up, and Lucy was re-united with her audiobook. Before she set down her head, she locked eyes with Elena again and tried not to groan.

Lucy needed to get some self-control. Let Elena do her job—and definitely not think about taking Carla’s advice.

Slipping on her sunglasses, Lucy leaned back and lost herself in the words of Patricia Cornwell.

\* \* \*

Elena smothered a yawn with the back of her hand; a glance at her watch revealed she had thirty minutes before the end of her shift. As much as she loved her job, she didn’t love the way time crawled to a near stand-still in the last hour.

At least things had been uneventful compared to the day before. She’d seen Quentin a few times that afternoon—though never running—and hoped he’d learned his lesson.

The heat today was near unbearable, and Elena debated slipping into the water to wet her bathing suit to cool herself down. She settled for dipping her feet in the shallow end, the joyful screeching of kids playing nearby filling her ears.

Across the pool, Elena’s gaze lingered on a figure stretched on a sun lounger, soaking up the rays. Lucy wore a cerulean blue bikini, matching the color of her eyes. Eyes Elena kept finding herself drawn to. And she wasn’t the only one, because Elena often found Lucy looking back at her.

A shadow fell over Elena, and she glanced up to find Marcos holding out a bottle of water.

“What’s this for?” Elena said in Spanish, though she was grateful as she took a sip.

“Got to keep yourself hydrated,” Marcos said, joining her by the pool. Their shift had just finished, so in place of the Sol Plaza uniform, Marcos wore denim shorts and a pink shirt Elena would never be able to pull off. “Especially if you’re going to keep drooling over our guests.”

Elena smacked them on the arm. “I am not drooling.”

“Sure you are. I’ve been watching you all afternoon, and you can’t keep your eyes off room 405.” They nodded toward Lucy, and Elena scowled. She hadn’t realized she’d been so obvious.

“She has a name. Lucy.”

“You’re on a first name basis already?” Marcos raised their eyebrows. “You work fast.”

“You’re the one that knows her room number.”

“She has to give it in to order drinks. It’s not my fault I’m an attentive person.” The grin on their face was wiped away when Elena tickled their sides. “Uncalled for.”

“Called for.”

“So, how long until you make a move? Should I get a sweepstake going?”

Elena shook her head. “You make me sound like a player.”

“Um, because you are. It wouldn’t be the first time you’ve slept with a guest—and let’s be honest, it won’t be the last, either.”

Elena knew they had a point. Sure, it wasn’t exactly encouraged—and if her father knew how many of his hotel rooms Elena had seen the inside of, he’d probably have an aneurysm—but when she spent six days of the week hanging out poolside, she caught people’s attention.

And they caught hers. For someone who wasn’t interested in more than casual fun, holidaymakers were the perfect match. Most guests stayed a maximum of two weeks—the perfect length for a summer fling before they went their separate ways, never to see one another again.



It was an arrangement that had never failed Elena in ten years of trying.

“If you need help, I can tell you her drinks order.”

Elena chuckled. “I think I can manage on my own, thank you.”

“I don’t doubt it. Speaking of drinks—if you still want to meet André, he’s coming here after work tomorrow night.”

“Of course I want to meet him.” Officially, anyway. Elena had spoken to André when Facetiming Marcos, but they’d yet to spend time together in person.

“You have to promise you’ll behave yourself.”

“You do know you should have made me promise before telling me when he’s coming, right?”

Marcos glared. “Elena.”

She grinned, leaning her head on their shoulder. “I promise I won’t embarrass you too much.” Having known each other for twenty-four years, Elena had dozens of stories saved up to unleash on their partners. It was the best part of meeting them.

“Just don’t tell him the hamster story.”

“I’ll think about it.” Elena grinned at the unimpressed look on Marcos’s face. “Speaking of hamsters,” she said, as her least favorite Sol Plaza employee caught her attention by the bar. She wasn’t used to seeing Miguel anywhere other than behind the front desk—thankfully. The pool was her turf. “What’s he doing out here?”

“Flirting with one of the new waitresses, by the looks of it,” Marcos said. The waitress in question looked young, her blonde hair scraped back into a ponytail. She seemed uncomfortable, her smile forced and her body leaning away from where Miguel towered over her. “Where are you going?” Marcos said when Elena rose to her feet.

“To check she’s okay.”

“Don’t antagonize him.”

“Would I do such a thing?”

Marcos raised an eyebrow. “Yes.”

Elena didn’t dignify them with a response.

## In Too Deep

\* \* \*

“Come on,” Miguel was saying to the girl in English as Elena approached. “Just one drink. That’s all I’m asking for.”

“I really can’t.” Her smile was more of a grimace. “I’m sorry.”

“Why not? You said you don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Has no one ever told you that ‘no’ is a full sentence?” Elena leaned against the bar beside Miguel, smiling when his face twisted into a scowl.

“Has no one ever told you to mind your own business?”

Elena ignored him in favor of turning to the poor girl he’d been harassing, now looking between the two of them with wide eyes. Elena glanced at her name tag—*Becky*—and wondered if she was one of the many British tourists who came to the island to soak up some sun while earning some cash. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“See? I wasn’t bothering her.”

Judging from the look on Becky’s face, Elena knew that wasn’t true.

“I should really get back to my shift,” Becky said, hurrying away without waiting for a reply, and Elena made a mental note to check in with her in a few days. It wasn’t the first time Elena had known Miguel to be pushy—he’d tried it with her when they were teenagers—but she’d hoped he’d grown out of it.

“What is your problem?” Miguel said, switching to Spanish as soon as Becky was gone, his eyebrows furrowing as he whirled to face Elena.

“My problem?” Elena scoffed. “Are you kidding me? You were clearly making her uncomfortable. Stop hitting on people when they say they’re not interested.”

Miguel muttered something under his breath, too quietly for Elena to hear.

“And that fake Rolex isn’t impressing anyone.” Elena glanced at the flashy watch on his wrist, his shirt sleeves rolled up to show it off, and Miguel bristled.

“It’s not a fake.”

“Sure, because that’s something a front desk manager can afford.”

“Oh, just fuck off, Elena.”

“Gladly.” She strode back to her chair with her jaw clenched. Miguel was her least favorite part of spending her summers at the Sol Plaza and she hoped, as she watched him disappear back into the lobby, she didn’t encounter him again too much in the next few weeks.

\* \* \*

Lucy pushed open the door of the hotel gym, pleased to find it empty. Not that it was much of a surprise—she imagined most people on vacation weren’t interested in an early morning workout.

She was, though. While she was taking a break from her life and work in New York, Lucy was glad she could keep up her regular workout routine at the hotel. Stepping onto the treadmill, Lucy upped the speed and settled into a rhythm. Sure, it wasn’t as stimulating as racing around Central Park, but at least here she didn’t have to dodge tourists and dog-walkers alike.

Behind her, the door opened. Lucy didn’t turn her head, too busy focusing on her breathing—but nearly stopped altogether when Elena strode into view.

Wearing tiny shorts and a sports bra in place of her usual poolside attire, Lucy felt as if Elena had been sent directly to test her.

“This is a nice surprise,” Elena said, smiling when she saw Lucy. “Usually the only other people I ever see in here are beefed-up hotheads that walk like this”—she did a demonstration of someone whose arms were too large to hang by their sides—” or guys hiding from their wives and kids.”

“I can safely say I’m not hiding from anyone.”

“I’d say that’s a shame, but...” Elena’s gaze flickered over Lucy’s body. “If that means you’re single then I’m glad.”

Lucy swallowed, decreasing the speed on the treadmill to a gentle jog—she didn’t trust herself not to trip and make a fool out of herself with Elena’s gaze on her. Lucy hadn’t ever met someone so confident—and considering her line of work, that was saying something.

“Are you?” Elena said, when Lucy remained quiet. “Single?”

Elena’s forwardness made Lucy more flustered than she’d like to admit. “Y–yes.”

Lucy felt like a fly trapped in a spider’s web when Elena’s smile widened.

“I’m going to be at the hotel bar tonight—let me buy you a drink?”

Lucy desperately tried to remember what she’d said to Carla: that it was a bad idea. Her mouth opened though she wasn’t sure what she was going to say—but was saved having to answer by the buzzing of her cellphone.

Glancing at the screen, Lucy saw Felix’s name and knew she shouldn’t ignore it. He would only call if it was important.

“I’m sorry,” she said to Elena as she lifted the phone to her ear. “I have to take this.”

“Saved by the bell.” Elena’s smile was wry. She left Lucy to it, settling onto a rowing machine in front of the row of treadmills. Lucy slowed her pace to a walk as she answered Felix’s call. “Hello?”

“Oh, thank God,” Felix said when the line connected. “I didn’t know if you’d pick up.”

Lucy struggled to focus as Elena set a punishing pace, the muscles in her back and arms working hard. She had a scar across her left shoulder, pink against tan skin, but if it was some kind of injury it didn’t seem to bother her.

“What’s up? Wait.” Lucy frowned as she thought of the time difference. “Isn’t it like 4 a.m. there?”

“Yeah. Couldn’t sleep. I’ve got the Hendel deposition later.”

“And you’re not feeling good about it.” Why else would he be calling her at a stupid hour in the morning?

“No. I feel awful.”

“You shouldn’t.” Lucy reached for her towel as she pressed the stop button. She needed to get of there if she was going to be any use to him—her eyes kept meeting Elena’s in the mirrored wall, and all she could think about was Elena’s offer, and what might happen if Lucy

took her up on it. “I wouldn’t have given you my cases if I didn’t think you could handle them, Felix.”

“But—”

“No buts.” Lucy had trained her fair share of junior lawyers over the years, and she was no stranger to talking them down from the edge. “How long have we been working together now? Three, four years? I know exactly what you’re capable of. This isn’t your first deposition. It’s not even the first one you’ve taken the lead on.”

“But it is the first time you won’t be in the room with me.”

“You have never needed me to be in the room, Felix. Trust me when I say that.”

“I do. I just don’t trust myself.”

“You need to.” Lucy stepped off the treadmill. “If you want to be at the top of your game, you cannot doubt yourself.”

“Can I run some of my questions by you?”

“Of course. Give me a second to get comfortable.” Lucy cast one last look at Elena before snatching up her room key and heading for the elevators, trying not to think about the look of disappointment that had flashed across Elena’s face when she’d realized Lucy was leaving.

Once back in her hotel room, Lucy settled herself in one of the wrought-iron chairs on her balcony and kicked her feet up on the edge of her hot tub. It was early, the air was warm and humid, and she couldn’t wait to slip into the shower and wash the sweat from her skin.

But she had to settle Felix’s nerves first.

It took over an hour, but he sounded more relaxed as time wore on, and Lucy was confident, as he read out his final question, he’d be fine.

“Thank you for your help,” Felix said. “I appreciate it. Do you—do you know when you’re going to be back? Everyone here misses you.”

Lucy scoffed, doubting that. Even before the disaster with Olivia, Lucy hadn’t been especially popular. Everyone at the firm was so busy with their own cases and their own teams, there wasn’t much time to be sociable. “No, they don’t.”

“They do. It’s not the same without you.”

“I don’t know when I’ll be back.” Whenever she thought about stepping into the office again, Lucy felt as if someone was standing on her chest, making it hard to breathe. And whenever she thought about laying eyes on Olivia, she felt as if she was going to be sick. “But I’m not ready yet.”

“Take as long as you need,” Felix said, his voice soft, and of all the people there, Lucy knew Felix would be one of the few who did miss her. “But if it’s going to be a while, I might be sending some client calls your way. Some of them are already getting restless dealing with me.”

Lucy sighed but knew she should have expected as much. Not many of her clients would have appreciated her going dark, especially so suddenly. “I think I can handle that. Tell me about something other than work. How is the wedding planning going?”

“One wedding has turned into two, so...”

“Just to confirm—you are marrying Saanvi at both?”

“Ha ha,” Felix said, in that deadpan tone he used when he was particularly done with a client. “Yes. But to keep everyone happy, we’re having a traditional Indian wedding to keep her side of the family happy, and a Mexican wedding to satisfy mine. Or we might just elope. It’s all very up in the air.”

Lucy chuckled. “I don’t envy you. I’m sorry for piling my cases on you, too—I didn’t mean to cause you more stress.”

“Oh, it’s fine. Honestly, it’s nice to have something to concentrate on—even if it is sometimes out of my comfort zone.”

“You’ll do fine.” Lucy was sure of that. “I’ll let you get back to it. Will you call me after your deposition finishes and let me know how it goes?”

“Okay. Thank you again, Luce.”

He hung up, and Lucy breathed a long sigh. There—she’d done something for work, and the world hadn’t imploded.

Lucy hauled herself to her feet; the day was still early. A quick glance over the balcony railing revealed her usual sun lounger was unoccupied, but she hesitated. Would Elena be working today? Would she seek Lucy out, ask her about that drink again?

Lucy shook her head. She was being ridiculous. And she couldn't avoid the pool for the rest of her stay. It would be fine—Elena probably wouldn't even look her way. And if she did...Lucy could handle herself.

Decision made, Lucy retreated into her room. Time for a shower and then another day of soaking up the sun, trying not to think about the things she'd left behind—or the temptation she knew would be waiting for her at the hotel bar later that night.

## Chapter 3

“YOU DO KNOW THIS ISN’T the only bar on the island, right?” Elena drew Marcos into a hug as she met them at the entrance to the Sol Plaza bar.

“Gotta take advantage of that twenty percent discount, Elena,” they said in Spanish, and Elena shook her head. “Plus, I promised Maria we’d keep her company until her shift finishes.” Marcos nodded toward the solitary bartender, who waved when she noticed them looking. “She gets bored.”

“I’m not surprised.” The nightlife at the Sol Plaza wasn’t exactly buzzing. Not with the bars and restaurants of Santa Cruz right on their doorstep. “So, where is this boyfriend of yours? You did invite him, right?”

“I knew I’d forgotten something!” Marcos slapped their forehead, and Elena rolled her eyes. “He had to work late. He’ll be here soon.” Marcos looped their arm through Elena’s and pulled her toward the bar. “You can buy the first round.”

“Me? I’m a poor student, remember?”

“A poor student who managed to get a sponsor to cover all her student loans—cry me a river.”

Elena grinned as she settled into one of the bar stools. “Okay, you got me there. What do you want?”

“Surprise me.”



While they waited for Maria to finish serving a guest a few seats over, Elena took the opportunity to scope out the room—and tried not to be disappointed when she didn't spot Lucy among the handful of patrons.

Maybe Elena shouldn't be surprised. Lucy had looked like a deer in the headlights when Elena had made the offer. And she hadn't agreed to come before answering her phone. In fact, she had avoided Elena's gaze at the pool all afternoon.

Still, a part of her had been hopeful. But she'd shake it off soon enough.

"Anyone would think you weren't happy to see me," Maria said, approaching with a smile. She'd only been hired two years before, but had fast become a bright spot during Elena's summers at the hotel. A native Latine Brazilian, her Spanish sometimes had a Portuguese lilt—it made for some interesting conversations sometimes when the words didn't quite match up. "What's with the frown?"

Elena hadn't realized she was frowning. "Sorry. Mind was miles away. And you know I'm always happy to see you."

"Flirt," Maria said, and Elena grinned. If Maria wasn't painfully straight, Elena had no doubt they would have hooked up ages ago. "So, what can I get you both?"

"I'll have a pint of San Miguel, and Marcos will have the strongest cocktail you can mix them."

"Are you trying to get me drunk?"

"Yes, that way you won't notice when I'm telling André embarrassing stories."

Marcos narrowed their eyes, and Elena smiled back serenely.

"You don't want to mess with me, Elena."

"Why not? It's fun."

Marcos shot her a glare, and Elena stared right back. Both of them were too stubborn to be the one who blinked first.

"Never a dull moment when you two are together," Maria said, amused. "Two drinks coming right up."

Marcos only looked away when a glass was placed in front of them.

“Let me know what you think,” Maria said, leaning her arms on the bar. “It’s the national drink of my homeland. A caipirinha.”

One of the things Elena loved most about the hotel—and the island—was the way it drew people from around the world, their cultures mixing together to make something unique. Maria had introduced Elena and Marcos to a number of Brazilian delicacies, and judging from the look on Marcos’s face, she had just added another to the list.

“It’s good,” Marcos said after taking a sip. “I’d order it again.”

“High praise.” Maria looked pleased as she turned her attention to Elena. “How are things with you? Glad to be back?”

“Good. And always.” While Elena had loved the chance to go to college in the States, a place she’d always dreamed of living when she was younger, it was so far away from home. “What’s new with you?”

“Nothing much. You know nothing interesting ever happens around here.”

True, but Elena loved that about the place. That no matter how long she was away for, it still felt the same when she came home.

Some things did change, though, Elena thought, as André strode into the bar. A tall, Black man with a wide smile, Elena loved him the second she saw his face light up when his eyes landed on Marcos.

“Hi, baby.” Marcos switched to English— André had only moved to the island two years before from London, and Marcos stressed he wasn’t completely comfortable conversing in Spanish yet—and stood to kiss his cheek. “You remember Maria? And this is Elena.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you.” André swept Elena into a warm hug. “You’re even more beautiful in person.”

“He’s a keeper,” Elena said once she’d been released, and Marcos smiled, resting their head on André’s chest.

“I know. How was work?”

“Fine, fine. But I don’t want to talk about that tonight.” André turned to Elena with a wide smile. “Marcos said you’ve been friends for a long time?”

“Twenty-four long years,” Elena said. “I deserve a medal for putting up with them for that long.”

Marcos rolled their eyes.

“You must have stories, then. Tell me—what were they like in high school?”

“Awkward,” Elena said. “We both were. Hadn’t really figured out where we fit in. But I never would have gotten through it without them.”

“Maria, what did you put in that beer?” Marcos said. “She’s never this nice to me.”

“Give me time,” Elena said. “Now, what embarrassing story should I tell first?”

Marcos waved a threatening finger toward Elena. “Don’t you dare.”

Elena grinned, deciding to relent—for now.

André was even nicer in person than he was on Facetime, and watching the way Marcos relaxed into him, a dopey smile on their face, Elena couldn’t help but smile too. Unlike her, Marcos had bounced from one relationship to another these last few years, never with someone good enough for them, and Elena was glad they’d finally found someone who appreciated them for who they were.

When Maria’s replacement arrived, signaling the end of her shift, the four of them took up residence at a table toward the back of the bar.

“Hey, look.” Marcos nudged Elena in the side a few minutes after they’d sat down. “It’s room 405.” He said it in Spanish—for her ears only.

Elena turned her head so fast she nearly got whiplash. Sure enough, Lucy was approaching the bar. Out of her usual bikinis and wearing a gorgeous white dress, she took Elena’s breath away.

“Is that your latest conquest?” Maria said in Spanish as well, eyeing Lucy with interest.

“I think she’s about to be,” Marcos said, but Elena ignored them. She watched as Lucy settled onto a bar stool, before glancing over her shoulder, scanning the room. Her gaze met Elena’s, but she quickly blinked and looked away.

Interesting.

Maybe she hadn't really expected Elena to be there—or hadn't been fully prepared for her to be.

Elena downed the remainder of her second bottle of beer. "Anyone need a refill?"

"Don't pretend you're going to be coming back here," Marcos said with a shake of their head, and Elena hesitated. She was supposed to be getting to know André, after all. Perhaps she should have invited Lucy out another night. "Go on," Marcos added when he noticed her wavering. "We're only staying for one more drink, anyway."

Elena leaned over to kiss their cheek. "Love you!"

"Yeah, yeah. Get outta here."

With a quick wave good-bye, Elena did. She made a beeline for where Lucy sat, resting her arms on the smooth wood of the bar as she leaned close. "I didn't think you were coming."

"I didn't know if I would," Lucy said, the words soft. She turned her head, and Elena lost herself in her blue eyes. "I've been pacing around my room for the last hour trying to decide whether I should."

"What made up your mind?"

Lucy worried at her bottom lip, teeth white against her red lipstick. "I don't know. Curiosity, I suppose. Wondering whether you were all talk."

Elena tried not to be offended as she held Lucy's gaze. "I can assure you I'm not."

"I guess I'll have to be the judge of that, won't I?" Lucy said, eyebrow raised. Elena grinned. She did like a challenge.

"What can I get you?" The bartender said, interrupting before Elena could think of a good comeback.

"A San Miguel, please." Elena set her empty bottle on top of the bar and turned her gaze back to Lucy. "And a...?"

"Passionfruit martini," Lucy said. "But I'm not letting you pay. Put the beer and a passionfruit martini on room 405's tab, please," she said to the bartender.

They nodded and hurried off to mix the cocktail before Elena had a chance to protest.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Elena said. “I said I’d buy you a drink.”

“What’s the point when my room is all-inclusive?”

“It’s the gesture.”

“Which leads to certain expectations,” Lucy said, and Elena frowned.

“I’m not expecting anything. If anything, you are—bold to tell me your room number.”

A blush stained Lucy’s cheeks, and Elena thought it was a good color on her. “I wasn’t telling you, I was telling them.”

“Sure.”

When their drinks were set down, Elena clinked her bottle against the rim of Lucy’s martini glass. “Cheers. And thank you.”

Lucy lifted the glass to her lips, and Elena tried to get a read on what she was thinking. She was leaning toward Elena instead of away, her body angled and open, her eyes twinkling in the low lighting. Elena wondered, as she debated walking her fingers forward to brush the back of Lucy’s hand where it rested on the countertop, what she would do if Elena swayed even farther into her orbit.

“Shouldn’t you be getting back to your friends?” Lucy said, though from the way her gaze flickered to Elena’s lips, Elena suspected that wasn’t what she wanted at all.

Elena turned her head, so lost in Lucy she’d almost forgotten the group she’d left behind. She was unsurprised to find them watching her—though she hoped it wasn’t putting Lucy off—and turned her attention back to the woman at her side.

“I have a feeling I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.”

\* \* \*

“Is that a line that works for you often?” Lucy said, an eyebrow raised, and Elena grinned.

It wasn’t fair, for someone to look so beautiful. After spending time basking in the sun, Elena was glowing. The red shirt she wore had a

plunging neckline that made it difficult for Lucy not to drift her eyes, and maybe coming down to the bar hadn't been such a good idea.

Maybe she should have stayed away, because Lucy felt powerless to resist the draw of Elena's eyes, couldn't stop admiring the curve of her lips.

"It's not a line if it's true."

"I'm not so sure about that." Lucy was well-aware of Elena's friends gawking at them, and they were growing increasingly hard to ignore. "I don't want to take up too much of your time."

Like that hadn't been exactly what Lucy had been planning on doing when she'd put on this dress—the nicest one she'd brought with her—and left her room. But she hadn't expected them to have an audience.

"What, like it's a hardship?" Elena ran her fingers across the back of Lucy's hand, and Lucy felt goosebumps erupt in the wake of Elena's touch. "Come on. I haven't been able to keep my eyes off you since I first saw you. Don't tell me you haven't noticed."

"Are you always this forward?"

Elena's shoulders lifted in a shrug. "When I choose to be."

Lucy took a sip of her drink to give herself a few precious seconds to think of how to respond to that. She wasn't used to being wanted. "So...have you worked here long?"

God, that was a stupid thing to ask. That wasn't how to flirt with pretty women at a bar. Though in Lucy's defense, she was rusty. In her last relationship—if it could be called a relationship, in light of the truths she now knew—Olivia had been the initiator, and before her, Lucy had been single for years. With a fast-paced job she loved sapping up most of her energy, trying to find the time to date was near impossible.

To her credit, Elena looked unperturbed by the question. "On and off since I was a kid. It's not a bad job to slip back into on my summers away from college."

Lucy's stomach churned. She knew Elena was younger—she wasn't blind—but college? Twenty-two was the oldest she could be. Unless she'd taken a year off. Or maybe she was getting a masters or a PhD.

Back stiffening, trying to drill into her mind that this was a woman much too young for her—one night or not—Lucy pulled her arm out of Elena’s reach and ignored her frown. “You’re still in college?”

Confusion turned to understanding, and Elena laughed. “I just graduated with my bachelor’s in exercise science,” Elena said. “But don’t worry—I didn’t go to college straight from high school. I’m twenty-eight.”

Still young, but not as young as Lucy had feared. Not young enough to send her running for the hills.

“I could tell you my whole life story, if you like,” Elena said. She shifted impossibly closer—must have been hovering on the edge of her seat—and Lucy breathed in the floral scent of Elena’s perfume. “But I can think of better ways to spend our time.”

“What do you suggest we do instead?”

A dangerous question, to be sure—but not as dangerous as the dark look that flashed through Elena’s eyes.

“Well,” Elena said, voice a low drawl, her Spanish accent more pronounced, “we could finish our drinks, and you could take me up to the fourth floor, and we can see what happens when there’s no one else around.”

Bold, and forward, and Lucy couldn’t deny it was having an effect on her. She’d never been wanted so openly, and she didn’t know what to do with the way it made her feel like her skin was on fire.

“Or,” Elena said, apparently noticing the hesitation on Lucy’s face, “we can finish our drinks, order another round, and have a conversation. No pressure.”

“No pressure? Like this isn’t what you hoped would happen when you asked me to meet you here?”

That smirk should be outlawed. “And what, exactly, were you hoping would happen when you did?”

Okay, Elena had a point there—and she knew it, too. Lucy hadn’t had to come. Hadn’t had to order them both a drink—or stay to finish it. But she hadn’t been able to resist the draw, the prospect of seeing if Elena was all talk. She hadn’t had sex in weeks—even before she and

Olivia had broken things off, it had been difficult to find the time—and Lucy couldn't deny a part of her was aching for human intimacy.

"I don't mind," Elena said, when Lucy couldn't come up with a suitable response. Laughter underlined her words, and no one should be so pretty when they smiled. "I'm glad you're here. And that we're on the same page."

"And what page is that?" Lucy said, breathless.

"Do you want me to spell it out for you?" Elena's hand dropped to Lucy's thigh, fingers drawing swirling patterns that made her dizzy.

Lucy shook her head. "Is this even allowed? Hotel employees sleeping with guests?"

Elena shrugged. "It's not exactly encouraged, but it's not against the rules, either."

"So we shouldn't really be doing this here," Lucy said, leaning away. "I don't want to get you into trouble."

"That's sweet, but I'll be fine. Like I said—we wouldn't technically be breaking any rules. And I won't tell if you won't."

Lucy cast her eyes around, knowing Elena wasn't the only employee currently in the room.

"My friends won't say anything," Elena said, like she could read Lucy's mind. Lucy got the feeling she wasn't the first guest Elena had done this with. It should probably bother her, but it only made it easier.

"And I'm sure that bartender doesn't even know I work here. I've never seen them before in my life. In fact, they might not even work here."

"They're wearing a uniform."

"Not conclusive evidence."

"I agree it probably wouldn't hold up in court, but short of asking to see their employee record, we'll have to give them the benefit of the doubt. Besides," Lucy said, finishing the last sip of her martini, "you don't wear a uniform. Maybe you don't work here, and you just pretend to be a lifeguard so you can hit on hotel guests."

Elena looked delighted. "That would be an elaborate plan." She set her empty beer bottle down, playing with the delicate silver chain of the



necklace around her throat. It drew Lucy's attention to her collarbones, and Lucy wondered if Elena was doing it on purpose. "And I do have a uniform. My bathing suit. Though if you'd prefer, I can turn up wearing a polo shirt and slacks tomorrow."

"I—would not prefer that."

"Why not?" Elena curved the fingers of her other hand around Lucy's thigh, one of her feet brushing the inside of her calf, and Lucy tried not to tremble beneath the touch. "You like my bathing suit?"

"I think you already know the answer to that question."

"I do." There was that damn smirk again, and Lucy wondered what it would feel like pressed against her skin. "I've caught you checking me out on more than one occasion. It's okay," Elena said, when Lucy felt her cheeks warm. "I don't mind. I've returned the favor. That black and white bikini of yours is incredible."

Lucy wasn't sure she'd ever met someone so brazen. The false bravado of youth, she supposed—though when she'd been Elena's age, she never would have dared approach someone older at the bar.

"I'd love to see what's underneath it, though."

Lucy couldn't help but let a chuckle escape. "Okay, that was a line."

"Yeah." Elena scrunched her nose. "Felt wrong as soon as I said it. Let's pretend that never happened." She nudged her empty bottle toward the other side of the counter. "Want a refill?"

Lucy knew that wasn't what she was really asking but appreciated Elena leaving the choice with her all the same. Elena had, after all, been clear about what she wanted from the get-go. It was up to Lucy to decide.

Lucy took a deep breath. She was forty years old, and she'd never once had a one-night stand. Had never wanted one, never felt the need to invite a stranger into her bed with the intention of a quick fuck before sending them on their way.

And yet, with Elena's eyes on her, open and wanting and dark in the bar's dimmed light, Lucy was starting to see the appeal.

Would she regret it, in the cold harsh light of day?

Maybe.

## **In Too Deep**

But she had a feeling she'd regret turning Elena down even more.

She'd never been good at taking risks. Her career certainly didn't allow it. Lucy had to be meticulous, scrutinize everything, think of every possible outcome—but maybe it was time she started.

Maybe some risks were worth taking.

“Why don't we see what my minibar has on offer, instead?”

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# IN TOO DEEP

BY RACHAEL SOMMERS

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