



# ROMERO

ELIZABETH REYES

**ROMERO**

**(The Moreno Brothers series #4)**

**By Elizabeth Reyes**

Romero By Elizabeth Reyes

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*This book is dedicated to my loyal readers. Particularly the ones who emailed me more than once to request that I write Romero and Isabel's story. This story was never going to be and if it hadn't been for you guys it may never have blossomed the way it did and now I'm so glad it's part of the Moreno Brother series. Just beware. Romero is ... well Romero. =)  
I hope you enjoy!*

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# CHAPTER 1

## High School Graduation

### Romero

Manny was on his third disposable camera. His girlfriend Aida stood next to him, wearing a dress that looked like he just picked her up on a street corner.

“Can you wind up your plastic camera a little faster so we can get out of here?” Max said. “It’s hotter than shit out here.”

“Shut up and get in there, will you? I’m sending every damn one of these to Cousin Lou in Texas. That asshole didn’t think we could raise this kid.” He smiled at Romero, and if Romero didn’t know any better, he’d think Manny was getting choked up again. *Jesus*. “C’mon smile, will you?”

Romero’s uncles had always insisted he use their first names

“You know, if you break down and buy a digital camera like everyone else, you can send them to him tonight in an email,” Max said.

Manny took a few more pictures. Romero got tired of telling him about his finger on the lens. Let him be pissed about it when he got all the pictures back. All he could think of was getting the hell out of there to go party with his friends.

“I can do the same with these as soon as I get them back. They give you a disc over at the drug store, smartass. Besides why would I buy a digital camera when I got a load of these?”

Romero frowned. His uncles had plenty of friends with “connections.” They constantly hooked him up with things that *fell off* of delivery trucks, in exchange for favors. Because of the business his uncles ran they had plenty of favors to barter with that those types of guys would really enjoy. The latest hook-up had been a few dozen boxes of disposable cameras. “Are we done?” Romero asked.

“Yeah, with this one.” Manny dumped the camera in a tote and pulled out another brand new disposable camera. “Go get your friends. I want a few with them in it.”

Romero began to protest, but it was pointless. If he didn’t obey, his uncle was bound to start yelling for his friends to get their asses over here anyway. Rather than endure another one of their usual public scenes, he complied. “All right, I’ll go get them but make it fast because I got somewhere to be.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll go when I say you go. We’re going to dinner, remember? I didn’t get all dolled up for nothing.”

Aida fixed his uncle’s bright red tie. Both his uncles had worn suits for the occasion. As usual, their choice in clothes didn’t disappoint. Manny, a heavysset man,

was in a white suit with a black shirt and bright red tie. Max looked like something out of a zoot suit movie. But it was all good. Romero was used to this. This was nothing compared to the matching powder blue suits they'd worn to his middle school graduation, and the scuffle they started in the crowd during the ceremony. "That fat bitch got right in front of me just as I was taking the picture!" was Manny's argument.

That fat bitch's husband didn't take too kindly to his uncle's foul mouth and it was on.

As he walked through the crowd of bodies, many still in their graduation robes, he spotted Claire—sweet, quiet, bookworm, Claire. Ever since the tenth grade when he'd caught her trying not to laugh at one of his lewd remarks, she'd been on his get-to-know list. Up until then he'd only had a to-do list when it came to girls. In fact, there were only two girls on his get-to-know list ever. Ironically, the other one, Libby, was a lot like Claire. Only unlike Claire, he'd never gotten the feeling Libby might actually be attracted to him, except for the few times he caught her staring and he thought she might've blushed. Unfortunately, they'd been in class and she'd spun her head around so fast he wasn't able to tell. Another unfortunate thing about her is she'd moved away a year ago.

He'd been surprised to see Claire in the Forensic science class he'd taken this past semester on the weekends as part of their school's regional occupational program. He hadn't told anyone about the class. Not even his uncles knew. He'd told them he enrolled in a weekend program but said it was a weight training thing.

Like in school, he hadn't expected to have much interaction with Claire, until they were partnered up on a project. There was no denying the attraction she tried so desperately to hide. He saw right through her. Even now, it made him smile at the times he'd broken through that sweet innocent wall of hers, and gotten her to admit a thing or two. Like when he teased her about being so holier-than-thou, she'd probably never even had a naughty dream. Not only did she admit to having had some, but they hadn't all been about her boyfriend.

Her boyfriend—that wiped the smile right off his face. He'd waited too damn long to get to know her and by the time he started talking to her in the ROP class she was taken. If she had wanted to, it wouldn't have been the first time that Romero had borrowed a little time with someone else's girl. Only thing was, with Claire he hadn't been too sure if he could handle sharing her. He never got a chance to find out though.

As strong as he felt her attraction had been, she wasn't the cheating type and apparently things between her and her boyfriend were pretty serious. Of course, that only made Romero want her more. What had really thrown him was when he smugly asked her if any of those dreams had been of him. He completely expected her to blush and deny it vehemently. Instead sweet innocent Claire smiled the wickedest smile that nearly made *him* blush and she pled the fifth.

But even that didn't top what he remembered most fondly about her. With all the suggestive teasing he'd done, he expected more demure responses. But after they finished up their project, instead of demure she'd teased him right back, calling him closet-smart. Something that for some reason always shut him right up.

Romero slowed down watching her pose for a picture with a woman he could only imagine was her mom. She noticed him after the picture had been taken and smiled, making Romero breathe in deeply. He smiled back and began walking toward

her. She'd only taken a few steps, when her boyfriend stepped in front of her with a bouquet of flowers. The moment was over and he decided to walk away.

He rounded up his two best friends: Eric Diego and Angel Moreno. "Don't ask me why, but Manny wants pictures with you guys in 'em. Let's get this over with. The sooner we're done, the faster I can get dinner with them out of the way and we can meet up."

"No fights this time uh?" Angel smirked.

"Shit, we're not out of here yet." Romero laughed.

They posed for a few hundred more shots, and the whole time Manny came up with more reasons why he had to take another.

"Do you have to make that face in every picture? This isn't a mug shot. Max, will it kill you to fucking smile in just one of these? Stop with the tough guy poses, Moe, no one's buying that shit."

Eric and Angel stifled in laughs. Romero had always gone by his last name to everyone else but his uncles. His first name was Ramon, though he'd never gone by it. Manny and Max both called him Monie when he was a kid. Over the years it morphed into Moe. His uncles loved introducing themselves as Manny, Max, and Moe any chance they got. They thought it was cool but Romero knew people's first thought, especially considering his two uncle's appearances were the Three Stooges.

They finally got out of there and went to the Lucky Dragon for dinner. Besides his friend Angel's family's upscale Mexican restaurant, this was the only other fancy restaurant his uncles liked going to. They'd gone there for so many years the owners knew them well. The owner's name was Pak Mi and even after all these years it never got old. "Pak Mi? No Pak *you!*" Then his uncles would go into a fit of laughter as if it were the first time they used that one.

After plowing through his food, Romero checked his phone again and replied to a text from Eric.

"Put that shit away, will you?" Manny pointed his chopsticks at Romero's cell. "How many times do I have to tell you, not during dinner?"

"But I'm done." Romero continued to text.

"Take that thing from him," Manny said to Max.

Romero scooted out of the booth before Max could reach for his phone. He leaned in and hugged Manny and then Max, then smiled and nodded at Aida. "Eric is outside—party time." He grinned. "Thanks for dinner. Don't wait up."

"Hey, Moe," Manny called out as he began to walk away. "You got condoms. Use them."

Romero turned to the women in the next booth who looked up at him after hearing his uncle's loud statement. He smiled and winked. "Don't worry. I always do."

Angel's family went all out as usual. They owned a restaurant and closed it up for the evening, just for the occasion. They'd party there for a while because they could sneak the free liquor from the bar and then move on to after-parties.

His two best friends couldn't be more different than him, but they'd been his best friends since they were kids and they'd always gotten along great. Romero knew if he hadn't lived up the street from them, they would've never been as tight they were now. That's how different they were.

Angel came from a big family—two brothers and a sister, and his parents

owned one of the most renowned restaurants in La Jolla. His two older brothers were in college on full scholarships. Angel was on the same path. He'd been the star football player most of the four years in high school. The only time he hadn't been in the spotlight was when his brothers were in it.

Eric was an only child so he could relate to Romero in that sense, but that's where any similarity in their family lifestyle ended. Eric's dad was a businessman and the epitome of class. He jetted all over the world, was well-read and educated. Both Eric and Angel's futures were carefully planned. They'd be attending college in the fall and knew exactly where they were going.

Romero, on the other hand, hadn't even looked into college. His uncles were under the impression that he'd join the family business. But Romero had other plans. Plans he hadn't shared with anyone.

His uncles, while a little rough around the edges, were good guys—now. They'd come a long way from their days of being thugs. His grandmother told him stories when he was younger. They ran with the worst of them and got his dad, their youngest brother, involved. Then his dad was arrested for drug trafficking—something to which his brothers introduced him. Romero was just a baby. His grandmother said his uncles, full of regret, decided to turn over a new leaf. Lead a life on the straight and narrow.

They gave up trafficking for gambling on the ponies in Del Mar. Manny was surprisingly lucky. He planned on saving up his winnings and opening up his own business. Then a few years later, his uncles decided they needed to step up and be the role models they never were to their younger brother. So they gave up the life of gambling for a more respectable way of life—they opened up a titty bar.

Romero's dad was supposed to do fifteen years in the can, but he was out on parole earlier that year. Just a few months later, he was back in for possession. The judge wasn't messing around either, since he was still on parole—slapped another ten-year sentence on him. Romero didn't care. He'd never known his old man anyway. As far as he was concerned, his uncles and grandmother were the only parents he ever had.

Romero would've never believed his graduation night would turn into this. Because Angel had met and fallen completely head over balls for the new chick in school senior year. She'd be coming along with them to party, like she had for months. Even worse? Now that Angel's highly guarded younger sister, Sofia, had turned seventeen, she was allowed to date. Eric had staked his claim immediately. Not that they hadn't been sneaking around for months, but now they'd be at the party out in the open for everyone to see they were a bona fide couple.

Romero couldn't understand how anyone would want to get tied down so young. He lived to get wasted and bag a new piece of ass every chance he got. That was the whole reason why he joined the football team to begin with. Ever since he'd made the starting line up and started bulking up, he never left a party without knowing he was getting laid, or at least blown by some of the girls who still tried to act like doing that was somehow more respectable than going all the way. Either way, it was a happy ending and he'd take it.

They were at a backyard party for over an hour and Romero had already thrown a few back. Eric and Angel were too busy honey-mooning to even get a buzz. Romero kicked it with some of the other football players. Ozzie, a third stringer but a good

buddy of Romero's, brought a bottle of Jack Daniels. "Your dad actually bought you this shit?"

Ozzie smiled, taking a swig then looking like he might throw up in his mouth. Romero laughed. Ozzie was no drinker. This was going to get ugly. "Give me that."

Ozzie handed him the bottle. Romero took a drink and grimaced as the warm liquid slid down, burning his throat in the process. "Smooth," he said, in a voice so hoarse the guys laughed.

Running into Claire and her boyfriend again at the party was an unpleasant surprise. He'd only seen her at these types of parties a handful of times—each time with her boyfriend—a basketball player who had frat boy written all over him. They were made for each other. What surprised him even more was her walking away from her boyfriend to come over and say hello to him.

"I was gonna say hello to you today when I saw you after graduation, but you walked away."

Romero glanced at her boyfriend who looked in their direction but avoided eye contact. Smart guy, because the liquor only intensified his regret of waiting too long to get to know Claire. It wouldn't take much now for Romero to snap. "Yeah, well, you looked busy."

She shrugged. "Anyway I just wanted to say congrats." She leaned in and whispered, "Mr. Closet Smart. I'm sure you have big plans."

Of course, Claire would be the only one who'd think that. "I have a few," he smiled. "What about you?"

One of the girls in the group with her boyfriend called out for her. Figures her coward ass boyfriend wouldn't even look their way, pretending he wasn't the one who'd put the girl up to calling for Claire. Claire turned and nodded.

"Looks like you're missed already."

She rolled her eyes. "Best of luck to you, Romero. I know you'll be successful at whatever you end up doing."

"Thanks," he smiled. "And I know you will, too."

He watched her walk back to her group and her boyfriend wrapped his arms around her as soon as she reached him.

A couple of hours later Romero was behind the garage with his hand down a cheerleader's pants. His fingers found their way to a spot that made her gasp and she moaned spreading her legs a little further. He kissed her even deeper.

"Romero," she spoke in his mouth.

He tried but couldn't remember her name. "Hmm."

"I've only done it once."

"Nice," he said, sucking her neck. "We'll get a few more in tonight."

"Right here?"

Romero stopped for a moment and looked at her. He hadn't really planned on doing it there. Usually, this was just the starter. They could head to the beach or a backseat later, but something about her anxious eyes told him she might change her mind.

He took the few steps over to reach for the back door of the garage. One turn, and it opened. Romero smiled. There had to be a car in there. He pulled her by the hand and she followed willingly. A peek inside, and he realized this was better than he

thought—an SUV, and the windows were open. He turned back to her with a smirk. “Happy Graduation, sexy girl.” He would’ve added her name instead of the endearment if he’d remembered it.

## **Isabel**

Isabel summed up her valedictory address with a smile. She glanced at her father who was behind the video camera that sat on a tripod just below the stage. He stood tall and proud, clapping. Her mother and siblings stood with everyone else, to applaud the speech she’d worked on for weeks. The immense relief of getting it over with was more than reward enough.

The last month and a half, she’d been a wreck. The only one of her siblings who hadn’t made Valedictorian was her brother Art, but then he’d gone to a highly regarded military school, and had graduated with honors, so that seemed acceptable enough. Isabel had struggled the last few months with her AP classes becoming increasingly difficult. She was so worried that her scores on her finals wouldn’t be enough. As relieved as she was that this was finally over, she knew this was only the beginning.

Both her oldest sister Pat, and her brother Art were following her father’s example and going into law. Her father was a criminal judge. Her other sister, Gina, had just transferred to Cornell, and knew before she even graduated from high school that she’d be majoring in civil engineering.

Isabel was still undecided about her major. Her mother had been a schoolteacher for years before being diagnosed with breast cancer a few years ago. Thankfully, she’d beat it. Even after the chemo taking so much from her mother and her father insisting she not go back to work, her mother insisted she had to.

Growing up, Isabel heard all the stories her mother told her about her students. She seemed to revel in it and even though her dad often made cracks about how unappreciated teachers were for all the hard work they did. Isabel noted how he never came home speaking fondly of his day at work, like her mother did so often. As much as her sister was pushing for her to go into law—maybe someday between them they could start their own firm, Isabel’s heart was leaning towards her mother’s first love—teaching.

After the ceremony, they went out for a swanky dinner in Laguna, at one of her dad’s favorite restaurants. A few of her friends had mentioned getting together later that evening to celebrate, but Isabel had plans early the next morning. Even though she was attending the University of San Diego, just over an hour away from her home in Laguna Beach, she would be staying in a dorm. Even more than her parents, her sister Pat that had always pushed her to excel. She did it all through grade school and high school. Unlike her brother, who was going to Loyola, Pat was studying close by and living at home. Isabel needed to get away. Already, because of their insistence, and because none of them had taken the summer off after high school, she was enrolled in summer school. Both her father and sister Pat had been hammering at her for months now, “Knock it out, no sense in wasting time.”

So tomorrow was orientation and her summer classes started in a week.

“I’m really proud of you, Isabel.” Her father squeezed her hand during dinner. It

was rare for her father to say anything heartfelt. It almost brought a tear to her eye.

“Yeah,” Pat added, “and you were worried about not making Valedictorian.” Her sister rolled her eyes. “I knew you had it in you, Bell, you just have to believe in yourself more.”

Isabel smiled. “I’m just glad it’s over.”

“Now the real fun begins,” Gina said. “College life and college *men*.” Her eyebrows bounced up and down.

Her mom chuckled. “Just don’t get too caught up in that stuff and let your grades slip.”

“I won’t.” Isabel couldn’t even imagine getting *caught up* in that. She had one boyfriend all through high school. The rest of the time, she spent most of her weekends studying and reading. Just like tonight, while everyone else was out celebrating graduation, she’d be hitting the hay early.

“Art, I thought you were bringing Sabrina to dinner tonight.” Her mom said, taking a sip of her wine.

Art shrugged. “Changed my mind.”

“Why?” Her mom asked.

“Is she still working at the Quick-Mart?” Pat asked, with a smirk.

“She’s putting herself through school, Patricia.”

Isabel chewed slowly, taking in the glare her brother gave Pat.

“It was just a question.”

“Yeah, well those kinds of sarcastic questions are the reason I didn’t want to bring her.”

Pat’s eyes opened wide as if his comment surprised her. “It’s nothing personal, Art. You should know by now, no one will ever be good enough for my little brother, least of all some trailer trash working at the Quick-Mart.”

“Pat,” her mother warned.

“I’m just—”

“Oh, but that arrogant asshole you’re dating—”

“Hey!” Her mom reached over and swatted Art on the back of the head. “I will not have that kind of language at the dinner table.”

“Your mother is right,” her father added, “lower your voice and apologize to your sister.”

Art apologized through his teeth, though it was anything but sincere. That pretty much ended any mood for small talk between her siblings. Her father asked Gina about her flight itinerary. Everyone agreed to keep their schedules open to be there to see her off since she’d be gone for months. Isabel never understood why Gina had chosen to go so far to school. As much as her family could drive her nutty sometimes, they meant the world to her and she’d miss them terribly if she was ever away from them for that long.

Even now that she’d be staying at a dorm, she was still close enough that she could drive back on a whim if she ever needed to.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Real World

### Romero

Now that he was eighteen, Romero could be a doorman at his uncles bar. He knew they expected him to be there for good, eventually graduating into working inside when he turned twenty-one, but that wasn't in his plans. He'd let them down easy when the time came, but for now, he'd enjoy the dancers and waitresses so easily accessible to him.

After high school, he continued to work out, maintaining the physique needed to man the door for unruly drunks who wanted in or needed to be thrown out. He'd been working there all summer.

Romero enjoyed the job. It gave him the experience he needed for what he was planning. While his friends would all be in college, he was doing his own prerequisite work. For years, he'd thought about possibly becoming a cop, then making detective like the ones he saw in movies and on television. But he decided not to go that route. He hated being on a schedule. That was the same reason he decided college wasn't for him. Unlike Angel and Eric, he barely managed to stay eligible to play football during high school. It wasn't that the classes were too hard for him. He just never really cared enough to pull top grades.

He'd already knocked out the joke of a test he needed to be licensed as a security guard. Not that his uncles required it, it was just step one of the goals he'd set for himself. Just like the sparring and grappling he'd taken up practicing for over a year now with some of the guys at the gym who did mixed martial arts.

Romero walked into the front room. He could hear Manny in the kitchen with Aida. "I put four meats in Max's sandwich, sugar." Aida said. "How many do you want in yours?"

"How 'bout I put my meat in you." Manny said, making loud kissing noises and Romero knew his uncle was attacking his girlfriend in the kitchen. *Again.*

Aida screeched then laughed loudly. Romero frowned. He was seriously going to have to get his own place. "Hey! I could hear you in here!"

"Well cover your ears 'cause it's about to get louder."

He heard Aida laugh, then snort. Romero laughed. *Sick bastard.* He sat down on the sofa and grabbed the remote. "You want me to fix you a sandwich, Moe?" Aida asked.

"Nah, I'm good. Thanks."

Max walked out of the hallway with a newspaper under his arm. "I have the squirts."

Romero didn't even look at him, just shook his head, staring at the television. "I

need my own place *now*,” he muttered.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

His uncle walked toward the kitchen. “Don’t we have medicine for the shits?”

Romero tried concentrating on the reality show on criminal investigations. But his uncles, as usual, were too loud.

“It’s in the bathroom,” Manny said.

“No it’s not, I didn’t see it.”

“It’s right there in the cabinet. I had the shits the other night, too. I took some.”

“I’m telling you it’s not there.”

Romero turned off the television and headed back to his room, trying to ignore his uncles, who were still arguing about the shit medicine on their way to the restroom. Manny walked in first. “Holy mother of fuck!”

“I told you, I’m sick! What did you expect, roses?”

“Well, can you open a ga-damn window for the love of Christ!”

Romero rushed by the open door, holding his nose. “And you left your splatteration all over the toilet, you sick fuck!”

“I couldn’t find the brush to clean it!”

The whole neighborhood could probably hear them, especially since his uncle had made such a racket opening the bathroom window. His uncles told him months ago that it was okay if he wanted to bring girls home to spend the night—he was a man now. Yeah, he really wanted to bring a girl home to this shit.

Romero grabbed his phone off the dresser. He had a text from Angel’s older brother Alex.

*Working out in 20 min at the gym.*

He’d sent it ten minutes earlier. Romero grabbed his gym bag and swung it over his shoulder. He squeezed his nose as he walked by the open bathroom door. Max was in there scrubbing the toilet.

“I’m outta here, Max. See you tonight.”

He walked through the kitchen to get to the back door. Manny and Aida were eating at the table. “Where you going?”

“Gym.” Romero took an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter and bit into it.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

Romero stopped at the door and turned around. “So talk.”

“Did you bang that new girl, Cici, already?”

Romero smirked, “Not yet.”

“She’s got a crazy-as-shit boyfriend.”

“And?”

“Stay away from her. I don’t want any trouble.”

Romero laughed and opened the back door. “All right, Manny. Whatever you say.”

What a joke—this guy’s girl was working at a titty bar. What did her boyfriend expect? She wasn’t even all that, but now things were interesting. Manny should know better than to tell him to stay away from someone. What little interest he had in the girl, which was close to zilch, had suddenly spiked.

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With summer officially over, the nights were beginning to take on a chill. Romero stood in front of the bar, wishing he'd worn a long sleeve shirt instead of a tank. He hadn't worked the last two nights, but his uncles had filled him in on Cici's boyfriend showing up and sitting at the bar while she worked, then trying to attack a guy who got friendly with her. He'd been thrown out and he wasn't allowed to come back when she was on duty. His money was still good when she wasn't there.

Cici had smiled at him tonight when she got there. Just like the first few times he'd seen her, he got the distinct feeling her eyes were saying more than her mouth was when she said hello. He was used to it. All these chicks were suffering from daddy-didn't-love-me syndrome. They were looking for love in the worst of places. He almost felt sorry for them.

He took some solace in knowing that while he'd never promised any of these girls more than a few moments of pure unadulterated fun, he always made sure they were as satisfied as he was. Not that it was important to him really, but nothing turned him on more than to hear a chick moaning in pleasure. Not the fake kind either. He knew the difference. There was no faking the trembling and the out-of-control heartbeat. Hearing and feeling their euphoria was the fucking best.

Cici walked out the door and gave him that smile again. Her perfume was overpowering, as usual. "Break time?"

"Yeah." She worked the lashes.

No question about it—this was going to happen. "What are you gonna do?"

"Sit... in my car."

Romero glanced around the parking lot. "Which one's your car?"

Cici pointed to the furthest end of the dark parking lot. *Perfect.*

"Mind if I join you? It's about time for my break, too."

"Sure." Her smile stretched out even more.

Romero radioed in that he was taking a break. In less than two minutes, another security guy came out to cover for him. Never one to beat around the bush, Romero touched Cici's dark hair as they walked to her car. With the roots showing, he could see it was obviously dyed. "You don't like the blonde?"

"I change it all the time. I get bored."

They reached her car. Cici stood against the driver's door and stared at him. Aware of the time constraint, and not the least bit unsure of what she wanted, he leaned in and kissed her. His uncle's words rang in his head. *Stay away from her.* All the motivation he needed. He smiled against her mouth.

As expected, she didn't protest, instead she opened her lips, welcoming his tongue. He took her face in his hands and kissed her deeper, pushing his body against her. Her hands pulled his shirt out of his pants with an urgency even he wasn't feeling yet. This was even easier than he'd thought. She started to undo his belt. Instinct made him look up. A guy stalked toward them, his furious eyes bouncing from Cici to Romero.

"Cici, is that you? You fucking bitch!"

Cici froze. "Oh shit."

Romero didn't pull his body away from her. "Is that your boyfriend?"

“Oh my God,” she whispered, “yes!”

Romero smirked, taking a step back. “It’s cool, you’ll be fine. What’s his name?”

“Freddy.”

“Get the fuck away from my girl,” the guy yelled as he got closer.

He wore a dirty mechanic’s uniform. Romero had been around enough drunks to know the guy had been drinking. He lifted his hands in the air and smiled. “You’re not supposed to be here, Fred.”

“Fuck you!” He pointed at Romero. “Cici, get your ass over here.”

Cici began to walk around Romero, but he put his hand on her shoulder, before she could get by. “She’s on duty.”

Fred charged at Romero. “I told you to get the fuck away from her.”

Romero grabbed his hand and spun him around, throwing him against the car. He held his arm behind his back. “You need to calm down, Fred.”

Fred squirmed but Romero held him tight. Romero frowned when he heard the voices and footsteps behind him. He was hoping this wouldn’t get back to his uncles. Fred stopped squirming. “You gonna be calm?”

The other security guys reached him. “You got things under control?”

“Yeah, we’re good. Right, Fred?”

Fred nodded, staring at Cici. Romero let go of him, and smiled at Cici, whose eyes still looked very frightened. In the next moment, he understood why. Fred backhanded her so hard she flew back more than three feet, hitting the fence behind her and fell to the ground, her purse spilling all its contents everywhere.

“You fucking cu—”

Before he could finish, Romero slammed his fist into Fred’s mouth, blood splattering all over. He got in a few more fists to Fred’s face, before being held back by the other security guards. More people spilled out of the bar and hurried toward them. Romero managed to free his arm and slammed another fist into Fred’s stomach. Someone caught his arm before he could hit him again. “That’s enough, Moe!”

Romero turned to face his uncle, feeling that familiar uncontrollable rage that had only gotten worse lately. “He hit her!”

His uncle turned to Cici, who was picking up her things from the ground. Fred looked up from where he’d doubled over after Romero landed one in his gut. Manny backhanded Fred one time. “You fucking asshole!”

Cici walked around the car. “Get inside, sweetheart.” Manny grabbed Romero by the arm and began walking away. “Get him the fuck out of here guys. He comes back, have him arrested.”

“No, call the cops on his ass now!” Romero yelled.

Manny shook him. “Are you outta your mind? I call the cops now, they’ll take you both in.”

Romero yanked his arm away from his uncle, feeling an immense urge to go back and pound on Fred some more. Manny must’ve seen the look on his face. “Keep walking, boy. Keep that temper of yours under control, son, before it buries you. Don’t you even think about going back there.”

Cici’s sister picked her up at the end of her shift. She said she was going back to her sister’s and not the apartment she shared with Fred. Jesus, she lived with the guy. She looked too young to be in such a serious relationship. Although it was so serious,

why the hell had she been moments from pulling Romero out of his pants? That whole night Romero tossed and turned.

She was a no-show the following two shifts. She called a week later to say she wasn't coming back. Romero already knew it. Though she didn't tell her uncle, he knew she'd gone back to Fred and he'd made her quit.

Weeks later, Romero still struggled with the fact that if he hadn't made it his mission that night to bag her, she wouldn't have gotten slapped. In hindsight, that slap probably wasn't the first she'd gotten from Fred and definitely wouldn't be the last. Those kinds of women couldn't be helped. At least that's what his grandmother said about his own mom. "Les gusta la mala vida." *They loved the bad life.* Yep, Cici had to know the risk she was taking that night, and she'd taken it so eagerly.

After that night, Romero never touched another of his uncle's employees again. Any time one of them flirted with him now, it brought back the memory of Cici being slapped. It was a memory he'd probably never forget. He couldn't stand it.

## Isabel

All summer, Isabel had had her dorm to herself. It was heaven. She'd always been a neat freak, so she dreaded having to share a room with anyone. She'd been warned that fall would be different. With twice the amount of kids enrolling in the fall, there was no chance she was going to keep her room to herself. She could only hope she got someone she got along with.

She was still holding out hope when she got back from her second class and no one was in her room. Then there was a knock at her door. The door opened and in walked a petite blonde girl, with her hair in a ponytail. She read the paper in her hand. "Are you I. Montenegro?"

Isabel nodded as disappointment sunk in. "Isabel."

"Oh good, then I'm in the right place. I'm Valerie." She dropped the two bags she carried, then peeked out the door. "This is it, Alex."

Valerie held the door open. Isabel had seen some muscular guys in her time, but this guy took the cake. Not only did his head nearly hit the doorway, he barely fit through the frame. He carried her luggage in and dropped it just inside the door. He glanced at Isabel who immediately felt inadequately dressed. She'd taken her bra off when she started reading. She hugged herself. "Meet my new roommate, Isabel."

"Hey, Isabel." He smiled at her politely, showing off a very nice pair of dimples before turning back to Valerie. "I'll go get the rest." He kissed Valerie before walking away.

*The rest?* With the bags Valerie dropped and the ones her boyfriend dropped, they were up to five. Valerie looked around for a few minutes.

"I take it this is mine, right?" Valerie plopped down on the empty, sheetless bed. Isabel nodded, still hugging herself. "That whole side is yours."

Valerie took everything in and was about to say something when Alex walked

in with two more bags. “This is it,” he said, dropping them on the already crowded floor.

Valerie stood up and climbed around all the luggage to get to him. She tiptoed to reach him and gave him a peck. “Thank you.”

Her boyfriend wrapped his arms around her, picking her up effortlessly, making her screech. Isabel turned back to her laptop and tried not to think of how invisible she felt. They stood at the door smooching for what seemed like an eternity. Valerie kept giggling because he wouldn’t let her go. “I have to unpack, Alex.”

They went silent for a while. Isabel dare not look up, since they were obviously making out right there in front of her. She could literally hear the exchange of bodily fluids.

“Stop,” she finally heard Valerie whisper. “Alex, we’re not alone.”

*Thank you!*

Isabel pushed her glasses up a bit and pretended to be engrossed in the screen of her laptop. After an unbelievable few more kisses, Alex finally left.

Valerie closed the door. Now Isabel could look up.

“Sorry about that,” Valerie said, still standing by the door. “He gets a little carried away sometimes.”

Isabel nodded, not sure how else to respond to that. She only prayed this is not what she would have to put up with for the rest of the semester.

“I’ll just unpack and let you do whatever it is that you’re doing.”

Two hours later, Valerie had unpacked most of her stuff, but as far as Isabel could see, she hadn’t really put much of it away. For the past half hour, Valerie had been on the phone with Alex again.

“Yeah, I’m done unpacking.”

Isabel jerked her head up from her book. Most of her things were still all over the floor and she’d stacked a lot of stuff along the walls. They had drawers, bookshelves and a closet. Was she not planning to use any of them?

“No, I’m not coming home this weekend but you can come here.”

Isabel squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath.

\*

Two months later, Valerie’s things were pretty much in the same place where she’d *unpacked* them, and there was never a dull moment. Valerie and her boyfriend had a turbulent relationship. Things were wonderful for a few weeks then Valerie would get into a noticeably bad mood, grumbling that she hated him and slamming things around for days.

Isabel never asked her anything about it. They hadn’t exactly warmed up to each other. Things got tense between them after the few times Isabel had to remind Valerie about not leaving her clothes on the bathroom floor after she showered.

Isabel had a ritual when it came to studying. She needed absolute silence. She’d explained this to Valerie, who said she understood and would try to keep it down, then proceeded to blow-dry her hair.

“I didn’t know you were studying,” she’d responded to Isabel’s complaint. “Who studies on a Friday night anyway?”

After a few more blow-ups, they officially hated each other.

Isabel sat on her bed. It was Friday night and she'd decided not to head home until the next morning. One of her friends told her about a party tonight just off campus, but as usual, she passed. She'd just finished talking to her sister, Gina, who couldn't believe Isabel was sitting in her dorm room on a Friday night. Isabel had always envied her sister who was not only smart, but always fit right in with the popular, party crowd.

To her surprise, the door opened and in walked Valerie. Ever since the beginning of the semester, Valerie had gone out every weekend and sometimes during the week. She glanced at Isabel, her eyes and nose bright red.

"You okay?"

Valerie shook her head and walked into the restroom. Isabel had witnessed many of Valerie and Alex's over-the-phone arguments. She'd been mad at him plenty of times, but this was the first time she saw her cry over him, if her tears now in fact were because of him.

Valerie came out of the restroom and pulled a t-shirt out of a bag from the floor. She took the blouse she wore off, and pulled the t-shirt over her head. Isabel had already decided she'd let her be and not pry, until Valerie sat down on her bed and buried her face in her hands, sobbing.

Out of pure reaction, because it was what she'd do if it was one of her sisters, Isabel jumped from her bed and sat next to Valerie, putting an arm around her. Valerie leaned against her, welcoming the comfort of Isabel's gesture.

"I don't even know why I care anymore," she said, finally looking up. "It's not like he's ever promised me anything."

Isabel stared at Valerie's wet face. She grabbed the box of tissue from the desk and handed it to Valerie.

"He does this *all* the time." She stopped to blow her nose. "And I pretend like it doesn't bother me, then I find out the truth and..." she put the tissue to her eyes and took a deep breath. "It hurts like hell."

Isabel had only been in one relationship in her life. It was long, but boring by most standards. She didn't have much to offer in the way of advice. "What did he lie about?"

Valerie told her how long she'd been going out with Alex, and that she'd been drooling over him since grade school. Theirs was an open relationship, which Isabel didn't get. Supposedly, they were both okay with seeing other people. From what little Isabel knew about Alex and the body language she saw when he was with her, he didn't strike her as someone who would be okay with that kind of understanding. But she listened without interrupting.

"The longer I keep this up, the more it hurts to know I won't be spending time with him because he's with someone else. I used to shake it off, but sometimes it really hurts, especially coming off a week like this one."

"So why don't you tell him?"

Valerie shook her head. "I can't."

"Why?"

"It's always been like this between us. Either I accept our relationship for what it is—take what he *will* give me—or walk away and lose him completely." She took one final deep breath, and wiped her eyes. "I'm done crying. This isn't the first time